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Special feature: 'The Politics of Psychotherapy'
A series of papers commenting on *The Politics of Psychotherapy: New Perspectives*, edited by Nick Totton (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006).

Preamble

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ABSTRACT *This paper is a preamble to three commentaries on* The Politics of Psychotherapy: New Perspectives*, picking up on some of the themes from a subjective viewpoint. It indicates the enduring actuality and relevance of the material presented in the book by touching on contemporary concerns in current events regarding world politics, intercultural understanding and psychotherapy. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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What would you expect from a book called *The Politics of Psychotherapy?* By way of a preamble I would like to loosely pick up just a few of the themes in the book that resonate with me at this moment and glance at them through a personal lens of 'critical subjectivity'.

The three reviewers of this book, which was edited by our own PPI editor, Nick Totton, are all known to our readers: Richard House, Ian Parker and Hilde Rapp have furnished us with rich and very individual contributions, threading in references to the book and weaving their own commentaries. These speak for themselves and I hope that they will stimulate much valuable discussion. The commentaries are prefaced by Nick Totton's own introduction to the book's structure and content. Reading it while travelling to an assignment, I wondered whether members of the public would be able to provide readily their personal definition or description of 'psychotherapy' and 'politics' and I decided to carry out an impromptu opinion poll amongst London commuters. Posted at the exits of three London train stations, I collected just five responses at each station to the questions: what is your definition of (1) politics/politician and (2) psychotherapy/psychotherapist? I didn't enquire about their thoughts regarding any connection between the two activities – that might be something for a more considered piece of research. The stations were not chosen,

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but simply stops *en route* that day: Richmond upon Thames, a leafy West London suburb; Waterloo, a busy London commuter terminus for the south-west; and a London underground station in Lambeth near the support centre for victims of violent crime where I supervise a group of volunteer counsellors. It was striking that although all but one of the interviewees had an idea about the concept of politics, only two could describe confidently what psychotherapy is. Five, (four in Lambeth, one at Waterloo) had no concept at all and the others said they didn't really know but guessed at 'a psychiatrist', 'a shrink', 'a kind of counsellor' or as 'someone working with the mentally ill'. If there is really such asymmetry in public awareness as this mini-poll suggests, what might they make of a title such as *The Politics of Psychotherapy*? Would it be as accessible or inaccessible as, for example, 'the politics of architecture' or 'the politics of art'? Whilst politics, architecture and art are widespread human activities, to what extent can the same be claimed for psychotherapy when in its present guise it has been a peculiarly Western construct? The asymmetry of the two concepts, both in practice in the therapeutic relationship in the consulting room, as well as in wider contexts and the world at large, is addressed by our commentators and by various authors in the book.

What about the relationship that individual psychotherapists have or have had with politics? In his introduction Nick includes a brief account of his personal history of involvement. He describes his own early days in political activism in the 1960s and as a fellow baby-boomer I am reminded how I would watch fellow students at London University joining demonstrations, not wanting myself to be drawn into that potent, but potentially crazy creature that is a large crowd. Instead I took the position of a close observer and became involved in supporting silenced voices of writers in Eastern Europe through organisations like PEN, one of the oldest organizations defending human rights and freedom of expression.

Throughout this year the media in the UK are reviewing the events of 1968, student and worker revolution in Europe. A rainbow of folk, some now seen as belonging to today's establishment, are remembering their own participation in the demonstrations and protest movements of that time. Some recount nostalgic memories of the solidarity of youthful radicalism, tinged with more cynical thoughts of how their idealism might have been manipulated, for example to alienate, to distract or to aggravate more violent behaviour by demonstrators as well as police and army.

At the time of writing, with China shortly to host the Olympics, connections between sport and politics and human rights are a hot topic and discussions abound again about the accountability and personal ethical duty of politicians and sports people to boycott sporting events in countries whose human rights records are a matter of serious concern.

Meanwhile the media are showing films of a young generation of now impatient Tibetan monks protesting vociferously on the streets as they demonstrate for independence from China, with violent and brutal clashes leading to serious injuries and deaths.

