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FACING POLITICAL TRUTHS

STEPHEN FROSH, Birkbeck College, London, UK

ABSTRACT *This response to Layton, Hollander and Gutwill's Psychoanalysis, Class and Politics: Encounters in the Clinical Setting (Layton et al., 2006) begins with an exploration of the political effects of analytic 'neutrality', giving two examples (psychoanalytic approaches to homosexuality and the treatment of Wilhelm Reich in the 1930s) to show how this can be, and has been, used to mask political conformism. The paper then takes up the issue of how politics becomes manifest in clinical psychoanalytic encounters, and focuses in particular on Jessica Benjamin's appeal to a notion of emotional 'truth'. This is linked to a different form of neutrality – one that is fundamentally political because it involves looking unflinchingly at whatever is there to be seen. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: neutrality, homosexuality, Nazism, analytic truth

NEUTRALITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Arguments over the politics of psychoanalysis are scarcely new events. As several of the authors in Layton et al. (2006) remind us, analysts and analytic institutions historically have attached great importance to 'neutrality' in the clinical setting, meaning the maintenance of the analyst's 'evenly suspended attention' (Freud, 1926/1962) when faced with the competing elements of the patient's psychic impulses, and avoidance of collapsing too readily into the analyst's preconceived or conventional opinions. This idea is still a cornerstone of the analytic attitude and distinguishes it from the 'ecstatic attitude' (Rieff, 1966) of much of the advocacy work that passes for psychotherapy, in which pushing people towards the *right kind of life* can take precedence over letting their troubles emerge. The neutrality of the psychoanalyst, at its best, is not in itself a failure to engage with politics or anything else; it is rather a willingness to face whatever comes – in a way to 'face it down', however disturbing it may be: sitting there, waiting to see what happens, allowing whatever must happen to do so.

This is, however, an obvious idealization of psychoanalytic neutrality. In fact, as Layton et al. (2006) repeatedly demonstrate, 'evenly suspended attention' that makes itself available for anything can morph into a mode of non-judgementalism that automatically, even silently, supports existing ideologies. To give one of the best known examples, mentioned in this book in a substantial way only in a pained contribution to the roundtable by Ted Jacobs (Layton et al., 2006, Chapter 12, pp. 186–7), the psychoanalytic stance on homosexuality degenerated from Freud's relative liberalism into a normative set of assumptions about healthy

and unhealthy sexuality. Stephen Mitchell noted specifically the nature of this slippage, in a paper from 1981:

> A survey of the most widely cited writings on the psychoanalytic treatment of homosexuality over the past 20 years reveals a recurrent admonition to the analyst to depart from the traditional analytic position of nondirective neutrality by actively discouraging homosexual behavior and encouraging heterosexual behavior. It is argued not only that the analyst *should* take an open stand against homosexual behavior, but that any meaningful treatment of such patients *must* entail such a stance. (Mitchell, 1981/2002, 23)

This might recently have been replaced by a more neutral stance, as Jacobs claims ('essentially that all our sexuality is the result of a confluence of many forces, and the outcome could be heterosexuality, could be homosexuality, could be asexuality, whatever, and that it's not pathological' – Layton et al., 2006, 186) but it is a moot point whether such a liberal position sufficiently contests the pathologization of homosexuality so rooted in social and psychoanalytic history. Some authors have argued that a more actively committed, 'affirmative' stance is required. According to Martin Frommer (1994, 223), an 'affirmative stance' here is one that 'emotionally communicates to the patient the analyst's belief that homosexuality is a natural developmental end point for some individuals.' Frommer argues that 'internalised homophobia' is an unavoidable developmental outcome for those raised within a homophobic culture – that is, for homosexuals and analysts alike. In the case of the former, an active and hence non-neutral therapeutic stance of asserting the legitimacy of homosexuality is seen by Frommer as a way of combating this internalized homophobia; for analysts, it is equally a path towards unravelling the blind spots of their countertransference towards homosexual patients, and thus making it less likely that they will fall back on ready-made formulations that explicitly or implicitly pathologize homosexuality.

