

EDITORIAL

‘The personal is political’: a slogan from the 1970s that, for many veterans of that era, is so familiar as to be almost stripped of meaning. In many ways, though, the statement becomes increasingly rich with significances as time goes on; and recent developments in psychotherapy – some of them featuring in the current issue of PPI – are doing much to develop what was just a notion into a precise theory.

One should perhaps say ‘notions’ rather than ‘notion’: the slogan can bear a number of different inflections. Born from Women’s Liberation Movement consciousness-raising groups, the phrase originally stood for the realization that personal experiences and options are in actuality limited and defined by their political context. Hence Carol Hanisch, in her original article with this title, stated that ‘one of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time’ (Hanisch, 1970, 76). In its extreme form, the implication is anti-therapeutic: nothing can be done about suffering on the level of the individual. Nothing – except, precisely, consciousness raising: to help individuals set their suffering in its proper social context. This agenda powered the US Radical Psychology movement.

However, the phrase also operates in reverse, so to speak: it can be used to imply that the political domain is itself informed

and defined by personal experiences and beliefs. Many of those currently active and prominent in the world of psychotherapy were drawn to it because their political activism reached a dead end and they came to believe that radical social change depended on a ‘revolution of the imagination’ or, less colourfully, on the transformation of personal and interpersonal psychological structures – structures that effectively prevented people from seeing where their own interests lay.

For better or worse, this Long March through psychotherapy, as we might call it, mostly never found its way back to the political struggle in which it began, and the slogan that originally represented a deepened understanding of the relationship between the personal and the political has in many uses come to stand for an effective depoliticization, a collapse of the political into the personal. As the Z Collective puts it:

The ‘personal is political’ – meaning that personal outcomes are largely a product of systemic relations and of structures beyond each individual that need to be addressed – came to mean, instead, that all political phenomena arise from the accumulated personal choices of individuals, so that what needed to be addressed to win better circumstances was primarily people’s personal choices. (Z Collective, 1997)

On this basis many psychotherapists with radical sympathies comfort themselves that

their work with individuals is incrementally revolutionary; that as people feel better in themselves, more able to choose what they want and work to get it, so the world will gradually become a better place. An easy idea to parody – and exactly the concept that Hillman and Ventura (1992) famously tried to demolish – but with an element of truth: Wilhelm Reich was already noting in the 1920s that his patients finished therapy less willing to tolerate oppressive jobs and relationships. But it takes a very long time to build a revolutionary movement from individual therapy clients. Having moved (very roughly speaking) from the political to the personal, by the 1950s Reich was losing patience with one-to-one therapy and casting around for other possible ways of inducing change. Well, it all comes down to the familiar joke: the light bulb has to want to change. And there are a lot of unwilling light bulbs in the world. Is that the conclusion of psychotherapy's political project?

Hardly so, as PPI has already made clear. An enormous number of practitioners and theoreticians are still pursuing the manifold nuances of that simple phrase, 'the personal is the political'. For instance, here is Sandra Bloom in our current issue: 'Trauma theory makes it clear that political and social policy decisions are intimately connected to people's experience of – and exposure to – traumatic experience.' This is the first instalment of Bloom's massive and important account of the relationship between individual and social trauma – 'the parallel process that occurs when traumatized individuals and stressed organizations come together to form stressed societies'. For all its problems, trauma theory provides a key formulation of the personal/political relationship, and

of why light bulbs so often don't want to change.

Two other papers in this issue directly inherit the women's liberation tradition itself, and address themes from gendered psycho-politics. Luise Eichenbaum renews the crucial psychoanalytic theme of *desire*, arguing that 'despite 30 years of post-feminist social change the thwarting of women's desire is pervasive and endemic to our culture', and looking at how psychotherapy can rescue desire from states of dissociation. Carol Gilligan's timely paper considers the culture of masculinity in relation to the Bush regime, drawing on a rich set of cultural referents, and asking 'how to establish manhood in the absence of hierarchy?'

Gabrielle Rifkind's passionate paper continues the theme of conflict work, which featured in the last issue of PPI. It focuses on the role of language in creating and maintaining conflict, largely in reference to the Israel-Palestine situation (and also to questions of gendered language). The remaining academic paper in this issue, Brennan and Hollander's 'Trouble in the Village?' tackles a very different aspect of psycho-politics, looking in detail at the fraught role of counselling within the British National Health Service, as it illuminates the complex relationship between medicine and therapy. And at the opposite extreme of discourse, Jocelyn Chaplin describes a shamanic/therapeutic intervention during the build-up to war in Iraq, invoking the indigenous goddess Inanna. All of these writings can be understood as facets of that same statement: the personal is political. That 1970s slogan seems more and more to encapsulate one of psychotherapy's fundamental insights.

A footnote on the last issue. In an open letter, Hal and Sidra Stone eloquently

pleaded with George W Bush to dialogue with unheeded aspects of himself as an antidote to the galloping polarization of his administration. It seems that *The Price of Loyalty*, Paul O'Neill's recent memoir of his two years as Bush's Secretary of the Treasury, contains Bush's reply. According to a *New York Review of Books* article (Powers, 2004, 5), one of the President's repeated – and deeply depressing – maxims is 'I won't negotiate with myself'.

REFERENCES

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- Z Collective. Editorial, July 1997. See <http://zena.secureforum.com/Znet/ZMag/articles/julyeditorial97.html>