

Psychotherapy, Political Resistance and Intimacy: Dilemmas, Possibilities and Limitations, Part II

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ABSTRACT *The following paper 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. It is the second part of a two-part piece. In the first part limitations of the traditional psychotherapeutic technical recommendations in a highly polarized political setting were considered. In this second part examples of the difficulties presented in Venezuela will be shown. Reflexive psychotherapeutic alternatives to traditional technical considerations such as neutrality will be considered. The possibilities opened up by the perspectives that lead us to engage simultaneously with the personal and social aspects of life, the inclusion of the power differential in the therapeutic relationship and the potential that psychotherapy has to act as a form of resistance to unjust circumstances when thought of as a space where the intimate and the political are intertwined will be considered. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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POLITICS AND THERAPY IN VENEZUELA

A few elements of the contemporary history of Venezuela will be mentioned here to provide an idea of the social setting where these observations originate. Venezuela has gone through what many have termed an economic, social and political crisis for more than 20 years. Venezuela has had a running democracy since 1958, which means that while other South American countries like Brazil, Argentina and Chile were suffering military dictatorships and harsh political circumstances, we were viewed as a democratic example. Being an oil country, the price of oil has played a big part in our history. The continuous rise in prices after World War II leading up to an oil boom in the beginning of the 1970s generated a privileged economic situation from the 1950s to the end of that boom. From the beginning of the 1980s the fall of the oil prices coupled with the foreign debt that Venezuela had

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acquired over the years and widespread corruption contributed to a sharp economic downfall that was felt in many areas of life. For the first time in decades Venezuela's currency fell against the dollar and economic difficulties multiplied, leaving the most vulnerable sectors of society in dire circumstances. During the 1980s poverty levels multiplied; sociologists like Pedrazzini and Sánchez (1992) documented the multiplication of precarious lifestyles that developed from the spread of poverty in the major cities that had grown at a very fast rate in the previous decades. Their book *Malandros, bandas y niños de la calle* registered what they called 'expression of urgency', referring to lifestyles that had developed in these urgent circumstances. Children living on the street, the rise of street gangs, unemployment and underemployment were all examples of this phenomenon. A first sign of mass social unrest was experienced at the end of the 1980s, after the re-election of Carlos Andrés Pérez, who had previously been president during the bonanza of the 1970s. One of his first measures was to decree a set of neoliberal economic measures with many restrictions. These measures included a sharp rise in gasoline prices. This triggered a national reaction when people found that the cost of public transportation had increased unexpectedly; street riots and looting spread through the country in what came to be known as the 'Caracazo'. The National Guard was called upon to restore control and more than 200 people were murdered. This marked the beginning of social unrest that in the 1990s translated in two coup attempts. The first one, in February 1992, was led by a group of dissident military officers that included Hugo Chávez. The elections of 1993 marked the first break in the two-party system that had been winning elections since 1958. In 1998 the fall of the two-party system was completed when Chávez, who had received an amnesty from the government after serving some time in jail, was elected president. His election spurred a wave of change termed by him the 'Bolivarian Revolution'. This included the setting up of a new National Assembly, which wrote up a new constitution that was sanctioned in 2000. Important political changes were approved, which included the possibility of immediate re-elections for presidency and the extension of the presidential mandate to six years. But Chavez's mandate has been also filled with political tension and social unrest, in part due to his authoritarian inclinations. In 2002 a series of civilian marches led up to a stand off between government supporters and critics, with the assassination of 20 civilians and the Minister of Defence's announcement of a presidential resignation. The resignation was later denied by Chávez and his supporters who claimed that he had been overthrown by a coup, deepening the gulf between government supporters and opposition. Later that year a national strike was led by the workers of the state-owned oil company that led to the firing and persecution of 23,000 employees. Even though protests have continued, Chávez has won a series of referendums and elections, most important of which was the race to be re-elected in 2006. But in 2007 his proposition for a new constitutional change, which this time would allow him to be continually re-elected without limits, was rejected by national vote.

This summary, incomplete as it is, serves to show how these two decades have been marked by continuous political controversy, very high numbers of people living in poverty (39% according to the National Institute of Statistics in 2005), a sharp rise in violence (seen for example in the murder rates that have skyrocketed from 1,501 murders a year in 1985 to 13,288 in 2003, making Venezuela one of the most dangerous countries in the world, Briceño-León, 2005), and in the last few years an intense polarization that has divided country opinion and affiliations.

SPECIFIC SETTING

With this wider social frame in mind, let me now mention a few details about the setting where I work as a psychotherapist. I have had the opportunity to work in two different spaces that allow me to see some of the nuances of the relationship between politics and psychotherapy in a very polarized society.

