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Psychotherapy, Political Resistance and Intimacy: Dilemmas, Possibilities and Limitations, Part I*

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ABSTRACT *The following is the first part of a two-part paper that discusses the challenges faced by psychotherapists working in Venezuela during years of political and social unrest as a way of examining psychotherapy's dilemmas when dealing with political issues. This first part will discuss limitations in the ability of traditional psychotherapeutic technical recommendations to address clinical material stemming from highly polarized political scenarios. Historical examples of how these limitations have led to abuse will be shown. The specific difficulties of traditional notions of neutrality will be questioned. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: politics, psychoanalytic psychotherapy, resistance

POLITICS AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

In his autobiography, Gandhi reflects on the relationship between his political commitments and very personal goals. He states very explicitly that he had striven for self-realization, in his case inextricably linked to spiritual development, while developing his political pursuits (Gandhi, 1949 [1925]). He comments on the inseparable link between his intimate life and his political life. He seems to have to stress this point of view when dealing with these two seemingly distant spheres of life as though it were suspicious to see them together. He seems to have to excuse or explain himself on why he has taken such a public means of developing his spirituality. Or maybe what he has to excuse or explain is how he is politically committed while at the same time pursuing very personal and intimate goals. Often it is supposed that one pursuit excludes the other.

But the intimate and political aspects of life have been increasingly begun to be understood as intertwined, thanks in great part to the writings and actions of the feminist movement who have rendered visible the obscured power relations in our private lives (Eichenbaum

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and Orbach, 2003; Dimen, 2004). Psychotherapy, an activity that deals with human suffering, is constantly exposed to the vicissitudes of the intimate. But inevitably it is also the setting where the consequences of political circumstances can be observed, talked about and worked on. This two-way relation between the intimate and the political has often seemed uncomfortable to psychotherapists and is a theme of constant debate (Samuels, 2001).

Some of those historical debates have reappeared in the psychotherapeutic work of those of us who practise in Venezuela in the middle of an intense political struggle that has been developing in my country for a number of years. Questions of how to deal with the consequences of political struggle, with the impact of these political dilemmas on the psychotherapeutic setting, have arisen; along with those that ask whether some of our psychological theories and techniques have to be changed and rethought to be able to acknowledge and work with the political dimensions of life.

At best the relationship between psychotherapy and politics has been uncomfortable. Freud, whose thinking, as we know, was influenced by the political circumstances of his lifetime, was still hesitant when considering the relationship of politics with analysis. On various occasions he comments on the desire to be able to attend to his work and not have to worry about the world's political struggles (Langer, 1972). In one of the last letters included in the Standard Edition of his complete works we find this curious example of Freud's thoughts on the political issues he had to face. It is a letter answering the editor of a journal called *Time and Tide* who had invited him to write a piece to include in an edition dedicated to analysis of anti-semitism. Freud writes:

> I came to Vienna when I was a child of four years from a small town of Moravia. After seventy-eight years of assiduous work I had to leave my home, I saw the scientific society that I had founded dissolved, our institutions destroyed, our Printing Press taken over by the invaders, the books I had published confiscated or reduced to pulp, my children expelled from their jobs. Don't you think that you ought to reserve the columns of your special number for the utterances of non-Jewish people less personally involved than myself? (Freud, 1964 [1938], 301)

This fragment not only summarizes the painful consequences that he and his family endured but seems to imply that his personal situation disqualifies him from speaking out and considering the phenomenon as if he would need to be an objective, disengaged observer to have a genuine possibility of offering insights. This consideration seems to be in line with the conception of psychoanalysis that Freud defends, which intends to include it among the natural, exact sciences (Freud, 1964 [1937]).

The modern positivist inheritance has frequently been cited as one of the main circumstances that have limited the possibility of thinking of the political dimensions of psychological theory and practice (Guba and Lincoln, 1990; Gergen and Warhus, 2003). Psychology's quest to be considered equal to the 'hard sciences', as well as the medical tradition that psychotherapy grew from, have framed this positivist influence.

