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CLASS IN THE CONSULTING ROOM

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores the centrality of class in psychoanalytic psychotherapy in the context of the review of Layton, Hollander and Gutwill's Psychoanalysis, Class and Politics (Layton et al., 2006). It reviews a clinical engagement with class, arguing that class has not been absent from the clinical setting, being salient in much social work analysis. The issue of how class enters psychotherapy is brought into salience by Layton's observation of comments made by middle-class therapists about their feelings of comfort in entering shops with ranges of goods and ambiences that can be understood in class terms. The issue of class in relation to identity has been well explored in the social science tradition, particularly in the work of a group of feminist scholars. This paper seeks to bring together insights from both the clinical and social science traditions, so that each may be enriched. It argues that much more dialogue is needed between the two kinds of work in order to think beyond the normative unconscious and the problems of the distinctions between inner and outer worlds. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons. Ltd.*

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I came to this review with a great deal of excitement about the prospect of a book that dealt with issues of class in a clinical setting and I went through a lot of mixed emotions as I read it. My first feeling was one of huge disappointment that so little of the book was actually about class and a profound sense of how far apart different literatures about class and subjectivity were – the clinical and the social scientific. As I continued reading the book I felt that there was a great deal of important material, especially about politics, and that a great deal was to be gained by developing dialogues between clinical and social scientific work. In this review I want to begin to explore what that might mean and, because others are reviewing the book in terms of politics, I will try to stick to issues of class. But to begin I want to go back to the period in my own life in which I first undertook psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

What I want to say first and foremost is that, as a person who grew up in the post-war British working class, I was able to come to grips with its emotional and unconscious effectivity for the first time in that therapy. It had a life-changing and profound effect upon me. Not because my then therapist dealt with issues of class – far from it – but because I began to understand my own emotional life as deeply classed and was able to have the space and courage to look more at complex and difficult issues, in

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which class was deeply woven into the fabric of my life. This was in marked contrast to the ways in which class was generally understood and worked with at the time – in a British context at least. Engagement with class was at that time dominated by Marxist men, for whom the economy was primary and for whom there was a deep romanticization of working-class masculinity as a well as, for the middle classes, a deep envy of it. This changed profoundly when Thatcher was elected and this romanticization turned on white working-class masculinity, making it the bearer of all that had gone wrong politically.

At this time I remember first attempting to speak about class in an academic setting, to be confronted by a Marxist male academic saying 'class? What do YOU know about class? Oh, of course [with a sneer], hidden injuries . . .' What is most interesting is that it is women who grew up in the working class in the British context who have done more than anyone to change how we might approach class – that is as an issue about identity, subjectivity, emotion. The best known are Carolyn Steedman, Diane Reay, Annette Kuhn and Bev Skeggs. All grew up at a time at which it was possible to recognize yourself through the designation working class even if this was not actually used in their family or community. So, academically, class is a fraught terrain – one that has been endlessly fought over and then one that, after the rise of Thatcher in the 1980s, disappeared from the academic scene completely. Had it not been for this group of women doggedly raising the issues, it would have disappeared altogether. However, as I discovered at this time, things were no better in clinical work.

In the 1980s, I began some research on issues of class and identity transformation. Because psychoanalysis had been so important to me I thought I would research the clinical literature. I soon came across the roadblock to this endeavour – there was no clinical literature. However, stating it that way is in fact too stark. Such clinical insight that I was able to find was all in one place – social work. In other words, psychoanalytic insights were brought to bear on a pathologized working class who were the object of psychoanalytically informed social work interventions. About the (middle-class) clientele of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic psychotherapy there was no literature that invoked class as a clinical issue. So, in some senses, I feel that this is a central issue to bring to the clinical engagement with class. There is, in a Foucauldian sense, not an absence of clinical engagement with class, but a very specific engagement with the working class as an object of a surveillant social-work gaze. This means, as Lynne Layton's essay about different kinds of shops makes clear, that the complex sensibilities about which class one belongs to and how this is signified is terribly important but is one of the repressed of psychoanalytic psychotherapy. So, Layton explores the ways that American therapists of different class backgrounds feel about shopping in different shops with different senses of classed belonging and identity. What becomes clear is the extreme discomfort felt by clinicians from the middle class at entering a shop that they consider more working class. Consider then Bev Skeggs' (1997) important work in the social science tradition, which shows that working-class women feel that they cannot enter middle-class department stores because they will be judged as out of place – they will neither look nor sound the part.

In this sense, then, both approaches tell us how profoundly classed our embodied sense of being and belonging is and therefore how profoundly we consciously and unconsciously respond to others whom we see as either from the same or a different class.

