

# **Diving into the Stream: Psychoanalysts Participating in Contemporary Society**

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During one of my internships, in the 1980s, I met a brilliant child psychiatrist who had been disillusioned by psychoanalysis. He explained that in the mid-1960s he was in analysis and one day was on the couch talking about his participation in an antiwar march the day before. The analyst stood up, announced that the patient was acting out his Oedipal rivalry with his father, and unceremoniously threw the patient out of his office and out of analysis.

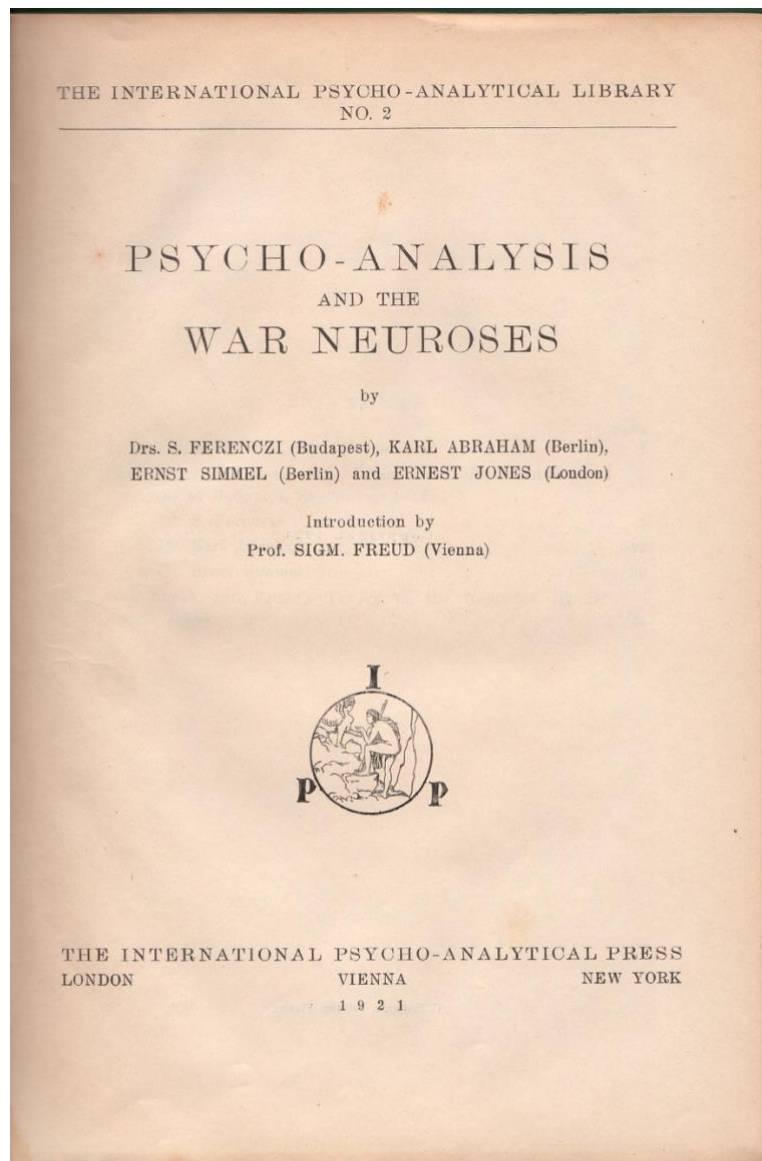
I've also heard of psychoanalysts who refused to go to the opera so as to avoid being seen by their patients and thereby disrupting the transference. Others have literally hidden their faces or ducked out when their patients have seen them on the street. This behavior is a grotesque caricature of the neutral and abstinent analyst. For these analysts, participating in political life is, of course, all the more off the table. After all, their patients might see them!

I don't know where these attitudes came from, but after Freud's death it seems that analysts either came out with innovations repudiating Freud's theory and technique or competed with one another in trying to be more Freudian than Freud—or, better yet, more Freudian than their colleagues—in order to prove their rightful place as Freud's favored son or daughter. Careful listening turned into absurd cavernous silence. The old offices full of art and artifacts were replaced with bland, flat, stark furniture. Some analysts competed to see who could be more sterile than the next. Some even took pride in showing no empathy in the face of a patient's personal tragedy. And if it was difficult to be a person in the room with a patient, it became even more difficult to be a citizen. This has not always been the case, and it was never completely the case, but it's a stereotype that has its basis in the behavior of real people.

In this paper I recall the psychoanalytic tradition of analysts participating in popular culture and offering a psychoanalytic perspective to the issues faced by contemporary society—issues of war, social welfare, prejudice, and politics. It is a long history but one that has been neglected for many years and is now being revived. My article is aimed at supporting the resuscitation of this psychoanalytic tradition as our world enters into yet another “time of troubles.” Does the analyst's engagement in political activity compromise abstinence and neutrality in his or her clinical work? Perhaps, but, of course, all of that can be analyzed.

