Psychotherapy and Politics International
Psychother. Politics. Int. 6(2): 110–117 (2008)
Published online in Wiley InterScience
(www.interscience.wiley.com) **DOI:** 10.1002/ppi.162

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).

The Practice of Truth

HILDE RAPP, London, UK

ABSTRACT *In this review article on Nick Totton's edited book the Politics of Psychotherapy (2006), I draw out some issues which particularly concern me, relating to truth, violence, and how the latter can silence people's capacity to bear witness to the former.*

Key words: truth; violence; politics; psychotherapy

In his own chapter, Nick Totton concludes that ' therapy is centrally a practice of truth' (Totton, 2006, 93.) To my mind this is the key message of the whole book. Firstly, psychotherapy is something people *do* together. Secondly, whatever else it may aspire to, this practice centres on people. It is essentially a *practice* that involves being in dialogue with one another about what *truth is* and what *truth means* for the participants in this practice. Truth seeking, as Judy Ryde explores in her chapter, is of necessity a dialogic and intersubjective enterprise.

Ronnie Laing, whose name is strangely absent from this volume, called this '*trothing*' in our clinical seminars at the Institute of Psychotherapy and Social Studies in its more radical days. The insistence on the verb form points in the same direction as Nick Totton's emphatic assertion that 'what therapy does and must do is to examine everything we can know about the truth of a situation … to establish *experientially* (my emphasis) that there is no absolute truth, that truth is … plural and contingent, and therefore *subject to negotiation* (my emphasis).' I am not so sure about truth itself being contingent, but I would agree that our truth seeking, our *trothing* is contingent, and that our truth saying (soothsaying, in the old days) is contingent, constrained by our point of view, our standpoint, which is directly consequent on the embodied nature of the human condition.

This fact throws us straight back to what Ronnie Laing calls the *politics of experience*, where he construes the task of psychotherapy to be the de-construction of the power relations that hold us captive in 'an alienated state, and this state is not simply a natural system.

Correspondence to: Hilde Rapp, 21 Priory Terrace, London NW6 4DG.
E-mail: rapp.biip@blueyonder.co.uk.

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

Alienation in our present destiny is achieved only by outrageous violence perpetrated by human beings on human beings' (Laing, 1967, 12). By violence Laing means what I have explored in previous articles in this journal (Rapp, 2006, 2007a) in terms of structural, cultural and direct violence.

The entire fourth section of this book is concerned with this violence and its capacity to silence the truth seeker and the truth sayer. The real tragedy is that we have learnt so little from what we have striven so hard to discover. Already in 1951 Theodor W Adorno mounts a coruscating critique of the Freudian project as he engages, like the authors of this timely book, in sustained interrogation of the relationship of psychotherapists to political power.

Our political preoccupations are cyclical and we are returning to issues that were already the subject of urgent concern in the aftermath of the second of two cruel and increasingly global wars, in which man's inhumanity to man reached a crescendo of hitherto unimagined proportions.

In his *Minima Morialia* , Adorno (1951, 71) examines how Freud and his disciples were continually caught between the liberational or emancipatory project of psychoanalysis on the one hand and their complicity in a practice that led all too often to the taming of the analysand into a socially well adjusted member of society. Adorno accuses Freud and his followers of being handmaidens of a socialization process that forbids the seeking of knowledge, the seeing of truth and thinking about how our late bourgeois social and economic organization alienates us from realizing our own human potential. Worst of all, this purportedly emancipatory process actually serves to inhibit the very political actions which would lead to liberation and what started as a project for enlightenment ended in a process of dumbing down and a flattening of affect.

In *Minima Moralia*, in the aphorism 'This side of the pleasure principle', itself a wordplay on the other side of, or beyond, the pleasure principle, Freud stands indicted of subverting the very principles of his own practice. On the one hand Freudian Psychoanalysis creates the conditions in which human beings can come to understand the *common roots of desire and of aggression*. In this way it delivers into their hands the very tools which allow them to excise choice between conscious and self responsible living or self alienated conformity to socialization pressures. Similarly, the authors of this book, none more fiercely than Petruska Clarkson, indict contemporary psychotherapists for developing a practice which always teeters on the brink of letting power relations close down the very space which psychotherapists claim to provide for the dawning actualisation of their client's human potential. Rather the asymmetric power relations between client and therapist threaten to pervert the therapeutic project as they engender subtle or gross acts of violence in virtue of demanding that the client submit to the rituals and the language of psychotherapy as if they were self evident and content and context free. The very tools of symbolization that were intended to set the client free then serve to eviscerate the recipient of therapeutic knowledge by requiring him or her to re-repress un-socialized, unmediated pleasure or aggression. Cultural sublimation is extolled as a condition for successful citizenship by restoring the client's capacity 'to work and to love' (to relate as a socialized or civilized person). I articulate this theme further below.

