

# TALKIN' 'BOUT MY EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT** *A response to Psychoanalysis, Class and Politics: Encounters in the Clinical Setting (Layton et al., 2006), which welcomes the dialogue between analytic and political voices and uses personal material to focus in particular on the themes of ideology and education. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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The public wants what the public gets  
but I don't get what this society wants  
I'm going underground  
(The Jam) "Going Undergrand."

The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist  
(*The Usual Suspects*)

Back in 1993, in my second year of training, I was browsing a bookstall, apparently safe in the knowledge that the speaker I was somewhat in awe of and finally about to hear was at the other end of the room gathering his thoughts. I'd already checked out one or two august, remote and classily double-barrelled figures from the Institute of Psychoanalysis who, in fairness, had spoken interestingly and well. But, I was here for the new rock 'n' roll, the guy who had been described to me as 'the *enfant terrible* of SAP' – which I understood to mean someone who continued to think for himself and beyond convention, in spite of the famously conservative pressures of analytic institutions. Lost in my positive transference I hadn't reckoned on actually *speaking with* him and was utterly nonplussed when I looked up from the copy of *The Political*

*Psyche* I had been thumbing to see Andrew Samuels standing looking at me! Panic instantly metamorphosed into cheek and I said: 'This book of yours – is it any good?' We both laughed, spoke and entered into a correspondence that subsequently led to me to being one of only about five people under 30 (then) who attended the very first meeting of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility (PCSR). Even at the time it struck me that the name of this fledgling organization ought to be tautological but as yet I was largely innocent of analytic culture! Like Samuels, I just couldn't figure out how you could keep the two things apart – particularly as my choice to train was partly motivated by the exasperating poverty of therapeutic services available to the 'mentally ill' people I worked with. Already a client, practising psychotherapy seemed like an opportunity to do something useful, a way to constructively contribute to lived lives: which I guess is something to do with politics.

This superb book, consistently mindful of the time from which it emerges, challenges the analytic orthodoxies that have historically attempted to separate the personal and

political worlds of analysts in clinical settings. It should be required reading in any reflective psychotherapy training, made up as it is of 12 diverse and scintillating essays questioning this separation, a roundtable discussion addressing the question 'Is politics the last taboo in psychoanalysis?' and three responses to the discussion offered by Muriel Dimen, Cleonie White and Andrew Samuels, which include his shocking revelation that, '... Discussion of any kind, I was taught in my training, is simply not analytic' (p. 208).

Wherever this remains the case, such dogma must create a remarkable incongruity for analytic trainees when set alongside the rest of their training experience! Unless, of course, discussion is out the rest of the time too...! Even less persuasive on the part of institutions adopting this liturgy is that in defining what people aren't supposed to think and talk about one cannot help but give voice to the taboo! And that's before we've even begun to factor in the notorious and gloriously non-compliant expressions of our unconscious thought, which, to apply a Jungian, if not a psychoanalytic gloss, would be merrily compensating for such conscious suppression! Worse still, the 'internal supervisor' (Casement, 1992) morphs into a castigating dominatrix inhibiting the analyst's capacity for listening and expression. People tend not to speak if they have sufficient non-verbal information to suggest that they will not be heard. Ironically, this is a model of analysis that promotes rather than interprets repression. Then I suppose there would be nothing to interpret unless there had first been acting out!

Collectively the authors of *Psychoanalysis, Class and Politics* seem to be suggesting that no matter how much anyone might wish to deny or disavow politics, it is a part of our experience and what as citizens we are *all* subject to. So for a discipline that has done

