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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).

Editing *The Politics of Psychotherapy*

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ABSTRACT *This introduction to a special feature on my edited book* The Politics of Psychotherapy: New Perspectives *(2006) places the book in the context of Western political and therapeutic culture since the 1960s, through the lens of my own political history over that period. It restates some of the key positions of the book, and argues – once again – that psychotherapy is inherently political; and also that therapeutic perspectives have a contribution to make to the new antiglobalization alliances. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: politics of psychotherapy; human nature; 1960s; 1980s

> The ontological structure of the human being imposes insurmountable constraints upon any form of social organization and any political project.
>
> (Castoriadis 1999: 409)

I used the above quotation from Cornelius Castoriadis as the epigraph for my introduction to *The Politics of Psychotherapy* (Totton, 2006a), because it gives a very challengingly negative answer to a question that I wanted the book to address. Put in very simple terms, the question is: what can psychotherapy tell us about those 'constraints' that our structure as human beings places upon our actions? And what, if anything, can psychotherapy *do* about them?

That our social organization and political projects are indeed constrained by what is usually known as 'human nature' is one of the key lessons of the twentieth century. Human beings could scarcely have tried harder or more inventively to create the good society; and we could hardly have failed more comprehensively or more agonizingly. But is it really 'the ontological structure of the human being' that wrecks all political dreams; or is it something more contingent, more open to change? And if it is in fact hardwired into our structure, where does this leave us – in despair, or in some version of the depressive position, realistically exploring the scope for limited improvement?

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These questions have, I think, been at the back of most Western political thinking since at least the 1980s, when the final hurrah of millennial idealism (if it was indeed final) crashed and burnt under the aegis of Reagan and Thatcher: not only the 'end of Communism', but also the final petering out of the countercultural revolution, in which I had myself been swept up as a young adult. I think that the most useful way I can write here about *The Politics of Psychotherapy* – or, indeed, about the politics of psychotherapy – is to describe something of my own experience of 1960s and 1970s radicalism and then of the drastically changed climate of the 1980s and 1990s. It was during this transition that I became a therapist; and I think that many other therapists and therapeutic schools have been deeply marked by it.

BECOMING A THERAPIST

I spent the early 1970s, having graduated from Cambridge University, moving gradually leftward across the spectrum of radical politics until I eventually fell off the edge. Up to about 1972 I was in fact officially still part of the university, being registered, and receiving a grant, for a PhD in Renaissance literature, while living in London as a political activist and having contact with my supervisor once in a blue moon. Such was the difference of the times.

Over four years or so, I moved from involvement in the Haringey Free Press, a local alternative paper; to being part of the Tottenham Claimants Union, an organisation involving few claimants and few Tottenham residents, which I gradually discovered was a sort of front-cum-recruiting body for a 'proto-party group' two of whose leading members ended up serving long sentences in Northern Ireland; to joining the libertarian socialist squatting scene in Islington; to co-running Rising Free, a radical bookshop near Kings Cross; to co-founding Wicked Messengers, a post-situationist groupuscule squatting communally in South Hampstead ('If you cannot bring good news, then don't bring any').

The main thing that I gradually learnt over those four years is in retrospect simple and obvious but at the time was terribly hard to grasp: that most people in this society do not want revolutionary social change and therefore that revolutionary activism, generally speaking, is a mixture of hope, fantasy and manipulation. A defining moment was during a meeting of a north London libertarian socialist group. Some members had been researching a possible mass squat; they had found an empty block of flats and worked out how to gain access. After a congratulatory pause, someone said 'OK, now all we need is to find some homeless families.'

This and other similar experiences gradually moved me out of direct activism (at which I was never very good) and into the situationist orbit (Gray, 1974; Plant, 1992). After all, May 1968 was a defining experience of my life, even in the diluted Cambridge University version (occupations, but no tear gas or Molotovs) and situationist ideas and tactics were central to May 1968. Perhaps people could be teased, provoked and subverted into revolutionary awareness.

