

### Special issue

Papers from the conference ‘Psychotherapy and Liberation: The Legacy of May 68’, which took place at the Institute of Group Analysis in London on 2–4 May 2008.

## May 68 and Psychotherapy

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It would be rash to claim that the May 68 uprising in France was about any particular issue. Such historical moments are inevitably the product of numerous complex themes and forces interwoven over substantial periods of time. For example, it is not difficult to trace certain elements of May 68 back to 1789, or to Rousseau. Equally there were essential features that were post WWII phenomena. It is also important to understand ‘les événements’ in Paris in the wider contemporary context of political protest around the world in the 1960s. The significance of ‘May 68’ lies less in the specific events in Paris and more in the complex web of ideas, beliefs, values and political tendencies that it symbolized. A matrix that became loosely termed the counter-culture.

While it is important not to idealize this historical event, or the climate in which it occurred and that subsequently emanated from it, it is also important to recognize the significance and enduring value of some of its aspirations and the continuing relevance of some of the questions it raised. Its primary focus was on political change at an institutional level, addressing the ownership of the means of production and the distribution of wealth and power within the political system. But it also addressed issues about interpersonal relationships, lifestyles and the authority relationships within institutions, particularly educational institutions, and the way in which individual identities and social values were formed within these contexts.

It now seems likely that some of its aspirations were unrealistic and unachievable, at least at the time, and perhaps expected too much of human beings, or at least of human beings at a particular point in history. But there may nevertheless be value in the impossible idea, in so far as it provides a position from which questions can be asked, critiques developed, and which may serve to indicate directions for individual and collective progress. For example, while the achievement of economic equality may be fraught with currently insurmountable problems, it remains a direction worth following and provides a point of critique

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of the growing inequalities that have developed during recent decades. The same applies to 'human rights', 'direct democracy' and visions of technology providing the basic requisites not only of survival but of well being with reduced amounts of labour leading to a consequent increase in creative leisure time.

Psychotherapy, as it appeared at this time in the counter-culture, was perceived to have the potential either to encourage and promote conformity and the repression or restriction necessary for accommodation with the prevailing social and economic order, or to facilitate radical thought, creativity and personal liberation. It was seen as one of the arenas that might open up the possibility of more 'authentic' and less alienated personal relationships as individuals became aware of previously unknown, unacknowledged or underdeveloped parts of themselves and of each other.

A number of adherents and former adherents of this counter-culture came into psychotherapy for a complex variety of reasons. Some pursued the ideal of psychotherapy as a route to personal liberation from the repressive social order that was the subject of the counter-culture's critique. Others, frustrated or disillusioned about the possibilities of political change at institutional levels were looking for more direct and immediate personal interventions. Others were seeking explanations for the failure of various political projects in the deeper levels of the human psyche. Then there were those whose own personal and interpersonal difficulties were not resolved through political awareness or activism, and were drawn to seek a different way of understanding themselves and their needs, motivations and desires.

The 40th anniversary of May 68 seemed an appropriate occasion to review the present situation of psychotherapy and particularly its relation to politics and to try to raise some questions about what might have happened to some of the hopes, visions and values of the past.

The conference which took place from 2–4 May (exact anniversary of the uprising in Paris) produced a rich assortment of papers and animated discussion with, perhaps predictably, few, if any, conclusions, which is perhaps as it should be. Although this issue of *PPI* carries only a sample of the presentations, I hope they convey something of the spirit and general direction of the conference. Both Peter Tatchell and Hilary Wainwright provided stimulating and indeed challenging keynote addresses, setting out a politico-historical context, and a conference structure including large groups and small groups sought to maintain an environment of discussion, debate and exploration in which the link between the personal and the political could be maintained.

After the conference and the publication of some of its content we remain faced with questions about how far we can, from a psychotherapeutic perspective, sustain a critique of our society, its institutions and our relationships, and how far we and our discourse become incorporated into and permeated by contemporary ideologies and discourses.

We live now in a national society and indeed in a global society where the extent of inequality in wealth distribution is probably unprecedented. And as these words are written we face an economic crisis, in the Western world at least, not unconnected to this extreme gap generated by the rise of the super rich.

We encounter on a day-to-day basis, within our institutions the belief that everything can be measured and evaluated. An assumption rooted in the market economy where everything can be evaluated in terms of investment, cost and profitability.

We also encounter an extraordinary belief in the capacity of procedures, policies and protocols to resolve most if not all problems. People, with their personal motives and idiosyncrasies, which frequently include goodwill and creativity, can no longer be trusted to address complex issues and achieve desirable outcomes. Only laid-down policies and procedures can guarantee fairness, efficiency, standardization etc. Again we find the influence of a cost-efficiency model whereby it is cheaper to employ functionaries to carry out procedures than to allow the exercise of creativity and discretion. But here also we find some of those cherished counter-culture values, re-emerging as rules and regulations, stripped of their complexity and often of their humanity. The left too has its capacity for alienation and dehumanization.

It is in this connection that we face the enduring problem of institutionalization. How is it possible to preserve, implement and pass on ideas, beliefs, values etc., without them becoming institutionalized into lifeless laws to be observed on pain of punishment or by way of social conformity, rather than through appreciation of their deeper meaning and significance, and genuine commitment to their spirit.

The May 68 counter-culture left us with a legacy that not only questioned established political systems with their unequal distribution of wealth and power – it also questioned all forms of authority and institutional structures and patterns of behaviour based on conformity rather than choice. In an important sense everything could be questioned and indeed everything *had* to be questioned. But asking questions is becoming an increasingly difficult task, even within psychotherapy, where one might expect the capacity to wonder about the most bizarre and unlikely possibilities to be a highly prized virtue. The culture of TINA (there is no alternative) has powerfully permeated many discourses and areas of life. And the reassurance of certainty is also something that as psychotherapists we know a little about.

What remains to be seen is how much of this sort of thinking, this counter-cultural legacy, with all its problems, idealizations and shortcomings can survive and flourish beyond this fortieth anniversary. Can the papers published here be beginnings, or continuations, rather than conclusions in relation to that legacy?