BOOK REVIEWS

SOMETHING VENTURED, SOMETHING GAINED

Politics on the Couch: Citizenship and the Internal Life. By Andrew Samuels. London: Karnac Books/New York: The Other Press, 2001; 216 pp. plus references and index. £12.99 pb.

This is the third book – and according to Samuels his most ambitious – in a sequence[1] in which he has been exploring his major theme of the relationship between two worlds: the inner world of thoughts, feelings, dreams and fantasies, and the political world of power, economics, social justice and cultural identity. Having read the book through twice, with some difficulty, I am aware of my own ambivalence (which is one of the psychoanalytic concepts Samuels argues has something to offer to politics) and am conscious of the adage that 'no two persons ever read the same book'. I can identify with those who will enjoy it as a provocative, creative and visionary challenge to our thinking about the relationship between the individual and society, opening doors to new possibilities for understanding and doing politics, drawing on the inner political wisdom we each hold. I can also identify, perhaps more closely, with those who will be irritated and frustrated by its verbose and repetitive style, its fragmented and speculative propositions, its idealistic utopianism, skimming across complex ideas with few examples to illustrate how ideas might work in practice and little acknowledgement of other work and ideas in the areas he touches on. But frustration isn't all bad, and I am left wondering whether the lack of practical examples reflects a lack of interest in everyday reality on Samuel's part, an anxiety not to allow his ideas to be too easily pigeonholed, or a deliberate ploy to extract more work out of the reader. Any book that makes readers think about their own approach to politics can't be all bad.

Partly to help me make sense of the book, and partly in acknowledgment of the richness of his ideas, I have written (with the forbearance of the reviews editor) more than is usual in a book review about the contents of each chapter.

Samuels' starting point is that most of us tend to live – at least consciously – in one or other of the two worlds (the personal or the political) but that we each – secretly – live in both worlds. (At times Samuels rather overworks his use of the image of secrets, as if we're all living out the plot of an Enid Blyton book.) Like an explorer

1 The sequence began with The Plural Psyche (1989) and The Political Psyche (1993).

searching for a mountain pass, Samuels is seeking a link between these two realities and sees the development of a common language as the potential link. But he is aware of the risks he runs, and devotes the first chapter to outlining why psychotherapists have so far had little impact on politics despite their interest in it. He sees only a 'depressing litany' of failure, berates therapists for their disastrous attempts to work in the social domain, and for their 'weddedness to normative and universalistic standards in relation to gender, parenting and sexuality' (p. 9). But I think he is unrealistic in expecting therapists to operate outside the standards of the society they have grown up in. He also offers cautious grounds for optimism in the increased presence of psychology in society – for example, increased interest in the experience of minority groups living in the West – and the increased awareness of political issues within the practice of psychotherapy. I was struck, however, by the absence of any mention of psychotherapists who have made a direct contribution to the political process, such as John Alderdice, whose interest in 'doing something' led him to become the leader of the Alliance Party in Northern Ireland and Speaker in the Northern Ireland Assembly (not to mention his role in the Bill to regulate the profession of psychotherapy).

In the next chapter Samuels explains the main principles of 'transformative politics'. He argues, persuasively to me, that self-expression and self-development, much valued by therapists, fulfil similar functions for the individual as political activity. He introduces his concepts of political energy and the 'resacralization' of politics, by which he means attempting to get a sense of 'purpose, decency, aspiration and meaning back into political culture', and points out that far more people are engaged in groups with such aspirations (for example, green and single-issue campaigns) than belong to the main political parties. Personally I find terms like 'holy' and 'sacralization' have unwelcome overtones of fundamentalist religiosity, and would rather settle for there being a spiritual aspect to politics. Samuels also introduces his concept of a political psyche, claiming that far more clients are concerned with political issues and are raising them in therapy than had been supposed. I like his encapsulation of the situation: 'From a psychological point of view, the world is making people unwell . . . for people to feel better the world's situation needs to change' (p. 21) but this page also illustrates Samuels' tendency to go in for sweeping generalizations and hyperbole: 'every element of our culture is undergoing fragmentation and Balkanisation . . . in the midst of our tragic anomie and baffling atomisation . . . there is occurring an equally strange and equally complex attempt at the transformation of politics' (p. 21). Which is a pity, because with important and difficult ideas like these it's best if the writing at least can be clear and accessible.