Worse still, not only is pleasure censured but thinking is maligned as an intellectualizing defence against pleasure and pain. This is what Bion (1959) addresses in his description of

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

'attacks on linking', when we defend against painful truths by 'shutting off troubled feelings, memories or thoughts about unfolding events, including thinking ethical standards for behaviour. This internal state of "freeze" helps us to temporarily reduce the overwhelming nature of the [biologically primed] stress response and allows us to stay calm and function, rather than experience emotions that are more than we can bear (Bloom, 2006, 19). This is how Sandra Bloom unfolds her understanding of what happens when individuals perceive themselves to be in danger and how this can generalize to an entire society that is already traumatized by war and in addition afraid of the future, and terrified of the very mechanism of governance put in place to provide greater security. Here the personal and the political intertwine in a way that subverts what was meant to be a biologically primed protective response to real danger and turns the stress response into a mechanism for social control by manipulating the fear of otherness to create group cohesion, which simultaneously excites desire for and forbids violence against members of one's own group while in the same breath breeding loathing for and inciting violence against members of the outgroup, shutting off all human empathy and forbidding all identification with the scapegoated collective and individual other. At the end of this book Katie Gentile and Susan Gutwill also pick up on this theme.

Worse still, as Adorno describes in his *Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, 1983), first published in 1947 before his return from exile, people have an extraordinary capacity for internalizing the aggressor, (for which Adorno coined the term 'kapo mentality') a process that allowed Jewish concentration camp guards to inflict terrible suffering on members of their own group without any longer empathizing with them as people just like themselves. These defence mechanisms against systematic traumatization are explored by Judy Ryde in relation to institutionalized racism, by Emanuel Berman in relation to the brutalization of Israeli society, and by Chess Denman in relation to institutionalized homophobia.

Freud did not acquit himself well in the task of truth saying when the Nazis came to power, despite the fact that he himself had striven to create the epistemological means to do so. The sorry tale of aligning with or at least not protesting against the creation of the Goering Institute (see Cocks, 1985) which set itself up to promote a totalizing integrated psychotherapy, bears witness to the failure of German analysts to seek, see and speak what was being done to their fellow beings far beyond the Eastern borders in Poland.

Lane Arye and Arlene Audergon pick up on what happens in a community when people no longer bear witness, because they have cut themselves off from their feelings and have anaesthetized their thinking about what is going on as they have abandoned their responsibility to make ethical judgements altogether. They end up bystanding, paralysed by the kind of indifference that takes over from horror when systemic terror overloads their capacity to stay in touch with their humanity. Arye and Audgeron movingly describe how they use Arnold Mindell's process-oriented therapy to reawaken the capacity for seeing, speaking and bearing witness to the truth in war torn Croatia and how their community forums work to thaw out the frozen capacity for human empathy and human responding as Serbs and Croats dare to cry together for the first time about the suffering each community has inflicted on the other.

The central theme of the book, then, is to trace how truth seeking and truth saying is experienced at the individual, personal, subjective level on the one hand and how it is socially, culturally and politically co-constructed in late capitalist society. We are consti-

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

tuted in such a way that our need for affiliation stand always in a dynamic tension with our need for individuation. Our need for affiliation is the motor or *drive* for seeking pleasure. The denial of human bonding and the frustration of desire inflicts pain and stimulates the desire for retribution. Our need for individuation and self-determination is the motor or *drive* to power, expressed positively as energy and co-creation, or negatively as aggression, hegemonic domination and alienation. Pleasure, desire and sexuality are inextricably linked to self-assertion. And the vicissitudes of pleasure link to aggression and power hunger and violence.

These basic themes are traced by different authors through a number of contexts in which they are articulated in specific ways. I have already picked out one strand that engages in a largely postmodern idiom with what we may broadly call the psychoanalytic project. The emancipatory intent of the *method* is sabotaged by the political structure of late capitalist forms of social organization. The 'free market' ultimately depends on our willingness to be rendered captive consumers, alienated from our own productive energy as feeling and thinking subjects. We have become hoist on our own petard.