Our main impact, I am afraid, was on the libertarian socialist left. (We invented an imaginary revolutionary group called Big Fist, and issued what were intended to be absurd communiqués. Several people tried to join and were very annoyed to find out that they had been – inadvertently – taken in. The big fist nearly came in our direction.) Meanwhile our own lifestyle was being transformed, primarily by LSD, the logical next step (or so it

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seemed at the time) in an exploration of the potential for human liberation and the causes of human imprisonment.

Although acid taught me an enormous amount, it failed to do the job – or at any rate, to do the particular job I had set for it, of showing the path to revolution; and eventually I took refuge in north Yorkshire from a classic 1970s welter of painfully confused relationships. On the kitchen wall of the shared cottage to which I moved was a flyer for a weekend workshop of Reichian therapy. Wilhelm Reich had been an iconic figure in the political scenes through which I moved, mainly for his utopian vision of a world governed by 'love, work and knowledge'; somehow I had overlooked the fact that he was primarily a psychotherapist. Reader, I attended the workshop; the rest is history.

What this means in practice is, first of all, that I discovered in Reich's work what still seems to me one of the most concrete, comprehensive and practical programmes for radical social change that I have ever encountered (though this partly only demonstrates the weakness of the competition); and secondly, that I ended up training and practising as a psychotherapist. The milieu in which I did so was, of course, drastically different from the milieu of therapy in 2008. We charged a lot less money, for a start; most of the people who came to us did so because they wanted to grow and change, rather than because they were in particular trouble, anyway so far as they were aware; and none of us – in my little neck of the woods anyway – were in it for the money, or for a career. Our work as therapists was a direct extension of our social commitment, our desire to help change the world.

The form of Reichian work which I was taught (Totton and Edmondson, 1988; West, 1988) was firmly situated within the human potential movement, the best home that Reich's work could find after his expulsion from the International Psychoanalytic Association (Sharaf, 1983). When I undertook an MA in Psychoanalytic Studies several years later, I found out that Reich's work was really better understood as a development of psychoanalysis (Totton, 1998). This dual allegiance meant that right from the start I was in some sense working both sides of the street, using psychoanalytic concepts within a humanistic style – which was in some ways rather confusing until I developed a clearer perception of what was going on, but overall I think a considerable advantage: having more than one therapeutic model tends to aid creativity.

THERAPY AND POLITICS

Having come into therapy from the direction I did, and being around for a relatively long time, has allowed me to watch the process of regulation and professionalization with a very critical eye. Like many other practitioners of my generation, I have always understood therapy as a *social* practice, a means to a potential social end: realizing in the 1970s that most people didn't want a revolution, I was led to explore the psychosocial reasons for this (as well as exploring my unconscious and neurotic reasons, alongside the conscious ones, for wanting a revolution myself). I saw therapy as a means of psychological liberation, a way of freeing up our energy for individual and collective creativity. This is pretty much how I still see it.

The advocates of professionalization take a drastically different view. They treat therapy as an occupation, rather than as a calling; and while this is an antidote to grandiosity, it is also a recuperation of therapy's potential for liberation. But in any case, an *occupation* is not a *profession*; to be a profession, we must necessarily align ourselves with mainstream

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social values and styles of proceeding. I have argued in several places (Totton, 2005, 2006c, 2007) that therapy is inherently subversive of mainstream values and conventions – even, I think, when practised by people who see themselves as quite mainstream. However, making serious money out of therapy in proper post-80s style means marketing it as a mainstream profession, which seems to involve buying into the medical model of 'mental health provision'.

So, when invited by Open University Press to edit this book, I wanted to collect material that would help make all these points: about the inherent radicalism of the practice of psychotherapy; about therapy as 'politics carried out by other means'; about the potential uses of therapy as a means of understanding and addressing social problems; and about the distortion involved in treating therapy as just another profession. I think that the book does successfully argue and illustrate these points and that some of the critical responses to it have been made exactly because it does.