so much to put sexuality, aggression and the usefulness of speaking and being heard onto the map, it seems nothing less than aggressive to deny consideration to a form of conjunction so obviously central to human existence. After all, wherever we group there is politics! It had never occurred to me, until I heard it from analysts, that one would consciously proscribe or interpret *away* an area of a client's experience. Wouldn't that be a way of intentionally limiting the therapeutic encounter, or of foregrounding the analyst's wishes while posing as being 'neutral', or of inducing negative transference or perhaps of just being rude in the working alliance by insisting one thing was another *before* one had analysed it? One would certainly have strayed somewhat from paying *even attention* to *free association*. Perhaps this classical position is rooted in Freud's separation of 'the latent' and 'the manifest' when he wrote about dreams and symptoms (Freud, 1991). To date, neither he nor anyone else I am aware of has produced any viable account of the criteria by which one could recognize latent dream content or of how the analyst might acquire such a privileged vantage point. Which ironically (again) brings power, politics and authority firmly into play as the underlying meanings of dreams/symptoms/experience become what the analyst says they are rather than what they can dependably demonstrate (Phillips, 1995). So here's a political question: do I trust what I can evidence or do as I am told – and what's the price for each? I'm with Bob Dylan when he sings,

But I mean no harm nor fault  
On anyone that lives in a vault,  
But it's all right, Ma, if I can't please him.  
(Dylan, 1974)

This said, it would be unrepresentative of the rigour of this body of work not to

acknowledge that throughout, the authors are mindful of all the conventional analytic concerns about enactment, resistance, avoidance, projection, etc., that political discourse in the clinic *might* represent in the analysand. It's more that they are also pointing to precisely the same qualities in analysts when they adopt a rote response to political material. The history of psychoanalysis is replete with reports of technical difficulty, but because something is difficult does not mean it is not worth attempting. We have seen this in the painful accounts of realizing what transference is and how it might be worked with, in the identification of the phenomena we call counter-transference, in our evolving understanding of these terms, and more recently in work readdressing their troublesome erotic components (Mann, 1997; Samuels, 1995; Schaverien, 1995; Dimen, 2003). More recently still, analysis has been furthered by developments in attachment theory and the new neuroscience but growth invariably implies discomfort. So, Word up! Thinking is much like breeding. Healthy stock emerges from lively conjunction with a world and ideas beyond the presumed safety of the familiar. Familiarity breeds contempt and incest is quite literally degrading. Analysis can no more afford to be contemptuous or avoidant of the world beyond its own culture than the West can. So we can either learn this lesson or become gradually extinct.

What I have greatly appreciated in my encounters with Samuels and equally in the contributors to this book is their willingness to engage with this difficult material from an inter-subjective rather than a subject/object stance. In walking, rather than merely talking the talk, they usher in a new paradigm. What might be frightening about this is that our authority as workers will of necessity be eroded by the increased complexity of the material we try to encounter – mate-

rial in which we are less expert. But whatever the narcissistic wounds, it might be more satisfying to engage more fully with our clients' concerns and to contribute further to our communities. Samuels' vision of contribution to a multidisciplinary democracy of sense (p. 203) reminds of how much more you get when you give. In the UK, we seem to have progressed considerably since PCSR first met in 1993 and the radical discussions in this book propel us further forward; but I am mindful of Chomsky's caution that:

An ideal form of social control is an atomised collection of individuals focused on their own narrow concerns, lacking kinds of organisation in which they can gain information, develop and articulate their thoughts and act constructively to achieve common ends. (Chomsky, 2006, 25)

We still lack these kinds of organization. As Muriel Dimen points out, in the US: '... left-wing politics has a patchy history. It starts and it stops . . . goes full steam ahead and then sputters out or gets sabotaged or ruined' (p 196). Back on this side of the pond it was an ironic joke when New Labour took office in 1997 that 'Tony Blair MP' was an anagram of 'I'm Tory Plan B'. The joke stopped being funny when it just became true. For me, being here now is more like being one of the animals at the end of Orwell's great fable, trying to tell the difference between the pigs and the men. I am suggesting here that 'left' and 'right' are now vague, outmoded terms and that in trying to identify much with either our attention is drawn away from much more pressing questions. Questions about whether we are content to continue in circumstances where our executives become less accountable and more dishonest. Questions about their collusion and personal interests in the transfer of power away from elected governments in nation states to unelected multina-

