

# POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND THE DIALECTICS OF HOPE

**Professor Andrew Samuels**  
**Society of Analytical Psychology London**

[andrew@andrewsamuels.net](mailto:andrew@andrewsamuels.net)

[www.andrewsamuels.com](http://www.andrewsamuels.com)

*I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will – Antonio Gramsci*

PP1

## INTRODUCTION

May I be personal as an opening?

I have been unusually lucky in obtaining work as a political consultant with political leaders, parties and activist groups. These experiences have included working in the 1990s on questions of leadership with Tony Blair and the Labour Party at a time when there seemed to be bright futures for him and for the party. I also worked on both Obama presidential campaigns in 2008 and 2012. Again, the theme was leadership and what the candidate might make of his beloved phrase 'the father of the nation'.

In the professional field, I was one of the two founders of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility (the organization behind the journal *Psychotherapy and Politics International*), and was a co-founder of the Psychotherapy and Counselling Union. These groups were active in the June 2017

general election in the UK, because there was (and is) a huge onslaught in the country on the rights and conditions of the ‘mentally ill’. I am ashamed to say that the mainstream therapy professional organisations are silent on such questions, leaving it up to these smaller, radical groupings.

So it is obvious that I am an enthusiast for the interfacing of what I call ‘therapy thinking’ and politics. I have worked in this field for more than 40 years but, just at the time when there could be said to be a ‘political turn’ in the therapies, I am beginning to get a bit worried and sceptical. Is the political turn just a fashion or fad? Will actual clinical practice receive a political boost, or will it be ‘business as usual’?

I am concerned that therapists and people in the psychological world just try to outdo each other in espousal of progressive politics, forgetting that our own professional politics have, historically, been rather demeaning and still involve massive personalising and polarizing of the issues. I expect my readers know about this shadow aspect of our work.

In addition, the record of the psychotherapies, particularly psychoanalysis and Jungian analysis, with regard to ethnic and sexual minorities has not been good. We have historically stigmatised and inferiorised both groups of humanity. Things seem to have changed, and we see a swing to an opposite point of view in which ethnic minorities and Persons of Colour are now idealized. Looks good, right? But it may be said, in Edward Said’s term, to constitute ‘Orientalism’. This means that what looks like liberal support and admiration for the oppressed Other is really still a kind of colonial superiority, involving a whole set of Olympian norms.

Jungians have a lot to think about here. The question is not only

whether Jung was an anti-Semite or racist. Maybe he was, and his writings have put off a lot of people from reading his works or training in his tradition. The problem is not Jung's problem. It is our problem, and we should take steps to distance ourselves from Jung - without losing our affectionate and respectful connection to him.

But there is a lot of denial going on around these matters and the recent publication of an Open Letter on 'Jung and "Africans"' in eight journals is significant. The *British Journal of Psychotherapy* first published the Open Letter on Jung and 'Africans' written by an international and diverse group of Jungian analysts, clinicians, and academics: <http://bit.ly/2Q9ajAG>

Here is just one example of the things Jung writes that create concern and disquiet:

An incident in the life of a bushman may illustrate what I mean. A bushman had a little son whom he loved with the tender monkey-love characteristic of primitives. Psychologically, this love is completely auto erotic that is to say the subject loves himself in the object. The object serves as a sort of erotic mirror. One day the bushman came home in a rage; he had been fishing as usual, and caught nothing. As usual the little fellow came to meet him, but his father seized hold of him and wrung his neck on the spot. Afterwards, of course, he mourned for the dead child with the same unthinking abandon that had brought about his death. (*CW6, para 403, written in 1926 but never revised right up to the Collected Works publication in 1961.*)

Jung never revised his thoughts of this nature though he could have and so the passage, and many like it, is in the official works that we all study. It is really sad. By the way, this wasn't something Jung saw

or experienced! He heard it third-hand as a gossip. And now it is in *Psychological Types* for ever.

To rectify things, here's a magnificent picture of a Bushman hunter:



*A Bushman hunter*

PP2

Now, I want to explain succinctly how this talk 'works'.

I am interested in how risk creates political hope.

