

COMMENTARY

Keith Tudor, ‘conscientious objector’: On transactional analysis and politics, 2020

Karen Minikin,  Principal, Insights—South West; Leadership Team, Black, African and Asian Therapy Network, UK

This commentary is based on Keith’s article, ‘Transactional analysis and politics: A critical review’, published originally in 2020, which can be found here: <https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international/article/view/55>.

INTRODUCING TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS AND POLITICS

Keith Tudor has been persistent and tenacious in moving the theme of politics and social justice from the margins in transactional analysis to the centre. He has written several papers both in *Psychotherapy and Politics International (PPI)* and the *Transactional Analysis Journal (TAJ)* that has kept the tradition alive and contributed to the canon of socially and politically relevant thinking. This has been personally and professionally meaningful and transformational for me. In many ways, Keith provided a bridge between my younger activist self and the woman/psychotherapist I became.

Tudor, the academic critic

Tudor’s review of transactional analysis (TA) and politics provides a thorough chronology of the TA literature concerning social responsibility, power, and politics and highlights the ambivalent feelings our founder, Eric Berne, had towards the place of politics in psychotherapy. He shows how bold some of Berne’s original writing was and acknowledges the threat Berne faced personally as an immigrant, a victim of anti-semitism, and also

*Contact details: karen@insights-sw.co.uk

professionally in the era of the red scare under Joseph McCarthy, when a number of artists and public figures were questioned and threatened for their political views. To be at the receiving end of state paranoia must have been terrifying for a number of people, no doubt raising realistic concerns of being ostracised personally and professionally. Tudor describes how the subsequent years of developing transactional analysis meant politics were side-lined in the main, and how Berne spoke about the Nazis in his 1963 book, *The Structure and Dynamics of Organizations and Groups*—but radical politics was largely picked up and made use of by his colleague and friend, Claude Steiner. However, there was no escaping the presence of politics in TA, which was one of the draws for Tudor in choosing it as his preferred modality. The birth of TA itself was a political act, motivated by a commitment to making the methodology far more egalitarian. Tudor was personally drawn to TA because of this promise as he looked to integrate his personal strivings, leanings, and values with the discipline he had committed to study.

Politics within psychotherapy/psychotherapy and politics

Tudor reinforces the identity that has lived on. That is, TA is and was always a social psychology—he shows how we have kept that identity alive and vital. In addition to dissecting the history of TA, Tudor also highlights the place of internal politics, whether that be via the structures and the procedures, the activities of the international bodies, including the long list of social and political events that supported the development of a theoretical canon in this field. For instance, many conferences ran with the themes of power and politics, such as ‘Restorative processes’, ‘Massey’s work on Freedom with Responsibility, Co-operation and Power’, and many more (Tudor, 2020). All of these developed and maintained the identity of TA as a social psychology.

Tudor does not sit still in his writing but points out the tensions and mixed feelings that continue to stir collectively. The lifelines of key political activities are linked to articles from 1976 to 2018. This is helpful in highlighting the flurry of activities, as well as the quieter years, during the 1990s. In contemporary times, he points to themed editions of the TAJ such as ‘gender and sexuality’ in 2017 and ‘social responsibility in a vengeful world’ in 2018.

As part of Tudor’s critique of the TA community is the observation that we are more comfortable with the word *social* than *political*—perhaps this is a hangover of the original fear and threats of holding a political mindset and/or perhaps this is the inevitable influence of mainstream thinking within a psychological paradigm that is already marginalised, given that few nations champion psychotherapy and its contribution to alleviating suffering. In the review of the special edition of *PPI* that this article comes from, Cornell and Tudor discuss this, with Cornell stating: ‘At its heart psychotherapy (and its definitions of ‘health’) serves to reinforce and maintain social and economic norms.’ (Cornell & Tudor, 2020, p. 5).

He even goes further than this in conversation with his colleague Bill Cornell, to state:

Psychotherapy and other forms of therapy have not only encouraged adaptation but been positively oppressive and even abusive. I am wary of what you describe accurately of colleagues' 'shocked awareness' as I think it represents something of a wilful ignorance that we (in transactional analysis) would understand as a discount at the level of the existence of the stimulus (i.e., poverty, injustice, racism, etc.) (Cornell & Tudor, 2020, p. 6)

So, this article (Tudor, 2020) examines and challenges ambivalence with regard to politics within TA. Tudor picks up the earlier Bernian mantle, which, no doubt, had been influenced by the rise of Nazi Germany compelling the world to risk getting involved, and to risk being criticised given that as Berne had previously said: 'it is no longer wise for scientists to refrain from expressing strong opinions and bringing strong influence to bear in a vigorous attempt to change the trend of history' (Berne, 1947, p. 292).

As Tudor (2020) states, these words 'written over 70 years ago, are still all too relevant today. The struggle—for necessary, healthy ambivalence as well as civic activism—continues' (p. 17).

Keith as conscientious objector

Taking a position can evoke anxiety given the risks of being accused of bias, reactivity, or even being 'unethical'. Perhaps these anxieties come from the original intent of providing a blank screen and offering the client a free and open space. However, critical thinking, such as the kind Keith offers, reveals that not taking a position—sitting on the fence so to speak—is also a political act, given, as he argues, that bystanding supports the norm in the face of injustice and oppression.

Critical thinking and radical ideas about society started with Freud and has continued intergenerationally. Keith is one author and editor who has opened the door for people like me to also speak out and share how I make use of the political in the consulting room. He has gone before to show how it is possible to reveal the workings of the political in framing minds. Keith has lived as a conscientious objector. His values in life are clear and he stands by what he declares in writing. This shows up in his personal narratives; for example, his commitment to learning from Māori culture in New Zealand, his willingness to speak out, even when it risks rendering him unpopular, and his absolute academic scrutiny in secondary research which examines our written history and enables him to argue a case rigorously.

CONCLUSION

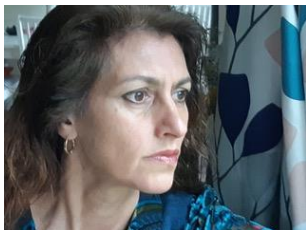
At the end of the *PPI* issue that Bill Cornell and Keith Tudor edited, the two wrote up their reflective dialogue. Keith shared his personal and professional history and how his father had been a conscientious objector during the Second World War. This modelling, along with his experience as a probation officer in 1970s UK, exposed him to social injustices. The feminist movement of that time had also encouraged him to study and specialise in radical social work (Bailey & Brake, 1975).

There are some white men who have had the humility to use their power in progressive ways; to have humility, and recognise and value their own experiences of feeling marginalised, and to use these as sources of wisdom, connection, and soulfulness. They have reached into themselves and out to others to search widely and deeply in the service of society, psychotherapy, and humanity. So, I am grateful for what Keith has committed to. He has shown that by centralising the political in psychotherapy, we can find emancipating experiences.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Karen Minikin, MSc UKCP reg TSTA (P), is a psychotherapist, tutor, and supervisor living in the south west of England. She is author of a number of articles specialising in radical-relational perspectives in psychotherapy. She is also a member of the leadership advisory team with The Black, African and Asian Therapy Network (BAATN).