

## BOOK REVIEWS

### SEXUALITY, INTIMACY, POWER

*Sexuality, Intimacy, Power*. By Muriel Dimen. Hillsdale NJ; The Analytic Press, 2003. 336pp. \$55.00 hb.

‘Only the shallow know themselves.’ Oscar Wilde

I am never quite sure how much store to set by the maxim ‘great writers are first great readers’, however an encounter with Muriel Dimen’s lucid, witty and perspicacious prose almost invites one to conclude it a truism! With authors as outstanding as Christopher Bollas, Jessica Benjamin and Judith Butler adorning her dust jacket with what I first imagined to be critical hyperbole, it was a delight to discover their praise was as ostensible as it was measured. *Sexuality, Intimacy, Power* is the rare literary achievement of an astute clinician, an accomplished academic and a smart politician. More than this – through its innovations in form (a blend of traditional scholarly narrative, fiction, journal entries, notes-commentary, afterthoughts and interplay between narrative proper and footnotes) and the diverse languages through which it speaks, ‘. . . scholarly, clinical, ethnographic, vernacular, and personal’ (Dimen, 2003, 3), what emerges is a new kind of artefact; one that

breaks prior literary frames to open fresh, transitional space. So, while separately, none of these things are new in themselves, what *is* new is Dimen’s extraordinary ability to contain them in one place. Central throughout is her realization of, and desire for, an interdisciplinary paradigm shift from dualism to multiplicity, ‘a ‘both/and’ beyond the ‘either/or’ (Dimen, 2003, p. 4). Whereas Critical Theorists have so often talked *about* intertextuality and deconstruction, Dimen actually produces the goods and, all the while, nothing is lost in her translations from abstruse conjecture into practical criticism.

She makes a fertile friction of rubbing psychoanalysis, feminism and social theory up against one another, allowing rapprochement without conclusion. In sustaining this tension, she recovers for psychoanalysis, via its own disavowed ambiguities and contradictions, the centrality of sexuality, gender and the body. Through these readings, psychoanalytic theory reacquires the lively dynamics that have undoubtedly caused analytic practice to survive this far. It is a tribute to Dimen that populism can achieve such utility. In a sense, her project is a resounding success precisely because she is mindful of how provisional any such thing could be. By fearlessly engaging with the fact that these chapters too will one day be just

yesterday's papers, *Sexuality, Intimacy, Power* deserves to make headline news. One senses Dimen might share in Adam Phillips' pithy maxims, 'Madness is the need for everything to make sense' (Phillips, 1989, 7) and 'There is no reason to assume that the people Freud knew in Vienna were representative of anything other than themselves' (Phillips, 1989, 7) Unencumbered by narcissistic aspirations to universality, her innovative responses to our perennial concerns allow play to be the heart of the matter. In a work of such erudition, it is rare to find so much clarity, so much available to interest.

However, in this beginning is, as it were, my end and the process dividing these positions was much more hesitant, even duly sceptical. Amongst the book's triumphs is its synthesis of personal and political narratives, and its consideration of their applications to the academy, clinic and street. Its vantage point, is the lens of a professional New York life, lived, reflected and refracted through all these settings and, consistent with its postmodern stance, its reports are clearly and self-consciously historicized. It neither takes refuge in the narrative layering of the novelist, the 'objectivity' of the academic nor the 'neutrality' of the analyst. Instead, Dimen intimately engages the reader in the ongoing therapeutic and political struggles she has shared with friends, colleagues and patients. Struggles that range from the mortification of a patient smelling and commenting upon her morning shit to evolving elegant third positions from the constraints of dualism. As such, much more is at stake for both reader and writer when the book is appraised. Its worth is more than usually contingent upon the extent to which one trusts the author but, equally, that to which the reader can stand intimacy

and multiplicity. Tinder to the sparks of our pleasure/unpleasure, the only way we can imaginably take all this is personally.

As our subjectivities meet, that third term, 'our relationship' is constellated and with Dimen omnipresent in the text, all the terms of her title, *Sexuality, Intimacy, Power* are unequivocally, equivocally and continuously in play. In this sense, it is much more like meeting someone than reading something. At first you're not quite sure how to begin *conversation* as the text begins with a rereading and revision of the changes and developments in her work over time, somewhat interrupting attempts to make sense for oneself. As I worked through her prologue, I had something of a struggle to decide whether to more indulge a sense of suspicious irritation that she might be reading herself *for* me or the possibility that she might simply be setting out her project, its history and intentions. Bolstered by my recollection of Groucho Marx's prophetic adage for an era of spin, 'Life's about hard work and sincerity, fake those and you've got it made', I pressed on, hoping she'd walk it as she talked it, that she'd reward my open-mindedness with her own. Quite quickly she did, and then kept doing so, by her penultimate page admitting, 'I'm greedy, I want it all; I want both irony and sincerity . . . I want [the third term] to be our guide. There is no end to theorizing, there is no final truth, there is only more truth. That's our third' (Dimen, 2003, 297). By the end I learnt that to join in with and appreciate her formal innovations meant sacrificing the cherished post-structural position of the reader as writer. However, her move from this more recent dualism was not to be a return to the author as ultimate authority but rather one towards multiplicity and the semantic democracy of a good conversation.