I have said in several places, including the introduction and Chapter 7 of The *Politics of Psychotherapy* (Totton, 2006a, b) that psychotherapy is intrinsically and inevitably political. The view, reiterated by critics of the book, that psychotherapy should not concern itself with the social causes of distress is still *political*: a view not just of therapy, but implicitly of citizenship – that individual members of a society should leave politics to the 'experts' – and also of life itself – that people suffer because of chance, their personal makeup, human nature, original sin, or some combination of these, rather than through the effects of the socio-political context.

In the introduction to *The Politics of Psychotherapy*, I wrote:

> All psychotherapists have a political view of their work; because all psychotherapy rests on a theory – explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious – of *how people should be.* In assessing and working with clients, one is inevitably drawing on a sense of what is a desirable and appropriate state. Is happiness the goal for human beings? Or calm acceptance of the unsatisfactory nature of life? Is happiness attainable through following our own star, or through adapting to the society around us? Should we strive to be useful to others, or concentrate on fulfilling our own potential? One can hardly do psychotherapy without some way of positioning oneself around these and many other questions – even if one's position is that people should be supported in whatever goals they set for themselves. This, just like any other position on these questions about human nature and its needs, is a position not only about individual goals, but also about social and political ones; there is no line to be drawn between the two. (Totton, 2006a, xiv–xv)

Conservative political stances in all areas of life tend to present themselves as 'non-political'. As they support the status quo (or, sometimes, what until recently was the status quo), they can argue for the inherent naturalness of things as they are, without exploring how they came to be so and in whose interests. This is effectively a trick: the belief that the current situation is one to be approved and encouraged is as political as its opposite. As George Orwell said in a different context in 1946, 'The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude' (Orwell, 1946, 4). Speaking specifically of psychotherapy, at certain points its job has been generally agreed to be supporting the status quo and helping clients adjust to it (for instance, in the USA in the 1950s); and at other points, sometimes very close in time (for instance, in the USA in the 1960s) its job has been generally agreed to be challenging the status quo and helping clients resist it. What makes the difference is the socio-political context – which, in this example, psychotherapy

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clearly influenced through the human potential movement but *by* which its view of its own task was shaped.

Now the wheel has turned again, and increasingly psychotherapy and counselling are expected to act as part of the security/surveillance society – the therapist as CCTV camera, 'for your safety and convenience'. This is not quite a return to the 1950s: there are newer and even more worrying values at work. In 1950s America, the required link between normative social values and therapeutic practice was at least openly spelt out. Now this link is deeply concealed behind a social rhetoric of diversity but operates at the heart of concepts like 'safety' – for whom? – and 'evidence-based practice' – evidence of what and by whose definition? The reality that therapy is a practice with risk and danger at its core, and which proceeds by informed guesswork and intuition, must be suppressed from public discourse.

However, whereas in the 1950s there was only very limited and marginal resistance to the hegemonic interpretation of the therapist's task – the therapeutic 'old left' having been decimated and demoralized by European fascism (Jacoby, 1986) – there is now a considerable, articulate and well-organised opposition to the new hegemony. The values and self-descriptions which therapy worked out in the 1960s and 1970s, in response to massive social change (some of the most influential writings are Laing, 1967; Cooper, 1976; Wyckoff, 1976; Rogers 1978; Ernst and Goodison, 1981; Steiner, 1981; Guattari, 1984), have become deeply anchored in its being, largely through the influence of a whole generation of therapists who, like myself, cut their teeth in this period and went on to teach, supervise and write.

THE BOOK

Editors are at the mercy of those whom they can find to write for them, a consideration that can often end up drastically reshaping projects. In this case, I have been very fortunate: I was able to find strong material on almost every topic that I wanted to feature. (The exception was the family as transmitter of and resistance to social control, the issue of macro- and micro-levels, which I take up below.)

