

FORGETTING RESPONSIBILITY:  
HANNAH ARENDT AND THE WORK OF (UNDOING)  
PSYCHIC RESISTANCE POST-APARTHEID

By Sergio Alloggio & Kylie Thomas



*It's not that I forgot. It's just that I don't care.<sup>1</sup>*

*The critical writing of history is a continuous struggle to liberate the past from within the unconscious of a collective that forgets the conditions of its own existence.<sup>2</sup>*

This paper engages with some of the writings of Hannah Arendt in order to draw a political parallel between the complex nexus of responsibility, judgement and sociality in post-war Germany and post-apartheid South Africa. In her writings on post-war Germany Arendt described the failure on the part of the German public to recognise and respond to what she terms “the horror” of Nazism.<sup>3</sup> In her report on the aftermath of war, written on her return to Germany from the United States in 1949, Arendt recounts how she found “an inability to feel”, “absence of mourning for the dead” and a “general lack of emotion”<sup>4</sup> in those she encountered in Germany at that time. In this paper we connect her insights on post-war Germany to her later work on the difficulties of judging; this allows us to cast light on the problem of the evasion of responsibility in contemporary South Africa. Read in conjunction with some of the concepts developed by Sigmund Freud, Arendt’s later work helps us to open up the trans-generational trauma of apartheid and to approach the redoubled form of repression that, we argue, characterises the post-apartheid

---

<sup>1</sup> Comment printed on the t-shirt of a white student at the University of Cape Town, South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and universal history* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009): 85.

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003): 2 - 3.

<sup>4</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and judgment*, 249.

condition. We employ psychoanalysis not as a therapeutics but as a means for approaching questions about the constitutive relation between the psychic and the political, drawing in particular on Freud's theorisations of the meanings of symptoms, repression, resistance and memory. In conclusion, via Theodor Adorno's essay "The meaning of working through the past"<sup>5</sup> we advocate for a post-apartheid pedagogy that seeks to unearth the problem of responsibility from the sinking sands of reconciled national history.

The post-apartheid state recognised the intensive economic and social restructuring necessary to positively transform South African society and in 1994 the new ANC-led government launched the Reconstruction and Development Plan. Addressing the psychic effects of apartheid and finding the truth about the history of the country was also acknowledged as essential to the so-called "peaceful transition to democracy". The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings that took place in South Africa between 1996 and 1999 opened a space for both victims and perpetrators to testify to their experiences under apartheid. The TRC was a site through which the wounds of the national body were made public; a *temporary* arena of witnessing that made visible the damage of a nearly fifty-year political configuration. The symptoms that were made visible at the hearings were, however, for the most part, signs that South Africans failed to diagnose or to read in any depth, nor did they attend to them in ways that would allow for recognition of the *on-going* nature of the trauma of apartheid. In the post-apartheid present a form of selective national amnesia has taken hold, both through the propagation of reified forms of national history and as a result of the exigencies of the present. As numerous scholars have noted, the TRC was a symbolic process, only the start of the material work required to alter the society for the better<sup>6</sup>. But more than a decade after the end of the TRC hearings, the unbearable psycho-political legacy of apartheid remains. Ongoing violence, poverty, the chasm between rich and poor, the persistence of

---

<sup>5</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Can one live after Auschwitz? A philosophical reader*, Rolf Tiedemann (Ed.) (San Francisco, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> See for instance the work of Erik Doxtader, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, Chabani Manganyi, Fiona Ross and Joseph-Philippe Salazar.

racism and the still largely segregated social worlds of South Africans make it increasingly clear that this legacy will not simply disappear over time. Focusing on the powerful forms of psycho-political resistance that characterise life in post-apartheid South Africa, and drawing on Arendt, Freud, and Adorno, we argue for the importance of critical responsibility for the emergence of alternative forms of post-apartheid subjectivity.