The next three chapters deal with gender and family roles. In 'A new deal for women and men', Samuels argues in favour of gender uncertainty and confusion, attacking what he sees as a spurious certainty about gender differences. Accepting uncertainty allows us to consider new gender roles and rethink the 'male deal' – that you get to control the world in return for giving up your feminine side.

In 'The secret politics of the internal family' and 'The secret psychology of political forms' (those secrets again) Samuels takes us through a series of parallels

between different pair relationships in the nuclear family and new ways of doing politics, arguing as he does so that if we could change some of our prevailing family-role stereotypes, we could introduce new styles of political co-operation. Instead of son/mother and daughter/father relationships revolving around our present-day concerns with separation/individuation and incest taboos, they could set the scene for a nurturing approach to the environment and a confident affirmation of sexual viability. Similarly Samuels argues that sibling relationships do not have to revolve around images of rivalry, and that politics based on the way brothers and sisters relate could lead to more egalitarian, cooperative political activity. Certainly it does seem, in Britain at least, that the media always seek to present us with images of politicians at each other's throats, and treat evidence of co-operation as somehow corrupt. (I sometimes wonder if this has to do with the intense rivalry among newspapers and journalists being projected on to their subjects.)

In the next two chapters Samuels acknowledges his debt to Winnicott, extending his concept of the good-enough mother to leadership and to fathering. 'The good enough leader' is for me one of the best chapters in the book. Samuels argues convincingly that politics would be very different if we could allow leaders to fail and non-heroic images of leadership could inspire people the way heroic ones do. In the 'war against terror' we seem to be going the other way with political leaders striking increasingly warrior-like poses. As is often the way, sport and popular culture may lead the way, with 'stars' who have to manage their very public failures providing us with a model of leadership that accepts failure as an inevitable part of achievement. This is a better chapter for its practical working through of ideas, describing three kinds of good enough leaders – the erotic, trickster and sibling – who can inspire but ultimately fail.

This is followed by a chapter on the 'good enough father of whatever sex', which comes across as a guide to women who (singly or in partnerships) are raising children without a man, and to men who want to be fathers in a different way. One of his themes, here and elsewhere in the book, is the positive value of physical warmth/erotic admiration, from father to daughter, which has been forgotten in the panic about incest. He also offers reassurance on how to handle the rough and tumble of aggression in lone-parent families, but avoids the more difficult territory of mothers frightened of their sons' violence. Beyond the important but limited aspects of sex and aggression, there is little attempt to flesh out what fathering is or might be as a different way of being in the world.

The remainder of the book consists of five chapters on particular political themes. In 'Politics, spirituality, psychotherapy' Samuels sets outs five kinds of spirituality, including democratic spirituality, craft spirituality (holiness in things we make), and perhaps most unexpectedly, profane spirituality – that in our use/abuse of sex, drugs, alcohol and materialism we are reaching out for something beyond our material existence. 'It is time to recognise,' claims Samuels, 'that the spirituality in our world . . . is oozing out of the profane pores of contemporary life' (p. 129). So far so good, but he goes on to suggest that 'psychoanalysis might be completely wrong about how relationships arise' (p. 130) – that we don't have to 'struggle to achieve relatedness' because we may all be connected with each other by a kind of 'social ether'. How should we take this sweeping proposition in

a chapter that opens with the warning to 'always be suspicious of cheap holism as a response to complex problems' (p. 123)?

In 'The economic psyche' Samuels recaps ideas he has presented in a number of previous writings. A core idea is that since the collapse of communism no one is defending either the market place or collectivism as absolute answers, so that there is all to play for if 'men and women of vision access their reserves of realism and men and women of realism access their reserves of vision' (p. 147). He offers interesting suggestions for trying to amalgamate the two models – to encourage economic success, but put a cap on the wealth individuals can amass, having entrepreneurs who aren't capitalists. Richard Branson's failed lottery bid comes to mind, but I couldn't help wondering if the upbeat optimism of the chapter – indeed the book – about co-operation between different world views would have looked different if Samuels had been writing this after 9/11 instead of just before it.

'The political clinic' explores one of Samuels' favourite images: that the world is the patient, political/social issues are the symptoms that are trying to communicate something, which the citizen as therapist uses his/her subjective countertransference reaction to try to understand. This is an intriguing notion, but how far could we really use it? The one example he gives is from a workshop on homelessness, where participants' subjective response was that 'everyone feels homeless'. If anything I think this highlights the risks of using our emotional reactions to try to understand complex political issues. It reminds me of those simplistic attempts to identify with the emotional despair of suicide bombers that ignored the spiritual beliefs, political calculations, and technical infrastructure without which such bombings could not take place.

