

Psychoanalysis and the Public Sphere: 'Authoritarianism in All its Guises: Right, Left and Centre' 30 Sep to 1 Oct [Panel 4: Freud's the Ego and the Id: 100 Years Later]

Revisiting Taiwan's Authoritarian Past Through Freud's 'The Ego and the Id': A Contemporary Exploration

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Abstract:

This presentation emerged from a sore spot – the kind of sore spot that pulses with an ancient ache, refusing to find stillness. The pain caught me in a passionate unrest, turning my pages and engulfing me in a subdued fury. Revisiting 'The Ego and the Id' goes beyond its role as a theoretical composition; it becomes a dialogical and affective quest, unveiling the complexities of psychosocial troubles of identity, desires, and oppression – not solely of individuals but of an entire nation. Historical reiterations of dictatorial 'thou shalt' (Freud, 1923: 55) echo resoundingly throughout contemporary Taiwan. If Japan stood as the foreign father – stern but devoid of the embrace of love – the subsequent rule of the Republic of China, the 'biological' father of Taiwan, was characterised by militarisation and violence. My inquiry repositions the father, the manifold 'authoritarian fathers' of Taiwan, who fixed social relations into precise configurations of dominance and submission. It delves into the influences of these preceding fathers, who assume everyday guises as ego-ideals, dictating how one should be in order to be loved.

Presenter's Bio:

Nini Kerr is a Lecturer in Counselling, Psychotherapy and Applied Social Sciences at the University of Edinburgh. She has published extensively in the field of psychosocial studies and recently won the Good Practice Research Award in the category of Positive Disruptor Award in 2022 in recognition of her sustained achievements in innovating and revitalising research practices that promote social justice and equality. She is a Scholar of the British Psychoanalytic Council. She sits on the Executive Board for the Association for Psychosocial Studies and the Editorial Boards for *New Associations* and *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*

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On my last trip home, I visited the National Human Rights Museum on Green Island, a remote Taiwanese location where political prisoners from the White Terror era (1947-1987) were held. When I came home, I eagerly shared what I saw with you, my mother, who's never been: the solemn wall with engraved names of those persecuted as political criminals; the photo gallery of the individuals, revealing innocence often vindicated posthumously or stolen youth spent behind bars. These tales included anguished parents crossing treacherous waters all for mere 15 minutes with their imprisoned children. As I spoke, your expression became pensive, as if you were hearing these for the very first time. It was as though, through my words, your daughter who had long departed from Taiwan, the history was reborn anew before your eye. I went on, "and beneath the list of names, a line read: "Official figures; many more believed executed".

With your hand resting upon your chest, at your heart centre, you said that your father had once been taken away by the police for three days after a neighbour overheard him whisper "police theft" – this is something you knew, but never thought about- what Freud would call the 'descriptive unconscious' or Bollas, 'the unthought known'. You recalled how, in your time, schoolchildren were told that those imprisoned on Green Island were major political criminals sentenced to face their fate. You recalled how speaking your mother tongue back then was forbidden; only 'Mandarin' ('the national language') was allowed. Those who broke this rule faced punishment and shaming. You jokingly said, as a child you used to be worried that a slip of the tongue into Taiwanese, your dialect, could result in being sent to Green Island!

Perhaps when you then cut yourself off in the middle of a sentence, saying, "but, there's no point in saying anything, anymore, is there?", it wasn't an admission of defeat but a declaration of a deferred truth. To you, history was a narrative of trauma, sorrow, of 'abuse by the outsiders', and silence became your way of life - a necessity, and an inevitability.

Delving into Taiwan's history reveals the double-spectres of colonisation and authoritarianism (Jacobs, 2019). Under the autocratic leadership of Chiang Kai-Shek and later his son Chiang Ching-Kuo, Taiwan endured a highly militarised and oppressive regime. This period culminated in the period of 'White Terror', one of Taiwan's darkest chapters, spanning four decades from 1947 to 1987. If we view the Republic of China who fled China to Taiwan, symbolised by the Chiangs as Taiwan's 'biological' father, who used violence to enforce its authority on his reclaimed, long estranged child, it was hardly Taiwan's first paternal figure whose interests lied not in the child, but in himself. The legacy of the authoritarian ruling extended seamlessly further back to the Japanese occupation of the island before the Chiangs arrived. From 1895 to 1945, Taiwan endured a five-decade-long colonial rule, enduring its "Military Suppression" with around 3,500 executions, its "Assimilation" and later "Japanisation" which sought to instill Japanese identity and values to turn Taiwan into a child he could love. Yet, colonisation, at its core, is about authority, exploitation, and control. Taiwan was never a child that Japan could fully love.

Freud's concept of the ego's relationship with the id suggests that they are not separate entities but rather dynamic forces within us. The id, housing instincts and repressed materials, represents uncontrollable passions within the self. Freud's

metaphor of "a man on horseback" is often misinterpreted as implying the ego's control over the id. His subsequent line clarifies that the ego must "hold in check the *superior strength* of the horse, highlighting the ego's vulnerability and anxiety in the face of the id's overwhelming force. The ego-id interplay illustrates that the ego is not only decentralised but also fragmented and that we are subject to uncontrollable forces that can defy our best judgements and common sense. We are "lived" by forces beyond our individual selves. The super-ego takes shape through our earliest identifications with the external authority, and this influence endures throughout our lives, asserting dominion over us. We submit ourselves to the super-ego and in Freud's words, his dictatorial 'thou-shalt', as much as a child is once placed "under a compulsion to obey" their external authority (Freud, 1923: 35).