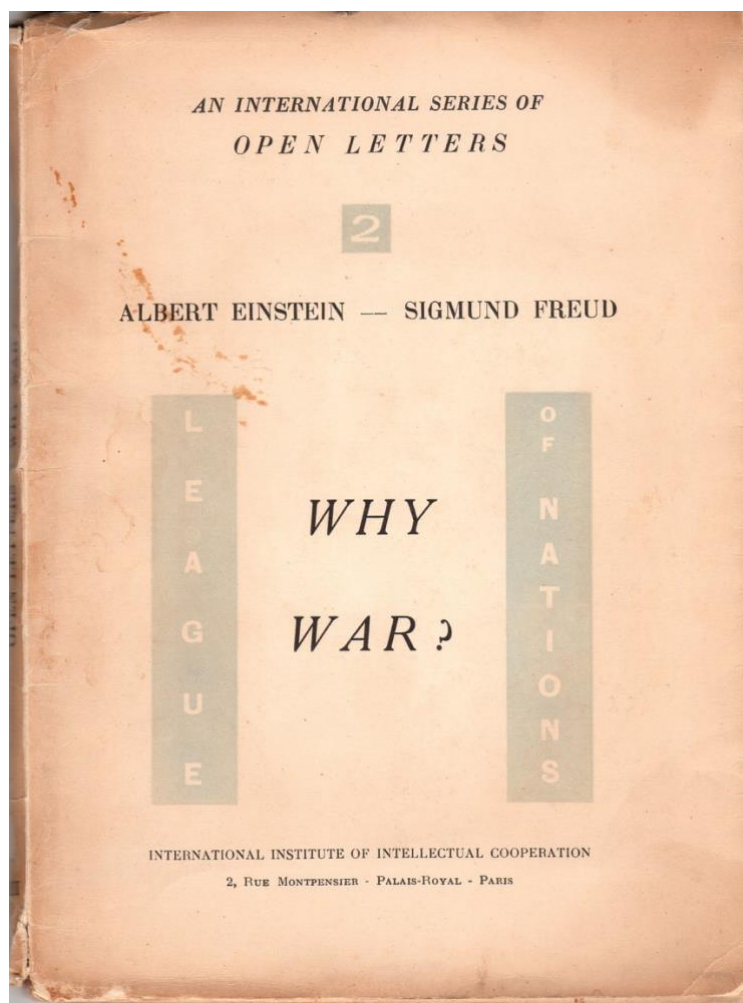
In 2016 I was awarded an honorary membership in the American Psychoanalytic Association partly for having brought psychoanalytic concepts and theories to professional and lay audiences in English and Spanish. In my brief acceptance speech, I called on psychoanalysts to write for the general public, something that is rare these days but was far more common in the past. By “writing for the public,” I was speaking about the introduction of theory and technique and applied psychoanalysis to lay audiences (Benveniste, 2016, pp. 10–11). Naturally, the field of applied psychoanalysis includes commentary on issues in contemporary society.

Sigmund Freud, Ernest Jones, Erik Erikson, Bruno Bettelheim, Karl Menninger, and many others wrote for lay audiences in popular books, newspaper columns, and magazine articles. This was the way they created a psychoanalytically informed public who naturally became interested in pursuing their own psychoanalyses. But they did not always write about psychic structure or therapy; they also wrote about contemporary society or engaged in clinical work that directly answered the social needs of the wider community.



Freud was often curiously uninterested in contemporary society, but in 1915, in the midst of the First World War, he wrote “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (S. Freud, 1915/1957, *SE* 14, pp. 273–300). Three years later, at the International Psychoanalytic Association Congress in Budapest Sándor Ferenczi, Karl Abraham, Ernst Simmel, and Ernest Jones delivered papers under the collective title *Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses*. When a

small collection of their papers was published Freud contributed an introduction. The success of a modified psychoanalytic technique in treating the war neuroses during the First World War was an impressive application of psychoanalysis as a contribution to the man-made disaster of war. It paved the way for the astounding success and popularity of psychoanalysis during the Second World War (Hale, 1995, pp. 187–210). At the Budapest congress, Freud also called for psychoanalysts to begin working in clinics and to extend the reach of psychoanalysis to members of the lower socioeconomic classes (S. Freud, 1919/1955, *SE* 17, pp. 159–168). In September 1932 Freud dove further into the stream of contemporary society when at the invitation of the League of Nations (the organization that preceded the United Nations) he wrote an open letter titled “Why War?” (S. Freud, 1933/1964a, *SE* 22, pp. 203–215). His letter was published along with a letter on the same topic written by Albert Einstein (Einstein & Freud, 1933, pp. 11–20).



Freud’s letter/essay addressed the development of culture from the battles of brute force to the civilized negotiations of conflicts. He spoke about how the instincts of love and hate are forever alloyed and addressed the futility of utopian visions that promise to rid us of aggression. He wrote of how violence could be overcome by transferring power to a larger unity held

together by emotional ties between its members. And then in two passages that have long inspired me, he wrote, “Anything that encourages the growth of emotional ties between men must operate against war.” And “whatever fosters the growth of civilization works at the same time against war” (S. Freud, 1933, *SE* 22, pp. 205, 212, 215). Late in life he also wrote a letter for the newspaper addressing the rising tide of anti-Semitism just before the start of the Second World War. His letter was titled “Anti-Semitism in England” (S. Freud, 1938, *SE* 23, p. 301). In all of these contributions, we see how Freud and his colleagues were bringing psychoanalysis to the wider culture in articles and public clinics and making psychoanalysis relevant in treating the traumas of war.



Siegfried Bernfeld (tall man in the middle in front) and staff of the Kinderheim Baumgarten

In mid-October 1919 Freud’s younger colleague, Siegfried Bernfeld, opened the doors to his Kinderheim Baumgarten, a children’s home for Jewish war orphans in the aftermath of the First World War. It was a school and demonstration center for progressive education based on socialist conceptions of the importance of trade apprenticeships, Stanley Hall’s work on adolescence, and the psychoanalytic principles of Sigmund Freud pertaining to preventive measures. Working in close collaboration with Willi Hoffer and a sizable staff, Bernfeld took on 240 children between the ages of 3 and 16 (40 of them under 5). Some had disabilities; all were hungry, undisciplined, and traumatized. The structure was antiauthoritarian and oriented to the creativity and freedom of the young people. The Kinderheim Baumgarten was open for only 6

months before it had to shut its doors due to a number of complications. As an institution it had failed, but it was the model of psychoanalytically informed residential care and treatment that would later inspire Anna Freud's nurseries in Vienna and London and could be fairly described as the original inspiration behind the subsequent history of psychoanalytically informed residential treatment (Ekstein, 1966, pp. 415–429; Young-Bruehl, 1988, p. 100; Bernfeld, 1925/1973, pp. 99–210).