On one hand, I work in a community centre that is run by the university I work at (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello). It is a Jesuit university and it is located in the south-west of Caracas. This is important because the south-west contains many of the poorer neighbourhoods or *barrios* of the city. It is also the area with least medical services available in the vicinity. The university is a neighbour of Antímamo, La Vega and Montalbán. The first two are large slum areas, which between them house approximately 400,000 people. The last is a lower middle-class community. Antímamo and La Vega are characterized by improvised, poor housing, with some of its sectors lacking regular and efficient services such as running water, rubbish disposal and security. The community centre comprises two buildings that house a medical facility, law, educational and psychological services for the community. The centre is located in front of the university campus and it is the place where many of the professional practices take place (mainly for law, psychology and education students). Our psychological service was set up at the centre in 1999 but it was a continuation of psychological work in Antímamo that began in 1993. In the psychology unit there is a team of 13 psychologists and two psychiatrists, who develop a series of interventions that range from traditional psychotherapeutic consultation to community projects. Students from a specialization in clinical community psychology also work at the centre.

On the other hand, I work at my private practice which is set in the east of Caracas in Chacao. Chacao is a middle-class sector that has been at the centre of political controversy because it is at the centre and gives names to the council where the wealthier neighbourhoods of Caracas are found. It is an area characterized by four- or five-story buildings that mainly house middle-class residents. Since it is where the council of Chacao's main offices are found, it has access to important health, police and administrative resources. The mayor of Chacao is one of the main political figures in opposition to Chávez.

So in a sense my two work settings offer a glimpse of the class divide in Caracas, which is somewhat related to the political viewpoints that have clashed in recent years. Chávez has maintained that the west of Caracas is where his followers live and the east has been appropriated by the opposition. I hesitate to describe the political affiliation in such simple terms; many variations are readily visible (the election results of 2006 and 2007 show a much wider array of political preferences in Caracas than the more simplistic pictures state) but it can certainly be said that, in general, the two settings where I work show very different pictures of access to resources and political preferences.

Therapeutic work has also been challenged by the difficult social disturbances and controversies that have developed in the country for years. Psychotherapeutic training in Venezuela suffers from the same avoidance of social and political dimensions that has been often criticized in other countries. So discussions about what psychotherapist's responsibilities are, technical and ethical frameworks and how to handle these issues in therapy began to repeat themselves, not only in informal conversations among us but in open events and

forums (Sociedad Psicoanalítica de Caracas, 2003; Llorens, 2006). In one psychoanalytic event I remember hearing analysts debate whether it was ethical or not for psychoanalysts to state their political preferences outside of the consulting room and, for example, attend the marches that were occurring frequently in the city to support one group or the other. A psychoanalyst who had a column in a national newspaper had to deal with controversies regarding whether it was acceptable for him to take political stances in his column and still practise psychoanalysis (Lieberman, 2007).

As therapists struggled to try to find answers to the pressing questions that this environment was posing, therapeutic conversations with clients increasingly included worries related to political circumstances. The persecution of people who had been fired for political reasons was reflected through the victims or family members who looked for support in therapy (Goncalves and Gutierrez, 2005). Family divisions and confrontations stemming from different political positions were often mentioned by therapist as a particularly hard issue to address. Constant reports of feelings of continuous instability in the country, difficulties in planning ahead, loss of previous structures, fear, indignation, rage, along with reports of hope, redemption, allegiance, triumph, revenge were many of the themes directly related to social and political circumstances that emerged. Many of the difficulties mentioned earlier in the paper arising from the challenges posed by political circumstances began to be experienced personally by therapists in Venezuela.

EXAMPLES

Let me mention a few examples that help to illustrate some of these challenges. On various occasions widespread protests erupted around the city relating to different events. It was always interesting to see how different areas of the city were affected by them. On some occasions protests on one side of the city seemed to be completely remote from the other. Difficulty getting to the community centre because of protests contrasted with the normality of the journey back to Chacao. And the other way around: street protests and riots went on while Antimano remained calm. This underlined the different experiences of the political situation for different communities and classes. In 2007 a wave of student protests erupted in the whole country. Universities began to challenge government policy very vocally, especially after the closing of a private television channel. Fears of growing political censorship led to huge student demonstrations. On this occasion it was inevitable that the people we worked with at the community centre wondered about our political positions and our link to the protesters. After all, it was the university's community centre and many of the protests occurred in the street in front of the centre. Discussions again arose among professionals about whether we should cancel sessions during these days of protest. On the one hand it seemed sensible to avoid endangering anybody; on the other it could be read in many different ways, for example as support for the protests.

A psychotherapeutic group that we conducted with women who were survivors of violence continued meeting during these turbulent days. We tried to keep our ears open to comments suggesting their thoughts on these issues. Interestingly enough, things went on as usual as if nothing had happened, even though the previous day streets in front of the centre had been filled with student demonstrators, police had arrived and the news had appeared everywhere. We wondered what that meant. Therapists at the centre frequently

commented how the political protests didn't seem to come up in the therapeutic conversations with the adults. Maybe it was our assumption, stemming from our social class and position that made us think that these issues were important to all, and maybe this was only so because we were so close to the students involved. On the other hand it was interesting how the child psychologists did report many comments from the children they worked with relating to the political issues. It was they who were bringing their questions, doubts, fears, desires around these issues. It seemed that avoidance was playing a big part in the curious absence of any comment of these events by the part of the clients and the therapists. It seemed similar to Puget's (1990) observations in Argentina about how the most frequent reaction in therapy was to avoid acknowledging these events.

