

The Political Psyche

A Review
Article by
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of Andrew Samuels' *The Political Psyche*



This is a book 'whose time has come'. It is very welcome, and very impressive. And discomfiting. Samuels is particularly interested in the role of the Trickster, of Hermes, in political and moral life. Since Hermes is the winged messenger, he's in his element here: the book is wide-ranging, multi-faceted, at times engaging with very abstruse philosophical and linguistic ideas, at times personal and whimsical — and full of inner contradictions. It irritates; it's elusive; now you see it, now you don't. See what?

It carries conviction (provisional, of course) and commands attention (well, he did lose me a few times). There is searching analysis of accepted concepts in politics and psychotherapy, a determination not to be sectarian, a genuine

humility, an insistence on wariness in interpreting politics from what may be a limited psychoanalytic perspective.

Basically this is all about what's inside and what's outside. How far do we practitioners defend against the threatening world beyond the therapy room by focusing only on the internal world? If my client dreams she's been given an unexploded bomb to hold, is that solely about her suppressed violent feelings and the therapy, or is the unexploded bomb a collective reality that is preying on her mind and her sense of responsibility? Your answer to that will tell you something about your apprehension of the political.

Such questions are explored here in depth. From the outset we are reminded that politics, like therapy, needs to be seen

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as a form of play (I'm surprised there's no mention of Erik Erikson's *Toys and Reasons*). At the centre of the book is a crucial exploration of the Father, whose status has been eroded in the disillusion/disintegration of patriarchal power. These chapters are strong by virtue of the context which frames them. Re-defining the father, the 'masculine', can only be done by a man who can be trusted not to betray, abuse or misrepresent the 'feminine' mother language, which Robert Bly, as he points out, is guilty of. I'm prepared to trust Samuels because he uses a variety of expressive modes, is undogmatic, calls for the honouring of the body and of subjectivity, explores a novel carefully, respects feminism, is unafraid to reveal his vulnerability and his disappointment with his erstwhile 'hero' Jung, and, perhaps the most difficult in our cynical society, to speak of his passionate commitment.

However, this book is mainly directed at the analytic community to which Samuels belongs, and I see that I'm praising this analyst (I hope not too matronisingly) for qualities and ideas that have always been *sine qua non* for humanistic psychotherapists. Recently we've found psychoanalysis 'discovering' — indeed re-inventing — the body, creativity, empathy even. Where have we been all their life? The omissions in this book are remarkable — no knowledge, seemingly, of bioenergetics and primal regression, of the brilliant and sometimes disastrous work of Reich in the political-analytic borderlands, of Moreno's 'democratisation' of psychotherapy, out of which has come sociodrama and the work of Marcia Karp and Ken Sprague, and Scott Peck. Humanistic groupwork, organisation

development, New Paradigm Research, all seem unknown; yet these are at the cutting edge, and central to work at the boundary between inside and outside.

Now we have to look at the politics of psychotherapy as a territorial issue, for once the Wall is down between 'them' and 'us' there will be manoeuvring for new positions, take-over bids, spying, battles for profitable territory. There's plenty in this book about group culture, the family, the environment, sex and gender, race, but nothing about derelict schizophrenics living in cardboard boxes and the nightmare that is the National Health Service. Whose political psyche will want to deal with that?

What will the analysts do then? If they ignore the fact that we have worked in these areas for decades they will annexe our territory. As in our party political system, the dominant party subsumes, denies, even demolishes all the achievements and hard-won learning of the 'opposition'. The bewildered 'client' population begins to see it as some kind of football match.

Of course, the more complex the systems become the harder it is to adapt them. Each tradition defines itself with its language, which tends to become exclusive. And numbing. Word-processors are now producing a manic publishing world: Andrew Samuels and others churn out numbers of books, but how well are their contents digested, and who reads them? He himself bemoans the market economy which rules us.

The dilemma is inherently one of sexual politics. The annexing of territory by the infertile 'party in power' was long ago recognised by women, whose creative

achievements and ideas are persistently appropriated by men and claimed as their own. It goes back to the patriarchal God's annexing of matriarchal religion. All you do is fool some of the people all the time by telling them a story about how you created the universe, and you're in — for centuries, with devastating results. The pattern continues in political life — remember the Greatest Story Ever Told to us 14 years ago? In psychotherapy, similarly, 'patriarchal' analysis has dictated the story and 'matriarchal' humanistic psychology has been made to appear, and feel, inferior, even though its sources and origins are in far richer cultures and languages, verbal and non-verbal, than psychoanalysis.