As my own example of taking a risk, I first suggest that therapists try to re-evaluate what they think about the incredibly risky business of political violence.

## POLITICAL VIOLENCE

The material on political violence falls into three sections: (i) a general exploration of political violence; (ii) a discussion of how to turn the tap of political violence off once it has been turned on; (iii) I'll be looking towards Islamic social philosophy for a fresh and inspiring angle on political violence.

I am going to talk about the present day *fascination* of the idea and image of political violence – particularly for people who do not carry

out political violence. Yet I will root my talk in the past, in the '60s and '70s because I was there.

Political violence takes place on the right and on the left. Political violence may be an outcrop of a desire to end oppression. But political violence may also be an attempt to impose a single point of view on everyone. Whatever, it is political violence that today fills our dreams and even our fantasies. It makes us, it makes *me*, anxious.

There is also a range of clinical motivations I'd like to mention. One of my very first clients in 1972 was a member of Britain's Angry Brigade. He is dead now so I can speak relatively freely. Britain's Angry Brigade was equivalent of the Bader-Meinhof Group in Germany or the Red Brigades in Italy, or the Tupamaros in Uruguay or the Weathermen in the United States. Not everyone will know or remember that in the 1970s there was a global phenomenon of urban terrorism; it did not begin with 9/11.

It was an important experience to dialogue in therapy with someone who was talking about setting off bombs. My then supervisor was influenced by Thomas Szasz's ethics of psychoanalysis in which the business of an analyst is *solely to analyse*. This made it impossible for me to contemplate doing anything about it.

Anyway, Phil left therapy after a while and, to this day, remains one of only two clients in 46 years of practice who have gone off owing me money. In his case, the huge sum of EUROS 15. (The other one was an Israeli who chose me because I was Jewish and then discovered I was one of the founders of Jews for Justice for Palestinians. No prizes for guessing what happened then.)

So - over the years, I have worked with some clients whose attitudes to collective political violence do not resemble those of most liberal

citizens. These clients chose me because of my writings, allegiances and engagements. It was rarely an accident. This business of therapist selection continues to be important in all contexts – we don't discuss this enough, I think.

Whatever - I have heard much in sessions about why 9/11 served the Americans right, about the role of Western foreign and military policies in the rise of ISIS/Daesh, about the biases of the Western media – for example, in relation to the bombing of Belgrade or to Putin's Russia.

I am not saying I am the only therapist who has worked with such clients, nor, at this point, whether I disagreed or agreed with what I was hearing. Such a simplistic report would not represent the relational and responsible approach to working with politics in the clinical setting that I have evolved over the years.



***THE KILLING OF MICHAEL BROWN IN FERGUSON,  
MISSOURI IN 2014***

The world is frighteningly coloured by the naked is-ness of political violence. It is hard to pick one's way through its embodied omnipresence, even if we are sometimes told – counterintuitively – that human violence is actually decreasing. Tell that the refugees and enforced migrants. Just recently we can consider: Israel/Palestine, Egypt, Ukraine, Congo, Nigeria, Turkey, Tunisia, Syria Iraq, the American southern states, and Paris, Berlin, Brussels, London and Manchester. Truly, all over the UK and the United States at this very moment. The US Presidential Election was shot through with violence.

The image is, of course, of the moment Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson in 2014.

My worry is that, by raising the problem of political violence, I might be perceived as making an inflated claim, either on my own behalf or on behalf of my profession, of offering to solve, or salve, or heal our terrifying situation. Yes, this possibility that I am coming with **ANSWERS** has worried me deeply. I am not.

