

The traumatic history of psychoanalysis

[BOOK REVIEW]

Kuriloff, Emily A (2014) **Contemporary psychoanalysis and the legacy of the Third Reich: History, memory, tradition**. New York: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-88319-1 pbk. Pages xvi +177.

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In the final chapter of **Contemporary psychoanalysis and the legacy of the Third Reich** (2014), Emily Kuriloff refers to having asked psychoanalyst Jack Drecher whether he thought the field of psychoanalysis had been influenced by “the Shoah” (p143). The answer Kuriloff quotes, “How could psychoanalysis *not* have been influenced by its own history” may be, as she suggests, characteristically Jewish (in responding to a question with another one) but it is, of course, much more than that. How could the most terrifying genocide in living memory, directed to the extermination of the very people that gave rise to the description of psychoanalysis as “the Jewish profession”, have not influenced both the theory and practice of psychoanalysis in important ways?

I raise this point via Drecher’s question because the book’s main title, together with its expansive subtitle, plays an important part in my response to it. While it is true that the history of psychoanalysis, like that of any other field, must always also be about “memory” and “tradition” in some sense of these terms, this title, applied to a genocide in particular, raises expectations that the book might connect its subject matter to some of what I believe to be amongst the interesting concerns in contemporary thought. Kuriloff’s title certainly echoes those of Dominick LaCapra (1994) in **Representing the Holocaust: History, theory, trauma and History and memory after Auschwitz** (1998) or that of Cathy Caruth’s (1995) edited collection entitled **Trauma: Explorations in memory**.

With expectations of this kind still more or less in mind, I closed the book with a response best described as disappointment. But, knowing that disappointment may be unfair response, I think it important to say at the outset that **Contemporary psychoanalysis and the legacy of the Third Reich** has much that is of interest to present. The material Emily Kuriloff has

gathered is both rich and rare and the disappointment I experienced does not relate to the material itself but stems from what is done, or rather not done, with this material. The first thing that Kuriloff does not do with the material is organize it clearly, a problem that the form of the work makes clear.

The book is based almost entirely on in-depth, first person interviews with some of the more important names in the history of psychoanalysis; people who had a personal relation to the Holocaust as survivors, the children or descendants of survivors or those who lost close relatives in the gas chambers. It is a slim book, divided into seven chapters, each of which has a number of subheadings. For example, the first chapter, entitled, "It's not what you have written down" has twelve subheadings, some of which are followed by no more than one paragraph, while the longest of these subsections (that which ends the chapter) covers approximately three and a half pages. The subheadings themselves are very varied in form and style including cryptic short titles like, "The silence" or "Exile" as well as bold ones such as "History and personal history".

This pattern, a chapter followed by short headings (sometimes just the name of an interviewee, or of a period or theme) characterizes all the chapters and accounts for much that is problematic in the work. As you read these sections there is little sense of why they follow each other in that particular order, nor does the subtitle chosen obviously fit or illuminate what follows and, as the book unfolds, the sense of many roads - from highways to foot paths - contemplated, but not taken, grows.

One road Kuriloff appears, for example, to contemplate taking is that related to the fact that some of the analysts she talks to seem to think it right to separate their memories of suffering or trauma from their work and seem, in addition, to be unwilling to relate their personal experiences of "extraordinary human unhappiness" and doubt, as Dora Hartmann puts it, that many aspects of her experience at the hands of the Nazis are "really of professional interest" (p15).

Although it is true that that Dora Hartmann's personal experiences may not, as Kuriloff points out, have been as horrifying as those of others, the point I see in germinal form at this early stage in the book is not just a personal one, nor can it be confined to the question of "professional interest". It relates to the much bigger question as to what counts as trauma, and what kinds of trauma, experienced by the analyst or her patients, should be seen as pathogenic and in what particular ways.

Something of the complexity of this question emerges explicitly in the material Kuriloff presents in two later interviews. Under the subtitle "As if nothing happened" Dr Nathalie Zajde talks of the significant differences between her training in France and her work in California. She talks about contexts in which reference to the transmission of trauma within Jewish survivor families is understood and conceptualized and where it is not, and goes on to refer to working with a follower of George Devereaux, an ethnologist and psychoanalyst, who encouraged her to work with her own "ethnic" trauma. Zajde goes on to say that her parents were hidden children and her grandparents deported to Auschwitz and to talk of her own "Yiddishkeit" and its "terrible disappearance" (p121).