He further postulates two fundamental aspects linked to the origin of the super-ego - "one of a biological and the other of a historical nature" (p. 35).

The biological and the historical intertwine in the formation of the super-ego. The biological superego is rooted in early experiences of a forceful separation from our desires. The historical superego refers to the repetition of prohibition and deprivation which becomes imprinted in our collective psyche of should and shouldn't. Historical experiences structure our emotional experiences. When these traumatic anguish, too painful to be grappled with consciously, are consistently repeated across generations, they evolve into experiences of the id, leaving enduring imprints that are preserved across generations. Re-reading Freud's "Ego and the Id" upon its centenary year offers timely insights on the interplay between the ego, super-ego, and id as chronicling an unending cycle of psychological inheritance marked by the enduring impact of political trauma and the recurrent fragmentation of the ego, burdened by id's memories across different times.

The history of Taiwan reveals that it was the authoritarian fathers whose legacies became history, their language the official tongue. In their reigns, their lives were epics, odysseys, marking the absolute beginning. The intergenerational super-ego of Taiwan emerges as a paternal persona encompassing all the fathers who came before, binding the biological and historical fathers together into a striking figure: one who is sparing with words but whose volatile temper, relished as masculine pride, instills a perpetual, paranoid dread in his children – the imminent threat of tyrannical outbursts, of violence that requires no justification, and of losing one's identity, our collective identity, as we compulsively search for it, and lose it over and over again.

Freud's poignant line, "To the ego, living means the same as being loved - being loved by the super-ego" (1923: 58), resonates deeply. He explains that feeling loved by the super-ego, the loved and feared father figure, provides the comforting assurance of protection in a world that often teeters on the edge of chaos. However, revisiting the contemporary history of Taiwan, we see how this love is one fraught with persecutory angst and unmet desires - a transaction in which the pursuit of love takes on the burden of conformity.

The super-ego is not a static entity; its influence is contingent upon its interactions with the ego. As Freud explained, the super-ego's authoritative hold over the ego gains strength from the ego's continuous submission to it, which the ego demonstrates through persistent resistance against the id. Yet, the id never sits still. The ego's

resistance manifests as an inherent and ongoing counteraction to the id's superior strength - whose formidable power lies in its unbridled emotionality, which threatens to reveal to ourselves the depths of our true feelings, often with an intensity that defies easy reconciliation. If the super-ego stands for the critical tradition to produce stable and fixed meanings, beliefs, and authorities from a moral high ground, then the id's superior strength would lie in its ability to evoke profound feelings within the ego from 'the deepest strata' (Freud, 1923: 21). Like an underground library, the id possesses boundless capacity for inheritance, preserving fragments of numerous ego struggles that came before us.

I think of the many lives taken by the authoritarian fathers of Taiwan, whose rebellion left their marks not only on historical but also on the psychic archive of Taiwanese people. Their rebellion against the authoritarian fathers left behind traces of an anti-oppressive path, ensuring that subsequent generations would keep the flame of hope alive for liberation, for a democratic society. Their life-history remodelled the collective psyche, and their images a reflection of what matters more than life itself.

To Freud, the question, 'How does something become conscious?' holds little analytic relevance. Instead, he suggests a more meaningful inquiry: 'How does something become *preconscious*?' According to Freud, the task of allowing the repressed to gradually emerge involves 'becoming connected with the word-presentations'. This enables us to evoke what he referred to as the 'residues of memories' (Freud, 1923: 23). Within the id, we encounter the memory traces of past generations oppressed by political injustices, and the profundity of these experiences transforms into unspoken affects—feelings of despair, loss, anxiety, and rage—all of which have endured exile at the hands of the super-ego. They bear the mark of what is real, revived in the form of passions which set in motion endless, fervent quests taking us closer to discovering what Taiwanese people truly want.

Even as the ego becomes undone in the face of authority, the remnants of memory live on through the id. As Freud reminds us, the id is perpetually seeking to be known by the ego, always striving to transcend the ancient bond the ego has formed with the super-ego, despite the ego's resistance to give it voice. The id remains vigilant, waiting for the moment of contingencies where the ego can come closer to it, to what it knows, what it remembers – a moment, quoting Karl Figlio “when one is seized, not just by that person's tragedy, but by sadness at loss” (p. 214).

Above all else, you fell silent to let me speak, to hear all the things you have known all your life, spoken and communicated so they can be grappled with and felt once again. To have them remembered by me, your daughter who has gone astray from home, is your greatest satisfaction; to have your alternative truth kept alive in my mind, your delight in justice.

Now this conversation between us is coming to an end and we both know what will follow before I depart from Taiwan once again. In the next few days, I will become frustrated with you for imposing an impossible standard of perfection on me for all the chores you wanted me to help with, and you will accuse me of being narcissistic and deeply insensitive to others' needs. We will become angry with each other and in our anger we will find a peculiar solace that makes the impending separation bearable. Deep down, we will both look forward to the day when we meet again, knowing that

we will never need to be the right kind of citizen, right kind of 'subject' for each other in order to be loved by each other.

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