Yet their leader in exile, the Dalai Lama, on meeting Clinton in 1998, and in 2005 on a visit to Scotland (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/4448946.stm) said his aim was genuine autonomy, not independence, for Tibet and he still expresses this wish today. In Scotland he had thought that the Chinese government's main priority was stability, unity and prosperity and that this would be meaningful for his concept of a meaningful autonomy for Tibetan people. He then added: 'Up to now the stability and unity are just superficial,

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under force or under gun' and 'The stability and unity must come from heart.' He is reiterating this opinion now. In 1998, China accused the Dalai Lama of playing tricks. This year, the Chinese media present current events as being orchestrated by the Dalai Clique, no longer referring to him as an individual but as a dangerous group.

The Dalai Lama is concerned about what he feels is cultural genocide, and has also commented that he will resign if violence gets much worse. The situation will likely have developed significantly by the time this issue of PPI is printed; I hope for us all to have responded with personal accountability and awareness of the forces at play.

Seen by many in the West as a spiritual Nelson Mandela figure, the Dalai Lama is supported by Nancy Pelosi, highest ranking woman in the US, who spoke for him as a character witness during a prescheduled visit to Dharamsala. While the US itself encounters serious ethical indictments concerning its own international actions, she asserts, 'The situation in Tibet is a challenge to the conscience of the world … If freedom loving people do not speak out against China's oppression of Tibetan people, we lose the moral right to speak of human rights' (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7308116.stm).

What character witness might psychotherapy attract in the question of human rights? As Andrew Samuels points out in the book (p. 10), psychotherapy has a sad record of collusion with oppressive regimes.

Meanwhile the Chinese Association for Mental Health with the Chinese Psychological Society and the Department of Psychology, Peking University are to host a World Congress for Psychotherapy in Beijing in October this year (www.wcp2008.org). A brief glance at the speakers' page shows themes also addressed, directly or indirectly, in *The Politics of Psychotherapy*; for example: 'Psychotherapy and our traumatized world'; 'Psychologists having an impact on world issues: what WCP is doing at the United Nations'; 'Towards a culture accommodation model of cross-cultural psychotherapy: recent developments'; 'Practising cultural competency in a global society'. Chinese contributors will speak about the growth of psychotherapy in their own nation; it is heartening that a Chinese school of psychotherapy has a pluralistic approach, training in several different modalities.

Can it be hoped that conference contributions such as those quoted above bode well for a possible future role for psychotherapy in contributing to understanding between nations and cultures, and in addressing 'the issues of power and control in human society' that form the meaning of 'political' in the book (Totton, p. xiv)?

We cannot but be political, as Totton asserts. Samuels relates how he invites people to explore what has formed their politics. My own politics were formed through a multicultural lens and are intimately bound in with my work as a psychotherapist. Originally studying Russian, German and French language, literature and philosophy, I was familiar with stepping into various points of view. This tendency had already been passed on to me by my East European parents, who had each undergone very different and varied Second World War experiences across Russia, Europe and North Africa. Their wartime experiences of solidarity among people of different nationalities undergoing the same human lot had a left deep impression, for their stories seemed to show that, in the worst circumstances, social class or common living conditions could at times promote deeper feelings of affiliation than nationality itself.

And yet, like other children born into a multilingual environment, I learned early that the way we relate to others and to the world, the way we think about and experience agency,

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space and time and action in various stages of intention, progress or completion, varies significantly, depending on what language we are using in the moment. We multi-lingual folk even find ourselves slipping into slightly different identities in our different languages.

After years of working as an intercultural communications consultant, I returned to England in the early 1990s to train and become involved in the field of psychotherapy. Having coached professionals from project managers to marketing and bank directors to communicate and negotiate in cultures very different from their own, I had simply taken it for granted that psychotherapy professionals would be particularly skilled in interpersonal communication, in being aware of their emotional triggers and in managing their own emotions. It was a considerable shock for me to find the profession embroiled in internal politics, with some groupings aspiring to or even understanding themselves as having hegemony in the field. I also learned that the languages of the various psychotherapy modalities had succeeded in developing their own divisive and exclusive jargon, just as other professional groupings (IT, medicine) have their own jargon that places them as experts and excludes those not 'in the know'. The curiosity here was that the jargon of any one grouping of psychotherapists was not instantly accessible to other members *within the same* profession.

Ian Parker's commentary addresses the infighting, the challenge to power. He also discusses the implications of the successful hijacking by politics of emotional language that has been the domain of psychotherapy, and psychotherapy's increasing adoption of the language of power in modern politics, the language that feeds off the fears of contemporary society in promising 'safety', 'accountability' and 'inclusion'.