The editor of this journal recently wrote:

I am developing an understanding of psychotherapy as a *practice of truth*. In a world where politicians are seen to lie without remorse or consequence, there is a great need for any source of truth. Psychotherapy is intrinsically concerned with truth and its consequences, untruth and its consequences, and how to distinguish the two. It is by no means the only such practice; but unlike science or philosophy, the truth it studies is not just rational but *emotional*. And unlike religion, for example, it also tells us, truthfully, that no truth is absolute – that truth is not singular but plural and contingent, and therefore subject to negotiation. (Totton, 2003, 382–3)

*Sexuality, Intimacy, Power's* rehearsal of both/and positions contributes immensely to the possibility of the kind of truth telling to which Totton refers. In the last 100 years left, right and fundamentalist totalitarianism has famously hidden truth by murdering or airbrushing it from existence. In the light of recent events and in the name of democracy, late capitalism has also been no stranger to these techniques. However, on whole, it has been more enamoured of 'killing it softly': suffocating truth in an abundance of disinformation and inane sound bites diversely proposing authentic subjects are consuming subjects. Dimen's proposition seems to be that intimacy, clarity and inclusiveness all serve to articulate plural and dynamic truth. Truth that is sincerely sought but ironically held because inevitably limited by the paradigms shaping its construction: something that makes space for the unacceptable and the unknown.

This capacity finds exemplary realization in Dimen's accounts of clitoridectomy (Chapter 4) and lust (Chapter 5). Of the former, she deftly formulates the institutional racism underpinning the Freudian dichotomy of 'immature' clitoral orgasm

versus 'mature' vaginal orgasm and it's fusion with the colonial iconography of female anatomy as 'dark continent'. This is elaborated through exposition of the (hetero)sexist bias of classical psychoanalysis' covert prioritization of orgasm as discharge (with all its excretory correlates) and of reproductive intercourse. Along the way she asks questions that, in the light of her postmodernism, acquire new complexity – for example: 'How do you draw the line between routine care of the body and domination? Between consent and submission? Between violation and self-expression?' (Dimen, 2003, 144). Instead of settling on reassuring answers she makes use of inclusive conflict formulation. Of clitoridectomy, she writes that: 'The controversy kindles anguished argument because it pits one central tenet of Western enlightenment feminism, control over one's body, against another, the need for multiplicity in understanding and setting feminist agendas' (Dimen, 2003, 144–5). In this account we don't get to choose *the* truth; we're just lucky if we can live true to our wishes.

She stops short of discovering 'clitoris envy' in Freud's footnotes but nonetheless the idea seems to emerge! Wryly suggesting, 'perhaps it is the clitoris's excess that has had to be excised' (Dimen, 2003, 146) she notices in its capacity to keep keeping on, this 'troublesome piece of flesh' not only offers alternatives to discharge being the orgasmic 'holy of holies' but also to the story of (object related) libido being anything like a whole story. Another story, that of Buddhism's 'breathing subject', doesn't prioritize desire at all. Another still, her account of lust as '. . . both the longing for pleasure and pleasure itself . . . Both-and, not either or' (Dimen, 2003, 163) foregrounds not only our ambiguous

relationships to pleasure and desire but equally those we have with knowledge and power. When, she says, like Freud, we express our scientific appetites for parsimony, consistency and precision, we strip away something vital. For accounts of connectedness to be anything like true they are, of necessity, diverse.

*Sexuality, Intimacy, Power* is a remarkable document of recent Western intellectual and political histories. Via psychoanalysis, feminism and social theory, it attempts no less than to make some honest sense of what it is to be a person amongst people and how much we can know of such things. It is readable, brave, witty and in places, quite funny. Put simply, you'll struggle through shelves on these subjects to find anything better. Check it out!

Phillips A. Reasons for Living. London Review of Books, 12 November 1998.

Totton N. Psychotherapy and politics: a crucial link. *Psychodynamic Practice* 2003; 9: 3.

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## PSYCHOTHERAPY AND POLITICS

*Psychotherapy and Politics*. By Nick Totton. London: Sage Publications, 2000. 186pp. £18.99 pb.

This is one of the most comprehensive books that I have read that addresses the relationship between therapies, the social and the political. Comprehensive in the sense that it covers many areas in short but succinct chapters that focus on particular relationships in the field. It is, in some way, a textbook, rather than a monograph and I would imagine that students of the field would find it a useful source of reference

that they would return to time and again.

The book is organized around four clear but often overlapping relations between psychotherapy and politics: psychotherapy *in* politics; psychotherapy *of* politics; politics *of* psychotherapy and finally politics *in* psychotherapy. Thus the first section deals with psychotherapy in politics, which is, to quote Totton:

A range of interventions by psychotherapists in the political process itself. Some of these are by therapists *acting as therapists* rather than private individuals: saying in one way or another, 'Through our clinical experience we have concluded that the following political programme is desirable . . .' In other cases, the therapists are *acting as citizens*, and putting their therapeutic skills and understanding at the service of a political goal to which they give priority. (Totton, 2000, 6)

So, in the first part of the book Totton examines the work of psychotherapists who are activists as citizens, those who are politicized as therapists, and those who justify politics and therapy each in terms of the other. Examining the work of 'right' and 'left' therapists up until the postwar period, Totton provides an interesting overview of the work of Wilhelm Reich and a useful summary of Reich's career contrasting left and right political positions via Freud and Jung. Totton specifically concentrates on Jung's anti-Semitism and his relationship to the National Socialist Party in Nazi Germany arguing that 'If only Jung could have "openly admitted" his own errors, and asked himself how they came about, something useful might have emerged from this sad tale' (Totton, 2000, 21). Following on from this, the chapter 'Alternative realities' examines the events of May 1968 and the rise of Lacan and Lacanianism in France. The thought of Jacques Lacan became highly influential in Paris, and has remained so, spreading to