A second example comes from my other setting in the east of Caracas. I had worked with Jorge previously for about a year. He was in his sixties and had come to work through some issues related to his second marriage which he later decided to end. As a young child he had been raised by a mother and a stepfather under incredibly poor circumstances. When he talked about the material deprivation of his early years he tended to show certain wonder and pride on having survived it. He commented on not having shoes, toothpaste or sometimes food. His stepfather had been a violent man and had hurt his mother repeatedly. In his teenage years he had begun to be politically active. Politics offered him structure, aim and hope to his life. There he found strengths he had not known about, he reflected on his life and circumstances and committed his efforts to a noble pursuit. In those years, the 1960s, democracy had been achieved in Venezuela recently, but stability was fragile. Social democrats were in power, more radical left-wing parties were banned and Jorge's activities suddenly had to go underground. He continued participating for some years, living with fear and persecution. He was jailed a couple of times and was beaten by his jailers. He later retired from these activities, went on to get a university degree and worked the rest of his life in an office job. When he retired from political activity he started a first therapeutic experience with a psychoanalyst, which by his own account helped him immensely.

Years later, after retiring from his profession and after a year of psychotherapeutic work with me, Jorge moved with his wife and two children to another city to give their marriage one last try. After a couple of years he finally decided to separate and came back to Caracas. That is when he began a second therapeutic process with me. In the first year of our work, Chávez had recently won his first elections and things were not yet polarized. At that time I felt weary of what seemed to me a very populist, demagogic government but was also worried about the growing signs of polarization by representatives of the right. But when Jorge returned a few years later, polarization had taken over the country, the strikes had occurred, the disastrous coup attempt or resignation had happened, violence had increased including the assassination of an important lawyer from the District Attorney's office. Chacao, where I worked, had symbolically appeared as a centre for the opposition. Indirect references to the political situation began to appear repeatedly in Jorge's conversation. He'd mention that he wondered how psychologists could join the revolution and contribute to the cause. He always came with a book or a newspaper under his arm, which he read while waiting to enter the room. On one occasion he was reading a hardline newspaper that backed the government and he joked on his way in 'it might be dangerous to be reading this paper here in Chacao' and smiled. I had tried to invite Jorge to explore his thoughts and feelings

on this subject, asking him to talk about how he was feeling about the political situation and having to come to Chacao, which was connoted as an area unsympathetic to the government. On this occasion I interpreted the comment as a transference remark, saying that he might feel threatened to speak about his political preferences and beliefs in therapy because he wondered what my position was on these issues and worried bringing something controversial into our work. He dismissed all of my invitations and this interpretation in similar ways. He denied that it was something that worried him; it was only a joke – he felt perfectly safe and confident to speak about anything he wished in our work.

In the meantime I had been feeling stuck in our therapy. I felt that these issues were not only important to the whole country – they were directly linked to Jorge's life, his aspirations as a young man, his convictions. I also worried that my objections to the government were getting in the way of being able to address these issues in a way that Jorge felt comfortable with. I wondered if he in some way sensed my doubts around these issues. I felt that the part of the 'neutral' therapist was especially artificial around these issues, I certainly would move differently around them if I shared the same beliefs as Jorge. I also felt it wasn't my place to question them – his beliefs seemed reasonable; I felt I could relate to his perspective. I thought it idealized positions that had a much more sombre meaning from my point of view. But I also had many shifting thoughts and feelings on the political situation. I could not identify with any of the polarized positions. But I did have strong positions on some of the abuses the government was openly committing. This stream of thoughts was present when I worked with Jorge and I supposed that they were somehow present in him also. Our therapeutic setting had changed somehow. Outside events had affected on our position in relation to one another. This also prompted me to read and study how similar events had affected therapy in other countries and how these issues had been dealt with.

I finally decided that a 'neutral' stance on these issues was untenable, that I inevitably had a perspective that influenced my stance, as did Jorge, and all we could do is to try to live with that and see if we could work through these issues.

So the next time Jorge alluded indirectly to politics I decided to ask him directly: 'Do you feel you need to know, or would like to know my thoughts on the political situation?' It might seem that going through all these internal debates to arrive at such a simple question is a bit exaggerated. But from my perspective this question implies important dimensions that are relevant when working with political issues in therapy. The first one is that it states the fact that I as a therapist have a political position that is open to questioning and discussion. It avoids staying behind a blank screen as if I was objective about these issues. Also it invited Jorge to renegotiate our relationship. It opened up space to talk about the power differentials in our work and to think together on how we would like to handle them. I felt that through the question I was following Totton's suggestion:

Instead of trying hopelessly to eliminate power struggle from the therapeutic relationship, we place it dead centre: we highlight the battle between the therapist and client over the definition of reality, bare it to the naked gaze and make it a core theme of our work. This is one style of working with transference and countertransference. It means that, faced with conflicting demands, we do what is best done in every such situation: we negotiate. This negotiation of realities, I would argue, constitutes an authentic and viable psycho-political practice. (Totton, 2000, 147)

Jorge had been trained as a psychoanalytic client, having gone for many years to psychoanalysis before coming to psychoanalytic psychotherapy with me. He knew the rules that analysts adhered to about speaking of their personal life. This question opened ways to rethink this around the political material that I felt was being avoided by both of us.