This theme unfolds as a persistent subtext throughout the book as different authors weave between the personal and the political and continually show us how we become complicit in our own undoing. Andrew Samuels explores how politics erupts in the consulting room and how the analyst and the patient can experience directly in the session how socialization pressures distort the unfolding of desire, misdirecting it onto substitute objects and to what extent we can liberate ourselves from these strictures by becoming conscious of them. He draws on his earlier work where the complex patterns in which the drama of politics and personhood, the sacred and the profane, the professional and human, are articulated along fault lines of gender and sexuality, nationhood and race, class and ability as they crystallise into institutional structures and cultural value systems.

Sandra Bloom expands this analysis into a sustained investigation of the workings of trauma and our defences against it, in ways touched on already above. She draws importantly also on research about the evolutionary biology of the human response to threat and stress, as well as the social construction of safety and security and the personal experience of fear, terror and trauma.

Nick Totton's chapter sets out the project of psychotherapy as truth seeking in the face of conflict, competition and aggression – again pitting the need for self-determination against the need for belonging, exploring what price we are willing to pay to achieve either. This tension between belonging and conforming and being different and marginalized , our primal fears as human beings, caught between the Scylla of engulfment and the Charybdis of abandonment is played out with respect to race, gender and sexuality, both in society and in the consulting room. Judy Ryde deals with the intersubjective dimension of identifications in the domain of ethnicity and race, while Chess Denman explores difference and diversity with respect to gender and sexuality.

The exploration of experiences of difference confront us with different articulations of psychological need and psychological defences, which in turn depend on how we make distinctions as we attempt to order our world. The complex patterns of identification with respect to gender and sexuality challenge the very categories by which any society orders its social relations into clean and unclean, good and evil, raw and cooked, forbidden and allowed, male and female. It is when our binary distinctions are challenged by transsexual,

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

transgender or homosexual identifications that our entire system for ordering social relations seems to be under threat of collapse. We are then faced not with a psychological defence but with a political defence against chaos or ungovernability, which tends to be enacted as aggression against the person or groups whose identification is transgressive. Faced with difference that is construed as deviant, groups and institutions become coercive and demand conformity. Failure to toe the line and to submit to the norm leads to marginalization, ostracism, banishment and exile. Both coercion and ostracism are defences against the threat of chaos.

Nick Totton traces how the exercise of power manifests in the consulting room. Just as Glover (1927) observed that there is a balance to be struck between raising enough anxiety for there to be enough free affect available for transformation but not so much anxiety that is becomes paralysing as it mobilizes the freeze response, so Nick Totton argues that the therapist needs to be potent enough to provide real holding, containment and safe boundaries for transformative work, without being overpowering, risking to shut down the very affect that needs to be worked through so that clients may find their own power.

In the third section on 'psychotherapy, the state and institutions', this same dynamic between the position of exercising too little power on the one hand and too much power on the other is played out at the political and institutional level. Petruska Clarkson indicts the very institutions put in place to regulate the practice of truth seeking and shows how they threaten to pervert the truth through the misuse of power. When individuals or organizations refuse to use their power to hold to account practitioners who abuse their power, they become complicit in harming vulnerable clients. Theories of psychotherapy are misused to pathologize complaints by victims of the abuse of power. The protest of the complainant, whether a wronged client, or a concerned fellow professional, is aggressively turned back on them, making the wrong doer well nigh unassailable. Ranks are closed and the whistleblower is persecuted. This cycle of wrong doing and revenge is endemic in any social order that is not properly governed by the rule of law as Girard in his seminal book *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) has shown across many contexts. It is for this reason that the issue of statutory regulation of psychotherapy keeps cropping up as long as there is no proper lawlike mechanism for putting a proper end to such a cycle of violence, which perpetuates itself at all levels of society in an anarchic manner. In the absence of law or ritual only sacrifice will put an end to this cycle of violence. It is for this reason that there is more splitting and projection in the psychotherapeutic professions than in any other – a point that is touched on, but not sharply articulated, by both Petruska Clarkson and Nick Totton.

John Lees and Dawn Freshwater explore how the National Health Service is used as an instrument of social control. Here the focus is not so much on the power play between institutional or individual actors; rather it concerns the categories of 'mental health' and 'mental illness' themselves and how they are used as instruments for social control. The concern with depression for instance turns more on the material and social cost to society in terms of output and talent lost, as well as treatment costs incurred, than on the genuine wellbeing and welfare of citizens. The system is geared towards restoring people to functionality so they can play their part in reproducing society. This is the classic Marxist critique of a social and economic system which objectifies people in terms of their instrumental value in the productive cycle. John Lees and Dawn Freshwater examine this objectification

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

in Rogerian terms. A normative diagnostic system effectively eviscerates the client as it replaces experientially and dialogically driven efforts after self-definition, centred on the self of the person, with external categorization and labelling. In this way the locus of control is shifted from the client to the expert practitioner, who holds the power to decide what is normal and what is abnormal behaviour in purportedly objective terms defined by the scientific measurement of certain characteristics classified in a diagnostic manual.