Alfred Adler was far more politically and socially involved than Freud, and his broad appeal to the public was derived from his public lectures and writings. Having done research on the early history of psychoanalysis, I know a bit about Adler's visits to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1929 and 1936. In 1929 a newspaper article reported, "Inferiority Complex Cause of All Ills—Prohibition Just Remorse, Says Adler." It summarized Adler's notion of the "inferiority complex" and its various social manifestations. It also reported Adler's assertion that Prohibition would never succeed in America (Inferiority Complex, February 4, 1929).

In a second article, Adler described the suffering in post-World War I Austria—the 100,000 Viennese who were unemployed and the psychologists, medical doctors, social workers, and teachers who were staffing the clinics for the children of poor families. He said, "I felt throughout the War as a prisoner feels. The only solution to the problem of future wars is for science to organize the world so as to make war unnecessary, and to educate mankind to become more socially adjusted and more interested in each other" (Noted Scientist, February 10, 1929).

On his return trip in 1936, Adler delivered a lecture on the radio. He compared the independence of people in America to the relative dependence of those in Europe. He also spoke in support of psychological education for children.

In a subsequent article Adler's feminist stance became evident. The article was condescendingly titled by the reporter "A Laugh for the Little Woman." Adler is quoted as having said, "Women have been treated as weaker by men and gradually they got the habit. They begin to recognize limitations which do not exist mentally" (Laugh, July 26, 1936).

Carl Gustav Jung wrote for the lay audience and most notably organized the production of the popular classic *Man and His Symbols* (1964), coauthored by several of his closest associates. Unfortunately, he also wrote an article in support of the rising popular movement of the new regime in Germany in the 1930s. Soon thereafter he came to see the Nazi regime for what it was, took back his comments, and throughout the war did his best to help his Jewish colleagues. In 1947, speaking of his early endorsement of Nazism, Jung said to his friend and colleague Rabbi Leo Baeck, "It's true, I slipped up" (Rasche, 2012, p. 54).

While many analysts have avoided politics, others in Europe in the first half of the 20th century were actively committed to their leftist, socialist, or communist views and worked to meld or at least take into account political and psychological theories. In addition, independent of their clinical and theoretical interests, they rose to the occasion with political action, often even at their peril.

Social commitment was common among psychoanalysts in the 1930s, especially with the rising tide of Europe's anti-Semitism and hard right-wing politics. Edith Jacobson became a

member of the German Psychoanalytic Society in 1928 and in 1933 joined the Social Democratic resistance group New Beginning, which launched illegal acts of resistance against the Nazi regime in February 1933. In 1935 the Gestapo arrested Jacobson, who was accused of planning high treason. In early 1938 she was granted a conditional release, during which she broke parole, escaped to Prague, and made her way to New York (Brecht et al., 1985, pp. 126–128).

Ernst Simmel was another one of those with three strikes against him. He was Jewish, a Social Democrat, and a psychoanalyst. He narrowly escaped capture on several occasions, serving some time in jail before fleeing to Zurich and eventually making his way to Los Angeles in 1934 (Peck, 1966, pp. 374–375).

John F. Rittmeister studied psychiatry and neurology in Germany and Switzerland, from 1929 to 1937, joined Marxist study groups, and visited Russia in 1932. He was a pupil of Jung's but broke away from the mystical atmosphere and distanced himself further when Jung expressed sympathy—albeit temporarily—for Hitler as “the loudspeaker of the German soul.” Rittmeister returned to Germany in 1937 to pursue analytic training at the German Psychoanalytic Society and took an active role in educational and propagandist activities of an antifascist resistance organization, Red Chapel. He was arrested in 1942, condemned to death by the Supreme Military Court, and executed by guillotine at Berlin-Plötzensee in 1943 (Brecht et al., 1985, pp. 186–190). Speaking up can have terrible consequences, but not speaking up has its risks as well.

Martin Niemöller (1892–1984), a Protestant pastor who spent seven years in Nazi concentration camps, famously stated:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Socialist.  
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Trade Unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew.  
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

In February 1937 Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham launched the Edith Jackson Project—a psychoanalytic day-care center for children of poor working-class mothers in Vienna. At the day-care center, the one- and two-year-olds were fed, bathed, clothed, medically examined, and psychoanalytically observed.

Anna Freud and her parents arrived in London in June 1938. In September 1939, Sigmund Freud died and the Second World War began. It was a time of national emergency and an opportunity to make a difference both in the lives of children and in the theory of psychoanalysis. As London became a target of German rocket bombs, children were orphaned by parents who were injured or killed in the bombings or who became so caught up in the war effort that they were unable to take care of their children.