tional corporations. Questions about how it is that wealth and power become ever more unevenly distributed whatever governments claim to act in the name of – be it freedom, democracy, God, the left, the right, the middle way, the free market, *sharia* law or traditional values. Questions about how anyone could possibly obtain reliable information from governments that ‘manage news’ and news organizations that, year on year, are owned by fewer and fewer individuals/organizations. Questions about how it is that a very small minority of fundamentalists, who on one side *claim to be* Christian and on the other *claim to be* Muslim, have so effectively succeeded in imposing their oppressive world views, laws and conflicts onto the lives of millions of people in hundreds of countries who would prefer to live co-operatively and peacefully alongside one another. Questions about whether fundamentalists of *any* persuasion – religious or secular – are fit for positions of leadership. Questions about what, if any, correlation there is between ‘fundamentalisms’ and the profiles contained in DSM IV. Questions about who is fit to be at large in the community, let alone running it.

Mr Bin Laden has left us in no doubt that from his point of view nothing less than the imposition of *sharia* law will do. (And as Wilde once pointed out, tradition is the refuge of scoundrels.) While in Bush’s US, ‘... the philosophical underpinning of the current administration’s policies ... is articulated in The Project for a New American Century, which calls for US domination of the world and its resources, and at home for the elimination of the social infrastructure’ (p. 96). It’s no wonder they’re rubbing each other up the wrong way! They are like the deranged megalomaniacs of Bond movies, narcissistically self-obsessed and hell bent on the destruction of others around them who may wish to be neither ‘martyrs’ nor

‘collateral damage’. But because they are real, they are frightening. Enough to make you want a Mummy or an analyst or leader which is bad news if your Mummy’s dead, your analyst doesn’t ‘do’ politics, and your state doesn’t ‘do’ representation. Oh and the official advice: ‘... Orange alert, danger, be careful, don’t worry, be patriotic, go shopping’ (p. 84). Either somebody’s taking the piss or the US administration is reminding us that we’re just like the chimps in early attachment experiments, clinging to their chicken-wire parents; we’ll take a bad explanation of our experience over none, almost every time.

I am fortunate, and more personally happy than not, but that doesn’t make me want to pretend that I live in anything much resembling a democracy, that I feel in any way represented by the political parties I can occasionally vote for or that I feel anything other than deeply angered and ashamed by the conduct of my putative representatives. I am fearful of the consequences of their actions, which, for the record, were not in my name. Which brings me to my epigraphs, to what I believe is most central in this book and to what I believe is missing.

I think it unlikely that as The Jam’s ‘Going Underground’ topped the UK Charts in early 1980, Paul Weller had Zizeck and Althusser’s work in mind, but he was clearly onto something – the increasingly bewildering spectacle of mass acquiescence in circumstances manifestly not in the masses’ interests. ‘Going underground’ points us towards the location of ‘... the ideological apparatuses, including the family and educational system ... each individual internalises ... the fundamental principles and values ... which become a significant aspect of unconscious life ... ideology functions to hide the unequal power structure and access to resources’ (p. 95). Artists have often worked for the communities they exist in

like canaries have done in mines; there is a marked sense of danger in Weller's words, a sense that 'When we live without critically questioning the sociosymbolic order that we take as a given, we embody what Zizek means when he asserts about ideology that "we do not know it, but we are doing it"' (p. 105). So, like the devil in my second epigraph, you can tell something's going on but you are not quite sure what to make of it, whether it's *really* going on or what, if anything, you can do about it. It's deception and it's up to no good. This is perfectly demonstrated for Western eyes in this short extract from the journalist Jill Carroll's account of her capture:

Abu Ali, the insurgent . . . declared that his wife wanted to die. 'Um Ali wanted to be a martyr. She wants to drive a car bomb!' he said beaming. Of course, she'd have to wait, since she was now four months pregnant. It is forbidden in Islam to kill a foetus at that age he explained . . . I talked with Um Ali and the other women in the kitchen. Yes, I travelled for my job, I said. They replied that it was wrong for them to work, that they left school at 12 to learn to cook and keep the house. Then the dinner platters returned with the food ravaged – rice everywhere, bones with the chicken chewed off, nothing left but scraps, really. And the women sat and began to eat. I could not believe it! After all the time they had spent preparing the meal, they got the leftovers. But I sat down with them. And, as I would often do with women over the next three months, I ate from the remains of the communal stew. (Carroll, 2006, 2–3)