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This is not a peripheral issue for psychotherapy – it is a central and crucial one. It matters not, therefore, whether the therapist and client are middle class – the issues of class will still be there and profoundly so if the therapist has to make judgements about the working-class background or life of the client. This becomes clear in Joanna Ryan's (2004) research on clinicians' experience of class in psychotherapy. She demonstrated that clinicians who came from the working class were far more likely to pick up and respond to class issues in their clients. Taking this further, we could say that class is absolutely fundamental to the ways in which we understand the family form and what we take as healthy or unhealthy. For example, Sue Austin (2003) argues that clinical attitudes to aggression and containment are profoundly middle class. I feel therefore that we are justified in at least speculating that class enters profoundly into every aspect of clinical work, from its basic assumptions to its transference and counter transference implications. However, to take this further, I think that we need to connect psychoanalysis and social science in ways in which are prepared to transform both of them.

If class enters into therapists' experiences of shopping, how much more does it enter unnoticed into their clinical work? And, as the book quite rightly says, this challenges what we see as the terrain of psychoanalysis. However, we cannot carefully separate the social from the psychic – there is no separation. It is the need to go beyond an analysis that separates them that I think has to be the long-term goal of the work begun so bravely in this volume. So, for example, I was recently talking with a colleague who told me that she had been researching her family tree. She recounted that she had discovered that relatives of a previous generation had been in the workhouse. It was only then that she was able to make sense of an aunt's frequent reference to a fear of having to go to hospital (which was situated on the site of the old workhouse) and her own desperation about lack of money and poverty. There are many such stories in which, of course, issues are carried down generations and a nameless set of anxieties transmitted, which we can only begin to piece together. But these embodied anxieties, which may be so hard to feel or to name, belong as much to a history of class as they do to any family relations that can be separated form that history. It is those embodied and unconscious relations that carry them, but they are not a psychic field with a social field lying somewhere outside the family as a secondary issue. As Walls remarks (Layton et al., 2006, 137) in relation to a case study, the patient he is considering fulfilled what he called her mother's manic intergenerational quest by pursuing a career as a degreed professional. This manic intergenerational quest takes place in a specific history and polity which make them necessary. Psychoanalysis is uniquely equipped to understand just how things are carried unconsciously and intergenerationally and in that sense has so very much to offer to the study of the complexities of how class and politics are lived not only now but how issues pass their complex paths down generations. I would have liked so much to have seen more detailed analyses of such issues in the book and wondered why there was so little about them. Why was there so much more about general political issues than these kinds of complex specificities? Is it because analysts and therapists deal with them routinely and therefore do not think to write about them or is it that they simply don't think about them in this way?

In a piece of research I am doing at the moment, the inhabitants of a small Welsh former steel town tell me about their experience of growing up and what the loss of the

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steel works means to them. One woman in her thirties talks of her memory of being a girl growing up. She recalls the terraced houses that had a path along the back. This created a social space in which there were always people moving along. Beyond this path were gardens, with low fences between them that facilitated conversation. Particularly on washing days, the women would congregate and talk to each other, airing and sharing problems. What this woman recalls is how it made her feel. She loved the feel of being with the adult women, of hearing about the issues, of therefore becoming a potential woman herself. The reason she tells me is because of its absence in the present. She now owns a house in a terrace but people have put up fences too high to talk over; some work and some do not; there is no communal and collective rhythm to the time – those who go to work do so at different times and, consequently, there is no time and no space in which she feels that she can share her feelings. Although she went to school with her neighbour, no opportunity presents itself to talk across the high fence, nothing of those old rhythms remains and because of this her own containment, her sense of being and belonging, cannot take place. Being able to talk about life and feelings, anxieties and life in general is the paths, the washing, the low fences, the wash day, the women. It is all of those things together embodied as both external and internal objects, flowing along and through complex paths.

A woman in her 60s describes how she was absolutely determined that the town would survive as a community, despite the sense that it was falling apart. Together with five others, including the mayor, she set out to collect money for Xmas lights for the town. In a town in which most people are short of money, they raised £56,000 through street collections, raffle tickets and so forth. The collection, the money and finally the lights with the elaborate switching-on ceremony create an external object that itself embodies the collective affectivity – the lights provide a material demonstration that the town is still alive. In that sense they provide a clear way of holding the anxiety about death that I would suggest circulates through the affective channels and absence of past practices. In other parts of the interview the woman gives me ample examples of how the town provided the central holding and containment that made her life possible, through her recounting of her absolute insistence that she would and could never leave it. What is important for me about both these examples is that what forms the community is both material – fences, paths, washing days, collections, lights and so on, but also ephemeral – feelings, anxieties about death and so on. In other words, what I am arguing is that we cannot separate an internal from an external world, as Amanda Hirsh Geffner makes clear in the book (Layton et al., 2006, 167). Nor, in that sense, can we separate the psychic from the social as though social science methods will tell us about the outside and clinical work about the inside – the inside and the outside need to be radically rethought – or to put it more bluntly, there is no inside that is not outside and vice versa.

