

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Dec 5, 2023

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/my-meeting-with-a-group-of-russian-analysts-response-to-some-criticism/>

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## My Meeting with a Group of Russian Analysts: Response to Some Criticism

*“You understand, on this Earth there is something frightening, the fact that everyone has their own reasons!”*

*Jean Renoir, La règle du jeu*

The editor of *The European Journal of Psychoanalysis* kindly asks me to respond to my friend Claude Schauder’s comment on a report I published about a conversation between myself and Russian colleagues about the **war** (and not “special operation”!) in Ukraine. [<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/my-meeting-with-a-group-of-russian-analysts-response-to-some-criticism/>]

Schauder expressed an opinion that other analysts have also taken up against my decision to suspend my collaboration with these colleagues (but I must also say that many other analysts – notably Russians – have expressed their approval to me: in my place they would have behaved in the same way). Some reactions were even offensive, one of them called me “Benvenutler”, imitation of “Putler”, the pseudonym used by Russian friends in their e-mail exchanges to escape cyber surveillance.

The great impact of my report, and the polarization of reactions to it, is, in my opinion, a symptom. I believe that what happened to me is indicative of a blind spot in what I would call the international psychoanalytic community if it existed (but it does not exist, because every school is closed in on itself and in most cases neglects the contributions of other schools). This blind spot is the relationship between the ethics of the analytical relationship on the one hand and the ethics of the analyst as a citizen living in a certain social context on the other. Lacan said that “il faut refuser le discours analytique aux canailles”[1], “we must refuse the analytic discourse to rogues.” But does the fact of having fascist, or xenophobic, or racist, or homophobic opinions, etc., that is to say opinions that we (who *are we?*) consider reprehensible, make someone, and especially an analyst, a rascal?

We know that there are rogue analysts. I think of the analysts who collaborated with Brazilian torturers to extract confessions from opponents (Bessermann-Vianna case)... Very often psychoanalysts assumed very conservative positions, for example, the American psychoanalysts who have always considered homosexuality a serious pathology, in a much more conservative position than American psychiatrists (who in 1973 de-listed homosexuality as a *disorder*). This poses a theoretical problem even more acute than the ethical problem: would not the fact that an analyst – therefore an analyzed subject – is a rascal constitute a refutation of the project of psychoanalysis?

But before answering, I would like to reconstruct the context of my meeting with my Russian colleagues.

On February 26 I had given an online seminar at the International Institute of Psychology of Depth in Kiev, where I have been teaching regularly for more than fifteen years. The war had already broken out and I knew that friends had already spent the night in the bomb shelters. The management of the institute had offered me the opportunity to talk about French psychoanalysis. At the end of January[2], the administration invited me to come personally to Kiev to teach at the end of February, “since the pandemic is over”... I did not dare to tell them: “But at the end of February there will be war!” I must say that the underestimation of the danger of war struck me, and was equally well shared among my Russian and Ukrainian friends (see the testimony of a Russian colleague, Ekaterina Bolokoskaia, in this very journal). But we knew that a Russian Army and a lot of tanks were waiting at the Belarusian border.

Two days after the outbreak of the war, the organizers insisted that I talk about French psychoanalysis. I said, “No, I’m going to talk about the war you’re going through! I will talk about the Freud-Einstein correspondence on the reasons for war and a clinical case of warmongering.” In the end, the organizers agreed on my deviation from the original program.

So, I spoke of the war and immediately proclaimed my solidarity with them, Ukrainians, against the aggression by the Russian Nomenklatura. During my speech, I was stunned that a student, a lady, interrupted me in an annoyed tone: “But do you want to talk about this war or about psychoanalysis?” I replied that psychoanalysis was born to rectify our relationship with reality, not to remove or ignore it, and that for me referring to those events was an analytical act.

As you can see, what I would call an *ostrich’s ethics* is present in Ukraine, Russia and anywhere.

The next day, I had the supervisory group with my Russian colleagues, and they expected me to talk about the clinical case whose text they had sent me. Our clinical meetings last an hour and a half, and the meeting of which I published the summary lasted just as long [<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/psychoanalysis-in-the-war-a-debate-with-russian-colleagues/>]. Even then I didn’t want to follow the prescribed schedule, and you can read for yourself what happened next.