His response was telling. After hesitating for a while he said that he didn't want to know. That he preferred to continue as we had been working. When I asked him to explore why, he mentioned two things. The first one was that he thought that we might share the same beliefs and that that might get in the way of my objectivity. It seemed interesting that Jorge hung on to a positivist, traditional way of imagining what my work was, while I was trying to transcend them. On the other hand, he said, he also feared that if we didn't share the same beliefs our relationship might be damaged by the controversy. He continued to explore the associations that appeared and it seemed that he also preferred my non-disclosure as this allowed him to distance himself from me, defending from fears of getting too close. He preferred to relate to an 'objective' and distant professional.

All these issues were useful to work on, but as our work continued in the next weeks he was increasingly able to bring his thoughts on the present situation and many memories of his political activities that he had previously left out of the consulting room. He began to detail his time in prison, the fear that accompanied him, the feelings of injustice that he carried from these experiences. He also wondered how he had gone through a long analysis without ever mentioning these experiences. We reflected on how he had been able to encapsulate this part of his life and protect it. His fear of bringing these issues into therapy not only related to the present situation and its tensions but also to past experiences where disclosure had been threatening and dangerous.

Again, these two examples illustrate what other therapists have gathered on the debates brought on by political conflict. They show the appearance of anxieties related to the political circumstances and the tendency to avoid these issues. They also reopen the debate on the limits of 'neutrality'.

POSSIBILITIES

Even though these events have challenged me to rethink my therapeutic beliefs and positions, they have also allowed me to explore the possibilities therapy offers to open space to think, reflect on political dilemmas in our lives and strengthen resistance to oppressive circumstances. We need to question our theories and our practice and evaluate its ethical responsibilities to our clients and the wider social sphere. We need to strive to keep our eyes open to the risks of psychotherapy and its problematic tendency to reduce social and political problems to psychological ones, thereby functioning as a tool to induce conformity. But maybe we can also work to further understand and develop psychotherapy's resources for political struggle.

Mary first came to therapy referred by a centre that works with women who have survived violence. Her therapist could only receive her for eight sessions and at the end of that treatment suggested she continue with long-term therapy. Mary was very cautious in our first meeting, commenting on how it was a bit uncomfortable to be working with a male therapist but she was also willing to give it a try. She mentioned difficulties concentrating and memorizing the information she was studying at her fourth year of language studies at her

university. She also mentioned some aspects of her family history, how her father was extremely controlling, how her mother tried to vouch for her to allow her a bit more freedom to study. She came from a lower middle-class family that struggled to help her with the costs of her studies at a public university. She mentioned that there were some things of her life history she wanted to talk about but was unable to do so yet. She also complained about being frequently unhappy and feeling guilty about everything. She shied away from relationships; it was better that way she'd say – it would be difficult, anyhow, for her father to allow her to have close friends. She was also angry at herself for what she felt was underachievement at her university. She had always been a very good student. She was the first one in her nuclear family to go on to college but during her whole university experience she had struggled and felt she could do more.

She dedicated herself to therapy even though, by her own account, it wasn't easy being there. She often felt anxious, not knowing if she should share her thoughts and feelings or not. Many times she sat in silence, seeming to struggle with her ambivalence towards disclosure. At the same time she seemed to be especially bright, reflective, capable of linking experiences in her life and opening up understandings that seemed to make sense to her and help organize her sometimes overwhelming experiences of distress.

She made constant progress. We were able to go back and explore her relationship with an abusive father who tried to control everything in the household and was often upset and violent. She explored her mother's life, full of deprivation and cultural norms that demanded submission and conformity. She thought a lot about her bond with her mother, her feeling of having to compensate by being successful, by living a life different from that of her mother. She was able to gain confidence in her abilities and her capacity to make decisions and explore her life. She began taking more risks on her behalf and even won an important academic prize.

When she graduated she began to worry continuously over her professional options. She wanted to explore creative working environments but had a few bad interpersonal experiences which she felt she had handled running away. She also worried about money and if she was going to be able to earn enough to be economically independent. Meanwhile her family life had been profoundly changed. A year before, her father had decided to accept a job in another city, which meant that he would have to move out of the household. It seemed like a quiet way for her parents to separate. Even though it made her feel very guilty to accept it, she was quite relieved by this. But her father stayed away only for a few months, although on his return, he seemed to be more reflective. He was more generous to the family; he even went along with letting Mary invite male friends over to their house. Although they never spoke about it, he seemed repentant in a way. She still didn't feel she could be close to him but she appreciated this turn. A few months into his return her father had a heart attack and died. This shook Mary profoundly; she began to have recurrent nightmares where her father appeared to yell at her or scare her. She felt remorseful for not having been able to patch things up and forgive her father. She was also very worried about her mother who was also struggling with the death and new-found freedom.

