

Who speaks at APsA? 6/19/23

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“I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

Voltaire’s quote sounds naive today when we are so ready to kill-off those whose speech we disapprove of. The high of February’s return to meeting in-person in New York quickly plunged to a low point as collegiality collapsed in the controversy over Dr. Lara Sheehi presenting at the June meeting. The excitement generated by passage of the Bylaw amendment expanding membership and by the plenary previewing the Holmes Commission report on Racial Equality was upstaged by the contentious, divisive exchanges that erupted on the Members’ List and across the Association, mirroring the polarization of American society. Speaking at APsA has become contested ground. Many protested Lara’s non-invitation as silencing her, others claimed a silent majority approves.

I will not repeat the details of the controversy but instead will focus on the general breakdown of collegiality in speaking and listening to each other at APsA. Most of the attention, pro and con, has focused on two individuals, Dr Sheehi and on Dr. Kerry Sulkowicz, then our President, who carried the explosive large group dynamics for us. While they volunteered for their respective roles, we projected our conflicts onto Lara and Kerry and are collectively responsible for the controversy. The path to truth and reconciliation requires us to own those projections.

Can the Subaltern Speak?

Initially, out of solidarity with Kerry and Dan Prezant, the colleagues and friends who followed me as President, I focused on the underlying governance conflict between the Executive Committee and Program Committee but was aghast as the animosity and splitting deepened. Looking for insight, Gayatri Spivak's landmark essay "*Can the subaltern speak?*" helped me realize that, while the governance conflict is important, for many members and potential members the overriding symbolic meaning of the controversy, and the answer to Spivak's question for APsA, is no, the subaltern cannot speak at APsA after all. Despite our professed welcoming of diversity, her voice is contingent and can be cancelled at any moment. We are ambivalent about a subaltern, in this case an anti-colonial Arab woman, speaking her truth. Dr. Sheehi's non-invitation was widely perceived as the silencing of a woman and person of color. The rationale for not inviting her to speak this time was that it was only temporary until she was cleared of charges of antisemitism, but none the less, not inviting her signified cancellation. This is something all who can identify as subalterns at APsA have ample reason to fear; BIPOC, other minorities, and the new member categories - that they too could be cancelled. The chilling message compromised the expansion of our membership by alienating the diversity we aimed to welcome. Lara and others resigned, absenting themselves from our discourse in protest. The controversy led to resignations and a governance crisis at APsA. Lara Sheehi resigned as have others from the diverse groups we hope to welcome. They are alienated and resign or turn away in protest.

Spivak's essay offers a multi-layered perspective. First published in the 80's, the essay was revised in 1990 and invites multiple readings. Subaltern was originally a British army term for a lower ranking officer. Antonio Gramsci, the revolutionary socialist thinker, adopted the term to describe marginalized

people and groups whose agency and voices are excluded from society to preserve the “cultural hegemony of the bourgeoisie.” The concept resonated in post-Raj India with anti-colonialists who founded the journal *Subaltern Studies* and an academic specialization striving to learn from below, from the oppressed and voiceless members of society. Use of the term has expanded to include anyone with inferior rank or station in a social, political, or other hierarchy.

In this view, Lara Sheehi, racial/ethnic and sexual/gender minorities, and the new categories of APsA members are all subalterns. Anyone identified by what they are not is a Subaltern whose power and voice are diminished by their lesser status; including non-white, non-normative gender or sexuality, as well as new members who are non-clinicians, non-analysts, non-MDs, or non-Training Analysts. It was not lost on our new members that both Lara and Kerry were dissed for what they are not; Lara is not a formally trained psychoanalyst and Kerry no longer practices clinical psychoanalysis. We who’ve trained and practice analysis were quick to disparage those who do not.

Spivak, a postcolonial theorist and professor of comparative literature, brought a feminist, deconstructive lens to *Subaltern Studies*. I will not attempt to unpack the richness of her complex essay but will focus on her clarion question, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* The example Spivak gives is the Indian custom of Sati-suicide, where a widow joins her deceased husband on his funeral pyre. Spivak points out that the Bengali patriarchy spoke for the widow and claimed she took her life out of free will while the British claimed to be saving her from this barbaric custom, thereby giving her free will. Spivak noted this act where “White men save brown women from brown

men” is but one example of the supposed beneficence of the Raj justifying colonization. Spivak emphasizes that neither patriarchy listened to the wife, a subaltern, for the meaning of the act to her. In our speaking controversy Kerry came to represent another hierarchy not heeding the subaltern, but not the only silencing force in APsA.

A silent majority?

