

BOOK REVIEW

***The political self: Understanding the social context for mental illness*, edited by Rod Tweedy. London, UK: Karnac, 2017. 233 pp.**

In the foreword to this important book, Andrew Samuels says that a “political turn” has been taking place within psychotherapy since the late 1980s. The importance of this turnabout is that, like the “relational turn” within psychoanalysis (Safran, 2003), it forms part of a movement towards a more engaged way of being, where therapists no longer hide away behind a blank screen in their consulting rooms.

The book consists of a selection of carefully chosen, previously published papers. Together they articulate a central message: that our sense of who we are cannot fail to be profoundly affected by the wider context within which we live. To paraphrase a well-known saying from the 1970s feminist movement, “the personal is indeed political”.

In his introduction, the book's editor, Rod Tweedy, states the importance of an “integrated approach to psychotherapy” that recognizes the deep intertwining of the seemingly separate and opposing concepts of “inner” and “outer”. Currently, our social, political, and economic context is one of deep divisions and differing worldviews. Within psychotherapy these manifest as a clash between different paradigms, with a drive towards an open, engaged, and authentic style on the one hand, and a more closed, evidence-based, and controlled way of working on the other. Perhaps we find ourselves in a phase of “abnormal science” (Kuhn, 1962) where the status quo becomes increasingly less tenable in light of new information and discoveries, but fights hard to retain the upper hand.

This book's two parts, entitled “insight” and “outsight”, contain five chapters each. Part I opens with a chapter by the late David Smail. When I first encountered his writing in the late 1980s I felt inspired by his (to me) new way of looking at the world. Here Smail criticizes psychotherapy's traditional insularity that has kept it separate from “the rest of reality”, viewing people's distress in terms of their own psyche. Within such a view “personal readjustment” is seen as the solution for unhappiness – a main driver behind Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT). However, for Smail the problem is not personal but structural, and due to the dominating power of money, which, in our neo-liberal, capitalist society, results in an ever-increasing polarization of rich and poor.

In Chapter Two Nick Totton claims that a structural inequality in power within the therapeutic relationship means that its misuse is common. However, rather than regarding this as an insurmountable problem, Totton advocates placing the power struggle firmly in the centre of our work with clients, which, he suggests, may be essential for it to be helpful. He also suggests that when we accept that our beliefs are influenced by society we can engage in authentic dialogue with clients, rather than training clients to speak our language!

In a hard-hitting third chapter, Joel Kovel argues that in our capitalist society relationships have become commodified. This means that many therapists effectively function as technologists, who help bolster their clients' defences against anxiety to achieve “mental health”. Kovel reminds us, however, that rather than offering ready-made solutions, therapy should help clients to reflect and search for truth, in order to be able to “make real demands upon the world” (p. 66).

Sue Gerhardt states that Western political and economic thinking is still dominated by Enlightenment beliefs that are ignorant of the importance of early experience in shaping our behaviour and worldview. She argues that, as therapists, we can help bring the importance of healthy emotional and moral development into political and cultural awareness. I was encouraged by her recognition of the value of an “ethic of care” (p. 76), which she compares to Fonagy's concept of mentalization (the ability to have a sense of someone else's state of mind).

According to Iain McGilchrist the two brain hemispheres have different functions that need to work together. The trouble with Western society, he claims, is its domination by the left hemisphere that does not value wisdom and experience, is not interested in meaning and cannot see the bigger picture. The result is a risk-averse culture with an emphasis on procedures, control and bureaucracy and an ever-increasing reliance on “rules, regulations and mechanisms of accountability” (p. 98).

Three of Part II's chapters focus on how young people are affected by aspects of our society. Nick Duffell states that, since many of our leaders went to boarding school, our country is being run by the traumatized children inside those leaders, who have learnt to dissociate, compartmentalize and oppress. Dave Grossman relates how new “training methods” using systematic desensitization, not unlike violent video games, have increased the number of soldiers who will shoot during combat from 15% to 95%. Lastly, John Beveridge reflects on the effects of addiction to Internet pornography on young people's relationships.

In the penultimate chapter, Joel Bakan relates how corporations don't accept any social responsibility, but see it as their “moral imperative” to make the maximum amount of money for their shareholders, irrespective of what harm they cause. He points out that corporations, like psychopaths, are thus programmed to exploit others for profit.

The final chapter is an edited extract from James Hillman and Michael Ventura's reflections on a hundred years of psychotherapy. I was struck by Hillman's insight that therapy's emphasis on the inner soul, whilst ignoring the outer soul, would contribute to the actual world's decline.

Although I had previously read some of the material, I enjoyed the book very much as it constitutes an important reminder of therapy's role – to disturb, to reflect, to open up and to connect – and that this does not occur in a vacuum. Therapy, for all its transformative potential, is only ever a part of our clients' lives, and needs to acknowledge the wider context to be truly effective. This very readable and well-presented book will help the reader engage with that wider context.

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