I didn’t think about recording our conversation, so I had to summarize what was said based on my memory.

I had ruled out talking about the clinical case as if nothing was happening. Not talking about certain things seems to me the worst repression, in fact an oblique complicity with the aggressor. So, I asked everyone for their personal opinion. I want to say that contrary to what some commentators might think, I have never said that I recommend my attitude as a model for any analyst who finds themselves in a similar situation! I did what **my** conscience told me to do, that’s all.

I had already perceived that the couple of leaders of the group were anti-Ukrainian. I said to myself: if some in the group do not share Putin’s positions, if someone at least expresses solidarity with the Ukrainian colleagues under the bombs, I will take note of the fact that there are different positions in the group and therefore I will agree to continue supervision. That is why I asked everyone to speak, to check whether or not there was unanimity.

There was a terrifying unanimity.

No one said: “I’m sorry for the Ukrainians! “. In fact, all of them firmly believe in the propaganda of the regime, that Russia must “denazify” Ukraine. Only then did I find it impossible for me to continue collaborating.

In such cases, any choice is wrong. I made a mistake by interrupting the collaboration, but I would also have made a mistake by continuing to “teach the technique” while our colleagues risked their skin. To decide is to choose how to be wrong.

I want to clarify all this because Schauder seems to reproach me for having interrupted a collaboration with “Russian colleagues” because they are Russians! Not at all. I have broken off a collaboration with analysts who think their country should invade another. Other Russian colleagues have a completely different opinion.

I am told: “by deciding not to work with putinophiles, you risk entrenching them in their certainties”. Maybe. But who can predict the effects of our actions on each one of them? These colleagues might say to themselves, “Westerners are all dogmatic anti-Russian, even when they are analysts.” Or maybe others can say to themselves “why did a colleague for whom I had esteem feel the need to know our opinions? What if he had good reasons that I do not perceive? Why did Benvenuto believe that the position in relation to this war was also important for psychoanalysis?” No one can predict what the effects of what I have done will produce in each person, each according to their own history. But precisely because I cannot predict the long-term consequences of my act, I preferred to act according to my heart. Counting on the fact that the spontaneity of the heart is more touching than all the arguments for or against Putin.

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Some have criticized me for not listening to my Russian colleagues. What a strange meaning they give then to “listen”! I listened to them so well that I tried to report everything they said. And if you had recorded the whole thing, you would have listened to them more. Have my critics ever transcribed pro-Putin’s arguments? If they did, then I congratulate them. “Listening” does not mean sharing the opinions we have heard!

For example, Schauder says, “We cannot lock up the other and pretend to know what he is, let alone his ability to be an analyst or not solely in terms of what he defends as a political opinion.” I never said that I know what the other (my colleagues) is/are, nor that these colleagues are not capable of being analysts! I simply said that I do not want to collaborate with people who cannot emancipate themselves from the propaganda of their regime. That’s all.

“Sergio Benvenuto,” writes Schauder, “cannot deny one of his Russian interlocutors the right to argue, in response to his arguments, the collaboration of the Ukrainians with the Nazis during the 2nd World War”. I did not deny my interlocutors the right to discuss, on the contrary, I faithfully transcribed what they said! I simply pointed out that justifying an attack today with a conflict 80 years ago is not convincing. I would add: for the most part, the Ukrainians fought in the Red Army against the Nazi-Fascists.

To say that we must militarily attack Ukraine in 2022 for what the nationalist Ukrainians did during World War II would be like saying that today we can attack Italy because it was compromised with Nazism, and certainly much more than Ukraine. Everyone would find this reasoning absurd. And it cannot be said that in Ukraine there is the danger of fascism because there is a small pro-fascist party that got 2% of the vote. Again, it would be like saying that we must attack France because of the vote for Marine Le Pen (a fascist, even if she does not declare herself as such)... At the first round of the election for the president, Le Pen received over 23% of the vote... I would say that France is in much greater danger of fascism than Ukraine. In any case, I think that today the fascist is Putin, not the Ukrainians.