In the words of Pakman, a family therapist:

> The therapist who suffered the vice of being a social actor committed to his or her client's demands tried frequently to copy the researcher in his or her aspiration to access a position of 'objectivity' that for so long was the guarantee of scientific rigour. But in spite of this attempt the world of 'academic

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> research' has seen this faithful follower (in intention) of the theoretical objectivist base reach the laboratory stained with the mud, blood and fire of the clinical trench. Research belonged to the more objective and impersonal academic world of pure science: intervention, in spite of its objectivist aspirations, belonged to the embodied world, more subjective and personal of social practice. (Pakman, 1995, 360)

But even if clinical theory and practice have tried to shy away from the political aspects of life, politics has seemed to crawl under the consulting room door and enter the personal world of psychotherapy. This always happens inevitably if we consider human relationships to be framed in the power relationships that unavoidably shape all social life. A circumstance that has become visible thanks to the work of many authors and movements relevant to psychological theory (Langer, 1972; Laing, 1990; Martín-Baró, 2002), feminism in particular (Eichenbaum and Orbach, 2003; Dimen, 2004). But politics has not only appeared in the consulting room quietly and subtly. On many occasions it has torn the door down and invaded the supposedly sacred space of psychotherapy. I am referring to the many instances where political turbulence has directly affected therapist's practice, clients and therapeutic institutions. In these cases, not even many therapists' active attempt to steer clear from political dilemmas has been enough to avoid them, which is a feeling expressed by authors working under unstable contexts in Latin America (Kemper, 1992).

POLITICS AND PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC ABUSE

Perhaps the most terrifying examples of this come from Nazi Germany. The 1933 rise to power of Nazism began the wave of cultural 'cleansing' that directly affected psychiatry as a whole and psychoanalytic practice in particular. The historian Mandler (2002) has reported how the German Society of Psychology's congress was changed to a later date after the election of Hitler in 1933, barring the participation of Jewish members. The official Nazi salute was made mandatory before each university class. A few academics resisted – for example Gestalt founder, Wolfang Köhler, who tried to leave his university post in 1933, among other things to protest the firing of his Jewish colleagues, including Kurt Lewin. His resignation was stalled until 1935.

But let us not forget that the mass murders of Nazism began in psychiatric institutions and were ideologically spirited by the eugenics movement, which collaborated with many justifications. The first measures implemented were backed by the psychiatrist Ernst Rudin who was the president of the International Federation of Eugenesia and Racial Hygiene and consisted in the sterilization of an estimated 300,000 to 400,000 persons, around 60% of which were psychiatric patients (Strous, 2006).

Later the T4 programme implemented massive eugenics programmes on mental patients. Long before the start of the war 70,273 psychiatric patients were murdered for reasons of 'racial hygiene' (Strous, 2006). Dr Alfred Hoche published a book in 1920 titled *Permission to Destroy Undeserved Life,* where he stated: 'The right to live must be earned and justified and not assumed dogmatically' (p. 33, as cited in Strous). This text was widely quoted by the doctors of the Nazi era. Another psychiatrist, Imfried Eberl, directed the concentration camp of Treblinka from 1942 until 1945. It may be important to consider the fact that although, not all of the mental health field participated directly in these events, the murder of more than 70,000 patients in hospital wards before the beginning of the war

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could not have been done without the silent complicity of a large part of the medical establishment.

With regard to psychoanalysis, the main psychotherapeutic institute was put under the direction of a right-wing political activist named Goering who began a process of trying to expel any Jewish influence. Freud's writings were banned, his books burned and 'Jewish concepts' such as the Oedipus Complex were prohibited. The name of the former section of the institute that dealt with psychoanalysis was renamed 'Section A' (Totton, 2000). Marie Langer, who was studying psychoanalysis at that time and later migrated to Argentina, recalled how psychotherapeutic practice was affected: analysts became fearful of their patients and vice-versa. An analyst was arrested after one of his patients had been found to be opposing the Nazi regime and the institute prohibited the political participation of its members. Patients were kicked out of treatment or these issues were silenced. Langer, who continued to develop her political activities under cover, was herself arrested in 1936 and 'paternally' reprimanded by her teachers (Langer, 1972).

In the former Soviet Union the use of psychiatric practice to persecute political enemies came to light in the 1970s through the brave work of local psychiatrists who accused the Soviet government of abuse. In the first years of the revolution, psychoanalysis had managed to find a place, even to the point of receiving official funding for the development of a children's school and some publications. But Lenin was explicitly suspicious of psychoanalytic thinking (Miller, 2005) and by 1930 Stalinist purges affected all of psychology. Pavlov resigned from his research post in 1927 over the firing of a number of his collaborators. In the 1930s private life began to be more strictly policed and psychoanalysis ran contrary to many of these principles. Psychoanalysis was formally prohibited in 1936 by Stalin (Miller, 2005) and Freud's, Adler's and Jung's works were burnt.