It would be easy for a Western reader to identify the alarming, paradoxical and oppressive operations of ideology in this short paragraph, for us to wonder at the apparent cheapness of life, at the apparent willingness of a mother to die before her children are grown and perhaps to console ourselves with the myopic idea that it's just down to Abu Ali; who of course is just as subject to ideology as his wife. The truth is

less palatable. In the West, ideology leaves us no more consistent and no less confused. We have pro-lifers and animal liberationists who bomb to assert the sanctity of life. We aspire to export democracy but rig our own ballots (Bush/Dame Shirley Porter). We condemn neglect but have neglected New Orleans; we assert the rule of law while denying access to it in Guantanamo and at the UN we only observe resolutions that suit us. We condemn torture while performing it at Abu Ghraib and a network of secret prisons that we first deny the existence of and then proudly assert 'produced valuable information in the fights against terrorism' (Temko and Harris, 2006, 5). Post 'women's liberation', we continue to oppress women though everything from low rape convictions to unequal pay and the variously disadvantaged and misinformed *also* feed on the scraps of carcasses. As Morgan Spurlock's film *Super Size Me* and Jamie Oliver's TV series *School Dinners* have been at pains to show us, we're just less honest about it – we spray the scraps off the carcasses, dye them, deep fry them and then cover them in sugar and salt. We condemn men like Pablo Escobar for bringing crack cocaine addiction into our neighbourhoods, especially if they're white; yet amidst an epidemic of obesity we actually *take our children to see* Ronald McDonald. I could extend this list seemingly to infinity but I would only be bringing further evidence to support the substantive points made by the disquietingly transformed protagonist of Pauline Reage's *Story of O* (Reage, 1991) or by Jill Carroll's statement that:

My release was one of the hardest memories of my captivity. Suddenly my structure was gone. There was no one to tell me what to do. My body was free, but my mind was not. I was conditioned to be whatever anyone around me wanted me to be. I had no opinions, no self will. I did not know how to make decisions. (Carroll, 2006, 5)

Human beings are very frail, impressionable animals and if you frighten or deceive us enough, we'll acquiesce to almost anything. We thrive in some conditions but are easily and rapidly capable of losing everything we thought was 'our selves' when subject to pathological systems and environments. It is easier to understand what is going on when a gun is pointed at us than it is to understand what's happening when, in submission to ideology, we point the gun at ourselves. So, I agree with several of the authors of *Psychoanalysis, Class and Politics* when I suggest that it takes the unconscious operation of ideology to explain this.

It is instructive to note that Verbal Kint, the speaker of my second epigraph, is a (long) con man. He is not only able to con the police, which is to say the people who specialize in investigation and latterly in the UK and US have unprecedented powers but he is also able to con all the other criminals, people who specialize in the unsanctioned invasion of others' spaces, in violence, theft, detention, torture, sexual abuse and murder – not unlike the US and UK administrations have since '11/9'. (No, that's not a typo: I'm English.)

In order to be able to sleep at night the criminals I have worked with have had to have a 'good enough' justification for their actions: just like our leaders. The more subtle point here is that in order to behave as the US and UK administrations have its leaders have been both *subject to* and at once are the *proponents of* ideology. Ideology prevents the very things Tony Blair set such rhetorical store by at the start of his reign: 'joined up thinking' and 'education, education, education'. Indeed it's not a bad rule of thumb to suggest that our politicians are usually trying to divert our attention away from the very things they speak most about: it's for this reason that for several years now

in the UK they preface almost every statement they make with, 'Now let's be absolutely clear . . .'