This argument that psychoanalytic therapy with homosexual patients can never be neutral in the traditional sense but must rather, if it is to avoid pathologizing, affirm the value of homosexuality, is radically different from the standard liberal analytic view that all material should be analysed for its psychic meaning, irrespective of any value judgements. The weakness of the argument is that it risks assuming knowledge of what it is that is producing psychological distress for the patient – that it is, above all, internalized homophobia that needs redressing in the therapeutic process. Analysis then becomes a form of advocacy in which the patient is encouraged to move towards self-acceptance and to feel herself or himself to be in a shared (less 'lonely') struggle. What is lost here is the relentless impartiality of the analytic attitude, which takes psychic health to be measurable only in terms of a capacity to face and understand conflict, rather than to adopt any particular position seen as legitimate by the analyst. On the other hand, what Frommer and others in the lesbian and gay movement achieve very powerfully is a dramatic confrontation with the manner in which psychoanalysis has balked at the implications of its own ethical stance. Homosexuality has been, and continues to be, derogated in the psychoanalytic movement, as in society at large; any strategic response to this must recognize the necessity for an active opposition to rebalance the scales. If society does come to value homosexuality equally with heterosexuality then an affirmative stance presumably will be unnecessary; but that situation is a long way off and in the meantime gay and lesbian patients need positive support in order to be able freely to work in the analytic situation (see Frosh, 2006, for a more detailed discus-

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sion of this debate). Is this the situation with neutrality more generally; that is, in an unequal society is it the case that analysts must take up the cudgels in favour of the oppressed if they are to avoid automatically pathologizing them?

NEUTRAL(IZING) POLITICS

Wariness amongst psychoanalysts of any political commitment, inside or outside the consulting room, can be seen as the key issue debated in Layton et al. (2006), and it is an issue with a history stretching back more or less to the start of the psychoanalytic movement. Freud, characteristically, was ambivalent on the subject: he was not at all reluctant to write about political issues from a psychoanalytic perspective, especially if one includes his discussions of the conditions causing repression and of religion under the general rubric of 'politics' (e.g. Freud, 1927/1985a, 1930/1985b; see also Einstein and Freud, 1933/1964). He also advocated finding ways of making psychoanalysis available to the masses and showed signs of at least some support for socialist ideals, however unrealistic he thought they might be. On the other hand, when it came to the institutional politics of psychoanalysis, Freud was very nervous about anything that might impugn its claim to 'scientific' neutrality. The obvious example here is the farrago around Wilhelm Reich, which preceded the abysmal response to the arrest of Edith Jacobson by the Nazis, mentioned in a couple of places in Layton et al. (2006). Reich had been seen as an analyst of considerable promise in Vienna in the 1920s, but his ideas gradually diverged from Freudian psychoanalysis, becoming more biological in focus and less interested in the fantasy dimensions of psychic life; this tendency became exaggerated as time went on, despite some very important later work, notably *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (Reich, 1948; Frosh, 1999). More relevantly, his political radicalism was also of concern within the psychoanalytic movement, with Freud himself being demonstrably critical. Reich had joined the Communist Party in Berlin in 1930 and had become increasingly involved both in a theoretical project to link Freudianism with Marxism and in practical politics surrounding sexual reform, and along with Otto Fenichel he was the acknowledged leader of the 'political Freudians' (Jacoby, 1983). With the arrival of the Nazis in power, the threat posed by such 'political' activity to the safety of psychoanalysis within Germany was seen by Freud as well as by Ernest Jones as potentially extremely damaging, with Reich as its most flagrant exponent. Anna Freud's letter to Jones of 27 April 1933 shows the reasoning as well as the emotion:

> Here we are all prepared to take risks for psychoanalysis but not for Reich's ideas, with which nobody is in agreement. My father's opinion on this matter is: If psychoanalysis is to be prohibited, it should be prohibited for what it is, and not for the mixture of politics and psychoanalysis which Reich represents. My father can't wait to get rid of him inasmuch as he attaches himself to psychoanalysis; what my father finds offensive in Reich is the fact that he has forced psychoanalysis to become political; psychoanalysis has no part in politics. (Steiner, 2000, 128)