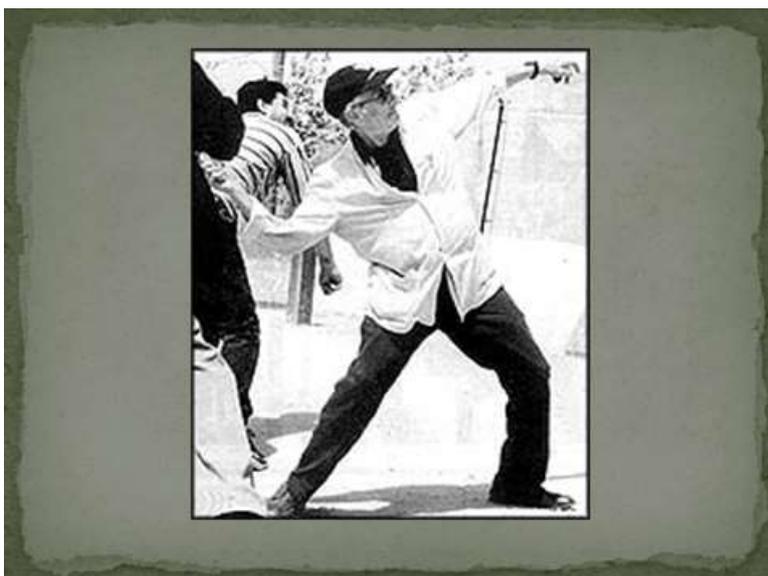
Many important and complicated questions concerning political violence have been much worked on in academic, activist, psychosocial and faith circles. I have contributed, but there is not time to go into these questions, most of them rather well known.



### ***A MAN OUTSIDE A BANK IN ATHENS IN 2015***

PP4

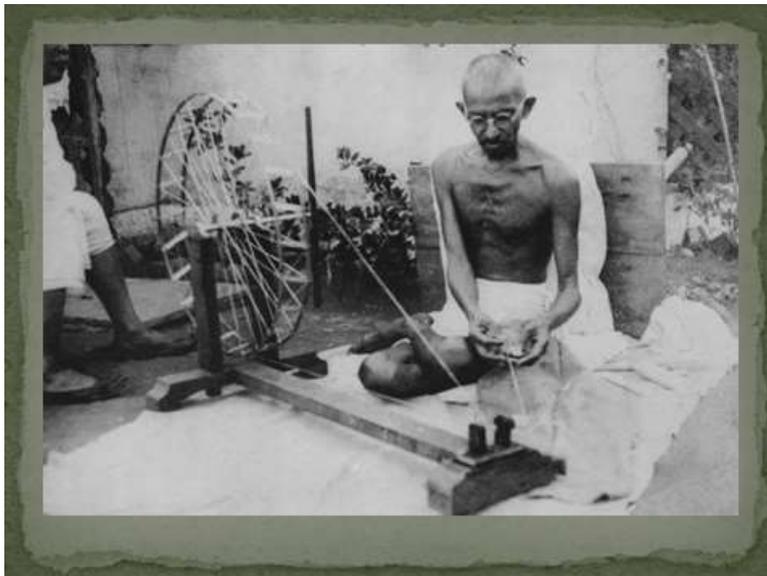
The Athenian man is crying with a queue for the bank in the background. This was at the height of the economic crisis in Greece in 2015, also understandable as a crisis of masculinity – hence the widespread violent response. Recognising this pattern in which frustration turns to violence is important.



## ***PROFESSOR EDWARD SAID THROWING A STONE***

PP5

The anxiety I confessed at the start to also stems from what happened to a far more important figure than I am, when he was accused of participating in and promoting political violence. This was one of my own heroes, the Palestinian academic and advocate for peace and dialogue in Israel/Palestine: the celebrated writer on post-colonialism Edward Said. Said was photographed participating in a ritual stone throwing at a far-off Israeli watch-tower on the Lebanon border. Responding to the furore that ensued, Said later stated that in one moment, understandably exploited by his enemies, thirty-five years of work for justice and peace had been thrown away. They even withdrew his invitation to give the Sigmund Freud Memorial Lecture in Vienna.