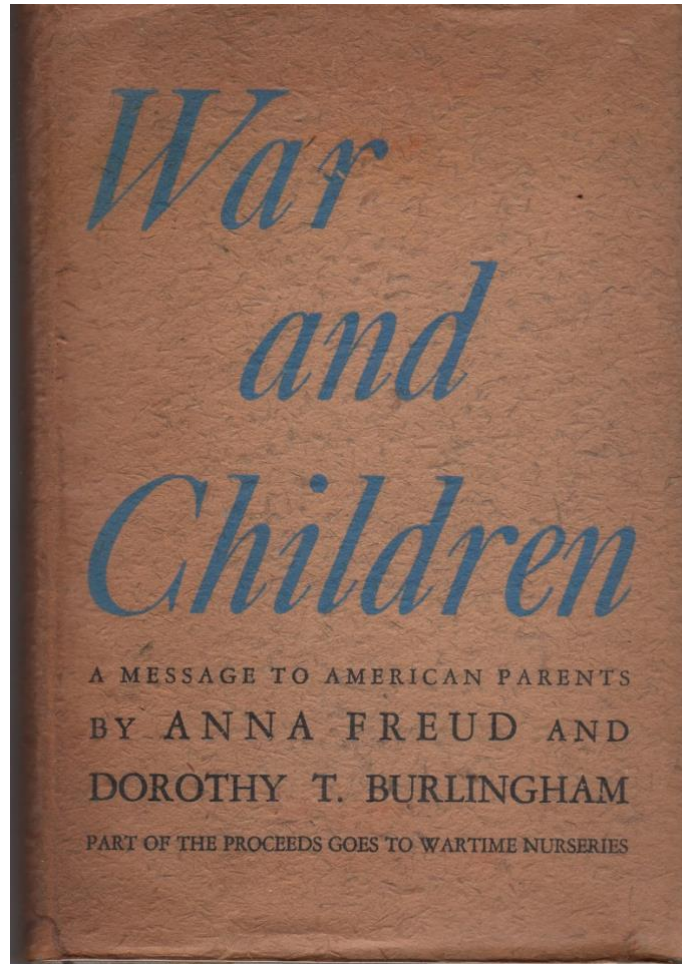


Children in Ana Freud's war nursery

Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham, recalling Bernfeld's Kinderheim Baumgarten, swung into action and set up three homes that offered shelter and stability for 191 children throughout the war. The nurseries offered a homelike atmosphere, medical treatment, Montessori education, intensive liaison work between the children and their families, and a bomb shelter in which to sleep. Anna Freud and her colleagues also investigated psychological and interpersonal dynamics of the children. A recurring theme in their investigations was the importance of the mother-child bond and the vicissitudes that bond suffers because of their separation from parents in wartime conditions (A. Freud, 1939–1945/1973, Vol. 3, pp. 4–5, 55, 313, 353–354, 535–536).

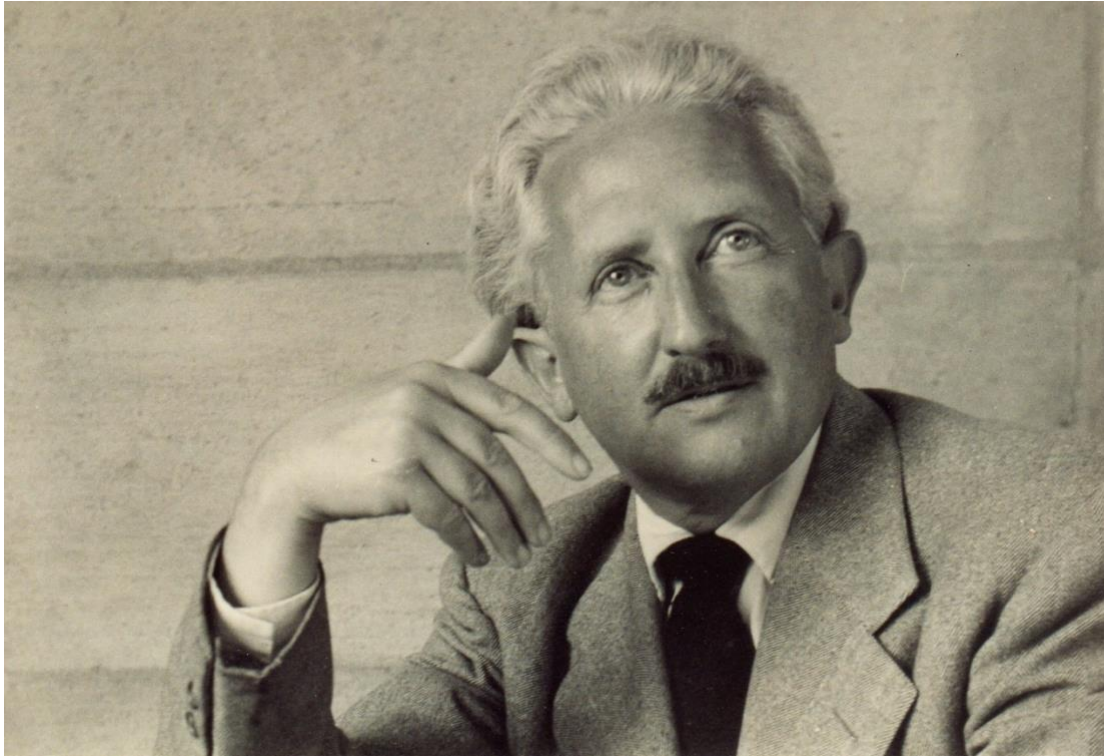
Donald and Clare Winnicott worked on problems of caring for troubled children who needed to be evacuated. Susan Isaacs worked on "The Cambridge Evacuation Survey: A War Time Study in Social Welfare and Education" (Burt & Simmins, 1942). Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, and John Rickman were also involved with this project as part of an advisory group.

The war ended in Europe on May 8, 1945, and 732 Jewish orphans who had survived the concentration camps were sent to England. One group of child survivors of the concentration camps was cared for at Weir Courtney House, a home run by Alice Goldberger (Bateson, 2010, pp. 1–3), and another group was given a home at Bulldogs Bank, run by Sophie and Gertrude Dann. These three women and others participated in seminars and supervision with Anna Freud as they ministered to the personal wounds of child victims of the holocaust. Later, when Anna Freud's Hampstead Clinic was established, concentration camp survivors found analytic treatment available to them. In the 1950s the Hampstead Clinic expanded to three houses, with Anna Freud as director (Sandler, 1965, pp. 109–123; Kennedy, 1978). The clinic served children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.