Promotion of the idea that 'psychoanalysis has no part in politics' was a key element in the defence of psychoanalysis against the Nazi critique of its inherently destabilizing nature and was precisely the line taken by the leaders of German psychoanalysis, Felix Boehm and Carl Müller-Braunschweig, in their negotiations (or collaboration, as some would have it) with the Nazis (Frosh, 2005). Boehm, for example, noted in 1934 that 'Reich had often come out publicly as a Communist and as a psychoanalyst, presenting his opinions as the results of psychoanal-

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ysis . . . I had to fight against this prejudice' (Brecht et al., 1985, 120). Boehm did this explicitly by arguing to the Nazis that there were two kinds of psychoanalysis, one being the genuine form that could be of service to the state, and the other being the distorted, politicized version brandished by Reich. That this paved the way easily for a distinction between 'pure' and 'Jewish' psychoanalysis was not a point made explicitly or necessarily intended, but was clearly a move made available by this 'two types of analysis' rhetoric. As implied in Anna Freud's letter, Freud himself was actually quite brutal in his view of what should happen to Reich and showed no qualms about engaging in street-brawling types of politics *within* the psychoanalytic movement. Writing to Eitingon in 1933, he commented, 'Since Reich is now causing trouble in Vienna, he should be removed from the German Psychoanalytic Society. I want this done for scientific reasons but have no objection to this being done for political reasons as well and wish him success if he wants to play the martyr' (Nitzschke, 1999, 355). Preserving psychoanalysis through suppressing or getting rid of troublemakers had always been one of Freud's strategies, and has never been alien to the psychoanalytic institutions' way of operating, as Jacoby (1975, 1983) – much referenced in Layton et al. (2006) – has documented in the American context. In Germany in the 1930s this approach was additionally fuelled by the hope that depoliticizing psychoanalysis through excluding its wildest radical would convince the German authorities that it should be judged on its 'scientific' merits alone.

As it happened, and as Reich and a few others were prescient enough to see, this 'non-political' attitude effectively paved the way for a partial Nazification of psychoanalysis, while depriving psychoanalysis of its crucial critical role in opposing the brutalities of Nazism (Frosh, 2005). It is this that makes the example relevant to the concerns of today, perhaps particularly for American psychoanalysts trying to maintain a minority leftist position within their profession and their country. Layton et al. (2006) is in this respect an attempt of considerable integrity to examine how the 'neutrality' argument clears the ground for reactionary politics, given the dominant trends in American ideology and in much of politics generally. The retreat into neutrality also fails to offer complex critical tools to those who need them in order to understand and where necessary oppose what is happening in the political sphere; and as this sphere is so close to home, so personal, it can be argued that this is a psychotherapeutic and intellectual failure as well as a failure of civic responsibility.

Many of the contributors to the book comment on how deeply felt political views can be, and of how refusing to engage with them in psychoanalysis can be a way of steering clear of difficult issues to a degree that would be regarded as professionally incompetent should it be seen in connection with issues such as sex or rage. As demonstrated by 'the events of 9/11', which hover over the book as the defining moment of the contemporary American crisis, it is not only identity politics that are personal; *all* politics have the capacity to break in on lives and turn them upside down. Not challenging, not picking up the cues, not noting the associations to political events, not attending to the 'external' situation, drains meaning from the analytic encounter in an unacceptable way.