It thus becomes pressing, in order to avoid the catastrophic acting out of recent times, for anyone who can to articulate the unconscious imperatives of ideology and to articulate what prevents us from acknowledging them. We need to talk and listen openly and honestly. Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy are clearly well placed to assist in these matters if workers are willing to participate. What is so refreshing about the contributors to *Psychoanalysis, Class and Politics* is their courage and their willingness to do so. However, in order for this to be of any significant effect the 'professional/academic language' and ideas of this book, (manic societies, denial and despair, attacks on dependence, splitting and depressive positions, disassociation and repression etc.) need to be usable by a much wider constituency than just people in or interested in therapy. There is not even an index reference in this book for the word 'education' yet education in general, informed by psychoanalysis and political analysis in particular, would seem to offer one of the most potent challenges to dominant ideology.

For example, education could help us to consider the impact of consumer culture and junk nutrition on our attention spans and what the changes to the ways in which higher education in the UK is funded have been *for*. My education has helped me to wonder whether a long con has been worked in the service of capitalist ideology and the personal interests of the politicians of the day. What do you mean James? Well, one of the best ways to stay in office is for politicians to appeal to people's greed. So instead of maintaining or increasing taxes to fund a grant system for higher education based on a fair assessment of each family's income, you adopt a US model of student loans

ensuring that all of your best educated workers are already co-opted by debt into being factors of production before they leave university. This, of course, impacts upon which subjects they choose to study, most likely more vocational/income-generating ones, and prevents them doing too much inconvenient stuff like thinking too much about what their lives are for and how else the world might be organized and whether/how they are being exploited. So ideology allows us to call 'training' education, to imagine we're being given something when we're being prepared for something else and it keeps the banks happy too! Ideology allows us to believe that everyone can be a winner when that manifestly cannot be the case in practice or by definition. Analysis can help us unpack this.

Education could encourage us to think about whose interests are served when we are encouraged to believe something, whose interests are served when we are not given information and what criteria we might use to establish whether the available information represents fact or ideology. It could include extensive work on emotional literacy to help us think about what helps us to see the truth and what encourages us to avoid it. It could help us to acknowledge how thoroughly disabling fear is to useful thinking and help us identify more clearly how insignificant all terrorist attempts to terrorize us have been when set alongside the reactions of our governments and media to events that are significant but small in number. I suggest it is *their* hysterical and aggressive responses that have curtailed our freedoms, not the actions of a handful of terrorists. I also suggest that Bush, Bin Laden and the media could hardly have been more helpful in furthering each other's personal agendas. The media has a commercial interest in selling 'news' and thus has a manifest interest in dramatisation; this is different to providing

balanced, well researched information. It likes to turn people into heroes and villains and of course Bush and Bin Laden like to see themselves as the former and each other as the latter. All three parties gain status and wealth from their activities. So here's a different take.

In the UK, we were subject to IRA terrorism for about 30 years. We were clear that they wanted a 'united Ireland' and we were also clear we were not giving in to bombers. It was frightening to be bombed nonetheless and I well remember the evening they just missed my dad on his way home from work. But the people in UK cities, many of whom had relatives who had lived through earlier visits from the Luftwaffe, helped each other in moments of crisis – just like they did on the day of the 7 July bombings. It left those of us directly affected hurt and angry but, over time, we have realized that dialogue and negotiation are the best things we have to work with.

I recall crying with anxiety over several days until I was able to clearly establish that none of the people I knew personally in New York were beneath the rubble at Ground Zero. I cried again when I discovered some of the people they knew were. But, in spite of the disorientating affects of my emotions, education and analysis have taught me two key things in this matter. In the UK we are far more used to the idea that we are not invulnerable on our own soil and, until we became Bush's poodles, we did not share in the aspiration to world domination that he shares with Bin Laden. These points are key because they are the differences that have made such a difference to all of our lives. It's education that has shown me that all empires fall so to produce a sustainable culture, we need to aspire to something else.

*Psychoanalysis, Class and Politics* represents an invaluable start to what I believe to

be a very important dialogue between the political and analytic worlds. The perspectives contained in this book have much to contribute to our understanding of what and who we are, and of circumstances we thrive or fail in. Gratifyingly, the book invites questions and conversation and, for its potential to be realized, its perspectives need to trickle down into other disciplines and circumstances. It only remains for me to salute all its contributors for such vital and evocative work.

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