It was then that she began to speak about the political situation in the country in our sessions. At first she seemed to ask for permission to explore the subject. She said: 'I don't know what your preferences are, but my father was Chavista and always had the radio on tuned to the government's stations. And he'd put the volume up when Chavez was giving

his speeches. My mother hates Chávez so she'd wait until my father was out of the room and turn the volume down without him knowing.'

The political debates of the country had been played out in Mary's home, intertwined with the very difficult power issues present in her family. Her mother had resisted her husband in a way. From Mary's perspective she had protected her from her father's wrath and served as a shield. But her mother's resistance was a very quiet and cautious one. She wouldn't confront him directly; she'd try a whole set of different strategies to calm, distract, reason out, divert his angry fits and impositions. And Mary had learned all of this. On the one hand she felt angry about the unfair circumstances her mother had had to endure many times, on the other, had also internalized many of the strict patriarchal norms of her house. Like her mother, who waited for her father to leave the room before turning the volume down, only after her father's death was Mary able to discuss with more detail some of the harder aspects of having lived with a very angry, violent and controlling father. She began to bring more detailed accounts of her father's abuse, along with the continuing guilt of feeling that it was inappropriate for her to speak badly of her father after his death. In this process she was also able to regain some more benevolent aspects of her life with her father.

At the same time, the university she had graduated from had appeared more and more in the spotlight of the country's political conflicts. The student's movement became the leading body of opposition to Chavez's government, protesting in the streets against the closing of RCTV, a private television channel. Mary avoided making definite comments on the situation, cautiously exploring her thoughts and opinions on those issues. She could relate to the claims for social justice that the Chavista movement promised. Having come from a poor family she identified with the need for social change. At the same time she felt disturbed by the authoritarian tendency of the president and the military presence in government. She frowned upon the increasing persecution of free press and what she perceived as unjust attacks on her *alma mater*. Again she was gaining ground on the possibility of thinking these issues for herself but was also very careful to not take any public stance that might be upsetting to people around her, including myself. I tried to encourage her to open up space to consider these personal and more public issues. She seemed to be able to calm down when I encouraged her to explore them and made numerous links between her personal biography and her thoughts related to these present issues. I also tried to help her see how she was very cautious, which again might resemble what she felt about the way in which others, specifically the authorities, might take her viewpoints.

At this point she received a call to attend an interview for a job. It was a teaching position in a public institution. She was excited about the opportunity because she liked teaching and also because the public institution made a good pay offer with promise of stability. She went to a group interview first and came to therapy afterwards a bit disappointed. She mentioned that the job still seemed a good opportunity but that at the meeting the interviewer had said 'evidently everyone here is Chavista, we are only hiring people with clear political backing of the President'. This comment was disturbing to Mary; she felt that it was inappropriate (as it was clearly stating political discrimination in the hiring process) and that it might mean she was entering an institution that restricted personal choices and preferences. Even though she did not see herself as completely in opposition to the government, she felt uncomfortable to accommodate an ideological agenda that she did not com-

pletely share. So she puzzled over what to do and decided to wait until the next individual interview before she made any hasty decision. In the next few days she went to the interview and the person that received her was even more explicit – she would be expected to include government propaganda in her teaching program and be openly supportive of the ‘revolutionary process’. The job was hers if she wanted it; they made her an offer. So now Mary was pressured into making a decision. As she told me all of these events I felt it was terrible for her to start her professional life on those terms. Mary could use the job and the institution could benefit from someone with Mary’s capacity and background, but at the same time the terms set up by the interviewers reduced the possibility of this job offering her a sense of growing in confidence in her abilities and in the possibility of constructing a safe environment for herself. At the same time many of these dilemmas were going on in the whole country and we both knew that Mary might have to face this and other similar situations and that it was difficult to know exactly the danger of the proposal.

Mary felt it was unfair that they made her employment conditional on her political opinions. She felt it was a way of buying her loyalty. I agreed and added that even though she talked about this with much calm, it seemed like a very difficult and unfair situation to be put into by the people who offered her the job, who at the end of the day held power over her by being able to open or shut a window of opportunity. I added that she was always very cautious to not upset anyone but at the cost of isolation. She began to express the anger she felt about having been treated the way she was at the job interview; it hadn’t been a dialogue but an attempt at bribery. She felt angry at having to always hide her feelings and thoughts so as not to unsettle authority. She also feared that accepting the job would involve entering a place where things didn’t depend on her work but on other uncontrollable variables. She also grieved about the cost of not accepting the job and how she would lose either way. In the end she decided against accepting the job even though it meant giving up on that opportunity. She didn’t explain to the people who interviewed her why it was she hadn’t accepted, nor did she consider making a complaint. She didn’t feel up to the confrontation but she wanted to avoid setting a precedent. In a way she might have also been re-editing her tendency to avoid challenging authority, but at the same time might have been protecting herself in the unsettled times we were living.