Work in the social sciences has rather lately come to champion the issue of affect. This means a radical shift from an interest in desire and the Althusserian/Lacanian problematic that dominated much European social theory in the 1970s and 1980s to a particular interest in how affect is both embodied and flows through the life world. The point is to critique the possibility of separating off the sphere of an unconscious that is located only within the family. While some of this work is in its infancy, nevertheless, it comes at an important time for those psychoanalysts, such as the authors of this

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volume, who are attempting to bring class and the political into the consulting room and to make the brave and radical step that they are making. My feeling, though, is that this work could fundamentally change psychoanalysis and I strongly want to call for much more dialogue between clinicians and those working within the social sciences.

Andrew Samuels tells us (Layton et al., 2006, 12) that 'most textbooks of therapy and analysis continue to accentuate the introspection by making it clear that the exploration of outer world issues is simply not done in "proper" therapy and analysis.' In many chapters, clinicians give wonderful examples of just how political issues enter the consulting room in ways that need to be engaged with. However, that still, for me, seems to separate these political issues as part of an outer world. My main point is that there is no outer world that is not also and at the same time an inner world. What is at stake, then, is a fundamental set of premises that understands the emergence of the human subject as primarily within the intimacies of early relations and separates this from anything else. Yet, for a long time now social scientists have been making clear that this simply does not make sense. The model of a social world outside into which children are gradually socialized has been the object of critique for at least 20–25 years.

What I am suggesting is that psychoanalytic models, whether they be classical and based on drive theories or object relations or relational, still often depend upon modes of theorizing that separate primary unconscious processes from those of secondary processes, which is where class and the political end up being located. I want to suggest, therefore, that there are some very fundamental theoretical issues to be considered here and so I might want to go further than even the authors of the book might go. I felt that the two chapters by Gary Walls do effectively attempt to recognize that histories of oppression bring with them modes of being that are central to how we might think about psychic organization. His exploration of double consciousness is exemplary, in that he demonstrates that African-Americans must maintain both a sense of themselves as the object of racialized discourses and practices in order to protect themselves against forms of violence directed towards them and at the same time attempt to have a sense of self-respect, which maintains a non-racialized definition of themselves. I would argue that such doubling is absolutely central to all those who are othered and its recognition and the necessity of being able to recognize both how one is positioned and also that one is not only the object of that positioning, is central to a possibility of wellness and strength. In this sense then, I absolutely support his plea for the central place of what he calls 'the specific psychological experiences of being a dominated, devalued, exploited person' (Layton et al., 2006, 130).

Here, we need to recognize the historical and political specificity of forms of subjectivity and subjectification and to recognize, too, that Layton's normative unconscious is precisely the failure to understand specificity and how it works. We might add to this, in the light of Layton's significant engagement with the middle-class shopper, equally the psychological experiences of being automatically recognized as a subject, as having value, as being the norm and what it means to have this as an apparent birthright or to feel that it might be just out of reach or that it might be lost and that this might mean joining the feared ranks of the Other. A central issue, then, is whether or not there are psychological experiences that are outside of these issues. And if there are not, what is their place in relation to what are often understood as more basic and primary

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issues? Of course, I am not the first to raise such matters. We know, for example, that Winnicott would do a mother's washing up and that this has been the object of just as much criticism as anything else. These are complex and fraught issues, but the reason I am suggesting that they cannot just be added on to psychoanalysis is that they raise issues that are at the heart of how the unconscious is understood.

After I recovered from my initial disappointment that there was so little about class in the book I enjoyed reading it immensely. I felt that the engagement with the political was incredibly important and it was an eye-opener to me as a non-clinician to understand just how hard it is for psychoanalysts to raise these issues and how contentious. In my own work I have struggled for years to find ways of bringing together classed experience with insights from psychoanalysis. Analysts have an absolutely invaluable set of insights to offer – issues that they deal with in all their complex and intimate detail, quite unmatched by any social scientific work. However, this does not mean that this work could not benefit from a stronger dialogue and learning from each other. Are analysts willing to hear from working-class academics? Are academics willing to listen to the detailed and complex clinical insights? While I enjoyed the fact that many analysts in the book made reference to social theory, in many ways I felt it was too simplistic. This reminded me of its reverse. When academics do psychoanalysis it is often sterile – there is no life and no clinical material – they take psychoanalytic theory as though it can be read and understood in ways that are often quite inappropriate. The other day I attended a very interesting seminar in which a literature professor discussed the Wolf Man case. But I genuinely think that he had no idea how and if psychoanalysis had moved on since Freud or how and in what way such material might be talked about now. This lack of engagement severely impaired his approach and his analysis in my view. Yet conversely I sometimes attend conferences at which analysts present work on culture which seems completely ignorant of developments in cultural studies and so alienates the academics present. For the intersection of class, politics and psychoanalysis to thrive, which I so desperately and earnestly hope it will, there must be sustained dialogue so that something new might be developed together. This can only enhance our understanding of the complex intimacies of class, the political and the couch.

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