The Politics of Psychotherapy has four overlapping sections: 'Psychotherapy in the political sphere', 'Political dimensions of psychotherapy practice', 'Psychotherapy, the state and institutions', and 'Working at the interface: psychotherapy in political action'. It opens with a powerful introductory chapter by Andrew Samuels, who founded contemporary thinking about psychotherapy and politics with his classic book *The Political Psyche* (Samuels 1993). His chapter resumes many of the themes Samuels has highlighted over the last decade-and-a-half: that contemporary politics in the West is 'broken and in a mess' (4), the need for 'resacralization' (9), the nature of political energy and political style, what it is about therapy that stops the world turning up for its appointment and much more.

Sandra Bloom's chapter 'Societal trauma: democracy in danger' is an incisive account of a live issue of current psycho-politics. Although theoretically problematic (Haaken, 1998; Leys, 2000; Bracken, 2002), trauma is a longstanding and powerful model of how certain experiences can have permanently damaging effects on people, and set up cycles of reenactment; more recently, it has been applied to the collective field and to reenactment of social violence (think of the former Yugoslavia). Bloom applies these insights illuminatingly to the so-called 'war on terror'. My own chapter on 'Conflict, competition and aggression'

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outlines some of the ways in which theorists from different schools of psychotherapy have tackled these issues and continues the theme of societal trauma, imagining how the reenactment cycle could have originated. It also sketches some practical therapeutic initiatives around social conflict, a theme that is explored in the final section of the book.

In 'The breast-milk of the Inuit mother: a tale of micro- and macrocosm, shadow and light', Hilary Prentice and Mary Jayne Rust describe what is perhaps the most recent, and arguably the most important, psycho-political formulation: ecopsychology, which asks: 'How can human beings create, tolerate, and even largely ignore the environmental catastrophe surrounding us? How can we mend our relationship with the world, and come to more deeply feel and express our love for it?'

Part II explores the energy flow in the other direction, from politics to psychotherapy, beginning with Chess Denman's synthesis around sexuality, gender and object choice, which tackles vast themes in a small space without sacrificing subtlety and nuance. In a very real sense, gender and sexuality are where psychotherapy started, and 'sexual politics' has always drawn heavily on therapy for its inspiration (for example the women's movement drawing on Freud and Lacan); but therapy itself is affected by the universal tendency to muddle and unconsciousness around this issue. Judy Ryde's chapter, 'Working with difference', focuses mainly on race but, as she points out, much of it applies equally to other differences. From an intersubjective perspective, she maps out ways of recognizing and respecting difference and understanding its impact on the therapy relationship. Her chapter is a model of how therapy can creatively take on political imperatives within the context of its own habitus.

My own chapter on power in the therapeutic relationship is also concerned with issues of difference – specifically, how the asymmetric roles of therapist and client can combine with social and individual expectations to create severe power imbalances. My suggestion, however, is that rather than seeking to smooth out such power issues, we need to focus our work on them, bringing to light clients' deep wounds around power and powerlessness.

Part III opens with the late (and much missed) Petruska Clarkson's analysis of the law and ethics in relation to psychotherapy, which challenges much received thinking and calls for a personal ethical commitment by each individual practitioner rather than reliance on institutional wisdom. I am particularly glad to have published one of her last writings. As my own chapter on 'The institutions of therapy' indicates, such wisdom is in short supply: the administrators of psychotherapy and counselling often function well below the average level of awareness shown by individual practitioners. I consider some of the reasons why therapy institutions are so often fractious, power-hungry and fundamentally stupid and look at one or two attempts to challenge them.

Dawn Freshwater and John Lees use discourse analysis to study one vast institution, the British National Health Service, as it interfaces with psychotherapy. Many of the issues they uncover are very widely relevant: the medicalization of therapy, the rise of 'evidence-based practice' and the alienation that can accrue for both client and practitioner. These phenomena are most apparent within what is after all a medical institution, but they are fast coming to dominate the practice of psychotherapy in every context. The magnitude of therapy's mistake in seeking to enter the NHS is becoming more and more apparent.