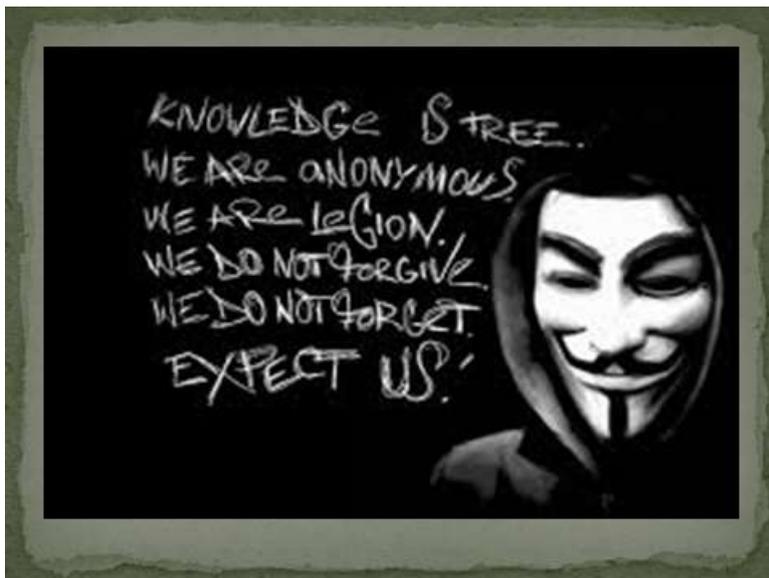


***GHANDI***

PP6

I can illustrate some aspects of the problem of being open-minded about political violence by recounting what happened when I asked the members of four separate on-line discussion lists in the analysis and therapy areas for assistance in finding literature that engaged the question of political violence with an open mind as to its usefulness and value. What I got back was around twenty references to *non-violence*, passive resistance, and Ghandi.

However, over many years reading and re-reading, I have not found the literature in favour of absolute non-violence in politics to be particularly convincing, though I respect it and can often identify with what is being expressed.



### ***VENDETTA MASK AS WORN BY 'ANONYMOUS'***

PP7

So - I don't find theories of absolute non-violence helpful.

But neither do I find romantic, artistic and anarchist (or nihilist) glorifications of violence to be of assistance when bringing therapy

thinking into an engagement with political violence. I certainly understand what Bakunin meant when he said ‘The urge to destroy is a creative urge’. But, despite the iconic Vendetta mask and the ingenuity of the Anonymous group, I don’t think this perspective or this language works well for us today.

Similarly, important ideas, such as those promoted by Slavoj Žižek (2009) concerning the deep and universal presence of state violence, and the internalisations we all make of that, don’t help us much when confronted *as individuals* with the problem of political violence.



### ***AFTER MANDELA’S TREASON TRIAL***

PP8

I’ll conclude the first part of the paper with a brief discussion of what I call the ‘Mandela-Ghandi hybrid’. I find this political fantasy to be a troubling sign of a massive psychopolitical problem.

In a nutshell, I have often found that people with average to little knowledge of the South African situation regard Nelson Mandela as

having followed the path of non-violence. Yet, in 1964, at his trial for planning violent revolution and committing sabotage, he stated:

It [is] unrealistic and wrong for African leaders to continue preaching peace and non- violence at a time when the Government met our peaceful demands with force.

The picture shows the freedom salute being given as the convicted are taken to Robben Island.

Many people who today celebrate South Africa's liberal constitution find it difficult to accept that the carefully and tightly controlled and targeted tactics of the African National Congress's military wing – *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation, known as MK) played a significant part in bringing down the Apartheid regime and Mandela to power. And they forget the key roles of Fidel's soldiers and the training provided by East Germany and Czechoslovakia and paid for by the Soviet Union.



## ***BLACK PANTHERS IN THE 1960s***

PP9

Now I want to make the concern I feel about this crucial topic more conscious and move on to a discussion of what I call ‘turning the tap on and off’, meaning the tap of political violence.

So, how do we turn off the tap of political violence after it has been on for a time? Can we in fact do this? We certainly can’t control the flow of things when violence enters the political picture. Hannah Arendt put it like this, in an article in the *New York Review of Books* in 1969:

If the goals of political violence are not achieved rapidly, the result will not merely be defeat but the introduction of the practice of violence into the whole body politic. Action is irreversible.

Yet even Hannah Arendt noted that:

Violence, contrary to what its prophets try to tell us, is a much more effective weapon of reformers than of revolutionists.

And she quotes Conor Cruise O’Brien with approval: ‘Violence is sometimes needed for the voice of moderation to be heard’.