FOR A SOUTH AFRICAN PSYCHO-POLITICAL: ARENDT AND FREUD

In the 1930s Arendt was a student of two of the most important philosophers in Germany — Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. In 1929 she submitted her doctoral dissertation on Augustine's concept of love, but her promising career as an academic in Germany, like that of many other Jewish scholars, was swiftly brought to an end by the rise of Nazism. The events of the war and its aftermath inaugurated a radical shift in Arendt's political philosophy. From 1941 Arendt lived and worked in the United States and in 1963, with the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt's name became synonymous with a powerful critique of the unexamined inner workings and consequences of Nazism and their effects on everyday life. Through her impassioned account of the Eichmann trial, at which she was present as a journalist, and in her subsequent analysis of Eichmann's testimony, Arendt provides insight into how Nazi officials saw themselves as 'moral agents'. In this way Arendt began to engage with what was to become her life's work — thinking the problems of judgement and responsibility within the horizon of totalitarian monstrosity and its aftermath. For Arendt, the scale and depth of the historically unprecedented events of post-Weimar Germany created an abyss in understanding and rendered all prior systems of knowledge useless:

We had to learn everything from scratch, in the raw, as it were — that is, without the help of categories and general rules under which to subsume our experiences... The more these things are discussed, the clearer it becomes, I think, that we

actually find ourselves here in a position between the devil and the deep sea.<sup>7</sup>

However, Arendt also points out that this abyss in understanding extends to a time prior to these events and prefigures them. It is as if, in Arendt, we can perceive a subcutaneous passivity in the political body that is retroactively dated and that provides us with a way to begin to fathom the origins of totalitarianism. For her, “Without taking into account the almost universal breakdown, not of personal responsibility, but of personal *judgement* in the early stages of the Nazi regime, it is impossible to understand what actually happened”.<sup>8</sup> It is important to emphasize that Arendt is not simply talking about an *inability* to judge — she is unequivocal in her dismissal of the ‘cog-theory’ as a mode of explanation for the institutional functioning of Nazism.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, there are two instances in Arendt’s analysis that seek to fundamentally contest those understandings of the rise of Nazism within which questions of agency, critical thinking and responsibility are suspended. The first is to be found in a fascinating passage in her article entitled “Personal responsibility under dictatorship” in which she responds to those who have reacted against her claiming the right to pass judgement on moral and political issues and on those who were complicit in Nazism by noting “how uncomfortable most of us are when confronted by moral issues”.<sup>10</sup> She also draws attention to her own discomfort in occupying the seat of judgement and goes on to relate why this should be so:

My early intellectual formation occurred in an atmosphere where nobody paid much attention to moral questions... To be sure, every once in a while we were confronted with moral weakness, with lack of steadfastness or loyalty, with this curious, almost automatic yielding under pressure, especially of public opinion, which is so symptomatic of the educated strata of certain societies, but we had no idea how serious such things

---

<sup>7</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and judgment*, 25

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 29 - 30.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 22.

were and least of all where they could lead. We did not know much about the nature of these phenomena, and I am afraid we cared even less. Well, it turned out that we would be given ample opportunity to learn.<sup>11</sup>

Arendt notes the deeply entrenched suspension of critical thinking within Germany prior to the war and for her the absence of personal and public spaces of deliberation is intimately bound to the disintegration of the very precondition for what would be considered a just social life. In her final, unfinished volume, *The life of the mind*, she compares those who fail to think to “sleepwalkers” and describes thinking as that which “rouses you from sleep”.<sup>12</sup> It is clear that for her, thinking is a conscious process inextricably bound to political understanding that results in judging that proceeds outside and beyond any form of pre-ordained morality. In her reading of SS official Adolf Eichmann’s decision to blindly follow the dictates of the Nazi regime, what he, at his trial described as *Kadavergeborsam*, Arendt points to how, in ceasing to think, Eichmann willingly gave up what for her would constitute his humanness.<sup>13</sup>

The second instance in which Arendt’s account undermines a linear explanation of the ‘total collapse’ of morality is her well-known analogy between the changing of morality/*mores* and “the changing of clothes”.<sup>14</sup> In this conception morality is understood to be a set of superficial and replaceable norms and values that are disconnected from any kind of critical responsibility. As Arendt’s work shows, such forms of ‘morality’ make possible and legitimate the most inhumane violence. Within such ‘moral’ rhetoric Auschwitz is made a ‘medical matter’, and the murder of anti-apartheid activists like Steve Biko and

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 22 - 3.

<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The life of the mind, 1: Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978): 191, 178.