In the early 1940s Erik H. Erikson, a refugee of Hitler's Germany and annexed Austria, contributed to the war effort in San Francisco at Mt. Zion Hospital's Veterans' Rehabilitation Clinic. In *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), he stated, "The term 'identity crisis' was first used, if I remember correctly, for a clinical purpose in the Mt. Zion Veterans' Rehabilitation Clinic during the Second World War. . . . Most of our patients, so we concluded at that time, had neither been 'shell-shocked' nor become malingerers, but had through the exigencies of war lost a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity. They were impaired in that central control over themselves for which, in the psychoanalytic scheme, only the 'inner agency' of the ego could be held responsible. Therefore, I spoke of a loss of 'ego identity'" (pp. 16–17). Erikson's concept of identity and identity crisis struck a chord in the hearts of "baby boomers," and in the 1960s and '70s Erikson became one of the few intellectual lights for that generation.





Erik H. Erikson

During the Second World War, Erik Erikson analyzed Hitler's speeches and German propaganda. In his papers on Adolf Hitler, he drew lines of correspondence between Hitler's early childhood experience and the typical early childhood experience of children in pre-Nazi Germany. It was the first of Erikson's psychobiographical projects for which he was later to become very well known.

In 1950 the United States was in the grip of a nationwide fear of communists that reached paranoid proportions. The University of California added to the oath of office, that all professors must sign, a clause stating, "I am not a member of the Communist Party or any other organization which advocates the overthrow of the government by force or violence." This loyalty oath created quite a stir among the faculty, as it was seen as a threat to freedom of thought, freedom of speech, and freedom of association. Erikson refused to sign the oath, left the university, and published his "Statement to the Committee of Privilege and Tenure of the University of California Concerning the California Loyalty Oath" in the journal *Psychiatry* (Erikson, 1951/1987, pp. 618–620).

Erikson's interests in adolescence, identity, and society made him a particularly keen observer of the American counterculture, about which he took a deep and caring interest. He lectured and wrote articles on "Emotional Problems of the Student" (1961); "Youth, Fidelity, and Diversity" (1962); "Youth, Change, and Challenge" (1963); "A Memorandum on Identity and Negro Youth" (1964); "Problems of Identity, Hate, and Nonviolence" (1965); "On the Potential of Women" (1965); "The Concept of Identity in Race Relations" (1966); "Memorandum for the

Conference on the Draft” (1968), *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), “On Protest and Affirmation” (1972), and many more.

In 1975 his son, the sociologist Kai Erikson, published a unique dialogue that he had arranged between his father and the well-known Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton. The book is called *In Search of Common Ground: Conversations with Erik H. Erikson and Huey P. Newton* (1975).

In the early 1940s, Nevitt Sanford worked with Else Frenkel-Brunswik in studying the anti-Semitic personality. Their work was published in a book edited by Ernst Simmel titled *Anti-Semitism: A Social Disease* (1946) along with chapters by other California analysts, including Otto Fenichel, Ernst Simmel, and Bernhard Berliner.

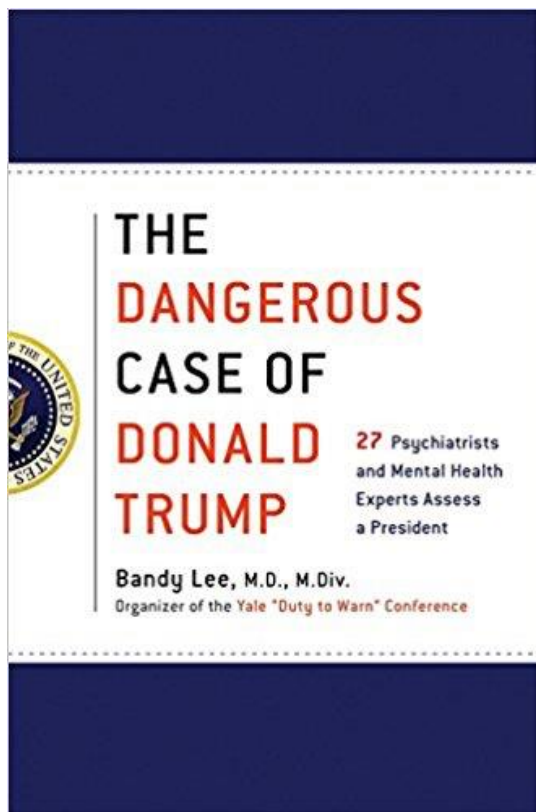
Sanford and Frenkel-Brunswik then joined forces with Theodore Adorno and Daniel Levinson on a massive research project that resulted in the publication of the now classic *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950). Through their research they learned that there is a spectrum between the personality traits of authoritarianism and egalitarianism. A person with a basically hierarchical, authoritarian, exploitative parent-child relationship tends to have power-oriented, exploitative dependent attitudes toward his or her sex partner and toward his or her God. The person also may well embrace a political philosophy and social outlook with little room for anything other than desperate clinging to what appears to be strong and a disdainful rejection of whatever is relegated to the bottom. Parent-child relations, sex roles, and moral values tend to be dichotomous, and social relations get sorted out as stereotypes and as in-group/out-group cleavages. There is a tendency toward conventionality, fascist potential, rigidity, repressive denial, emotional coldness, identification with power, and general destructiveness, all of which intermittently gives way to weakness, fear, and dependency in the personal, religious, and social spheres.