Indeed, despite her worries over the widespread political violence in the US and Europe in the 1960s, Arendt is ever careful to state and restate that political violence may be conceived of as ‘rational’. I believe she would agree that sometimes, for anything to really matter, for example, for full attention to be paid to the situation of African Americans or Afro Caribbeans here, *it takes a riot*. The picture is from the 1960s of course.

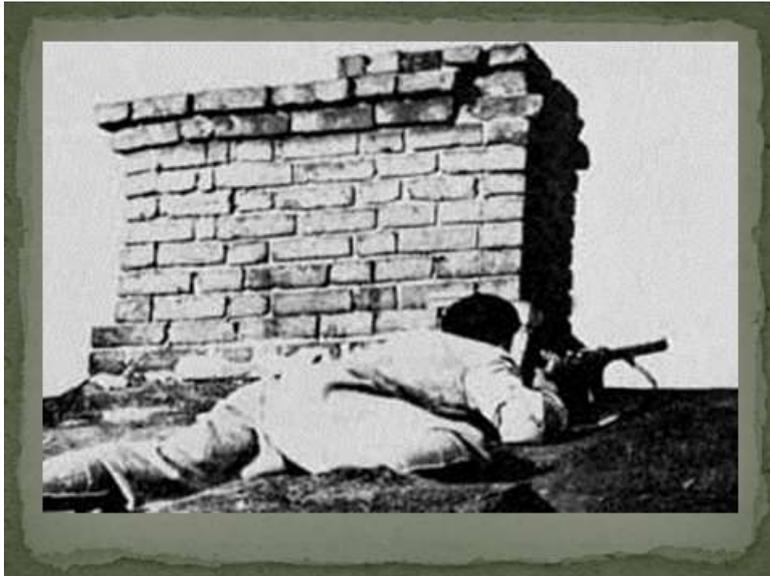
But this one is from 2016 in Baton Rouge:



***NEW BLACK PANTHER PARTY IN 2016***

PP10

When I look at this year's image, I just don't know whether to say 'this is democracy' (a statement) - or 'is this democracy' (a question)?



### ***A JEWISH SNIPER IN THE WARSAW GHETTO***

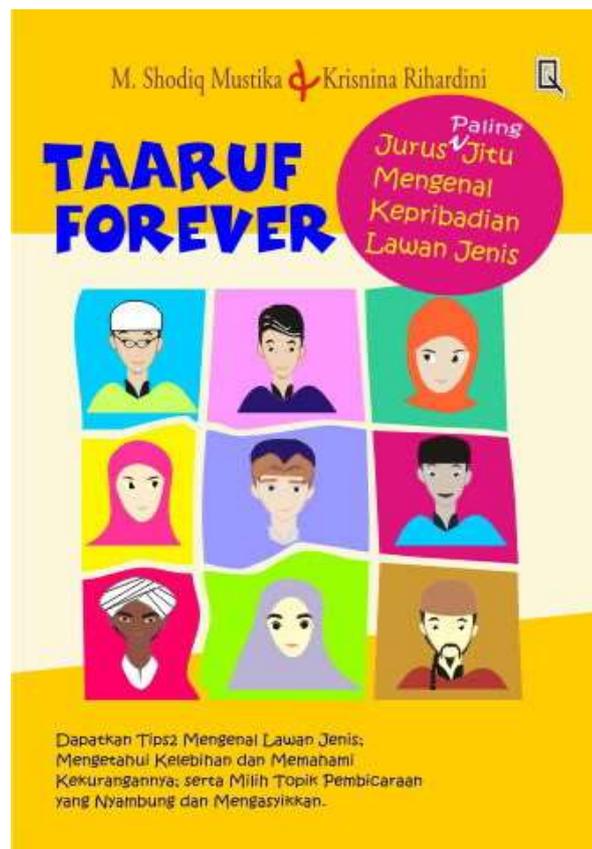
PP11

If we look around, we see that examples of rational political violence abound and have always done so. Some of the images that move us the most include the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, and many of examples of national liberation struggle, including that of Palestine today. This is a Jewish sniper in the Warsaw Ghetto.