MAKING THE UNCONSCIOUS CONSCIOUS/RENDERING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

Mary’s psychotherapeutic work also helped me to reflect upon therapy’s relationship with the political dimensions of life and the wider political debates. Work with her brought back the words of Virginia Woolf: ‘the private and the public are inseparably connected... the tyrannies and servilities of one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other’ (Woolf, [1938] 1992, 147). The feminist perspectives that helped us see the links between the private power struggles and the public sphere, seemed to shed light on the work with Mary and have also helped me to think of the power differential as a man, when working with women who have been abused by men. They have allowed us to think of the interpersonal world as one shaped also by power and to include it in our comprehension and intervention. In doing so, they have also challenged psychotherapists to be aware and acknowledge the power structures that exist. Considering this frame, personal change can be conceived as not only facing

unconscious personal repressions, but sometimes even more crucial, social and political ones.

Criticism of psychotherapy (Masson, 1997) has questioned the field's capacity to attend to and really be effective in dealing with the social structures that sustain demeaning or unfair circumstances. Many times, the activity has not only stood silent before human rights abuses, but also colluded with oppressive structures. So can psychotherapy effectively empower clients to resist political oppression?

In reviewing experiences of resistance, I believe there are a few key elements that people have used to resist unfair and oppressive political structures that are available in the psychotherapeutic experience – the first of which I believe has to do with safety and intimacy. It's almost a cliché to state that healing and development depend on connection and relationships. But in extremely oppressive circumstances these relationships become threatening. The state of control and vigilance makes people cautious and suspicious of others. Isolation and distrust ensue. Potentially dangerous opinions are kept secret, disagreements with the controlling powers are silenced. Thoughts and feelings of dissent are split off to protect them from state surveillance (Harmatta, 1992; Sebek, 1996; Connolly, 2006). Many texts have documented a retreat into private and covert activities, as well as the frequent use of dissociation, in order to avoid persecution under politically dangerous circumstances. As with Mary and her mother's strategies for avoiding conflict, a submissive face is presented in order to comply with the desires of the powerful, while all resistance is developed in more covert forms.

Harmatta (1992) chronicles some of the incredible circumstances of a group of professionals who practised psychoanalysis under Hungary's 'soft dictatorship'. He details a number of limitations and curious adaptations therapy suffered under continuous political surveillance, but also how the development of a small group of professionals who studied and practised psychotherapy gave him, his colleagues and his patients a space where they could 'escape from social control' (p. 135). He mentions how analysts were allowed to practise (unlike in other communist republics); how therapy was a place where 'the telephone could be disconnected' (p. 136), which seems to be a highly significant concrete but also symbolic act of closing off political presence and surveillance. Psychotherapy, in Harmatta's account, functioned as a type of internal exile.

This account doesn't seem to be too different to other accounts of resistance in very different circumstances. Let us compare, for a minute, Harmatta's observations to those of feminist researchers and therapists who have worked on the different styles of resistance young women have against many of societies' limiting expectations of them. Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan (1995) have reflected upon the difference between psychological dissociation and political resistance in the life of young North American teenagers. They have distinguished between overt and covert resistance. The first refers to a direct form of speaking out or acting against conventions that oppress. The second refers to a way of 'going underground with her feelings and knowledge. Aware of the consequences of speaking out, she outwardly appears to comply with the conventions but does so as a conscious strategy of self-protection' (Taylor et al., 1995, 26). In some of her studies, Gilligan has traced young women's voices to try to understand the ways in which they have adapted to, resisted or lived with impositions and prohibitions. On some occasions she has found a splitting off, dissociation of potentially dangerous thoughts and feelings, but on other occasions she has

found a conscious strategy of administering their conversations so as to sustain a resistance without compromising their safety. In Taylor et al.'s (1995) study on young teenage women in social deprived circumstances they found time and again how an intimate relationship with adult women was one of the most powerful tools to be able to avoid dissociation, resist and challenge limiting and oppressive circumstances.

Another example that I found to be particularly powerful and subtle at the same time was Schilt's (2003) study on young girls' self-edited magazines or 'zines'. Through her analysis of 18 interviews of young zine editors, Schilt was able to identify how a forum for exploring, writing about, sharing and contesting very personal perspectives on being a young girl in North America, became, for many, a place where they first began to question cultural expectations and impositions, learn and have access to feminist literature and to develop intimate connections that helped them to gain confidence in their viewpoints. She takes Gilligan's dichotomy a step further considering that there are some activities that are potentially covert and overt at the same time, which she terms *c/overt* resistance. These are activities that have the ability to simultaneously be public and private. Themes of a very personal nature were discussed, linking their private life to the political issues they touch upon. Schilt is able to link once more the personal with the political but is also able to see the political potential of an activity we may easily overlook.

