

Book Review

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Not a Tame Lion: Writings on Therapy in its Social and Political Context. By Nick Totton. (2012). Ross-on-Wye, UK: PCCS Books. 192 pp.

It's a topsy turvy world when radicals become conservatives but, as someone who identifies politically as a radical or on the Left, I often find, when talking and arguing about psychotherapy, that I am taking a conservative position, that is, one which wants to “conserve” the original – radical and subversive – vision and contribution of psychotherapy. This position finds resonance with a point that Nick Totton makes in the Introduction to his latest book, *Not a Tame Lion*, when, reflecting on the themes in his own writing, he suggests that “Each . . . illuminates an aspect of my overall concern, which is . . . a historical one: at this point in time, therapy seems in danger of forgetting where it came from, and hence what it is about” (p. viii).

In this volume Totton has brought together 24 of his own papers, including three new papers – on intimacy, pluralism and embodied relating – in a well-organised collection on themes for which, and concerns about which, Totton is well known: professionalisation and regulation, the nature of therapy, therapy in the world, and ecopsychology and embodiment. The central thesis of the book, encapsulated in an eponymous article, is that therapy should not be “safe” and free from risk; in other words, like Aslan, the lion in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, therapy is not tame or safe, but it is – and should be – good. As Totton himself elaborates: “By ‘good’, I mean tending to increase the range of clients’ relaxation, freedom, expression and self-acceptance; by ‘safe’, I mean free from pain, anxiety and risk of failure” (p. 71). Totton's critique is that some understandings and forms of therapy promote the idea that we can and should alleviate presenting symptoms, and that we can be in control, and that such views conform to a dominant social ideology that people and psychotherapy itself should be controlled, e.g. through regulation. Totton argues that:

From a psychological point of view, this path of control is in effect a project to eliminate the unconscious. “Aslan” actually represents . . . not God, not therapy, but what I believe to be therapy's true subject, the unconscious, that aspect of our bodymind which is beyond all control. (p. 73)

For Totton, what makes psychotherapy truly valuable is that it offers a space free from goals and intentions, demands or interpellations, and, instead, a space free for not knowing, for paradox, and to work, as Bion (1967/1988, p. 18) put it: “without memory or desire”.

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Another feature of this chapter, and the book as a whole, is Totton's reflexivity: in other words, he reflects critically on his own work and thinking. In a number of chapters he includes a footnote that indicates not only the original context of the particular piece, but also how he has edited it to avoid unnecessary repetition in the book as a whole, which has the effect of providing greater linkage between his contributions and arguments. In this particular chapter he reflects on the consistency of (t)his argument for the freedom from demands with another argument, represented in two other chapters (15 and 16) in this collection that therapy always takes a position on how people should be.

The main themes and strengths of Totton's work are all here: his detailed knowledge of the history of psychotherapy; his advocacy of the radical origins of therapy, and that the nature of therapy is political and radical; his emphasis on politics as power; his critical analysis of the power of the "psy" professions and professionalisation; and his keen interest in embodiment and in ecology. As he himself reflects in the Introduction on the process of selection, he notices his "favourite riffs recurring" (p. viii), that is, the concept of local knowledge, and its polarisation with expert systems (chapters 1, 6, 12, and 16); the analogy of pidgin and creole as a way of thinking about the therapeutic relationship (chapters 6 and 16); the characterisation of therapy by Denis Postle (1997) as a rainforest rather than a monoculture; the insistence that therapy is political, and that it should be, at least in part, a conscious power struggle (throughout); and the image of the Therapy Police (chapter 8).

My only criticism of this book, and of some of Totton's other work, is that it is not as well edited or, perhaps, as self-edited as it might be, and I wonder if, for Totton, there's something of a polarisation between the poetic and the academic.

Readers familiar with Totton's work will be grateful that he has collated and edited his key papers into one volume; readers unfamiliar with his work will find this a rich reader, which includes some personal history and background to Totton's interest in the interplay between psychotherapy and politics. This is a great collection of writings on psychotherapy and politics from a leading exponent in this field who himself is no tame or safe lion, though he is good; and is essential reading for anyone interested in therapy in its social and political contexts.

REFERENCES

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