There is another silence at APsA. Many of us are reluctant to enter public debate, particularly in the thrust and parry of the Members’ List, now even more so for fear of being called out for enacting racism. As subaltern voices challenge the hegemony of traditional powers at APsA, many of us are silent about the changes underway.

The Holmes Commission report describes that “A climate of fear (typically of retaliation) impedes needed change ...White faculty and candidates were fearful of showing racism or ignorance. These strong subjective states among BIPOC and white faculty and candidates can lead to superficial and ineffectual engagement of race and racism, and even stasis.” P.15

In our controversy Lara Sheehi was not the only one cancelled. Feeling he could no longer lead when his critics dominated the Members List and the Board did not support him, Kerry Sulkowicz resigned as President and has fallen silent. My formulation is that a backlog of ambivalence about the many changes at APsA added fuel to the controversy. In this condensation, Kerry represented a part of us we usually consider “super-altern,” that experienced a taste of subalternity in the controversy. I hesitate to suggest any equivalence but do so in recognition that the unconscious is neither fair nor politically correct. We all harbor unconscious transgressive wishes to murder, assault, and dominate others.

Is there a silent majority opposing change at APsA? Some members comment privately that the changes are “not psychoanalytic enough” and

that our turn to the social dilutes psychoanalysis. They too feel it is not safe to speak at APsA. While that attitude protects their psychoanalytic values it also protects privilege and systemic racism. Neutrality is not apolitical. The majority seem more deaf than silent. If they hear they don't engage, assuming they are secure in their professional enclaves. They too feel it is not safe to speak at APsA.

The Terrorist and the Tyrant

At our worst, we labeled Lara an antisemitic terrorist and Kerry a racist tyrant. The accusations of antisemitism against Lara included allegations that her husband supported the terrorist organization Hezbollah, locating them outside of civilized mores, deserving of silencing, and adding to the constant threats and opprobrium they endure. When he would not agree that his stance toward the Program Committee was an authoritarian, racial enactment, Kerry was portrayed as a racist tyrant who must resign.

Such accusations are standard political tactics to discredit an opponent in the court of public opinion. Racism and terrorism are two of the strongest moral condemnations of our time. As the rhetoric heats up there is a rush to judgment. The war on terror is extended to speech acts. If you don't agree that something is a racial enactment, racism is implied in the urge to reproach

Another political tactic is the trope of a "silent majority" who oppose change. Silence can be a passive aggressive delay, a flight tactic, while aggressive advocacy or opposition becomes a fight tactic, together producing a fight/flight basic assumption group.

We have a standoff where the subaltern shouts to be heard and some clap back while the majority don't speak. The silent majority is a conservative trope invoked to counter progressive movements by another kind of guard – to preserve not only privilege but psychoanalytic identity and values. I do not think there is a silent majority at APsA opposed to change. I believe that we want change but are conflicted about how to achieve it. Most of us are bystanders. I suggest that “abdicating bystanders,” Stuart Twemlow’s term for those who sit on the sidelines, is more accurate than “silent majority”. We all have to engage and not retreat into enclaves. Both the implementation of change and preservation of values are weakened by our polarization. Qui bono? If we are divided who benefits? The enemies of psychoanalysis and its humanist values.

What is a psychoanalytic approach? In our turn to the social we not only want to recognize the social in theory and clinical practice we also want to bring a psychoanalytic perspective to group and political dynamics in society.

Representation

Spivak can help us here. The first and obvious reading of her essay is a straightforward call to listen to the subaltern. Spivak revised her article in a subsequent publication, emphasizing the problem of representation, who speaks for the sub-altern, and, instead of political representation calls for a re-presentation of the subaltern, as in literature, her original field. Art and reportage are best able to re-present the subaltern. George Floyd’s death was a piercing re-presentation of the subaltern speaking, his murder captured on video by Darnella Frazier, a courageous young Black witness.

But George Floyd moments are rare. It is well-nigh impossible for the subaltern to speak so directly. They need the tools to speak, the language,

delivery, and access to an audience, but the subaltern lives in a different world and needs representation. George Floyd's death speech required representation. But usually when someone speaks for the subaltern they bring their own values. The patriarchs of Bengal claimed the widows wished to die with their husbands while the English patriarchy claimed to be saving them. Spivak implies similar for activists and their opponents – that our own values and ambitions come into play when we claim to speak for the people. Politicians seek power, scholars academic capital, professionals a share of the market.

It is no coincidence that pandemonium broke out immediately after the expansion of APsA membership. We evoked a desire to belong by those previously excluded by inviting membership in a reimagined, welcoming APsA but when all our fears crystallized around Lara speaking we disappointed them when her exclusion signified the ambivalence of our invitation.