A place where our intimate life can be safely reflected upon seems to be a subtle but important aspect not only for personal development but also for political consciousness. A space analogous to a 'room of one's own' that Virginia Woolf proposed as being crucial for women to be able to empower themselves in a patriarchal society. The writer, herself a survivor of child sexual abuse (De Salvo, 1989), knew of the importance of safe limits where her intimate life could connect with the public sphere. The reference to Woolf shows that the constructing of a secure, personal space in which to explore and share one's thoughts is by no means limited to psychotherapy and has been used in many different settings to resist political oppression. Vaclav Havel's writings ([1987] 1992) are a testimony to the many ways he and many other citizens in former Czechoslovakia resisted totalitarian surveillance. In his essay 'Stories and totalitarianism' ([1987] 1992) he shows the many covert ways in which society resisted constraints and regulations. Many of his observations lead back again to psychotherapy's conditions and aims. For example, he mentions how one of the key elements of the exercise of totalitarian power was the imposition of a fixed way of interpreting events that stripped history of its meaning, making any reference to specific and idiosyncratic locations and events apparently meaningless. Only in prison, he recalls, was he asked repeatedly the specific area of Prague that he was from. Only in these settings, these cracks as he calls them, was he able to recover specific history and resist the imposition of the dominant discourse:

While I was in prison, I realized again and again how much more present, compared with life outside, the story was. Almost every prisoner had a life story that was unique and shocking, or moving. As I listened to those different stories, I suddenly found myself in something like a pre-totalitarian world, or in the world of literature. Whatever else I may have thought of my fellow prisoners' colorful narratives, they were not documents of totalitarian nihilization. On the contrary, they testified to the rebelliousness with which human uniqueness resists its own nihilization, and the stubbornness with which it holds to its own and is willing to ignore this negating pressure. Regardless of whether crime or misfortune was predominant in any given story, the faces in that world were specific and personal. When

I got back from prison, I wrote somewhere that in a cell of twenty-four people you can probably encounter more real stories than in a high-rise development housing of several thousand. People truly afflicted with asthma – those colorless, servile, obedient, homogenized, herdlike citizens of the totalitarian state – are not found in large numbers in prison. Instead, prison tends to be a gathering place for people who stand out in one way or another, the unclassifiable misfits, real individuals with all sorts of obsessions, people who are unable to conform. (Havel, [1987] 1992, 191)

Havel concludes by considering how resistance for his country was crucially linked to finding a way of telling the story of their suffering. Prison, in his story became the surprising setting for resistance, a fact that opens up space for us to continue to reflect upon the complex and problematic notion of a liberating psychotherapy. That which is sometimes seen as a place of freedom can be in another sense profoundly oppressive and vice-versa.

In another testimony, Azar Nafisi (2003) writes a moving account of a reading group she set up along with a small group of female students to study English literature in Tehran, evading political censorship and exploring their world under the list of prohibitions imposed by government. Nafisi states that, through the weekly meeting, the room became a place for transgression, where they explored their experiences of oppression and created their own code of words and expressions to avoid censorship. She also describes a life of severe splits between their public and private personas, where it was hard to hold on to their identity and where they struggled to find gaps. Through literature and, curiously enough, the reading of Nabokov's *Lolita*, they accessed material that allowed them to reflect upon the experience of control, surveillance and resistance.

In a peculiar sense it seems as though there is something common among girl's zines, Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own*, Nafisi's group reading of *Lolita* in Teheran and the prisons Havel was subjected to. It has to do with a place securely outside the control of the dominant discourse, a place where the personal, intimate story can be unravelled, recuperated and shared in safety. There, I believe, lies a key to psychotherapy that can resist dominant oppressive structures. The intimate can be profoundly interconnected with resistance. The very personal reconstruction of life has the potential to become testimony; the interaction with an audience helps to construct a narrative, to link what imposition had split off and so produce a shared meaning that resignifies the experience of oppression, questions and defies the dominant oppressive narratives. Through telling and witnessing, resistance is rendered visible and the narrative is authenticated (White, 1995). In Nafisi's words:

... to steal the words from Humbert, the poet/criminal of *Lolita*, I need you, the reader, to imagine us, for we won't really exist if you don't. Against the tyranny of time and politics, imagine us the way we sometimes didn't dare to imagine ourselves: in our most private and secret moments, in the most extraordinarily ordinary instances of life, listening to music, falling in love, walking down the shady streets or reading *Lolita* in Tehran. And then imagine us again, with all this confiscated, driven underground, taken away from us. (Nafisi, 2003, 6)

Mary had been trained in the construction of these spaces. Her bond with her mother had helped both of them to ally themselves to keep things safely outside of her father's control. Her studies had also helped to establish spaces with a minimum of independence from her father and finally, therapy did the same. Through our work she was able to cautiously tread new territories and for the first time explore thoughts, doubts, complaints, feelings she normally split off to protect herself.