<sup>13</sup> See José Brunner’s “Eichmann, Arendt and Freud in Jerusalem: On the evils of narcissism and the pleasures of thoughtlessness” in *History and memory* 8, 2 (1996): 61 – 88, for a psychoanalytic reading of Eichmann’s character as described in Arendt’s book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

<sup>14</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and judgment*, 43.

Siphiwo Mthimkulu is termed “elimination”.<sup>15</sup> In the end, for Arendt the only antidote to this collective breakdown in moral thinking lies not in:

a.) highly developed intelligence or sophistication in moral matters, but rather the disposition to live together explicitly with oneself, to have intercourse with oneself, that is, to be engaged in that silent dialogue between me and myself which, since Socrates and Plato we usually call thinking.<sup>16</sup>

Arendt goes on to explain that such forms of reasoning are not limited to professional thinkers but may be achieved by anyone, who, in spite of external circumstances, makes use of critical reasoning to “examine things and to make up their own minds”.<sup>17</sup> In *The life of the mind*, Arendt returns to the question of the conditions under which it became “no more difficult to change the mores and habits of a people than it would to change their table manners”.<sup>18</sup> She observes that the reversal of “the basic commandments of Western morality” under Nazism should not be thought apart from its “sequel — the reversal of the reversal, the fact that it was so surprisingly easy “to re-educate” the Germans after the collapse of the Third Reich, so easy indeed that it was as though re-education was automatic — should not console us either. It was actually the same phenomenon”.<sup>19</sup>

In what we read as Arendt’s philosophy (although of course, she famously resisted such labelling), thinking can only take place after a ‘withdrawal’ that allows consciousness to begin that ‘silent dialogue’ that the self conducts with the self. In *The life of the mind*, Arendt explicitly focuses on mental activities without borrowing from the lexicon of psychoanalysis.<sup>20</sup> She refuses to read inner life as determined

---

<sup>15</sup> See the testimony of South African Security Policeman Gideon Johannes Nieuwoudt delivered at the TRC and also in Mark Kaplan’s film *Between Joyce and remembrance*.

<sup>16</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and judgment*, 44 - 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 45.

<sup>18</sup> Arendt, *The life of the mind*, 177.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 178.

<sup>20</sup> In *Without alibi* (San Francisco, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002): 57,

by unconscious drives, and instead resolutely insists on the possibility of describing the workings of “Thinking, willing and judging”<sup>21</sup> without recourse to psychoanalytic terms or concepts.<sup>22</sup> *The life of the mind*, like Arendt’s other works, employs an approach to the study of complex matters such as memory, imagination, will, and the relation between inner and outer life that remains faithful to “protocols of transparency, scenarios of operability”.<sup>23</sup> There is simply no space in her reflections for repression, latent content, sublimation, or the multiple ways in which traumatic experience affects psychic life. The inner life of the Arendtian subject proceeds through the ‘silent dialogue’ between the part of myself that raises questions and the part that seeks to answer them. This inner dialogical arena is the locus of the struggle that takes place as I strive to be in agreement with myself. This “duality of the two in one” is for Arendt a critical component of any ethical being.<sup>24</sup> For her the accordance of my inner selves is the precondition for living *first* with myself and then with others.<sup>25</sup> The two inner actors of the “soundless dialogue” are characterised by a thoroughgoing rationality, and in this way Arendt’s “two in one” theory dispenses with the productive elements of psychoanalytic thinking rather too swiftly.

Recognising what we read as a reductive aspect of her otherwise insightful analysis, in this paper we draw on the writings of Freud *alongside* Arendt in order to think about psychic repression during and

---

Jacques Derrida points out that “the work of Hannah Arendt signals but... never deploys” what he terms “a symptomatology of the unconscious”. See also his remarks on Arendt’s studious avoidance of psychoanalysis: *Ibid.* 67.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, *Without alibi*, 67.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, *The life of the mind*, 113, for Arendt’s resistance to psychoanalysis.

<sup>23</sup> We draw this phrase from Jean-François Lyotard *The inhuman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992): 201.

<sup>24</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and judgment*, 187.

