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Otto Fenichel's Rundbriefe for the Present Moment

Rundbriefe Take II: Response to Letter One

When I was invited to participate in this *Rundbriefe* letter writing exchange, I felt a mixture of excitement and urgency to actively engage in this unique project. I hope this letter becomes my contribution to the emerging collective fractal, an entry point for a creative, generative conversation. It felt important to share my personal reflections on psychoanalysis intertwined with the sociopolitical, particularly at a time when attempting these conversations at a distance on a broader institutional, or national scale can often collapse into a space of polarizing discourse and subsequent frustrating disillusionment. As I began to write, a sense of overwhelm crept in—where to begin when our current surround now includes the weight of escalating wars, mass displacement, political instability, racism, poverty, transphobia, and numerous other intersecting layers of oppression? How to respond to Letter One in a way that feels authentic to me? With a bit of time and self-reflection, I began to regain my psychoanalytic stance, and identified my familiar mix of anxieties, in part looking for an anchor point to ground my thinking during these uncertain times. Whether putting pen to a blank page, or starting an analytic hour, both offer the space for profound, new liberatory potential to emerge.

In our hyper-scheduled and often transactional society, the act of spending an hour in the safe presence of a dedicated other who is attentively engaged, an hour that encourages free expression without preconceived expectation, is a radical act in itself. I believe strongly in the power of psychoanalysis to help our patients discover their voice, bear various emotional experiences, and grow toward living more enriching, fulfilled lives. This way of working aligns largely with a shift toward ontological psychoanalysis, which traces its roots to existentialism. Ogden identifies Bion and Winnicott as the primary developers of ontological psychoanalysis, and he summarizes the main focus of this way of working as, “becoming more fully present and alive to one’s thoughts, feelings, and bodily states; becoming better able to sense one’s own unique creative potentials and finding forms in which to develop them....developing more fully a humane and just value system and set of ethical standards” (2019, pp. 673-674). A psychoanalysis focused on the process of becoming and potential growth, rather than an archaeological quest to uncover hidden, elusive knowledge, represents a major theoretical departure from the more classical Freudianism to which Fenichel was committed. However, theories can be held in mutually enhancing dialogue, rather than rigidly opposed. My hope is for psychoanalysis to flourish, rather than merely survive. I would advocate for a psychoanalysis that is not “owned” by the privileged in power, but collectively shared, open source, and strengthened by interdisciplinary dialogue. This poses significant challenges, as welcoming in new knowledge from diverse fields outside of psychoanalysis will require the field to re-examine

its current power structures and to allow room for reorganization. Saketopoulou and Pellegrini discuss this in relation to their novel work with psychoanalysis and gender theorizing. They warn against psychoanalysis coming into interdisciplinary contact and persisting without any active engagement or new transformations in theory, and write, “We are not interested in how ideas from other domains get ‘used’ in psychoanalytic thought, but in the perturbations such contact brings to the psychoanalytic edifice itself, in what can help *dis-integrate*. Weathering these disturbances so that we may theorize again, and theorize better” (2023, p. xvii). A contemporary psychoanalysis that can be of use to diverse populations must call forth an appreciation of both the patient and the analyst within the context of their real-life social surrounds. To question the validity of the sociocultural surround within psychoanalytic work, and to pit the sociocultural versus the intrapsychic, in my opinion, is an outdated either/or argument that has too long been entrenched and constrains our present ways of thinking.

My academic journey toward psychoanalysis started during my undergraduate years, as I had the privilege of enjoying a liberal arts education. My decision to study French literature provided my first exposure to existentialist philosophy, which ultimately led me to reading Freud through literary criticism. As I pursued medical school, I experienced a growing sense of unease, as the biological sciences did not satisfy my intellectual curiosity to the same degree as did the humanities. It was not until later in my psychiatry residency when I discovered the psychoanalytic community at BPSI that I felt a renewed spark of intellectual curiosity. Michael Parsons writes eloquently about his experience of becoming an analyst, and the necessary unlearning of his medical training in order to relearn how to be with patients as a psychoanalyst. This process of unlearning and relearning certainly feels resonant with my own analytic development. Parsons writes, “Analysts, and people, are not abstractions. There is only whatever unique psychoanalyst, whatever unique person, someone arrives at being, through his or her own particular process of becoming” (2022, p. 80). Positioning myself as a gay, Arab American, and the first in my family to pursue medical training, let alone psychoanalysis, I privately questioned how a voice embodied in experiences such as mine would feel within the seemingly rarefied halls of a psychoanalytic institute. My culture is woven into my being. I wrestle with these thoughts periodically, and I am fortunate that I have found encouraging colleagues and supervisors along the way, including friends who are actively engaged in work to enhance DEIB efforts within psychoanalysis at the local and national level.

As the threat of authoritarianism looms with political strife in the US and abroad, and with the word “unprecedented” having lost all sense of import, we are uniquely positioned as psychoanalysts to take action and use our psychoanalytic skills in service of sociopolitical good. The capacity of taking an observing stance, listening with close attention and open curiosity, and an appreciation for a dynamic unconscious with the capacity to hold multiple simultaneous potential meanings—these are powerful psychoanalytic concepts that are desperately needed to preserve a sense of respect for human dignity, and to counter the current sociopolitical discourse that regresses too quickly to dehumanization and polarized splits, impeding the ability

to think constructively. I would like to imagine that Fenichel and his group of “political Freudians” would recognize the urgency of the moment today and feel reinvigorated to take up the cause for a sociopolitical psychoanalysis once again.

#### References:

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Saketopoulou, A. & Pellegrini, A. (2023). *Gender Without Identity*. (First edition). The Unconscious in Translation.