There's also our national passive-aggressive habit of self-effacement which can be seen in the other polarity: the transatlantic 'special relationship'. Samuels has pertinent things to say about complementarity, which can easily become destructive polarisation. I see how American missionary colonialising therapists come to regard British therapy as poor unenlightened Old World territory in need of being told how to do it. Blind to our perspectives, they will lighten our darkness — for a price. The natives fall for it.

So who will take charge and oversee the process of all these complementarities? Is the UKCP a sort of UN? NATO? EEC? The more I muse on all this as I read *The Political Psyche*, the more depressed I become. I look at the chapter which reports in detail the outcome of the survey-by-questionnaire which Samuels organised to investigate the presence of political material in the therapy room (see *Self & Society*, November 1993). It makes fasci-

nating, surprising reading. As a reflection of political process, however, what do I see? He's a kind of democratic electoral officer, and we are the voters with various party affiliations. He emerges at the end with a sense of achievement, but also an apologetic acknowledgment of relative impotence, mishandling of the statistical method and so on — basically this form of democracy doesn't really work. Should it then have been a referendum, a ballot with proportional representation? He says with justification that it made many people think, but will it make us *act*? And how about those who don't vote because they don't trust democracy, the scornful aristocrats, and the lumpen-therapists slumped in their empty-chairs, while the Great British Depression descends over them?

What an infernal scenario! In the end acting, (which some analysts call disdainfully 'acting out') is the only way: you choose movement or inert deadness. When I'd finished the book I wrote three politically protesting letters, standing in my authority as a psychotherapist, letters I'd previously been dispiritedly telling myself weren't worth the effort.

Mistrust — of 'them', 'it', ourselves, the shadow — has to be acknowledged. Frank Lake in his wisdom said 'to trust others with our mistrust is to speak beyond the boundaries'. The UKCP has been dealing with this — slowly, painfully, pretty well on the whole. The lines really are open now between different branches of the profession. When I reflect now on last year's AHPP Conference on 'The Use and Abuse of Power in Therapy' I give us full marks for the risks we courageously took in going into that area. Exposure, conceal-

ment, trust, mistrust, abuse, were happening right there and then; we had to trust the process, and trust our own commitment to humanistic psychology practices and principles. I doubt that any other professional grouping could have handled it that way. I'm not saying we're 'better than them', only that we've become better equipped. They have always left it to us to find out what happens when you take away the safe boundaries and defences (and we did choose to ignore *their* hard-won experience). We've spent around 25 years here doing just that — at considerable cost to many of us — which was the only way to learn. The conference was painful: old wounds were opened up; attempts at manipulation and cover-up were transparent; there was some healing relief, some disillusionment, and no quick fix. If there was a shock of realism, I trust it has been empowering in a benign way, and I hope that what we have learned can be shared with those who haven't as yet been strong enough to cope with the loss of face and faith involved.

As you see, *The Political Psyche* stimulates many thoughts, reactions, actions. Read it. It's very long, and does suffer from the imperialist need (never satisfied) to

cover all the territory. If we really want to reach out to one another and to 'them', we have to look at language economy. Shorter books are needed, costing less, expressed in fewer words, which get to the essence. Small is beautiful. For the essence I turn to Yeats, poet and politician, caught in his country's turmoil, despairing prophetically of spiritual redemption for a blighted civilisation: 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity.' Trickster that the truth is, I turn that around: The worst lack all conviction, and the best are full of passionate intensity. The tide is turning — but frustrated passion can resort to terrorism, and even the psyche can be terrorised. This book can frighten: it carries its author's passionate intensity. His avowed aim is to explore the politics and processes of 'resacralisation' which he knows is needed and wanted by those who people our world. He doesn't use the word 'love' but it is present in all he writes: 'devotion' is maybe the better term. Perhaps the love and devotion we all need to experience, and make real through action, will come more easily when we have grieved together for all the good that has been destroyed and irretrievably lost.