POLITICAL INSIGHT

In fact, it turns out, many analysts do allow politics to creep into their sessions. The informal piece of research carried out by Andrew Samuels several years ago (and

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summarized in his chapter in Layton et al. (2006), the only one by a non-American), in which he asked analysts of various theoretical schools and in various countries about the extent to which they take up political issues, is one of the starting points for the book and for many of its contributors, as is Samuels' set of arguments in favour of more explicit links between the political and the psychotherapeutic. The other founding text reprinted here is Muriel Dimen's penetrating account of money in psychoanalysis, which offers an anthropological and sociological take on the class position of analysts and on their resulting anxieties about their status, expertise and worth. Lynne Layton's reprinted chapter on visceral responses to class displacement ('This place gives me the heebie jeebies') takes up the issue of emotionality and social positioning, and is incidentally a florid example of a methodologically catastrophic piece of research of the kind that makes empiricists snooty about psychoanalysis, even though it nevertheless produces some interesting material. These early chapters stake out some important ground concerning both political commitment and the significance of class – a neglected phenomenon within psychoanalysis – in emotional life. The difficulty of holding onto this focus on class is enacted later in the book, which moves away from the specific issues of social class to a much broader set of responses to American imperialism and to the challenges of a critically oriented engagement with politics in clinical work. The particularities of American life shine through here: on the negative side, its relative lack of a radical leftist tradition and its tendency to see its own experience as the marker for the whole world; on the positive side, its remarkable diversity and tradition of critical dissent in unexpected places. That others outside the US fail to see this diversity and are impressed and relieved when they find it is exemplified in Nancy Hollander's description of the amazement of her audience in Brazil when she criticized America's foreign policy:

> Our responses, which indicated our agreement with the participants' views regarding US global reach, were apparently so discrepant with Brazilian assumptions that the majority of people in the USA provide consensual support for the government's policies and priorities, that they made the front page of a major Rio newspaper the following day. (Layton et al., 2006, 163)

As Hollander argues, this draws attention to the responsibility that people have to ensure that their dissenting views are heard; it also suggests that psychoanalysts are not usually looked to for critical views but are assumed to be at one with the establishment.

The rather rapid loss of social class from the analysis even in a book that includes it in its title is perhaps a consequence of the relative weakness of the American socialist tradition in comparison with that of Europe or Latin America. It also reflects the dominance of private practice as opposed to state health care in the US, which has ensured that the client base for analysis is even more socially homogenous than is the case elsewhere. The middle-class assumptions of analysts are borne out by the middle-class responses of their clientele, with much less of the abrasive challenge presented, for example, to those who also practise in deprived areas of the British National Health Service. What America does have, however, is power, and it is in relation to issues of power and politics that this volume has most to contribute. Several of the authors have something important to say about this. For some of them, the key issues relate to the attack on democracy by the Bush administration and the sense of helplessness that has engulfed much of the American left. For others, the issues relate to the power of America in the world and the responsibility

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and guilt that flows from this – Hollander's chapter is an especially evocative presentation of this kind, building on an account of the behaviour of 'citizen-bystanders' (including psychoanalysts) in Argentina's 'dirty war' and using this to give resonance to a description of political resistance in the US. However, it is the roundtable discussion amongst Manhattan, mostly Jewish, analysts reprinted from *Psychoanalytic Perspectives* and dominated by Jessica Benjamin, that especially cogently pulls together large and small politics, the politics of international conflict (Israel-Palestine), historical guilt and responsibility (the Holocaust), personal belief and clinical psychotherapeutic practice, including the effect on the transference when the analyst is known publicly for her or his political views (not that much, as it turns out, because everything resonates on both the public and the private stage anyway). Benjamin herself touches on all these themes and does her best to weave them together, whilst maintaining some caution about the extendibility of psychoanalytic concepts and practices to politics at the social level. She opens with her current primary concern, the need for engagement with Palestinian suffering from the perspective of acknowledging responsibility as a Jew, and links this with the analyst's realization that whilst you might be the 'activator of old traumas, old pain' rather than their instigator, 'you acknowledge that you have, you know, bumped into the person's bruise, and you acknowledge that there is hurt and pain and that you may have responsibility for that, and in doing this, you alleviate a whole level of tension that makes it possible, then, to talk about, to explore' (Layton et al., 2006, 170). This account flows directly from Benjamin's theoretical and practical interest in 'recognition' (Benjamin, 1998, 2000), and whilst there are clearly limits to its applicability (Benjamin herself gives an example here – Layton et al., 2006, 172), it offers a rather direct example of how an understanding derived from clinical work, when informed by a sophisticated appreciation of political issues (notably, Benjamin's work arises from a strong background in critical theory) can supply a very specific blueprint for non-violent intervention.