Testimonies of political dissidents being hospitalized by force in psychiatric institutions begin to appear from the 1950s and apparently began to multiply under Khrushchev's government (Bloch and Reddaway, 1984; Miller, 2005). The diagnosis of 'sluggish schizophrenia' began to be systematically used for political purpose – a vague term that allowed practically any behaviour to be classified as potentially schizophrenic and was applied to many political activists who were then hospitalized and tortured. In 1971 the Soviet psychiatrist, Bukovsky, accused his government before the World Psychiatric Association. This accusation led to years of debate, research on the subject and Bukovsky's seven-year arrest and later exile (Bloch and Reddaway, 1984). It wasn't until 1989 that Soviet delegates to the World Psychiatric Association recognized the widespread abuse of psychiatry for political purposes.

In the development of psychotherapy, South America has struggled through political dictatorships and abuses. Perhaps the most documented cases, because of the severity of the abuse and because of the wide network of mental health professionals established in the country, comes from Argentina. Numerous practitioners have written on how the analytic setting was profoundly disturbed by the authoritarian regimes (Langer, 1972; Puget, 1990; Hollander, 2006). Clients and analysts were directly persecuted and the therapeutic setting was altered by fear. Puget (1990) chronicles how political issues were avoided in therapeutic conversations, normally without acknowledging it, but often even explicitly. Clients who had any involvement with resistance movements were denied therapy. She writes:

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> The practice of psychoanalysis in a period of social commotion caused by state terrorism poses some difficulties. I therefore make the following hypothesis: that we eliminated certain representations concerning social reality from the field of perception, which led us to misjudge material associated with this type of representation. In some cases, this was because we declared ourselves powerless, or 'lacking theory' to conceptualize it. In other cases, the failure was directly linked to fear and irrationality. In other cases still, we left this type of material to one side using a certain form of rationalization, which justified our failure, as an excuse. (Puget, 1990, 29)

Even more surprisingly, an analytical candidate of the Psychoanalytic Society of Rio de Janeiro, during the military dictatorships in Brazil, was found in 1973 to belong to the torture squads of the House of Death of Petrópolis. The president of the association denied the allegations and refused to open an investigation. International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) accepted these arguments, the case was silenced and it wasn't until 1995 that these accusations were duly investigated and confirmed (Villela, 2001).

Many other examples can be quoted where political circumstances deeply affected psychotherapeutic practice, to the point of turning psychotherapeutic practice into the tool of human rights abuse. Recent debates have again shown the CIA's use of psychology, and the American Psychological Association's complicity, in hiring psychologists and developing research on interrogation techniques that include stripping prisoners naked, intravenous injections that make prisoners urinate on themselves, exercising them until exhaustion, making them spin on the floor and do tricks as if they were dogs, strip searches, exposition to extreme temperatures; in short: psychological torture (Gray and Zielinski, 2006; Levine, 2007). These examples serve to illustrate how psychology and therapy, far from being an apolitical space at a safe distance from power struggles, has many times inevitably come to be another one of the scenarios where politics are played out. Psychotherapists' efforts to maintain an objective, apolitical stance do not seem to have protected the therapeutic space and instead may have led to collusion and silent complicity with abuse.

BRIEF APPEARANCES OF POLITICAL DILEMMAS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Since the beginning of the psychotherapeutic endeavour, while some thinkers have preferred to steer clear of political dilemmas, others have been keen to think of the relationships between therapy and politics. For example, Jacoby (1983) chronicled what he termed the 'political analysts' and 'neo-freudians' that include Wilhelm Reich, Otto Fenichel's circle, the Frankfurt School and developments of ego and cultural psychology that include Karen Horney, Eric Fromm and Harry Stack Sullivan and their debates on the relationship of psychoanalysis with political transformation. But Jacoby goes on to register the historical account on how these issues have tended to be filtered out of the therapeutic professions and remained in the background. More recent discussions have stated:

> Since most traditional training settings provide no way to think about how class and politics enter treatment, therapists have little chance to reflect together or develop strategies to deal with the mutual interaction of psychic and social reality. (Layton et al., 2006, 2)

This book by Layton et al. (2006), states that politics is the 'last taboo' of psychoanalysis and brings up again the debate on how therapists tend to struggle to deal with the political

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dimensions of life in their work. Civil rights movements and feminism have contributed to keep the debate alive, but still seems to occupy the margins of the profession.