<sup>25</sup> There is a way in which the TRC process can be understood as having operated in exactly the opposite way — by calling for an external reconciliation between perpetrators and victims without first confronting the multiple forms of psycho-political resistance that would make such reconciliation not only possible but meaningful.

after apartheid. The writings of Freud help us to recognise the burden of history and its weight on both the individual psyche and within the social body as a whole. However, just as Arendt refuses the unconscious psychic dimension of the political, Freud does not take into account the political construction of the inner geography of the subject.<sup>26</sup> Our intention in positioning Arendt *alongside* Freud is to show how the political is informed by the unconscious and how the unconscious is in itself a political construct. In the section that follows we ask: what are the psychic effects of the vast biopolitical experiment called apartheid? How has this affected the ability of South Africans, both black and white, to judge their past? How might fusing the work of Freud and Arendt offer a way to think the fallout of apartheid differently? What kind of political subject might be imagined into being if we refuse the routine division of the psychic and the political?

#### REPRESSION<sup>2</sup> : STATES OF EMERGENCY

In 1900 Freud published *The interpretation of dreams* and in 1901, *Psychopathology of everyday life*. In these works Freud began his reading of dreams as the projection of unconscious desires and inaugurated a new ‘science’: psychoanalysis, a form of ‘therapy’ that “does its work by transforming something unconscious into something conscious”.<sup>27</sup> As Freud has taught us, the psyche is a site of permanent conflict between different instances, two connected but at the same time heterogeneous realms — the conscious and the unconscious. In the unconscious,

---

<sup>26</sup> For a critique of Freud’s own blindness to his own historical moment and the racist, sexist, hetero-normative presuppositions at work in order to produce the dream of psychoanalysis as science, see for instance Luce Irigaray’s *To speak is never neutral* (London: Routledge, 2002), Derrida, in *Without alibi*, 272; also addresses some of the deadlocks in Freud’s attempts to think the psycho-political and draws attention to how Freud’s general pessimism finds its cure in a “dictatorship of reason”. “The ideal, Freud then says, and he even speaks at this point of utopia, would be a community in which freedom consisted in submitting the life of the drives to a ‘dictatorship of reason (*Diktatur der Vernunft*)’”.

<sup>27</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Introductory lectures on Psycho-analysis* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1922): 237.



space and time are unfixed and follow neither a linear chronology nor causal dynamics. In the unconscious, cause and effect are not the primary laws: time, space and causality succumb to the living fabric of pleasure, pain and emotional life.

According to Freud, insistent desires, whose content the individual feels she or he must repress, will often find alternative paths towards satisfaction and therefore manifest themselves as symptoms. He defines a symptom in the following way, “A symptom is a sign of, and a substitute for, an instinctual satisfaction which has remained in abeyance. It is a consequence of the process of repression”.<sup>28</sup> For him, symptoms are signs that the subject cannot read themselves but that the work of psychoanalysis renders legible, and ultimately cures. Freud’s psychoanalysis operates through its (his) desire for the conservative normalisation of the patient and in his formulation of the ineradicable presence of evil within any collectivity. His theorisations allow no place for a positive plurality — from his claims about the primordial origins of the human psyche to the dysfunctions of metropolitan life, the possibilities for radical agency are at their best deferred and, at worst, practically negated.<sup>29</sup> For Freud when the psychoanalytic process is successful it is able to produce subjects who are at peace with themselves and also at peace with others. Thus the desire of Freud’s psychoanalytic thinking and of Arendt’s political philosophy is a similar one: to formulate a way for subjects to live with themselves, which will also affect, necessarily, their conduct within the collective. However, the peace that Arendt argues will come about in the subject who can live with his or her self is of a different order from that brought about by psychoanalysis — for her, being able to live with oneself entails a constant process of self-reflexive thought. Arendt resists the victimisation of the subject by psychoanalysis and

---

<sup>28</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety* (Toronto: Hogarth, 1959): 91.

<sup>29</sup> For Freud’s applications of psychoanalysis to the study of society see *Totem and taboo, timely reflections on war and death* (London: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1918) and *Group psychology and the analysis of the ego* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922). For a radical account of the political possibilities of psychoanalysis, see Frantz Fanon, *The wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963); and, *Black skin, White masks* (New York: Grove, 1967).

insists on the transformation of the inner faculties of thinking, willing and judging as immanent political activities.