In retrospect, I am particularly pleased with the final section of the book and its four examples of 'psychotherapy in political action' (all originally published in PPI). Firstly,

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Arlene Audergon and Lane Arye describe their work in Croatia with survivors of vicious ethnic conflict; with humour and compassion they bring out the intensity and difficulty of this sort of work, and indicate the methods of Process Oriented Psychology, currently perhaps the most politically committed form of psychotherapy. In a classic paper Emanuel Berman then describes the campaigning work of Israeli psychotherapists opposed to Israel's policies on Palestine, incisively responding to some of the criticisms of therapists making themselves politically 'visible', and illustrating his arguments with clinical examples.

Jocelyn Chaplin's account of the Bridge Project in West London shows how social activist projects of the 1970s can survive into the twenty-first century. She also describes some of the ways in which, in order to do so, this feminist counselling project has had to change and adapt over the years of its existence. Chaplin's chapter aims to position the deceptively simple concept of equality at the centre of psycho-political thinking. Finally, Kate Gentile and Susan Guttwill describe with great openness and honesty activist US therapists' response to September 11 and the ensuing 'war on terror': both the struggle against dominant political attitudes and the difficult internal dynamics of the group. This is a valuable resource for any group of therapists trying to take a radical position in the face of resistance from society, from their professional institutions and from their own internalized oppression.

CONCLUSION

Psychotherapy is suffused with political judgements. It is also a field of political *action*, a place where power is exercised and contested, as therapists try to affect clients' lives and clients acquiesce, resist, or do both at the same time (Totton, 2006b). At the same time, clients' problems can only fully be understood within a wider socio-political context, in which various forces are similarly trying to affect their lives while they acquiesce, resist, or both. Hence therapy may have something useful to say about how these two contexts, of society and individual life, relate.

It is clear that there is something in human culture that matches Marx's unsatisfactory dichotomy between 'base' and 'superstructure'. Individuals do correspond, in however complex a way, to the conditions set by the ensemble of social relations. But it is not easy adequately to describe this crucial correspondence. If we look at psychotherapy from this angle, we can see that it constitutes an ongoing research programme, using both historical reconstruction and here-and-now investigation, of the workings of families, their micro-politics, the processes through which children develop in certain directions and styles, the resistance as much as the acquiescence that forge subjectivity. This is not usually understood as political science! But, among other things, that is what it is.

Therapy involves itself centrally with the family, the field within which infants become adults, 'the place where psychic structure is formed' (Poster, 1978). The pioneering work of Wilhelm Reich (1975) mapped out how family constellations gives rise to character structure, conceived essentially as a relationship to power, an internalisation of social institutions. Psychotherapy also charts the *externalization* of *psychic* structures, which forms those social institutions: a mutual, dialectical co-arising of individual and society.

As I wrote in *The Politics of Psychotherapy*:

> Mutuality, in fact, is the keynote of the relationship between psychotherapy and politics. One can sum it up as follows: *Psychotherapy and politics each problematize the other, and each contribute to solving*

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> *problems which the other faces.* For example, politics identifies difficulties with the therapeutic project which we would often rather not consider – issues like discrimination, prejudice, domination, and hierarchy; while psychotherapy shows politics its own unconscious – the structures of projection and identification which scaffold it, the 'motivational and affective bases of political action' (Hoggett 2004: 80). Politics shows how the roles of both client and therapist are socially constructed (Gergen 1994), and how therapy constitutes a regulatory discourse of social control (Foucault 1980). Therapy responds that something crucial is missing from this picture – the actual suffering of the subject, and the therapist's response to it (Burr and Butt 2000). (Totton, 2006a, xvii)

The mutual friction between therapy and politics uncovers some of the deepest paradoxes in human experience; for example, the status of the self. Nikolas Rose (1990) suggests that the emphasis on personal responsibility in most therapy is a form of interpellation (Althusser, 1971) which pressures the client to take on a particular form of subjectivity. At the same time, though, therapy constantly and profoundly challenges this appearance of self-responsibility (Totton, 2007), most directly through the very notion of unconscious process – which also throws into question all the appearances of social and political life.

The Politics of Psychotherapy is not the last word on any of these issues – new thoughts are bursting out of me as I write this piece. But it seems to me a useful and significant step along the way to fully clarifying our thoughts about these matters.

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