

Have We Learned Anything Important?

Theodore Roszak

The two most important elements from the 1960s that have survived and flourished are environmentalism and the women's movement — and both have had an enormous impact on our society. The women's movement established a pattern for many kinds of social movement — situational networks, groupings of people on the basis of injustices and victimisation leading them to identify themselves as a distinct group.

I grew up in a world where you couldn't mention homosexuality in any kind of company, it was a taboo subject — women were automatically assumed without any second thought to be social inferiors, and other divergent groups had assigned roles which were never called into question. This business of identities is as old as human civilisation, and it has been in the span of my lifetime that we have seen it break down so rapidly. Things have maybe not changed as much as we would like, but at least many of the important questions have been asked.



Third-Force Therapy

The late 60s and early 70s saw the proliferation of humanistic psychology, what was often called third-force therapy. Within that spectrum there was one school called radical therapy, connected with the work of Thomas Szasz and Ronny Laing, which was essentially opposed to the idea of labelling people for therapeutic purposes.

I often refer to these as 'the new therapies' because it's hard to find a good label for them, but most people in the United States know what is meant by that term. It means everything that is not connected with the psychiatric establishment, and usually these are people who are called psychotherapists rather than psychiatrists. They have created so many

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different schools that it's hard to keep track of them, and a vast number of people in the United States have now had some kind of connection with psychotherapy. Very few of them have gone to the old main-line schools which are very expensive, one-on-one treatment by people with medical degrees. That kind of therapy belongs to a minority of the population.

The other form of therapy, which often takes the form of groups, is much cheaper and much more accessible. It's also highly experimental, and what I am currently interested in, eco-psychology, has found a great deal of acceptance among these highly experimental therapies. I take that to be a response to a felt need, and I believe that the need is to let people tell their own story, to sing their own song.

Inevitably you have people who have done it one weekend and do it to somebody else the next. Thus a kind of people's therapy has developed. Most of this kind of therapy is fairly cheap and readily accessible. Many groups don't charge anything at all. I couldn't begin to estimate how many people have already experienced this sort of therapy, but I have a strong conviction that if opportunities like this were available in any part of the United States — cities, suburbs, small towns — people would flock to it. Ordinary people need some place to go to talk out their problems, their grievances, their frustrations.

Does Self-Exploration Help?

I'm very often asked whether I think that the current explosion of self-exploration is leading to meaningful social, political and economic change. To be brutally

frank, I'm so tired of that question that I don't even register it. Asking whether something is politically relevant is more often than not the most effective way of closing down the whole debate.

It's like censorship. It seems to me that what we have here are people in need looking for a way to meet that need. If you say to them 'Yes, but are you being politically responsible in doing this?', in effect you are shutting down their original need. Maybe they could usefully be signing petitions or on a picket line, but their personal need to meet and talk is just as real as the political imperative. We need to be patient and merciful, and let nature take its course. My conviction is that the more people have a chance to find the foundations of their lives and define their own personalities, the better citizens they become in the best sense of that word. If you give ordinary people the chance to explore their personal reality it inevitably has a maturing effect upon their personality, making them bigger and better people. And people like that are more apt to take mature political action than those who have denied themselves the opportunity to find out who they are and what they want to be in life.

Activism and Integrity

I have spent years in politics working with people who said all the right things, but whom I would not trust to cut my lawn because they are so deeply frustrated, angry and resentful. I cannot remember how many times I have sat in meetings with people who talked about saving the human race but whom I found it very hard to like or to trust. They

seemed to be operating on the basis of anger, hatred, frustration, resentment, all the wrong motivations. Many were in terrible marriages, their home lives were miserable.

In the '60s and '70s (and in some activist circles it hasn't changed much since), when the meetings finished and the heavy talk was done about saving the world, the men left and the women had to clean up. It wasn't long before women in radical groups had had enough; they'd had enough of the shit work. If your politics doesn't begin right here in this relationship with me, your lover, your wife, your girlfriend, they said, how can we trust you to save the world.

