

Where Do the Analytic and the Political Meet?

On Free Speech, Positioning, and the Risk of Petrification**

To what extent can—and should—the psychoanalytic field and the political field intersect? Is their separation necessary, possible, or even desirable? And if they are to overlap, what might constitute their healthiest point of contact?

I would like to begin from a seemingly personal place, which I believe is already political and analytic. Years ago, when I applied to CCPSA, I was asked—rightly—to write a statement introducing who I was. I sat down and began instinctively, from the place I had always known as my point of origin. I wrote: *I am a Turk whose family was forced to migrate from the Balkans to Istanbul in the 1880s*. I wrote about the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the founding of the Turkish Republic, and the ways in which my lineage and family history were shaped by these transformations. I attempted to answer the question: *Who am I? Who is this young clinical psychologist aspiring to become a psychoanalyst?*

Those writings were not merely meant to inform an admissions committee. They offered me the space to think. And I kept writing. Migration, war, captivity, those who died at the front, those who worked in palaces, those who remained among the people, the dead, the survivors, the founders, those who endured, those who inherited new roles and responsibilities. For someone born in the 1980s—who found herself asking, *What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to live? What is mental health?*—these felt like the foundational elements one needed to know in order to answer the question of “who.”

To define and present a life—if such a thing is even possible—I had to go back a hundred years. This was especially striking given psychoanalysis’s aspiration toward neutrality, balance, and relative calm. Yet my very first sentence had already disrupted that ideal position. I found myself saying: *Do you know how I identify myself? I am over a hundred years old, and I am Turkish.*

Life, of course, continued. And much happened—too much, perhaps. The content of what happened was complex, painful, mournful for all of us: macro-political shifts, elections, regional transformations, unexpected natural disasters, thousands of deaths and injuries, regional wars and their global reverberations, the constant anxiety of a looming world war. We came to see more clearly how commercial interests often sit at the center of war, and how human life and nature are not always prioritized by every mind. For anyone capable of empathy, of feeling, this was devastating.

But it was not only these macro events. There was also me. As I write about how much a person should open themselves in analysis, how much a therapist should disclose in the consulting room, whether the political sphere is public or personal, I ask myself: should I refrain from speaking from my own story in the here and now? For this paper, my answer is no—and I hope this contributes something meaningful to psychoanalytic work.

What occurred was not only collective catastrophe. In what I had described as my “hundred-year life,” the most recent chapters were marked by the rapid, consecutive, and unexpected deaths of nearly all my family members. Many were literal physical deaths. Strikingly, some felt like psychic, emotional deaths. This became a turning point: the answer given by a young clinician applying to become a candidate psychoanalyst to the question “*Who are you?*” had inevitably evolved.

Amid deaths, destructions, massacres—mutual and unilateral—amid what might be called more “micro-political” forms of violence that do not kill the body but target the mind and affect, all of us were compelled to renegotiate who we were. Or we resisted doing so. This was not a conscious choice. It was an enforced direction of social existence: the self endlessly kneaded, reshaped, and reconfigured within collective life. Any resistance to this process became an internal resistance, regardless of its cause.

Self-definition changes and develops. When this change is permitted, it brings a certain peace. When it is blocked—when development is mistaken for annihilation—we risk what Laing described as *petrification*, what Heidegger might call a diminished mode of Being, or what Sartre framed as being trapped *in-itself*. Deaths structure us. The devastations and assaults of life inevitably reshape those who survive. This feels almost like a universal physical law—like entropy. Whether this is my own projection or not, I also believe that death, at least for those who remain, can enable birth and renewal. The self—personal and collective—can learn to be born from death, if it dares.

In 2020s Istanbul, suspended between Europe and Asia, with war to the north and south, socio-political tensions, earthquakes, fires—I chose, as one among many, to continue being born. I asked myself: *What did I experience? What is happening? Is what I see only a fragment?* What if massacres are not unique to “us”? Who were “we” to begin with? How many versions of “we” exist, and by what criteria do we define them? Who would we be if we had been born elsewhere, with different resources, histories, and lineages?

And with this so-called sacred self, how do we enter the consulting room? As which analyst, which clinician? We enter assuming the other is “someone,” assuming we already know. We position ourselves in order to position them, and position them in order to position ourselves. This can be done in a harsh, unreflective way—or in an overly academic, seemingly refined one.

Are we always the oppressed and the other always the oppressor? Are we always the enlightened, rational, emotionally mature ones, while the client arrives merely with pathology? If we are the opposition, are we always right, and if the other represents “power,” are they necessarily wrong? If we are the winners—politically or historically—was that victory inherently just?