This goes against the grain of what many practitioners view as the proper project of psychotherapy: to provide a non-judgmental, non-instrumental relationship in which the value of a person lies in their capacity for human relating and for creative self-realization or self-actualization – in other words in their capacity to love and to work. Work here is in the service of self-expression, self-determination and self-reliance as a potent, dignified and self responsible member of a sociality, as Gandhi has articulated this in his concept of *swaraj* (Rapp, 2007b). I make a sharp differentiation here between two meanings of socialization. One is socialization as a mechanism for enforcing conformity through social and emotional control – that is socialization as wholly in the service of instrumentality. The other is socialization as a consciously chosen consent to regulating our affect and our behaviour in order to create fair and reasonable conditions for a social organization by means of which the needs of people who are living together in a polity may be negotiated. The former tends toward authoritarian systems, the latter towards democratic participation in collective decision making. Both are subject to conditionalities and contexts; embodied human beings can never be wholly free, but they can be aware of the limitations of their freedom and have some choice as to what forms of limitation they are willing to accept and respect. Our duty as therapists is to create the space within which to interrogate authority such that these choices become possible.

Judy Ryde is similarly concerned with the objectifying shift of the locus of evaluation in relation to issues of race. If whiteness is the norm and belonging to a non-white community group is the exception, as becomes clear from the term 'ethnic *minority*', the abuse of power arises in the same way: it is not black clients who decide on how they define their identifications, their moral compass and their cultural practices from within their own centre but it is the white therapist and the white therapy institutions that do the defining from a locus of control that is external to the client, thus rendering them excentric in relation to a white centric definition or normality. Judy Ryde, like Neil Altman (2004), therefore argues strongly for the proper recognition of all identifications as culturally situated, such as whiteness is just one category among many plural identities rather than occupying the canonical position. Chess Denman argues the same point with respect to sexualities. Heterosexuality is not the norm – it may be the most prevalent form of sexual choice but this does not confer any special status with respect to normality or abnormality.

The same dynamic is picked up by Jocelyn Chaplin who looks at these issues with respect to class as well as ethnicity and race in her exploration of the Bridge Project, founded by Sue Holland in the 1980s (Holland, 1988). In the White City project, depressed women initially learnt how to fit themselves to the categories by which they have been defined in order to get their needs met. The project has been working to undo these power structures and to create the space in which women can come to articulate their needs in their own terms, as people in all their complexity, rather than as carriers of the 'depressed' label. This was facilitated by setting up a service in which service users became active participants in

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

decision making rather than passive and dependent recipients of care and help. The achievement of *deep equality* is a central aspiration of this project.

Emanuel Berman addresses himself at exploring political activism by Israeli psychotherapists aiming to bring the violent conflict between Israel and Palestine to a peaceful end. Poignantly, as mentioned above, it was the non-action of German analysts and indeed, worse still, their complicity in the face of the Holocaust, that has sensitized Israeli therapists to the moral unsustainability of bystanding in the face of political realities that harm both the occupied and the occupier. Not only is there an active political engagement of therapists and analysts to work for peace and to mitigate the traumatic effects of the war both for Israelis and for Palestinians but, as with Andrew Samuels, there is also an active engagement with political issues in the consulting room. Emmanuel Berman delivers a very sensitive and complex analysis of how and why empathy, the recognition of individual and collective transgenerational trauma, guilt and fear, current trauma and political instability lead analysts, and certainly Emmanuel Berman himself, to be much more transparent about their own political responsibility than is customary within much psychoanalytic practice and he shares with us why and how this is helpful to his patients.

Similarly, Katie Gentile and Susan Gutwill share how the dramatic events of 9/11 led them and a group of colleagues to act in much more overtly political ways than is considered normal practice among most psychotherapists. Here we are dealing with the politicization of therapists who use their insight into the human psyche to critique political actions, to highlight collective defence mechanisms in a way that Andrew Samuels might term *being a therapist to society*, and in the same vein as the work of therapists and professionals for social responsibility both in the US and in the UK.