Benjamin's second major contribution to the roundtable debate identifies some of the issues blocking clarity in liberal thought – notably the shame-guilt axis in which, as she puts it, the left is driven by 'guilt about having too much power, or guilt about having too much, period' and the right by 'shame about being weak' (Layton et al., 2006, 174). The right-wing political position is thus organized around defence against weakness, which is a source of its refusal to acknowledge the other (that is, other people and their ideas) and its relative lack of difficulty in embracing intolerance and fundamentalism. The left, however, is weakened by its wish to reach out and see the other's view; hence the laughter in the roundtable when Benjamin avers, correctly, that 'we're right and they're wrong' (Layton et al., 2006, 173). This links with an absolutely central claim, which perhaps really does embody what psychoanalysis might say to politics, a claim about truth. Benjamin says (Layton et al., 2006, 178–9):

> So, our belief, our commitment, is that we can stand to find out things about ourselves and about the other that are inherently painful and disappointing. And how we can do that is by having some kind of faith, either in the strength of self-reflection or the connection between ourselves and an other, who is committed to truth. Either way, there is some truth commitment. There is some commitment to facing what's going on underneath the surface that I think unites all analysts and causes them to move to a socially critical dimension that rejects authority, that insists we have to face what is unpleasant, either in human nature or in society.

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It is important to note here that Benjamin is not claiming that analysts own the truth, a stance that has in fact been enacted by the more conservative and elitist practitioners throughout the movement's history. Nor is a specific set of socialist ideals pulled into the fray, even though adherence to certain kinds of ideals (often liberal ones) is a marker of much analytic practice as it struggles to make sense of individuals' troubles. Nor, for that matter, is there advocacy exactly of an analytic stance that stands outside experience – a 'neutral' analytic attitude in the old sense – analysing everything that comes its way with a commitment only to the unconscious, and nothing else. Rather, Benjamin makes a claim for something related to this, but more engaged: she identifies the psychoanalytic project as that of facing truth without backing away, seeing whatever is there without adopting the kind of defensive, shame-induced activity that she had previously associated with right-wing politics. This injunction to face reality reaches beyond the language of values and ideals and instead defines an attitude, an approach that involves searching out whatever there is – however destructive, painful, guilt-inducing or shameful that may be, however much it impugns the good name of the individual or the society (or, for that matter, the institutions of psychoanalysis itself), however much that might then place on us a responsibility for difficult actions. 'Truth' here is not a thing, but an activity, a way of approaching life that is inherently political.

The end result of all this is that the intersection of psychoanalysis and politics does not reduce to questions of whether to take up the political issues clients raise, or what weight to give the 'external' in clinical contact, or whether psychoanalysts and psychotherapists have special kinds of social responsibilities. These are important issues and they are explored well in *Psychoanalysis, Class and Politics*. But alongside these questions, or rather in excess of them, there is something more challenging still: the issue of how to gaze unblinkingly at what there is, and how to respond to it analytically by seeing its contours and its underlying drive, its desire and its hidden recesses and its violence. The analyst's capacity not to look away can be translated into the political injunction to refuse ideological distortions, to look clearly at the world and not be afraid to speak about what can be seen, particularly in relation to justice and injustice, truth and its suppression, which can perhaps be understood as social parallels to the dynamic processes with which analysts are familiar. It is in adhering to this kind of neutrality, in which whatever is there is seen and pronounced upon in all its actuality, rather than in the spurious neutrality of the one who has no commitments at all, that psychoanalysis becomes (to quote the book's subtitle) genuinely both a political and a clinical 'encounter'.

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Correspondence: s.frosh@bbk.ac.uk.

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