I've come to recognise that their self-discovery is a maturing process in everybody's life, and if people don't have the chance to do it then life is going to be sad and tragic. I'm therefore willing to be patient with people while they work these issues out on the grounds that I feel that the more people become fully realised human beings, the better they do in politics.

Personalistic Belief

I have a thesis going here in the background which I think is highly controversial, but I think it's important. One of the developments I see happening is a growing ethos of what I call personalistic beliefs, and I think that is the force that will eventually change those societies from their very foundations.

The power of big structures, corporations, state systems seems to be seeping away. In many ways this is a response to the environmental crisis, and is taking place in those societies that are using too much and wasting too much. It is

interesting that the environmental crisis and the personal crisis are taking place at the same time, since I think they are both aspects of the same condition of life. This ethos of self-discovery is an important reaction to the environmental crisis of our times within those societies that have to be challenged to make the greatest changes. While this may be very difficult for people in third world countries to understand, it is nevertheless a politically relevant gesture.

I would never talk anybody out of a political act; there are many people in the justice and environmental movements whose work is often heroic. Yet I do believe that many people can become significantly more effective by introducing a more personal dimension into their politics. I take seriously the possibility that we have to address the key political questions of the day in rather a different way. We usually ask the question what are we going to do about, for example, the environmental crisis. But what if we were to ask as well what the environmental crisis might be planning to do about us? I take seriously the possibility that the planet itself has forces of self-repair that can be invoked, and which are in fact taking place right now among us as a response to the environmental crisis. I'm working with the idea that a lot that we see happening in the disintegration of our society is part of what the earth itself is doing. People today want to be their own kind of person and define their own values and their own identity. One of the reasons why the big industrial systems aren't working any more is because the human material on which they're built is used to co-operating, is acquiescent

and obedient. But now they're learning to be disobedient.

They're not being disobedient because they are worried about acid rain or ozone depletion, but because they are responding to a personal need. The resulting disorganisation and chaos are often presented as bad news, yet from the planet's point of view maybe it is excellent news that the systems that torment the planet are coming apart at the seams. I think that every kind of economic problem we currently have is great from the planet's point of view, because it will make it harder for the industrial systems of the world to be efficient.

Fantasy and True Need

One of the things I'm working at through the eco-psychology movement in the United States is to bring people to identify their true needs from their fantasies. People's needs for friendship and companionship and support, people they can love and relate to, all of this is a greater form of wealth than consumer things in the market place. Having a vital community, a vital neighbourhood, is infinitely more important than being a high-production industrial system. This idea requires a profound readjustment of people's views and values.

I've been running some workshops where I ask people to talk about their environmental habits as frankly and fully as they can. This is not exactly a therapeutic process, but is nevertheless an opportunity to talk about important concerns. I find that people are very worried about problems like their consumption levels, their attitude towards nature, and their need to dominate in order to be

secure. Perhaps political activists should do more listening and less scolding. If you listen carefully you hear people calling out for help, they want to change their way of life. They know this already, and they don't need to be made to feel even more guilty about it. They know there is something crazy about the way they are living.

Now 'crazy' is a psychological term; it's more than just a catch phrase. Give people a chance to talk about the way they live and they will often talk about consumption in terms of addiction. 'Addiction' is another psychological term, suggesting that they are feeling bad about their consumption in the same way as alcoholics feel guilty. They don't need more guilt; what they need is a chance to tell you about the problem and why they are doing what they're doing. If you help them understand that you may have a chance for change.

I see my role in this field called eco-psychology as taking abstract economic and social problems that are usually talked about statistically, and making them as emotionally real, as personally real, as possible. If we can identify the true motivation underlying what we are often pleased to dismiss as greed or selfishness, it would have the same therapeutic effect that psychotherapy can have whenever something that has been repressed has the opportunity to emerge into consciousness.

Addiction is often supported by peer pressure and commercial persuasion, but I am surprised how very cynical people are about forms of persuasion like advertising, how aware they are that they are being made fools of, that they are being

victimised, that they are being manipulated. Many 'consumption addicts' resent it very deeply. I have only anecdotal evidence to offer the social scientists, but my hunch is that there is a strong desire on the part of people to be good citizens.