More traditional perspectives on psychotherapeutic technique have at least acknowledged the difficulty of sustaining an ascetic, non-political stance in times of political turmoil. Kernberg (1998), for example, who witnessed these struggles first hand in Latin America writes:

> In both countries [referring to two Latin American countries], social change was taking place; in my opinion, each example brings home the limitations of technical answers ('neutrality') found under conditions of rapidly shifting value systems in the society. Neutrality is protected by social stability and is less clear in its definition than appears to be the case under ordinary circumstances. It cannot be place within an exclusively technical system … At the same time, to abandon the technical concept of neutrality in terms of social or political ideology may be an easy way to avoid painful and irresolvable conflict – but only at the cost of uncontrolled and uncontrollable influences of the psychoanalyst's personality and value systems on the patient. (Kernberg, 1998, 176)

Kernberg's technical propositions of course are novel in many ways, suggesting setting and intervention changes in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. 'Traditional' above refers to his more classic perspective on the use of 'neutrality' and the rather simplistic recommendation of continuing to adhere to it only under 'social stability'.

Samuels (2006) has carried out research on therapists' approaches to political material in psychotherapy. He states that since the 1980s therapists seemed to be more open to paying attention to the political aspect of their client's lives, so he sent out a questionnaire to 14 professional organizations in seven different countries – to approximately 2,000 therapists. Around one-third of this sample replied. He asked them about how they handled political material in their therapeutic work, which he has considered an 'explosive' topic in the field. He found that 56% of the respondents reported discussing politics with their clients and 44% reporting that they didn't. We don't know the specifics of what these therapists consider politics to be or how it is that they intervened in these conversations, but Samuels reports that the replies 'thoughtful and extensive – showed considerable struggle by the respondents as they endeavoured to mark out their positions' (Samuels, 2006, 13).

DIFFICULTIES

The fact that some therapists consider speaking and discussing politics in therapy, which prides itself as a place set up as safe and containing, where people who come for help are invited to speak whatever comes to their mind without censoring anything, is curious in itself. One might assume that therapists who are trained to be able to listen and facilitate exploration of difficult life experiences, should be able to handle the difficulties that stem from political life, as they are able to do with other problematic issues. But Samuels' findings and many other therapists' observations suggest that politics offers a particularly challenging area.

Puget (1990) explores possible origins of these challenges in the setting of a political crisis and uses various psychotherapeutic examples from the political dictatorships in Argentina. She mentions how analysts and their clients are both immersed in the same social context and are simultaneously experiencing the same anxieties arising from it. The field of daily life floods the therapeutic situation with news and information of events. If

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some of these events are traumatic, both the therapist and the client may tend to deny or avoid these disturbing experiences. When these political events represent threat to sectors of the population, these fears can alter the therapeutic relationship. Social violence leads to the re-examining of relationships to see if they are trustworthy or may entail any risk. In rapidly changing political turbulence, life can become unpredictable – previous ways of organizing and planning life are altered. Authoritarian regimes that punish opposition have consequences for individual functioning and increase caution in relationships. Psychological warfare with its use of disinformation alters people's capacity to obtain, examine and think through information available in the social realm. Polarization leads to experiences of fear, as well as extreme, dichotomous, simplistic evaluation of others. During times of political crisis, Puget says, in summary: 'all relations are impregnated with an experience of threat' (Puget, 1990, 12). She concluded that denial was the most frequent reaction in Argentina. A switch to a more short-term basis for planning life was also common. Sometimes the therapeutic situation was idealized to preserve it as an untouchable space, free from social threats; the analyst was thought of as being invulnerable. She also mentions how, in her experience, group therapy was where the effects were most obvious.

NEUTRALITY

All the factors mentioned by Puget seem pertinent to the experience of practising psychotherapy in Venezuela during recent years of political struggle. But Samuels' and others' comments on the difficulties regarding the political refer not only to times of political crisis. Other authors have discussed clinical psychology's difficulties in theorizing and intervening on the political and social aspects of life (Herman, 1997; Pakman, 1997, 2004; Martín-Baró, 2002).

One of the technical considerations that frequently comes up is that of neutrality (Guba and Lincoln, 1990; Mahrer, 2000; Totton, 2000; Coderch, 2001; Gergen and Warhus, 2003). This technical recommendation seems closely related to the positivist ideal of a disengaged, apolitical, distant and objective observer that avoids 'contaminating' reality with his or her viewpoint. Freud explicitly expresses this influence when using the archaeologist's search to discover physical artifacts as analogous to psychoanalytic explorations (Freud, 1964 [1937]) or when he states that 'psychoanalysis is a method of research, an impartial instrument, like the infinitesimal calculus' (p. 36).