This endeavour has many of the characteristics of the radical engagement that found an iconic representation in the 1967 Congress of the Dialectics of Liberation in the Roundhouse in London, where intellectuals and activists, Marxists and anarchists, psychiatrists and analysts, poets and playwrights came together with political leaders to discuss and shape the issues for the next decade and beyond. I was there and I have carried the seeds of this event with me ever since. Big themes characterized the canvas then: nothing less than liberation from the mystification of commodity fetishism, from the blind destruction of the environment, from the inhumanity that human beings project on their opponents, be this in the family, in racial, religious or political conflicts or outright war. Then consciousness raising through public speaking and writing and political activism through demonstrations and concrete action for change in communities, at the individual level and at the level of society were on the agenda for urgent action.

It seems that Katie Gentile and Susan Gutwill have taken up this baton 40 years on and that support for this kind of engagement is growing. David Cooper's book *The Dialectics of Liberation* (Cooper, 1969) is still as relevant to this struggle as it was then, especially since despite 100 years of psychotherapy and forty years of psycho- political analysis and activism, the world is still getting worse … Hilary Prentice and Mary Jayne Rust remind us forcibly that we have dragged our heels after the Meadows' wake up call in the 1970s in their seminal book *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al, 1979). How sad it is to learn that, in what should be a pristine part of the world, Inuit mothers may no longer breastfeed their babies because the levels of polychloinated biphenyls (PCBs) in their breast milk is five

DOI: 10.1002/ppi

times higher than elsewhere in the world! The Arctic ice is melting ever faster and rising sea levels will devastate some of the poorest countries in the world. Hilary Prentice and Mary Jayne Rust present a moving counterpoint narrative where they liken our behaviour of over consumption followed by waste dumping to that of a bulimic and yet they are not becoming prophets of doom and gloom. Rather they invite us to become mindful and compassionate. They hold out hope that we may yet cooperate and live in harmony with one another and that we will honour our responsibility to all life on our planet. They urge us to commit at last to understanding that we are holding our share in the earth's bounty in trust for future generations, not just of human children but for all the diverse forms of life of which we are just one manifestation.

Let us use Nick Totton's book as a powerful impetus to build on the richness of analyses and sharing of experience, to galvanize more people to take seriously their responsibility as card-carrying members of the human race to get their hands dirty in this urgent work of transforming violent responses to conflict with mindful and reflective engagement in truly human relationships with one another and all that lives on this our shared earth. Let us embrace and transcend the ethical dilemmas and philosophical complexities of the human condition with courage and wisdom and act before another 40 years goes by.

REFERENCES

Adorno TW. Minima Morialia. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1951. (English translation at http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1951/mm/ch01.htm.)

Adorno TW, Aron B, Hertz Levinson M, Morrow W. The Authoritarian Personality (Studies in Prejudice). New York: WW Norton, 1983.

Altman N. The Analyst in the Inner City: Race, Class, and Culture Through a Psychoanalytic Lens. Hillsdale NJ: Analytic Press, 2004.

Bion WR. Attacks on linking. International Journal of Psycho-Analysis 1959; 40: 308–15.

Bloom S. Societal trauma: democracy in danger. In N Totton (ed.) The Politics of Psychotherapy: New Perspectives. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006; 17–29.

Cocks G. Psychotherapy in the Third Reich: The Goering Institute. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Cooper D (ed.). The Dialectics of Liberation. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.

Girard R. Violence and the Sacred. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

Glover E. Lectures on technique in psycho-snalysis. International Journal of Psychoanalysis 1927; 8: 311–38.

Holland S. Defining and experimenting with prevention. In J Marmor (ed) Psychiatry in Transition. London: Pluto Press, 1988.

Laing RD. The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.

Meadows DH, Meadows DL, Randers J, Behrens WW. The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind. London: Macmillan, 1979.

Rapp H. The four chambers of the heart of peace: the role of emotional intelligence, counselling skills, and living systems thinking in the transformation of violent conflict. Psychotherapy and Politics International 2006; 4, 3: 157–74.

Rapp H. The four chambers of the heart of peace: four key tasks for peacebuilders working to heal a hurting world. Part II. Psychotherapy and Politics International 2007a; 5(2): 82–102.

Rapp H. A Neo-Ghandian Vision of Prosperity. Talk given to a seminar on Visions of Prosperity, held by the Sustainable Development Commission , London, 26 November, 2007b.

DOI: 10.1002/ppi