The other end of the spectrum is characterized primarily by affectionate, basically egalitarian, and permissive interpersonal relationships that extend from parent-child relationships to attitudes toward the opposite sex and cultural differences in general. It is characterized by an internalization of religious and social values. The result is that those at this end of the spectrum have greater flexibility and a higher potential for the genuine satisfactions of basic needs. In a word, it is characterized by eros, which is best defined not simply as sex but as “relatedness.” *The Authoritarian Personality* came out in 1950, the same year as the famous loyalty oath controversy in which both Sanford and Erikson left the University of California, Berkeley, in protest against the requirement that state employees sign an oath of loyalty to the U.S. government.

One could say that psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton has conducted much of his professional life as, in part, a form of social activism. He has done so through his studies of Nazi doctors, Hiroshima survivors, Vietnam veterans, his critiques of U.S. involvement in our various modern wars, his study of totalism—or the ideological movements that seek total control over human behavior and thought—and in his studies of the psychology of genocide. These professional undertakings, which typically involved extensive interviews, gave him a close-up view into the

evil in the heart of men. With this knowledge he has been able to sound the alarm for our culture on numerous occasions when he saw us drifting toward evil in our wars or when ideological movements were drifting toward totalitarianism.

More recently Lifton has been speaking and writing in defense of the rights of mental health professionals to offer their opinions about the mental health of President Donald J. Trump in compliance with their ethical “duty to warn” about the dangers of this president. In addition to his public pronouncements and interviews on the topic, Lifton also wrote the foreword to *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump* (2017) a volume organized by Bandy X. Lee, M.D., M.Div. This is a book with chapters by 27 psychiatrists, psychologists, and mental health experts offering assessments of Trump’s mental health. Their involvement in this project was not primarily an academic psychobiographical exercise but rather a patriotic duty to call attention to an international nightmare in the making.



There is a history behind Lifton and his colleagues’ defending the rights of mental health professionals to speak about the mental condition of a public person. In 1964 the magazine *Fact* polled psychiatrists in the United States on whether they thought presidential candidate Barry Goldwater was fit to be president. Their poll found that 1,189 psychiatrists saw him as unfit to be president. Goldwater sued the editor of the magazine for \$75,000 and won. In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association wrote into their ethics Section 7, which states that psychiatrists may share with the public their professional expertise in general but should avoid offering a

“professional opinion” unless the psychiatrist has directly evaluated the person and been given authorization to release such information. In 2016 American Psychological Association president Susan H. McDaniel said psychologists are ethically bound to not offer a diagnosis of a living public person whom they have not examined directly. In 2017 the American Medical Association issued a similar guideline saying medical professionals should not offer a clinical diagnosis of anyone they have not personally examined ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goldwater\\_rule](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goldwater_rule)). *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump* considered malignant normality, pathological narcissism, delusional disorder, cognitive impairment, and more. Personally, I tend to agree with the ethical stances of the professional groups. I think we should stick to the political acts and discuss the psychological fitness of our political leaders in terms of their character. We are far more effective politically when we describe behavior and political acts in detail rather than simply giving a “diagnosis.”

There are many in our field who have found a way to be involved in contemporary society by way of their professional expertise; some have written on issues in contemporary society in books and articles for readers within our field or for the broader reading public, while others have taken political/clinical action. In the first decades of the 20th century, psychoanalysis attracted many who were quite actively involved political leftists. They included Wilhelm Reich, Otto Fenichel, Siegfried Bernfeld, and many more. During the Second World War, William C. Menninger was the director of the Psychiatry Consultants Division in the office of the surgeon general of the United States Army. Albert J. Solnit was a distinguished adult and child analyst who did research on child development issues at Yale’s Child Study Center and coauthored a series of books with Anna Freud and Joseph Goldstein on family psychology and the law. He also created opportunities that permitted law students to come to the Yale Child Study Center as part of their training. One such student was Hillary Clinton. Leo Rangell wrote *The Mind of Watergate: An Exploration of the Compromise of Integrity* (1980). Portia Bell Hume, an early psychoanalyst in San Francisco, was called by some the Mother of Community Mental Health in California. Norm Reider started the crisis clinic in San Francisco decades ago. Stuart Twemlo has done monumental work in addressing school violence, prevention of community violence, terrorism and cult dynamics, victim-victimizer-bystander relationships, and more. Arlene and Arnold Richards organized the post-9/11 New York Disaster Counseling Coalition to provide pro bono mental health services for police, firefighters, and other first responders. And Peter Wolson has written numerous letters in newspapers and blogs that address contemporary politics through the lens of psychoanalysis. This, of course, is only a partial list, but I think it would be worthwhile to amplify it so that analysts can see their options for public involvement and the public can begin to change its view of psychoanalysis and psychoanalysts.

In addition to involvement in environmental and antiwar demonstrations in the early 1970s, I worked in community mental health for 24 years in San Francisco. I then moved to Caracas, Venezuela. After a massive flood that killed thousands of people and left hundreds of thousands homeless in December 1999, I wrote an article on crisis intervention after major disasters. It was used throughout the country in aiding the survivors of the flood.

I had arrived in Caracas in March 1999, just one month after Hugo Chávez had moved in to the office of the presidency. He presented himself as a socialist intent on helping the underclasses and ending corruption, and I was ready to sign up. In addition to my practice and teaching at Universidad Central de Venezuela and Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, I started writing a monthly article in the English-language newspaper under the title “The Psychology of Everyday Life,” addressing topics such as childrearing, adolescent issues, and others. Shortly after my arrival it was clear to me that Chávez had nothing to do with socialism and was even more corrupt than the previous Venezuelan governments. There began many massive demonstrations against the government, and on April 11, 2002, the entire freeway was blocked with a peaceful demonstration of 800,000 people. Chávez met the demonstrators with guns and tanks. Nineteen people were killed and a hundred injured before it came to its bloody end. My next article for the newspaper was “The Authoritarian Personality.” As the dictatorial regime dug in, I wrote other articles, such as “Effective Communication: The Real Power of the People”; “Conflict Resolution from the Kitchen Table to the Negotiation Table”; “The Individual and Culture, Violence, and the Word”; “Collective Hysteria and Fear: How to Keep Critical Situations in Perspective”; and “Civilization and Its Discontents Revisited: What Freud Might Say about Venezuela Today.”