Yet, as we argue here, the psyche is a permanent battlefield in which we cannot perceive the workings of the faculties Arendt describes in *The Life of the mind* as naturally given as she claims — what kind of thinking, willing or judging can be analysed during and after apartheid without taking apartheid itself as a constitutive part of such forms of thought? What we call repression<sup>2</sup> is a kind of historical repression that redoubles what was operating during apartheid and manifests in multiple ways across different people in South Africa. The redoubling effect is a combination of the first experience of repression under apartheid — a repression needed in order to make bearable the unbearable — apartheid as a State. The elevation squared operates to efface the first repression and in this way to make possible the repression of how economic, social and political life in contemporary South Africa continues to be overdetermined by the racism, injustice and inequality of the past. Our analysis of the forgetting of responsibility draws attention to the constant work required to continually *forget-deny-repress* both past and present injustice. We argue that in order to achieve the conditions of possibility for Arendt's 'silent dialogue' in contemporary South Africa we must unearth the relation between the rational and the irrational, the conscious and the unconscious, history and the present, the forgotten and the remembered, the acknowledged and the disavowed.<sup>30</sup> Such work, that of *undoing* the redoubled forms of psychic resistance, would result in a psycho-political configuration in which such tensions are not buried in the unconscious but provide the political grammar for breaking the vicious cycle that binds violence and reconciliation.

---

<sup>30</sup> Peter Sloterdijk develops the term "*metanoia*" as a means of describing what he understands to be the positive transformation of the psycho-political legacy of war in his *Theory of the Post-War periods: Observations on Franco-German relations since 1945* (Vienna: Springer, 2009): 14. His diagnosis of the "*metanoia*" of the present significantly differs from the approach we follow here, in particular in his proclamations of so-called "normalisation" (see in particular 36 - 43).

In his essay “The meaning of working through the past”,<sup>31</sup> Adorno takes up the question of memory and psychic resistance in Germany — post-Nazism. Like Arendt, Adorno is disturbed by the lack of critical reflection and engagement with what both thinkers refer to as “the horror” of the past:

One wants to break free of the past: rightly, because nothing at all can live in its shadow, and because there will be no end to the terror as long as guilt and violence are repaid by guilt and violence; wrongly, because the past that one would like to evade is still very much alive.<sup>32</sup>

Adorno’s reading of “the effacement of memory” in Germany complicates Arendt’s position on thinking and judging as critical subjectivity. For him:

The effacement of memory is more the achievement of an all-too-alert consciousness than its weakness when confronted with the superior strength of unconscious processes. In the forgetting of what has scarcely transpired there resonates the fury of one who must first talk himself out of what everyone knows, before he can then talk others out of it as well.<sup>33</sup>

Like Arendt, we understand critical reflexivity to be the *conditio sine qua non* of an anti-authoritarian society. As long as South Africans remain bound by the psycho-political knot of redoubled repression, critical reflexivity remains beyond their reach and the society will continue to bear the marks of apartheid-era authoritarianism. As Adorno has written, “This bears directly on democratic pedagogy”.<sup>34</sup> For Adorno there are both conscious and unconscious processes that constitute the life of the mind and it is necessary to address the workings of both in the psycho-political “re-education” of the subject.<sup>35</sup> In Adorno’s theorisation of the troubled relation between the German people and

---

<sup>31</sup> Adorno, *Can one live after Auschwitz?*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

their history, what in various places he refers to as “the unmastered past”,<sup>36</sup> there is both what South African scholar Pumla Dineo Gqola has termed “unremembering”,<sup>37</sup> a deliberate, wilful refusal to engage with the events of the past, and psychic resistance, repression and traumatic repetition. In response, Adorno calls for “a precise and undiluted knowledge of Freudian theory” as an indispensable component of the radical transformation of education that must begin with the education of “the educators themselves”.<sup>38</sup> The work of undoing psychic resistance through an engagement with apartheid, and its psycho-political legacy as trans-generational trauma, is what we understand to be one of the most important tasks of scholars in our context. Without this, we are not merely unthinking somnambulists but those who desire a hollow ataraxia in the “anticipated oblivion of a better future”.<sup>39</sup>



SERGIO ALLOGGIO, *University of Cape Town*,  
& KYLIE THOMAS, *University of the Western Cape*.



---

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 10. See Arendt’s discussion of this term in her *Responsibility and judgment*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> Pumla Dineo Gqola, *What is slavery to me?* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010): 8.

<sup>38</sup> Adorno, *Can one live after Auschwitz?*, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1951): ix.