In the safe domain of psychotherapy the internalized prohibitions were re-examined. In that sense a space to question authority was opened. Control and surveillance was breached. To the creation of a safe space psychotherapy adds the presence of a witness how can listen, express solidarity and register the indignation caused by abuse. Oppressive circumstances are thus rendered visible. What, in personal dynamic terms, was described as making conscious what previously was unconscious on a social level is analogous to making visible that which previously had been silenced or denied. The private confines of abuse now have the potential to be made public. A network of survivors can be created.

The recuperation of personal history is central to psychotherapeutic work and also plays an important part in empowering oppressed communities. This is done in psychotherapy through two interrelated processes. The first one is what traditional psychoanalysis referred to as making the unconscious conscious or what more postmodern or narrative therapies refer to as constructing a narrative that gives meaning to the experience. But through this process of making meaning, simultaneously previous conclusions, unquestioned assumptions, internalized projections are now questioned and re-examined. What seemed natural, fixed, 'the way things are' is now seen in a new light that can re-evaluate the circumstances and the responsibilities of each of those involved. What before seemed natural can now be seen as historical and circumstantial and therefore challengeable.

The analogies with resistance to social and political imposition are evident. The cultural givens, the dominant discourse, the internalized preconceptions that seemed self-evident, natural, immovable can also be pinpointed, questioned, re-examined. What seemed static becomes dynamic. What was once internalized can now be externalized (White, 1995). Through the psychotherapeutic conversation the therapist can not only point to the interpersonal conditions that influence experience – he or she can also open conversations that explore the social norms and beliefs that frame these relationships. Mary's exploration of her relationship to her mother, for example, not only allowed her to examine her feelings and story together; it also allowed her to reflect upon the wider patriarchal influences that contributed to keep her mother passive in the face of abuse. And the examination of these issues also increased her awareness of the issues that were going on in the wider political arena, the issues of status and class that were being intensely debated. She was more aware of the power relationships present in different scenarios and the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that power is imposed. That gave her the chance to search for some space to move among these forces. I believe it furthered her capacity for resistance.

Seen in this light, psychotherapy has the potential of offering a place for c/overt resistance. The political impositions that had helped to shackle personal life can be undermined and what was considered only a personal problem can regain its links to political struggle.

LIMITATIONS

Perhaps I would have liked to conclude my reflection on the potential of therapy in that last sentence on a hopeful tone. But I am much too sceptical and doubtful to be able to hand psychotherapy a blank cheque. Its history warns me of being too optimistic (Bloch and Reddaway, 1984; Villela, 2005). It needs to be submitted to critique to try to avoid it lapsing into just the opposite.

A first critique might consider that therapy viewed in this manner is not too different from more traditional descriptions of the therapeutic process – that nothing has been added to our psychotherapeutic repertoire. I would argue that this is partially true. In a sense a politically reflective psychotherapy might not seem radically different from traditional psychotherapeutic technique – even feeding off it. What I do believe is different is the therapist position, which has to be re-examined to include not only the therapist's personal dynamics and countertransference experiences but also a comprehension of his or her social and political background, which leads to an ethical revision of the therapist's positioning with respect to political issues. The potential for collusion or resistance would need to be continually reflected upon. Understanding of the potential of politics to either repair or damage the psychotherapeutic relationship widens therapists' awareness of these issues. Authors such as White and Epston (1990) have developed some work that does seem to offer new tools for therapists, which seem to lead in the same direction.

Perhaps a second, more controversial debate is that of psychology's tendency to appropriate and ultimately reduce political struggle (Parker, 2007; Jacoby [1975] 1997). Psychotherapy cannot substitute collective struggle; it can only contribute to it, help to empower it. To look towards psychotherapy as a substitute for political action runs the risk of being useful for the powers that be, to further the split from the public and the private to the point of giving up on public, collective resistance – of settling for individual development and give up trying to influence the world. Understanding intimacy as a dimension of the private world and politics as that of the public serves to continue a dichotomous separation of one from the other and not the intertwined conception that Ghandi, as mentioned in the beginning, seems to imply. As has been emphasized here, individual psychotherapy needs to bond with progressive political and human rights movements to be able to struggle against oppression (Herman, 1997; Parker, 2007).

Psychotherapy always runs the risk of turning into the place where non-conformists are sent to be pacified, calmed or 'cured'. A politically reflective psychotherapy needs to be aware of the wider political context where individual lives are framed, continually reflect upon the ethical dilemmas that these circumstances bring up and from there develop what Pakman (2004) has termed as the 'micropolitical tasks' that are 'an essential part of our daily endeavours as psychotherapists, instead of seeing our roles as limited to an abstractly defined mental health field whose only legitimated focus should supposedly be on a decontextualized asystemic mind' (p. 266). The potential of psychotherapy to develop these tasks is what this paper has tried to explore.

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