The European Association for Psychotherapy seems also to be appropriating not only the language of politics but also the WOT (way of talking) of the psychologists and psychiatrists, who in some European countries wield hegemony in the field of psycho-practice and resist the notion of psychotherapy as an equal and separate profession. In this context, equality of professional recognition is seen as a valuable, though still distant goal, which will allow psychotherapists with an agreed level of training and education to move between and work in all countries in the European Union. Despite many controversies, not least between modalities, there is a strong impetus towards a common overarching understanding which goes hand in hand with recognition of the autonomy of individual modalities – something like a United States of Psychotherapy.

Of course there are all the attendant dangers that Nick Totton, Richard House, Andrew Samuels and many others see and describe so clearly. Yet however much some of the protesting voices might want to separate themselves from the overall political system created by the tribes of psychotherapists and rule themselves independently, they have thus far been but the other side of a single coin, providing balance and a different face, but as part of the same currency.

In the UK this may well change in the near future, once the government implements psychotherapy regulation. Once again the psychotherapy factions are in disarray, as those in political and fiscal power seem to be promoting and will support cognitive behavioural therapy as the preferred modality within the National Health Service (NHS). Our reviewers and authors in the book address the bellicose dynamics leading to the current situation, and today we can again observe how modality groupings are turning attention inward, away

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from the larger constellation, displaying despair, anxiety, anger and closing ranks to appeal to whoever can further their individual cause.

Perhaps there will indeed be radical change in the way psychological support is defined and offered in this country. There may be new coinages for psycho-practice, which will allow for greater creativity and development – although these might fall well outside the currency of the NHS and the losers may be those least privileged in society who cannot afford to choose to go privately.

Sometimes, given the right conditions and a resolute enough maverick approach, creativity and development may be sponsored from within the system. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), too, seems to be widening its shape and for people who 'relapse' a while after a course of CBT for depression, mindfulness (meditation) is now in some places being integrated into the therapeutic offering. If this hints that spirituality can be introduced into an apparently intransigent system then perhaps we can look forward to other possibilities becoming actualities.

It is useful, though, to note that there is danger in being too loose as well as too tight. In our society we coexist with many different paradigms. As some of us slowly move out of the post-modern era whilst others are still ensconced in modernity, it is apparent that too much choice can be counter-productive, as Ken Wilber says in *Integral Psychology*:

> Extreme postmodernism thus went from the noble insight that all perspectives need to be given a fair hearing, to the self-contradictory belief that no perspective is any better than any other … Thus, under the intense gravity of flatland, integral-aperspectival awareness became simply aperspectival madness – the contradictory belief that no belief is better than any other – a total paralysis of thought, will, and action in the face of a million perspectives all given exactly the same depth, namely, zero. (Wilber, 2000, 170)

Although some of us can choose what beliefs we take on, many of us have no choice at all when it comes to medical support for mental illness. Recently a prolific and popular fantasy author, Terry Pratchett, 'came out' with his diagnosis of Alzheimer's at the age of 57. Having learned that research into this condition attracts only 3% of the funds given to cancer research, he has donated £0.5 million. Wryly he reports: 'The NHS kindly allows me to buy my own Aricept because I'm too young to have Alzheimer's for free, a situation I'm okay with in a want-to-kick-a-politician-in-the-teeth-kind of way.'

Alzheimer's charities show that right now there are 450,000 sufferers in the UK and this number is expected to double within a generation, with one-third of all people who live past 65 dying of dementia. Might we, as psychotherapists, put more of our energy into developing more adjuvant psychological support systems, not only for sufferers of dementia and other old-age mental health challenges but also for their carers? As old age gets longer, bringing with it not only reminders of old war wounds but also the resurfacing of war trauma, many of us second generation survivors are caring for parents who have shown wonderful resilience throughout their lives but whose systems can no longer bear the pain. Whenever I see human suffering caused by the destructive effects of political hubris, I see the generations to come who will inherit this unnecessary pain. If we can overcome our own professional hubris, so aptly described in the book, then perhaps we can, *outside* the consulting room, choose to influence a little towards the diminution of misplaced aggression and misuse of power.

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