With this careful evaluation of political violence in mind, could we possibly try to construct some kind of very modest programme or set of thought experiments that would enable people in the West and North to develop a less absolute and critical and a more empathic and mirroring stance towards the political violence that ‘they’ (the ‘Jihadists’, the Russians, those living in slums and banlieus) do towards ‘us’, the peace-loving Western democrats that ‘we’ are supposed to be, even now?

Maybe this is not possible, and it is the rejection even of the existence of the ethical narratives and political desires of these ‘others’, that causes me to end the paper with a section entitled ‘learning from Islam’. I believe that what follows helps us to consider whether we can go beyond the binary of ‘political violence’ and ‘non-violence’.

## LEARNING FROM ISLAMIC SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY



### ***COVER OF A CHILDREN'S BOOK ON TA'ARUF***

PP12

So - in this spirit, in the third and final section of the paper, I turn to today's Islamic philosophy to see what it might teach us about the value of the mind's ‘turn to violence’.

I have learned a lot at depth from Imams about political violence. They have referred me to the central and important Islamic idea of *Ta'Aruf* found in Surah 49 Ayat 13 of the *Qur'an*: 'Oh Humanity, we have created you male and female, and have made you peoples and tribes, that you might come to know one another.' You can see them on the cover to this children's book, the females and males, the peoples and tribes.

I find this *Ta'Aruf* a brilliantly inspiring take on difference that does not gloss over the violent conflict that encounters with difference inevitably bring. In this reading of things, a point or purpose (*telos*) is given to difference and even to the violence that difference can bring. If we want to know one another in any meaningful way, then that other has to be radically different from ourselves. But we don't automatically love the other do we? Admitting that instantly brings questions of aggressive conflict and violence to the foreground.

There is more to this than simply getting to know the other, important though that is. Analysts and therapists know how full engagement and dialogue with an 'other' benefits the self. I can only whisper the next thought, which is that this might be true even when the dialogue is tinged and irradiated by political violence. If violence is as ubiquitous and omnipresent as Jung and Freud suggest, then that is where we end up.

So there is this fascinating congruence between Islamic

social thought and psychosocial and psychoanalytic ideas about the interconnectedness of hate and love, and how aggressive and even violent acts may also reflect desires for contact, touch recognition and mutual recognition.

Both Islam and psychoanalysis understand that, whether we like it or not, conflict, aggression and violence will arise (though they should not be referred to as ‘erupting’, for there is always a back story).

Unfortunately, I can’t end this section on *Ta ‘Aruf* and what we can learn from Islam without the following anecdote:

I first started to write about *Ta ‘ruf* in the mid to late 1990s. I wrote about how, in certain respects, Islamic commentators were functioning as the ‘therapists of the west’, critiquing the banality and materialism of our cultural practices and ways of living. I quoted one Muslim critic as saying that in the West we live ‘in a brothel’. In general I found many Islamic observations about the spiritual voids in our existence to be spot on. Well, it was an idea, you don’t have to agree with it, please just try to realise what I was getting at, in order to appreciate what happened next.

Anyway, many blogs and comments, including from fellow therapists and analysts, began to discuss what I had written. They started to state that ‘Samuels is saying that *terrorists are the therapists of the West*’. I got hate mail, things thrown at my house, excrement put through

the letter box, the whole treatment. Maybe I was asking for it, but the experience brought me closer to the roots of Islamophobia and therefore of being an Other which is why I am introducing such a downbeat note.

I hope you will agree, it matters a lot what our attitude to political violence is, it matters a lot how we relate to the idea of political violence, it matters a lot that analysts, therapists and psychosocial academics join in discussions about political violence. It matters because political violence in all its many forms is perhaps the key collective issue of our times, now just as it was back then in the '60s and '70s. That is why I decided to introduce this matter today.

## HOPE AND RISK

Hope is as big a concern as political violence. And the question of hope comes up a lot in clinical sessions. We can see that our clients are affected by the catastrophes of the world, not only with their own personal stories. Clients, and therapists too, have the greatest possible interest in the question of hope.