This is a soul defining moment for APsA. Our actions need to match our aspirations for recognizing the social in psychoanalysis. Our commitment to racial equality is challenged. We need to deliver the home we promised. For APsA to be a truly inclusive psychoanalytic community we must work through our resistances without silencing anyone to achieve as democratic a consensus as possible.

Reciprocity

We need reciprocity in speaking and listening to each other. Too often we speak to prove our belief, to convert others to our cause, or to mobilize our base, rather than to converse with one another in an exchange of views and

opinions. Listening means hearing someone, considering what they say, not looking for a riposte to “own” them.

Can those in the “superaltern” position listen but also speak and not retreat into enclaves of illusory safety? Can the subaltern speak and be listened to? Can the subalterns listen as well as call out those who say something objectionable, giving their other the space to speak and be listened to? Can we listen without disqualifying each other as terrorists or tyrants, non-analysts or rigid stereotypes, woke or racist? We know the limits of confrontation in the consulting room, the same applies in groups and in society. Democratic change requires confrontation leavened with compassion and the courage to listen to the other as we reshape our habitus. The national movement for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion recognizes that it must lead to Belonging. Inclusion means opening the door, belonging means being accepted and listened to even when you rock the boat. If expanded membership does not lead to true belonging, it will fail. We have to do more than invite people to join, we have to be willing for our home to be reshaped by and for them as APsA becomes their home too.

Conclusion

If there is a silver lining in this controversy it is the passionate engagement of so many members. Enactments are mutually constructed and each of us must reflect on our part. All of us, both active participants and bystanders, are implicated in this traumatic institutional enactment. The final report and recommendations of the Holmes Commission will help but the work of repair is up to all of us.

In closing, I believe that Lara Sheehi and Kerry Sulkowicz both deserve our apologies. Not to equate their personal merit or the merit of the positions

we've projected onto them. The equivalence is that both are used as receptacles for our projections in the fight or flight basic assumption group functioning that APsA so often devolves into. All of us bear responsibility for the breakdown of communication and rupture of our community. Repair depends on our ability to own our projections, to speak truthfully, and listen carefully to each other.

Although I disapprove of some her positions, leaving Lara off the June Panel on Treatment in War deprived us of hearing about clinical work with Palestinians by Palestinian therapists. This is a missing link in our discussion of bringing the social into psychoanalysis – accounts of how it is actually happening in treatment. In the clinical vignettes of activist therapists that I've read, their technique is within analytic parameters and we should not assume that their provocative public rhetoric reflects their therapeutic technique.

Condemning indigenous practices as immoral is a classic strategy for justifying colonization. A contemporary version is the 'war on terror' where the desperate, asymmetrical tactics of an outgunned, marginalized group fighting for their survival are condemned by the civilized liberal powers for amoral, barbaric terrorism. In a recent lecture, *States of Denial: How democratic society manages to square its liberal values with the 'war on terror'* Conor Gearty, Professor of human rights law, stated "The 'war on terror' was building on a long tradition of squaring illiberal treatment of the other with the celebration of the liberal values of the rest of us."

Bringing British law and values to India were justifications for its colonization. In addition to banning sati the excesses of Indian military rebellion, such as the Black Hole of Calcutta, were publicized as primitive

immorality while the depredations of the Raj went unremarked. Today, revolutionary groups are deemed terrorists and the resulting outrage obscures and justifies ongoing oppression. Meanwhile the civilian casualties of sanctioned bombing by liberal powers are accepted as unavoidable collateral damage. The deadly migration gauntlets and monopolization of Covid vaccines by the global North are condoned. Wars and walls are funded instead of addressing the inequities underlying subaltern rebellions.

Spivak, with her concept of “strategic essentialism” argues that the tactics of liberation may require a temporary essential focus to achieve specific goals, not a universal, permanent notion to create a new hierarchy of doer-done to. People of color, Black colleagues in particular, are rightfully concerned, as Dorothy Holmes reminds us, about being downed yet again, and not let this momentum to break the chokehold of racial oppression slip away. But when confrontation polarizes a community the democratic consensus necessary for deeper change can be blocked.

On the Member’s List and elsewhere we too often talk past or attack each other rather than listen, reflect, and dialogue. We are beginning to establish better venues for listening and, hopefully, repair. The question is, will both sides of the conflict participate? We have to demonstrate to those who feel in a subaltern position at APsA that we truly will listen to and be responsive to them. This includes the “silent majority” when they experience a taste of subalternity. We must welcome dissent. Cancelling each other gets us nowhere.