The Uselessness of Guilt

I have never before been part of any political movement that wasn't steeped in guilt. We always hope that guilt will serve to change people. But I've come to recognise that there is a difference between the way in which political activists use guilt and the way in which therapists use guilt; I think therapists use guilt more skilfully.

Guilt is used by activists to beat people as hard as possible, either to neutralise them or to force them to do their duty. The problem is that often that doesn't work at all, and can produce exactly the opposite result — activists are seen as a bunch of scolding puritans. When therapists work with guilt, which is always a factor in therapy, they use it as a basis for self-knowledge. I may be guilty, but therapist and client are interested in how this came about, where it started. This is much more personal, but it has a much greater capacity to change people.

Sustainable Extravagance

There is a chapter in *The Voice of The Earth* in which I seek to address the issue of the need for excess, since this is something I think environmentalists have not thought about. I think that what we may be seeing in our consumer society is a perversion of a corruption of something which is very important to us — the need to experience extravagance. Where that

can be ritualised and socially sanctioned it may be something we can accept and live with, but when we exercise the need to experience extravagance again and again, day after day, we are in serious environmental and social trouble.

I would like to see addiction to consumption replaced with the idea of sustainable extravagance. We all need to have a certain sense of opulence or extravagance in our lives, a sense of opulence which in many traditional societies is organised in a highly ritualised way. If this is the case then environmentalists will never achieve their ends by creating a sense of privation which can lead to hostility against those who are seen to be censoring people's real needs. It's rather like puritans telling people to rein in their sexuality.

My feeling is that it's very important to deal with people's extravagance, because something might lie behind it that has to be dealt with, rather than trying to repress it. That would be a good example of ecopsychology addressing itself to a problem that the environmental movement has so far been rather stupid about.

Is There Hope for the Future?

I spend about half my time despairing utterly and about half my time feeling hopeful. The problems are enormously threatening, and even if we could make radical changes the day after tomorrow it wouldn't be enough and fast. On the other hand you can't write a book out of sheer despair. You must write with some sense of hope, with an understanding that we are part of the system that has been forced upon us in what I call the

ecologic unconscious, our psychotherapy again. I take quite seriously the possibility that the human psyche is deeply grounded in planetary eco-system, that we are in touch, and that the planet is in touch with us in ways that as deeply unconscious psychiatry thinks the sexual impulse may be, and that those forces

work upon us to change us and through changing us to change the culture.

When I ponder that I tend to be a bit more hopeful, though it seems to me that disintegration of major industrial systems can be so messy and so haphazard, so chaotic, that it's not necessarily going to be a pretty prospect.

Politics in Therapy

Andrew Samuels

One of the most potent criticisms of therapy and analysis is that the client is encouraged or even required to turn away from external concerns such as political issues, and focus exclusively on the 'inner world'. This, it is argued, makes nonsense of the statement that therapy develops the whole person. Text-books of therapy and analysis accentuate the introspection by making it clear that exploration of outer world issues is simply not done in 'proper' therapy and analysis.

Over a period of time, I have sensed that this professional consensus is collapsing and that therapists and analysts are indeed beginning to pay more attention to what could be called the political development of their clients. In my own practice, I have noticed that patients seem to be introducing political themes more often. Colleagues say that this also goes on in their work so it is not all due to suggestion on my part. We have tended to put it down to the fact that,

since the mid 1980s, the pace of political change in the world has quickened. At times I have felt that the usual formulation — that such material needs to be understood as symbolic of what is going on in the client — worked pretty well. But at other times it has turned out that the client had a need to talk about some public issue, maybe to work out what their true feelings and opinion were. For example, during the Gulf War there were certainly some clients who were using war imagery to tell me something about their inner state. But there were others who were hiding a profound need to talk about the Gulf War behind the flow of regular, normal clinical material.

I decided that what was needed was a large-scale investigation, by means of a questionnaire, to see if analysts and therapists were experiencing something similar in significant numbers. I therefore obtained the co-operation of 14 professional organisations with differing

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