To adapt a famous aphorism of Freud's, hope in our times, for people who regard themselves as humanitarian, progressive - not only radical and leftist- is not only impossible, it is also extremely difficult.

Where is *our* hope going to come from, considering the state we are in, here and now and outside in our fractured and suffering world? As some ecopsychologists put it, the planet is fighting back against the way it has been treated - and will defeat us.

So: Isn't hope in politics somewhat abnormal? What would normal hope look like?

Is hope to flow from psychoanalysis and Jungian analysis? Well, maybe just a bit, but for it to happen psychoanalysis has to change.

**Question:** How many therapists does it take to change the world?

**Answer:** That's the wrong question.

For, on its own, psychoanalysis and Jungian analysis has very little to offer. But with connections made by ourselves to organisations working in front-line, engaged areas, which have very different frameworks of understandings, maybe (only maybe) we can make a modest contribution.

Hence my slogan is: 'One psychoanalyst or Jungian analyst every policy committee – but for God's sake, not a policy committee of psychoanalysts'.

What about the concern of psychoanalysts for 'the Other'? Isn't this a sort of acid test of our political compassion? Surely contemporary practitioners pass this test? Actually, sorry, maybe not.

I see a good deal of abuse of the idea of 'the Other' and of Otherness. It can be as much a marker of White, liberal guilt as genuine reparation. Hence, it is or can be hypocritical, sentimental Orientalising and patronising. I am going to talk about the hypocrisy of Western liberal concern for 'the Other' at the Congress of the International Association for Analytical Psychology in Vienna in August.

And there are other problems with seeing psychotherapy generally as a source of hope. Can we change our clinical theories in response to evolving and present political contexts? In that recent Colloquium on race, I argued that, when working in areas marked by 'difference', concepts like containment and empathy become less obviously

valuable.

For there's a colonial aspect to containment, as the White analyst manages the savage and primitive dynamics of their patient of colour. This way of thinking needs revisioning. Similarly, empathy's stepping into the shoes of the other, is ludicrous and arrogant given the composition of many therapy dyads.

Let's get back to hope! If you still want to leap into hope, there is a simple way. Do you know this, from the Monty Python film 'The Life of Brian'? Brian is being crucified with hundreds of others and he leads them in a chorus of the song 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life'



*Crucifixion scene from Monty Python film 'The Life of Brian'*

PP13

Especially in the American context, I have been astounded and humbled at the current progressive expressions of hope one encounters, often written or crafted by women of colour.



***At the ‘National Lynching Memorial’ (National Memorial for Peace and Justice), Montgomery, Alabama, 2018. Extract from Elizabeth Alexander’s Invocation: ‘The wind brings everything. Nothing is lost’.***

PP14

So, let’s go on with *hope*. I’ll remind you of that exhortation I put on the opening PowerPoint. It came from Antonio Gramsci, the early twentieth century Italian political thinker. We should face the political world with ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’.

Despite the temptation to consign hope to the bucket of optimistic delusion, I prefer to see hope *against the odds* as stimulating responses to the greatest political challenges. You have to be up against the wall before you can contribute to things moving at all. That’s why the powerless can, from time to time, be so damn effective.

On this basis, it is possible to work through Brian’s (or anyone’s)

manic elation or elevation in order to reach a variant of hope that rings true. Now, such a hope-state isn't going to be reasonable or rational. It will be, has to be, as much spiritual as psychological. This hope-state defies, has to defy, common-sense. That is a Good Thing. It will be, has to be, adolescent and Tricksterish. Also, good, for Utopic thinking' is central to psychoanalysis and Jungian analysis.

The hope-state I am identifying flirts with failure all the time. But as the great Sufi poet Rumi wrote, 'Failure is the Key to the Door of the Kingdom of Heaven'.

What I will do now is to add risk to hope. Hope in politics involves *risk* to an incredible degree. The Latinate etymology of risk is 'to run into danger'. Run, not walk.....

This is the coupling I want to focus on, hope and risk. These are not opposites or counterpoints of each other; they are often indissoluble and that is where the challenge lies. Sometimes, the risk through which an individual puts themselves involves crossing a red line into the mysteries of self-sacrifice.

