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BOOK REVIEW

Sheehi Lara and Stephen Sheehi. *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine* Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2022.

A revolutionary love

*Psychoanalysis Under Occupation*¹ is a book that was born under the sign of love. The love that the authors have for each other, but also the more revolutionary love that each of them feels, as activists of Lebanese origin, for the anti-racist and anti-imperialist movements that are fighting to end the apartheid situation in which the Palestinian people live. For this reason, the book, unlike many other academic books, is a masterpiece of *situated knowledge* that does not only offer us an abstract analysis of colonialism, but also demonstrates to us how psychoanalysis is practiced in Palestine today, that is to say in occupied territories.

Who are the analysts working in these territories? What are their profiles, their training, their difficulties, their expectations, their desires? What are their therapeutic objectives? Who supervises them? And even more problematically, what is their relationship with the culture of their patients when this culture seems to contradict the objectives of the analysis? And finally, how do they position themselves with regard to the political violence that makes the lives of Palestinians unbearable on a daily basis? Do they take it into account? Or do they deny it and leave the brutality of the world at the door of their office?

By providing precise answers to these questions, *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation* allows us to rethink in context the links that unite the practice of psychoanalysis to politics, and by implication the revolutionary potential of the latter. By demonstrating that what is individual in Palestine is always political, even though politics is never put at the service of the individual (since it is at the service of the imperialist interests of the State of Israel), this book shows us how psychoanalysis can become a practice of resistance to oppression as soon as the indigenous populations learn to use it to decolonize what, in its theory, still bears the traces of the white, European and heterocentric culture that saw its birth.

The sovereignty of care

The critical apparatus that supports the book is rich and complex. Inspired as much by feminist and queer theories as by critical theories on race or decolonization, *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation* follows in the footsteps of the studies

on racism carried out by the Martinican psychiatrist and revolutionary Franz Fanon in works such as *Black Skin, White Masks*² or *The Wretched of the Earth*.³

For example, the book reviews the political use of the concepts of ‘trauma’ and ‘resilience’ and argues that the instrumentalization of such psychological concepts, far from helping colonized populations to emerge from their status as objects, only serves to mask the violence done to them by making these populations victims, rather than desiring subjects capable of fighting for their independence.

The book also attempts to show that psychoanalysis, as soon as it is put at the service of a policy of social emancipation, can also become a place from which to imagine new life possibilities. Mobilizing, to this end, the concept coined by Scott Lauria Morgensen in *Spaces Between Us*⁴ of the ‘sovereignty of care’, *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation* puts forward the idea that the ‘politics of care’, far from being detached or even detachable from the political and revolutionary stakes, constitute in fact the very basis from which a radical questioning of colonial politics can be thought of.

Thus, vigorously opposing the fact that psychoanalysis can be put at the service of a form of denial of the political violence suffered by colonized populations, this book intends to make the practice of psychoanalysis ‘a mechanism of social and political mobilization’ (6) that can serve the interests of subalternized populations.

Sumud

Following the example of thinkers and activists such as Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Rita Giacaman, Rema Hammami, Lena Meari or Ibrahim Makkawi, *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation* is dedicated to describing in great detail the internal dynamics that animate the Palestinian population, including gender and sex dynamics, so that they can be compared to more global political dynamics, whether they are dynamics arising from the colonial policies of the Israeli State, or religious and traditional dynamics arising from Palestinian culture. In doing so, the book avoids projecting a ‘Westernized’ and potentially pathologizing gaze on the Palestinian populations, while showing how the ‘regime of psychological foreclosure’ (p. 10) in which the Israeli state’s occupation prevents most Palestinians from being able to develop psychic spaces of their own, by forcing them to take the place of the radical Other, i.e. the unrepresentable Other, as soon as they try to revolt.

On the other hand, the book also shows very well how Palestinians continue to oppose this ‘regime of psychological foreclosure’ with a constant desire for reinvention, for minority and dissident knowledge, as well as with a form of solidarity that takes its impetus from the social resistance movement that has been in place since the end of the Six Day War in 1967, and that the term *Sumud* (which means perseverance) sums up in itself. By highlighting such a term, the book actually opposes a widely held opinion (even though it is false!) according to which Palestinian psychology is ‘perverse’ insofar as it is considered to be

either entirely caught up in forms of archaic traditions, or entirely the object of multiple resentful impulses.

Analytical neutrality and political commitment

Refusing any psychologization of the Palestinian people, and more generally any form of pathologization of subalternized populations, *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation* intends to rethink the concept of *analytic neutrality* through the concept of ‘sociogeny’ developed by Franz Fanon, and then re-elaborated several decades later by Sylvia Wynter (Wynter, 2001)⁵ in the field of critical race studies.⁶ The term ‘sociogeny’ was coined by Fanon to emphasize the importance of the social factor in psychology, as soon as one tries to understand what underlies the development of an individual or a people. For this social factor is what allows us to explain, beyond phylogeny (the links of relationship between beings) and ontogeny (the process of internal development of an organism), the behavior of a person according to the socio-political context in which he or she evolves.

This is why, for the authors of *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation*, there can be no question of being able to claim any kind of analytical neutrality without, at the same time, this neutrality being based on a full and complete political commitment, in other words, without an effort to understand the political stakes involved in a given situation. For it is precisely this understanding, and the commitment it implies, that makes it possible to realize that the very idea of analytical neutrality, from the moment it implies leaving politics out of the practice, is in fact based on an active path to denial, or even of disavowal. The French Psychoanalyst Sophie Mendelsohn,⁷ in her interview with the authors,^{8,9} sums up this position with the following formula: ‘To be analytically neutral, one must be politically engaged’. For, if one is not, how could one have the audacity to claim to be able to listen to what the analysands have to say without, at the same time, taking seriously the harsh political reality that sets such cruel limits to their lives?

Note

1. Lara Sheehi, Stephen Sheehi. *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation, Practicing Resistance in Palestine*, 2022.
2. Fanon Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York, Grove Press, 2008.
3. Fanon Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York, Grove Press 1991.
4. Morgensen Scott Lauria. *Spaces between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*. University of Minnesota Press 2011.
5. Wynter S. “Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon Identity the Puzzle of Conscious Experience and What It Is Like to Be ‘Black.’” *Hispanic Issues* 2001 pp. 30–66.
6. See, for example, Marriott David. “Inventions of Existence: Sylvia Wynter Frantz Fanon Sociogeny and ‘the Damned.’” *Cr: The New Centennial Review* 2011 pp. 45–89
7. Mendelsohn, Sophie & Livio Boni. *La vie psychique du racisme*. Pairs, Edition La découvertes, 2021.

8. <https://www.collectifdepantin.org/posts/psychanalyse-sous-occupation-pratiquer-la-resistance-en-palestine>
9. See, for example, (David, 2011).

Disclosure statement


No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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