Schauder must not have read my text about my experience in Russia and Ukraine, published shortly before the war (<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/a-broken-heart-between-ukraine-and-russia-2/>), where I remember the pro-Nazi commitment of some Ukrainian nationalists, I talked about Bandera and I even published a photo of a Bandera monument in Lviv... It was I who evoked this past. Of course, there were

Ukrainian collaborators of the Nazis – but there were also French collaborators of the Nazis. Is it really necessary to mention the Dreyfus’ affair here to remember how France has an old anti-Semitic tradition (much heavier than that of the Germans before Hitler)? And would this “illustrious” tradition be a good reason to attack France militarily today?

Schauder: “The Ukrainian unconscious, like those of the Russians, often keep traces of a past that, if not recognized, does not pass!” This evokes Jung’s collective unconscious, but let’s say I agree. However, this is true for many countries, I do not see anything special in this regard with the Russians and the Ukrainians. Also for the French: collaboration with the occupiers during the Second World War, torture of militants during the colonial war in Algeria... Few peoples are without skeletons in the closet, which is why no one should throw the first stone, as my Russian colleagues did, as if they were sinless.

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Schauder says you can refuse to take certain analysands for ethical reasons, but that’s not the case with colleagues. My ethical criterion is exactly the opposite.

I take the analysands who have political ideas that I consider horrible because I take those ideas as discursive masks of unconscious problems that lie elsewhere. Cesare Musatti, one of the founders of psychoanalysis in Italy, said he had a murderer in analysis – no one knew who he was, he only told his own analyst. Musatti did not interrupt the analysis with him.

Unlike what Schauder claims, I am not at all ready to cooperate with *any* analyst. None of us, not even Schauder I think, is willing to cooperate with any analyst. And we feel justified in refusing to cooperate for reasons much more frivolous than a fundamental political discordance: we refuse because the clinical level of the colleagues is too low, because the analytical culture of the group of colleagues is too different from ours, because the members of the group are unpleasant to us ... Why would only political divergence be a bad reason to not cooperate with colleagues? As we say in Italy, it is not the doctor who prescribed me to collaborate with this group!

I believe that in the end, in all the reproaches levelled at me for suspending my collaboration with the Putinists, it turns out that there is a *basic assumption*: that political opinions are just chat. That we must be tolerant of fascist, racist, Putinian ideas... because they don’t mean anything important. This seems to me, however, to contradict the substance of psychoanalytic ethics: any analysis leads us, on the contrary, to give great value to what we say and what we have said, and therefore to what we reveal through what we say. The ethics of *bien-dire*, *good speech*. Beyond what we do – which is of particular interest to behaviorists – what we say is important, and therefore what we think behind what we say. As Lacan said, *scripta volant, verba manent*, writings fly away, words remain. Talking involves as much as throwing stones or unsheathing a dagger. Words determine us – this is one of the essential bets of psychoanalysis.

An Italian colleague who disagreed with me said that she had accepted in analysis a fascist hooligan (she is left-wing) and an anti-vaxxer (it was noted in Italy that many anti-vaxxers today are putinophiles. One should ask oneself why this is the case).

I also have anti-vaxxers in analysis, which also tend towards conspiratorial thinking – they are university professors, highly educated people, scientific researchers... And since they know that I got vaccinated, some do not hesitate to tell me that I am a sheep that follows the flock of vaccinated people, another nut who does not want to accept the “irrefutable” scientific evidence that the vaccine is useless and / or harmful. They think of me in the way many of us think of the Russian Putinians, Putin’s flock...

In a 1999 film by Harold Ramis, *Analyze This*, a New York mafia boss asks for an analysis and the analyst, though hesitant, ends up accepting it. Happy ending: thanks to the analysis, the gangster will understand that

his symptom – his difficulty in being an effective killer as his father wanted – is precisely what he must love about himself ... This is where an assumption emerges that is not dictated by psychoanalysis: that if you are really analyzed, you are a good guy. However, this remains to be proven.

But let's imagine that the fascist hooligan says in session to my colleague that the same evening he will go attack defenseless Jews or Muslims, what will you do? Will you say to him: "See you at the next session, as usual"? I, in that case, would remember being a citizen before being an analyst, and I would warn the police of the crime that they are preparing. And I would say to the fascist: "If tonight you are going to beat these people, never come back here again".

Perhaps others would do otherwise.

I find the idea that the analyst does his job in a celestial sphere – a fairly common idea among analysts – is naïve and nefarious. They see analytical practice as a type of scientific research, like at CERN, where you have to deal with elementary particles. But the analyst does not have to deal with elementary particles: he has to deal with people like him, who often have the same problems as him, who live in his own society.