One example is Jan Palach the young Czech student who self-immolated in protest against the Soviet invasion of his country in 1968.



***Self-immolation of Jan Palach in Prague in 1969.***

PP15

I do not think it far-fetched to say that Palach – and other self-immolators – are expressing for us all a kind of hope that is, paradoxically, grounded and solid, despite its many contradictions. What they do looks despairing and pessimistic - but is it only that? Or is it not also an extreme example of what an individual can contribute? Why do people do it, if not in part motivated by passion and hope? In Albert Camus' words: 'I Rebel, Therefore We Exist'.

Increasingly across the globe, there are young people desperately seeking hope. They take political risks to link 'the spirit of the times' with 'the spirit of the depths' (Jung)?

Here are pictures of some examples:



*Saffiyah Khan and an English Fascist*

PP16

This is a young Muslim British woman, Saffiyah Khan, reaching out to a member of the English Defence League, our own White supremacist organisation. The picture captured the popular imagination in Britain in 2018.

This is the 21 year old Palestinian paramedic Razan Ashraf al-Najar in Gaza just before she was shot on June 1<sup>st</sup> 2018:



*Razan Ashraf al Najar running to treat an injured man, Gaza, 2018*

PP17

And this kind of thing is also very risky, in a different register:



*Israeli-Palestinian Memorial Day 2018*

PP18

Look, I don't *like* political violence really. I don't go in for anarchist

glorification of violence – like Bakhtin's 'The urge to destroy is a creative urge'. Aren't sanctions and boycotts better than violence?

Be that as it may, as I have said, it may be too easy to kneejerk psychopathologise everyone who turns to violence.

In my talk today on hope and risk, I am saying this:

Playing risk into hope, hope into risk, creates an opening. Opening ourselves, opening our hearts, opening our repertoire of behaviours and relationships, opening our politics to a complex version of hope, running into danger. Opening ourselves to open-minded and unconventional reflection on the place of political violence in our world. These all constitute the unmistakable and risky signs of hope.

As T. S. Eliot wrote: 'Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.'

#### CODA: RISK AND THE THERAPY RELATIONSHIP

If there is hope for the project of therapy, then it, too, may require taking risks. In recent books and papers, I've been asking whether relationality in therapy is still cutting edge or has become plain normal. I said it could well be both. But I also argue that the usual stress on the therapy relationship leans towards its accompanying notions of safety, containment, holding and diminution of risk. Hence, 'normal relationality' tends in a conservative and conformist direction. Towards monogamy and heteronormativity. But there are other riskier and more queer versions of the relational that can get excluded.

I won't go so far as to say that making therapy safe is all done in the interests of the therapist. But I think there is a normal professional

expectation or default position to note here: That safety is what clients need. Then we have to wonder what this unchallenged middle class, middle brow, middle of the road norm has done to the way we work.

Does it not reinforce the idea of the clients as abnormal when compared to us therapists: the client as always already needy, dependent, infantile, caught between flight and fight? Such clients exist. Maybe every client is like this at some time. But this seems far from something one can claim to be normal. It is not normal for an adult seeking healing to be treated as a baby, nor for the healer to be treated as a parent.

As an example, I just want to say something about containment in therapy – a pretty normal idea, I am thinking in particular, but absolutely not only, of when the therapist is white and the client is a person of colour. Then, containment becomes far from normal. It becomes something ‘colonial’, as the White therapist manages to contain, transform and detoxify the savage and primitive dynamics of their patient of colour. To civilise the client in other words, even to Christianise or Judaicise (or ‘Westernise’) them.

By the way, our therapist-colonial ways of thinking need a general careful revisioning and not only in connection with containment. When you are working with someone whose subject position in the world is different, empathy is not benevolent, it is arrogant. But to challenge something like containment is a risky proposition.

## POLITICAL FLAMENCO

The talk has been about political therapy. But I am also interested in political art. This is a clip from the great contemporary Flamenco artis Maria Pages. It says what I have been trying to say to you:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGoRIvjJeWo>