Crucially, at the end of the section, Kuriloff quotes Zajde as saying:

"I tried to have my psychoanalyst get interested in it too - to think of me not only in terms of drives and unconscious - but also through my origins, my family, my story, etc - but she couldn't given the fact, I think, that she was a very serious and strict Freudian analyst." (p121)

There is much that is of importance in this quotation. Zajde seems to be talking of what Kuriloff refers to much earlier as “blind spots in the consulting room”. But if so, what kind of blind spot is this? The ambiguity here, as I see it, relates to whether Zajde’s analyst’s unwillingness to discuss certain aspects of the patient’s life in the therapy, is a conscious, theoretically-based decision or a symptom, “a defensive distortion” based in some way on the legacy of the Third Reich (p72).

I highlight this point because there are a number of places in the book in which this question is raised - albeit on another level. There is that of psychoanalysis as “a profession long burdened by its insularity and divisiveness” (p142), which is reminiscent of something said earlier by Regine Locket who refers to the “furnace of theoretical discussion” given the label of “theoretical differences”, but ones Locket sees as stemming from “blaming others for one’s own inability to integrate parts of yourself and your past ... the German past that is hard to accept” (p76).

And then, under the heading, “Nothing is off limits”, there is the material that emerges in the very rich interview Kuriloff has with Robert Prince after reading his book entitled **The Legacy of the holocaust: Psycho-historical themes in the second generation**. Kuriloff, rightly I think, devotes a lot of space to this interview, one in which Prince is very clear what the legacy of the holocaust means to him – as a person, as an analyst and as an analyst of a particular orientation. He believes that his experience as a member of “the second generation” has everything to do with his professional life. He talks, for example, of growing up as the only child of holocaust survivors and of his sense that in choosing a healing profession he was trying to heal parents. He talks too of his own aggression and his projections and of encountering “the dark side of psychoanalysis in Freud” (p143).

Prince, crucially, says, that he was warned that psychoanalysis was not interested in the impact of “historical” trauma on the individual in adult life but rather focused on infantile trauma with its emphasis on the “canonical centrality of the psychosexual unconscious” (p147). As important he talks of the confluence of historical and personal dynamics in his work saying, “I guess the holocaust drew me to interpersonal psychoanalysis” because “as the famous saying goes what really happens really matters” (p147).

I have referred to the Prince interview in detail, and linked it to other interviews, because I am hoping to illustrate what I think is of interest in **Contemporary psychoanalysis and the legacy of Third Reich** but also why I found it disappointing. Choosing these examples from the interviews Kuriloff has presented, it seems to me that the issues raised by her interviewees are concerned with no less a question than that concerning the limits of psychoanalysis, as both theory and practice. And this is the second thing that Kuriloff does not do – she does not make the centrality of these issues and what is at stake in them, clear.

Firstly, we can take the idea that the psychoanalytic profession, with its theoretical divisiveness can be related to the holocaust, and to the “Jewishness” that was its deadly target. Where people were, where they moved to, or were in exile and how close they were to Auschwitz, all played a part in establishing what their theoretical affiliations and their instantiations in practice came to be.

Zajde’s “strict Freudian” could be seen to embody the classic view that ordinary or even extra ordinary human unhappiness should not be confused with neurotic misery, nor should the extraordinary experiences of the adult ego be confused with those always “other” intrusions from the unconscious. A strict Freudian draws classic distinctions; should not forget that mourning is significantly different from melancholia, that real, adult trauma lures the

unconscious and in doing so implicates, to a greater or lesser extent, that which has its origin in the traumatic fantasies of childhood.

Secondly, Prince's almost throw away comment that "what really happens really matters", *really matters* to the history of psychoanalysis itself. For a start (and it is not really only 'for a start') it opened up the space for interpersonal psychoanalysis and similarly also opened up a space outside psychoanalysis that has yielded much for the study of trauma more widely. To return to LaCapra in **History and memory after Auschwitz**, (and to the term "historical trauma" used by Prince referred to earlier) it has opened up the "problematic distinction between structural or existential trauma and historical trauma that enables one to pose the problem of the relations between the two" (LaCapra, 1998: 47). And discussions of this problematic distinction continue to prove fruitful in many ways and in many unexpected places.

Finally, I think it important to make it clear that am not saying that Kuriloff *should* have explicitly demonstrated an awareness of any of these wider issues, nor can she be asked to have taken a stand on any one of them. My personal disappointment may stem from her not making any of these more reflective moves, but perhaps more legitimately, I believe she could, minimally, have been expected to organize her rich material with more insight.

In the end the book feels like the first draft of a thesis that a very good PhD student, who has gathered wide ranging and rich material, might have produced before attempting to pull it all together. It is a book filled with the thoughts, opinions, and experiences provided by some very remarkable people, one which reads as the work of someone who, perhaps intentionally, wants to do these people justice by letting this rich data speak for itself. But although **Contemporary psychoanalysis and the legacy of the Third Reich: History, memory, tradition**, is undoubtedly a book about real (and really living) issues, in standing this far back from them, it is one that pays the price of being a book without a real author.

References

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