In 'Psychotherapy, the citizen and the state' Samuels explores the meaning of pluralism in politics – not simply acceptance of diversity but a much more active attempt to reconcile differences without imposing a false resolution. He sees pluralism being expressed in competition, bargaining, balancing the tension between opposing claims, and, Jungian that he is, suggests we need to 'trade off the shadow', making constructive use of what the other/opponent tells us about ourselves. Taking this idea forward, in the summer 2004 issue of *Transformations* (the *Journal of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility*), Samuels is quoted as positing the idea of Islam not only as the enemy and the critic of the West, but also its therapist. This seems to me a valuable insight, although one unlikely to gain wide support in a climate of fear and revenge. Indeed he acknowledges that there are many reasons why this is so difficult – that it's hard to establish conditions under which citizens with widely different viewpoints can take note of each other; that our attitudes to ideological competition tend towards one-sided denial of doubt, or towards synthesis that avoids the 'hard edges of valid disagreement'. He wants us to 'consider several competing theories together and organize our civic life around such competition' (p. 183) but how to do this seems like Harry Potter looking for platform nine-and-a-half. Samuels concludes this collection of chapters with a carefully playful exploration of national psychologies, or rather the fantasies we entertain about them.

In the final chapter, 'The transformation of politics', Samuels asks whether qualities that are virtues for psychotherapists, such

as delay, reflection, looking at all sides, are vices in politics, or if they can have something useful to contribute to how we do politics (pp. 195–6). Two uses that he suggests are that they can be added to the bank of ideas politicians and journalists draw on in making critiques, and that by 'repositioning' the citizen as a therapist of society they can change our attitudes to our own capacity as individuals to get involved. He reprises some of the main themes of 'transformative politics' – politics as self-expression and a resacralization of culture, political energy as the capacity of citizens to concentrate imaginatively on a designated problem, good-enough leadership where the acceptance of failure is normal, and ambivalence that allows love and hate to co-exits in social attitudes – and pushes the boat out with some more or less serious suggestions for structures that might take some of these ideas into national debate: a National Failure Enquiry, a National Institute for Reconciliation, a National Diversity Commission, a National Emotional Audit, and an Emotional and Spiritual Justice Commission (this last would look at how policy decisions affect people's self-esteem). Echoing Winnicott's concept of the facilitating environment for infants, he finally offers a nice encapsulation of 'the facilitating environment for transformative politics' as one that values 'respect for others, ambivalently coupled with self-respect and self-assertion, together with compassion in the face of failure' (p. 205).

As I said at the start, this is a difficult book to review – indeed I'd say it's the most difficult book of the 20 or so I must have reviewed over the years. On the one hand Samuels is undoubtedly a visionary, almost bursting at the seams with new ways of looking at things, going back and forth between psychotherapeutic and political 'takes' on the world. On the other hand he is (a) repetitive and longwinded, seemingly always getting there but never arriving, like Escher's famous staircase, and (b) almost wildly optimistic in his proposals with very little to say about how to get from A to B, although he can perhaps be forgiven for not having anticipated the impact on would-be co-operators of 9/11. I doubt I'd have read the entire book if not reviewing it, but I'm glad I did because I suspect that, much as Samuels might have wished, the ideas have begun percolating through. In a way, Samuels can be seen in the tradition of political missionaries in the early days of socialism, of the type satirized by George Bernard Shaw in plays like *Man and Superman,* and *Candida.* It is easy to scoff at such enthusiasm, but in a world obsessed with competencies, technology, and getting things done, there is also an important place for radical speculation.

David Kennard
24 St Oswald's Road Fulford York
YO10 4PF

DISSOCIATION AND THINKING TOGETHER

Attachment, Trauma and Multiplicity: Working with Dissociative Identity Disorder. Edited by Valerie Sinason. London: Brunner-Routledge, 2002; 280pp. £18.99 pb.

Valerie Sinason is well known for her dedication in bringing to the fore certain issues that are uncomfortable to address, particularly relating to those people whom society has neglected or excluded. Her earlier work in disability issues was groundbreaking; later, she helped us to understand satanic