In my twenties, I might have answered the question of who I was by saying: *A Turk, a clinical psychologist, trying to be just*. I may have unconsciously experienced any opposing description as an attack on my history and lineage. Was I proud? Yes. Capitalist? As much as any analyst at the end of a session. Communist? As much as any therapist within the session. Liberal? Certainly, in my projects. A dictator? Perhaps—especially when unconsciously imitating the sadism embedded in certain academic systems, particularly within mental health education in Turkey.

So where do the political and the personal separate within psychoanalysis? Where do my transference and the other’s countertransference diverge? How much should be spoken?

Socrates, after all, was not only physically executed; his public existence was annihilated. His ideas were perceived—rightly or wrongly—as a threat to underdeveloped selves. And underdeveloped selves perceive feelings, not actions, as dangerous. Thus, it was necessary to speak of affect rather than behavior—then as now.

But how honest are we in our own internal rooms? How much space do we allow for the multiplicity of our own feelings? In the United States, it is easy to define Russia as the aggressor. In Western Turkey, it is easy to invalidate the East. Islamophobia is as easily constructed as Christianophobia or Judeophobia. We avoid positioning ourselves where we believe we are unequivocally wrong, yet we always place someone there.

For years, passing by bookstores, I found myself drawn to *Mein Kampf*. I was curious about that pathological mind, about how cruelty could be justified, about the psychic formations that made it possible. Like a surgical assistant wanting to witness a difficult operation, I wanted to look. Yet I never bought the book—out of fear of how it might be seen. This fear, I now understand, stemmed from uncertainty about my own position. When one is secure in one’s position, one knows it cannot be defined by another.

Fear is human. But when it becomes chronic, when our position is imagined as fixed and under threat, paranoia, sadism, and narcissistic attacks emerge. Wars that redraw borders are fueled by the fantasy that the other will eventually displace me—so I must displace or destroy them first. Politics exploits this. Psychoanalysis, however, knows this dynamic and chooses a different path.

If positioning is a human need, the problem lies in fixating positions and experiencing the other’s position as a threat. How, then, does the analyst risk fixating their own

position in the consulting room? Is excessive neutrality, silence, or rigid adherence to theory a protection of the analytic frame—or a defense against existential threat?

Shortly before beginning analytic training, a patient who identified as a communist saw the Göktürk necklace around my neck inscribed with the word “Turk” and said: *If something happens in Turkey today, the first conflict will be between people like you and me.* What had we become trapped in at that moment?

How do we justify excluding veiled women from therapeutic work while considering our own uncovered heads “neutral”? How do we dismiss psychoanalysis as atheistic in communities where any framework not explicitly grounded in God is deemed pathological? What is the “god” of the most committed atheist, and how does it differ from the god of the most devout believer?

From where I stand now, I can say this: all these ideologies could have been alive—but in their rigid forms, they were dead. Petrified. They searched for their vitality in opposition to the other’s position, and therefore could not find it. Vitality is not relational in that way.

One can be Turkish and still understand Kurdish suffering without annihilating either position. When I once felt violently ejected from a session with my first analyst—whom I believe I triggered into a Kurdish identification—what was circulating between us within that layered system?

These things happened long ago. But what we fail to think through accumulates, repeats, and grows longer. When a Trump-supporting patient meets a Biden-supporting therapist, is the positioning in the room truly about understanding? Or do contemptuous micro-aggressions leak into supervision and peer discussions?

Are we ideal analysts? If we were, that would itself be the problem.

What I continue to learn—echoing one of my teachers—is that this is an apprenticeship without end. Go with the desire to understand; understand as much as you can. Go with the desire to be understood; be understood as much as possible. We fear—not ever-ending, not being fixed. We fear being seen as antisemitic, Islamophobic, complicit, naïve. Psychoanalysis is not about erasing these fears, but softening them. This, perhaps, is Winnicott’s transitional space: learning to exist without petrification, implosion, or engulfment.

So the question is not *what* should be spoken in the room, but *how*. With what desire, intention, and affect?

I return to the question I first asked when applying to the psychoanalytic community:
Who *am* *I?*

I ask it again so that I may also ask: *What is psychoanalysis? What is the human? What is existence? And what is permitted here?*

My answer, for now, is this: I am Handan Sureyya Aysun. I am trying to be born, and I accompany others who are trying—or afraid—to do the same. I am wrapped, like everyone else, in unavoidable garments imposed by history, ideology, and meaning. Sometimes I see them, remove them, and breathe. I do not know if one can exist without garments, but I know that clinging to them is deadly.

What is spoken does not kill. What kills is freezing, turning to stone. Here, in this room, we meet to greet what lies beneath the garments—with curiosity, anxiety, fear, and care—and to speak, without petrifying.

As best as I can.”