In their *Dictionary of Psychoanalysis,* Laplanche and Pontalis (1994) write that analysts must be neutral with respect to their religious, moral and social values so as to avoid leading therapy in any particular direction. In some cases neutrality led training analysts to recommend therapists to abstain from participating in public life as is the case of Greenacre (as cited by Totton, 2000) who wrote:

> The need to avoid the violation of the transferential space through the establishment of other channels of relationship with the patient demand from the analyst a high degree of restriction and sacrifice. It demands, among other things the sacrifice on the part of the analyst of his public and conspicuous participation in any of the social and political 'causes' to which he in other situations might have given his time and name to. (Greenacre, 1954)

Hollander alludes to this factor as a main obstacle in discussing politics in psychotherapy. She writes, referring again to Samuels' work:

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> Samuels noted that those psychoanalysts who do not do so reported that their disinclination stems from a conviction that they do not know or understand much about the social and political worlds or that it would be an ethical violation of what they presume to constitute the psychoanalytic frame. (Hollander, 2006, 159)

But the idea of neutrality has been highly problematic and has been increasingly debated. In the wider arena of science and epistemology, the crisis of modern science has continually debated on the possibility or not of an objective stance. But more specifically in the therapeutic realm the notion of neutrality has been disputed because, among other things, it tends to deny or make invisible the ethical and political basis of all theories (Mahrer, 2000), as well as denying the political positions and social hierarchies that therapists belong to. It tends to deny and avoid responsibility to social issues (Langer, 1972; Gordon, 1995; Layton et al., 2006); and finally, as a rationalized or mechanical answer to political issues, it ends up serving the status quo (Langer, 1972; Frosh, 2007).

Other authors, particularly those from a social-constructionist stance, go further, stating that to aspire to neutrality is to sell the impossible since we are always inevitably set in a social and political frame (Coderch, 2001; Gergen and Warhus, 2003; Totton, 2006). In the view of Coderch, a Spanish psychoanalyst, the analyst's questions as well as his or her silences necessarily influence therapy in one direction or another and these influences are inevitably related to theoretical and personal inclinations. He states: 'to search for neutrality in human relations is to search for an illusion' (Coderch, 2001, 182).

Other factors that have been mentioned by authors reflecting on the depoliticizing of psychotherapy are the appropriation of this activity in some countries by the medical establishment, which in turn limited the practice of therapy to a very particular social group, that, for example, occupies a stable professional status that tends to be in favour of maintaining the status quo (Jacoby, 1997 [1975]; Parker, 1997); psychotherapists' report of having very little preparation to think and attend to social and political issues (Hollander, 2006); the avoidance of the emotional burden that comes from attending wide and complex social problems by turning to a more technical and mechanical approach to clinical work (Pakman, 1997).

VENEZUELA

These dilemmas and discussions have appeared over and over again in psychotherapeutic work during these years of political turmoil. Questions that we might not have asked ourselves as therapists in other times have come up. My private practice is located in the east of Caracas, in a county called Chacao, which has come to represent a home to the opposition to the government. So now the place where I practise tends to elicit material about my possible position in the political debate. One person I had been attending before the polarization began who is a strong backer of the government began a number of sessions talking about Chacao and joking if it was OK for him to bring a pro-government newspaper under his arm while walking through the neighbourhood. This remark helps to open discussion on how to handle the complexities of psychotherapy in a politically charged scenario. Should one interpret it only as an expression of transference? Might not interpreting it in such a way not be a way of denying the political realities we are facing and trying to reduce political tensions to the individual? How can we address both dimensions? How do the places

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(real and imagined) we are embedded in and the power each one conveys come into play in the therapeutic encounter?

Another example is a psychoanalytic congress where the therapists debated whether it is appropriate or not for therapists to participate in public marches and public expression of their political allegiances, when they run the risk of being spotted by their analysands – as well as questions on how to handle the conversations that might come up after such an encounter (Sociedad Psicoanalítica de Caracas, 2003).

These issues have come up again and again in our practice. I believe they show the limitations and blind spots of a traditional positivist frame of psychotherapy, the impossibility of neutrality and the dangers of trying to avoid dealing with this impossibility. The issue of how to develop a politically reflexive psychotherapeutic practice is brought up by these dilemmas. These difficulties and possible options will be discussed in the second part of this article.

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