During the 11 1/2 years that I lived in Venezuela, I watched as the country was systematically destroyed from the bottom up. As a foreigner, I initially remained silent to this disaster until December 6, 2002, when I watched, live on TV, as 17-year-old Keyla Guerra died from a gunshot wound to the head in a plaza not far from my home. Keyla was demonstrating against the Chavista regime. She and two others were killed that night by a Chavista gunman, and many more were injured. They were three of hundreds who would eventually be killed and thousands who would be injured, jailed, and tortured in Venezuela. I could no longer be a bystander. I began making contacts with opposition leaders, writing articles, and trying to offer psychologically informed perspectives on strategy aimed at a democratic resolution to the problems of the country. I wrote dozens of articles, met with countless members of Venezuela’s civil society, and yet, for a variety of reasons, was spectacularly unsuccessful in my efforts. When we observed the rising tide of street violence and anti-Semitism in Venezuela, my wife and I decided it was time to get out. We returned to the United States in September 2010. I continued my political writing and circulated it on various blogs in Venezuela and also tried to discuss my concerns with U.S. politicians. However, these politicians were shockingly unavailable or unresponsive. Finally, I wrote a book about my concerns—*The Venezuelan Revolution: A Critique from the Left* (Benveniste, 2015).

My interest and articles on behalf of Venezuela continued until Donald Trump came onto the scene here at home. Observing his actions and hearing his words was like “déjà vu all over again.” During the Clinton-Trump election cycle, I wrote three articles before the campaign and an open letter to the Republican leaders after Trump was elected. The main message was that I had witnessed firsthand the destruction that Chávez, the so-called socialist, had done in

Venezuela, and I recognized how the world was poised to watch a repeat of that destruction in the United States at the hands of a so-called Republican.



Donald J. Trump

Hugo Chavez

My main point was that Chávez (who died in 2013) and Trump are two of a kind—both bullies, thugocrats, demagogues, and authoritarians with dictatorial ambitions. They speak in violent metaphors and incite violence, prejudice, and hatred. They prop themselves up as strong men, telling the people, “There are enemies out there that threaten you, but if you stay close to me I will protect you.” They are both crude in their language, disrespectful of women, and hostile toward differences of opinion. They are showy, entertaining, and lie with the greatest of ease. They have eroded the institutions of government and the separation of powers and unleashed corruption in broad daylight. They appeal to the lowest instincts of human nature: vengeance, resentment, greed, tribalism, fear, hatred, intolerance. If we ask, “Do we agree with the Supreme Court justice pick or with the tax reform bill?” we have one kind of discussion, but if we ask what the personality constellation and political plan look like, we are immediately reminded of the worst authoritarian regimes throughout history. The White House doesn’t understand why the public is so outraged by Donald Trump. They do not understand that Trump looks more like Hugo Chávez and other dictators than any other president in U.S. history. And if we know our world history, we also know we need to act quickly in order to stop such authoritarian trends, which are obvious not just in Trump but also in the 30 percent of U.S. citizens who support him. Chávez, too, had 30 percent support, even when people were dying of hunger, violence in the streets and a lack of medicine.

When I would give parenting or child development lectures in Caracas, parents would always use part of the question-and-answer period to ask my professional opinion about Chávez’s psychological diagnosis. I always saw any possible diagnostic label I could assign as completely irrelevant. Diagnoses in their technical sense, including their limitations, are not understood by the public. In time, diagnostic terms in public discourse transform into name-calling and disqualifying—idiot, moron, imbecile, schizophrenic, borderline, retard, autistic, and others. The terms “idiot,” “moron,” and “imbecile” are no longer even used as diagnostic

categories, and the others should never be used as insults. There should never be anything disqualifying about a diagnosis. And, lest we forget, not only Trump but all of our favorite politicians could also be diagnosed. What strikes me as far more important politically is to describe the politician behaviorally, that is, in the terms that are also used to arrive at a diagnosis: he lies, bullies, covers feelings of inadequacy with bravado, distorts reality, projects his own limitations onto others, steals without guilt, is impulsive and self-centered, and so on. This sort of description stirs the passions of the people and allows them to recognize the same features in historical figures, such as, in this case, other authoritarian dictators. Psychiatric diagnoses distract us from the political acts of these authoritarian leaders. To say someone is a “malignant narcissist” reduces the critique into psychiatric jargon when we are better off staying with words like “liar,” “self-centered,” “hateful,” “corrupt,” “thieving,” “unethical,” and so on. That said, I applaud the work of Lifton, Lee, and the other coauthors of *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump* (2017), as it is an important book that has highlighted the concerns of many professionals and given the public something more to consider.

More recently, Lee Jaffe, the current president of the American Psychoanalytic Association, had a letter published in the *Los Angeles Times* addressing Trump’s policy of separating children from parents at border crossings. Jaffe described the results of a study by Anna Freud during the Second World War in which it was found that children who were separated from their parents and moved to safety fared worse than those who suffered the bombing attacks in bomb shelters with their parents. Jaffe (2018) concluded, “Taking children from their caregivers is a cruel and inhumane policy. It is also contrary to our American values.”