Another quote from Lacan (I'm not a Lacanian, but I often like to quote him).

In the 1970s, in Milan, we, young analysts in training, had a meeting with him. On that occasion, a young woman read a kind of paper in which she celebrated the dis-social or a-social, anarchic meaning of analytical practice, detached from any social law outside of analysis. Lacan replied by saying that "psychoanalysis is a social practice like many others!" Not only because the analytical social bond is well defined (and he distinguished it from the three other social bonds) but also in the sense that the analytic act – he said – is part of the society and culture in which it takes place. It can also be said that psychoanalysis is a symptom of one's own time, of the society in which it flourished. This does not prevent the analyst from having symptoms in turn: that of not knowing "who my colleagues really are" is one of his most obvious symptoms. We have no criteria to decide at the end whether somebody else is "a colleague" or a charlatan.

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Schauder took advantage of the controversy with me to distance himself from Western support for Ukraine. (In short, what really interested him was not to criticize my decision not to work with Russian colleagues, it was rather to prove that after all Russian colleagues are right! Which is very different.) He attacks *Mr.* Zelensky (this "Mr." qualifier says more than anything my friend says explicitly) for his Knesset gaffe about Shoah, especially since he is Jewish. Yes, it was Zelensky's mistake. So what? Does this make Putin's delusional speeches, not to mention his actions, more convincing? It seems to me that here we want to see the straw in the eyes of one so as not to see the beam in the eye of the other. I am very surprised that Schauder insists on this diplomatic error in a context that sees cities destroyed, civilians killed, thousands of dead... It would be like criticizing Putin especially for wearing a Loro Piana jacket during the meeting at the Olympic Stadium in Moscow in March.

One feels an anger in Schauder against Zelensky, and one wonders why? Basically, Zelensky's greatest merit was that he was in the "right" place at the "right time", that of the attack on Ukraine, the country he thus became the symbol of. One cannot help but read a possible *subtext* in this anger against Zelensky: it is that he is now considered a hero of the West, and obviously everything that comes from the West (including psychoanalysis?) is rotten. Their ritual and "obliged" condemnation of Putin is a loincloth that does not hide the true narrative that dictates the accusations against Ukraine: that the real enemy is "American imperialism", the black wolf that frightened us children, because we received an "anti-imperialist" education.

I find that Schauder's speech is similar to many others we hear in Italy as elsewhere: they begin by saying "We must condemn Putin's aggression ... **but**..." "But Ukrainians have always hated Russians... but

NATO provoked Putin by expanding to the east... but alongside the Ukrainians fight the fascist battalion Azov... but the Ukrainians commit massacres in the Donbass...” One realizes that, despite the initial clause condemning Putin, all the enjoyment of the speaker is in the “but ... “. It is a game that can be played in any situation, we will find “good reasons” for the most monstrous acts, if we want. Since my childhood I have heard “good reasons” given by philo-fascists, and the quotation marks here are not ironic. It reminds me of the British intellectuals during the WWII war that George Orwell was talking about, mostly Stalinists: they said, among other things, that American soldiers in England were not there to fight the Nazis but to suppress a proletarian revolution that otherwise would certainly have broken out in the UK! Many British left-wing professors sympathized with Hitler during the war.

I do not have time here to analyze the reasons for this enjoyment in being-against-the-opinion-of-my-country, typical enjoyment of *cool* intellectuals. I believe that it is a tacit code to be given the title of “intellectual”. Frankly, I don’t need this title.

## Notes:

[1] Lacan, Seminar « Le savoir du psychanalyste », session of 1<sup>st</sup> June 1972. Lacan, *Télévision*, p. 67 : « Je pense qu’il faut refuser le discours psychanalytique aux canailles : c’est sûrement ce que Freud déguisait d’un prétendu critérium de culture. Les critères d’éthique ne sont malheureusement pas plus certains. Quoi qu’il en soit, c’est d’autres discours qu’ils peuvent se juger, et si j’ose articuler que l’analyse doit se refuser aux canailles, c’est que les canailles en deviennent bêtes, ce qui certes est une amélioration, mais sans espoir ».

[2] In this context, I have invited in Kiev Elisabeth Roudinesco. Cf. « No pasaran ! »