On June 24, 2018, in the Argentinian magazine *La Voz*, President Virginia Ungar and Vice President Sergio Nick of the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA) also rejected Trump’s policy of separating 2,000 children from their parents at the Mexican border. They further repudiated any form of violence against children and adolescents that alters the crucial parameters of growing up, including separations from parents, the lack of basic care, and denial of the rights of children and adolescents. They also announced a new structure in the IPA organization called IPA in the Community, which is dedicated to various social concerns such as migration, education, violence, child abuse, and more (Psicoanalistas del mundo, 2018).

On the same day as the article in *La Voz*, Jaffe announced an effort to assist in finding, evaluating, and obtaining any help necessary for reuniting those children separated from their parents by Trump’s administration. The effort is being coordinated by Gilbert Kliman, a San Francisco psychoanalyst who, in addition to this work reunifying children with their parents, founded the Center for Preventive Psychiatry in Yonkers, New York; the Foster Care Study Unit at Columbia University; and the Children’s Psychological Health Center in San Francisco.

When psychoanalysts are cautioned not to participate in public life, they ostensibly avoid participating in order to allow transference to develop unencumbered by reality factors. But do we sit quietly in the presence of a patient of Mexican descent when the president of the United States of America calls Mexicans “bad hombres,” “criminals,” and “rapists”? Do we sit quietly in front of a Muslim patient when the president calls for a Muslim ban? Does a man sit quietly

behind his privilege and in front of a female patient when the president speaks of groping women? Where is the line between being psychoanalytically abstinent and politically complicit? I had never been open about my politics with patients until Chávez came into power and I was asked directly by a patient, a military man who worked at the U.S. Embassy. He wanted to know and needed to know. Sometimes, in the presence of political tyranny, which threatens the very conditions of the analytic process, one must take a stand. How can a patient free-associate if there is no free speech? How can a person think freely if there are forbidden topics? My clinical mentor, Nathan Adler, was a very active communist in the late 1920s and early '30s but with the anticommunist atmosphere in the United States, he went “underground” into social work and then into psychoanalysis. He explained that because of the Red Scare he never kept process notes. He didn't want to have anything that the government could steal. Paranoid? Just ask Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. One way or another I think it is worthwhile to investigate our individual reactions to political tyranny and consider the implications they may have for our clinical work—our political countertransference.

How does the nightmare of the Trump era affect me personally? What does my psyche do with it? I think we can all find ways in which political dynamics attach to our personal dynamics. I once saw a couple in Caracas with a typical set of marital communication problems, which they explained to me in great detail.

I then asked, “Do you discuss these problems together?”

“Never.”

“So, you don't talk much?”

“No, we talk all the time. In the morning, during the day on the phone, and every night.”

“So, if you don't talk about your problems, what do you talk about?”

“Chávez!” they said in unison.

“And tell me, Señora, what troubles you most about Chávez?”

“All the insecurity in the country. I just don't feel safe anymore.”

“And for you, Señor, what troubles you the most?”

“All the restrictions tying down the owners of small businesses.”

Now, both of these concerns were more than accurate concerns about the Chávez regime, but the reader will not be surprised to learn that the wife's biggest complaint about her husband was that she did not “feel safe” in her marriage, and, correspondingly, the husband felt unnecessarily “restricted” by his wife. This does not invalidate their respective political views nor their held resentments of one another. It just goes to show that our politics are shaped by our psychodynamics.

Some will say the political activity of the analyst compromises abstinence and neutrality and introduces reality factors into the transference. I agree, but all of that can be analyzed.

While no one would deny a psychoanalyst having a private political opinion, some might be concerned about the analyst's public political activity if it occurs in view of the patient or enters the consulting room. We rarely, if ever, discuss our own politics with our patients in terms of their position vis-à-vis our position, but the patient's political views are always up for



discussion as derivative material of their psychological dynamics and history, just as religion and philosophy are. The confusion between the analyst's political opinion, political activity, and clinical technique may create problems, which can certainly be analyzed, but they may also support a rationale for the analyst to avoid political engagement.

During the Second World War, with bombs falling on London, the Melanie Klein–Anna Freud controversies were raging. As a parallel concern to the theoretical and clinical differences between the Freudians and the Kleinians, some members criticized the British Psycho-Analytical Society's officers for their aloof and arrogant attitude toward other professional groups and for not involving members in the war effort. They compared the British Society to the Tavistock Clinic, which was Freudian but allowed people who were influenced by other theorists to join them as well. Unlike the British Society, the Tavistock was directly involved in the war effort and actually in charge of the organization of army psychiatry (King & Steiner, 1991, p. 27).

Then England began making plans to reorganize its medical and child welfare professions in anticipation of England's postwar necessities. The British Society was completely uninvolved when it came to input, direct aid, or training. For years they had felt themselves above it all; suddenly they were just out of it (King & Steiner, 1991, p. 487).

It is not surprising that when I analyze my emotional reactions to Chávez and Trump, I find a history of old traumas from childhood into adulthood, but I find it curious that many of my reactions have been similar to the emotional reactions of others: terror, disbelief, and, perhaps more than anything else, a sense of powerlessness. It then occurs to me that what is activated by authoritarian leaders is the powerlessness of the infant in the face of infantile injustices—the pains of the body and being controlled by and at the mercy of parents. So what do we do with that? We feel it, we remember, and then we recognize that although once we were powerless, we are no longer. We have education and experience, we can join forces with others, and we can push back.

*The three commandments we learn from the Holocaust:*

*Thou shalt not be a victim,  
Thou shalt not be a perpetrator, but, above all,  
Thou shalt not be a bystander.*

—Yehuda Bauer

*There comes a time when silence is betrayal.*

—Martin Luther King Jr.

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