Politics and Psychotherapy: The Private and Public Domain

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So often within our field there are raised eyebrows about analysts and therapists who insist that the political dimension is a dimension of psychic experience. Such attitudes, sometimes whispered, sometimes more public, suggest we are somehow less than pukka because matters both social and interpersonal characterise our understanding of psychic possibilities for men, women and children today. It reminds me of the wrong-footed criticism of scientists who are scolded by people in the arts for their limited aesthetic sensibility. I have difficulty comprehending how an understanding of political structure detracts from, rather than enhances, the psychological understanding.

The curious divide between politics and psychotherapy and the even more curious criticism of the links between the two,

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suggests that some people fear — and I am not wishing to pathologise this, simply to suggest that there is such a phenomenon — our attempt to integrate, contextualise or situate personal experience with reference to the wider social world. I hope that we can address some of this fear, understand it better and allow ourselves to encompass in our understanding of psychic processes the complete interpretation; the interpretation that allows the individual in the group and in the world to understand him or herself with reference to several experiences.

I suppose I say 'curious criticism' for a couple of reasons. Firstly I think that it has been impossible in the last years to escape the relationship between the personal and the political. Tim Yeo's expulsion from the government was significant, not because of the moralism it draws on, but because conservative government, like all other governments, seeks to influence the way we live our private lives both through the structures such as the education system, the welfare system, the taxation system, housing policy, and through ideological pronouncements. A government that says that private matters are public matters is telling us that the most seemingly personal of decisions and desires refer to arrangements in the public sphere. This is obvious. Politicians know this. Why don't psychotherapists? How I wonder do they create such a divide?

But I'm curious mainly because my entry into psychoanalysis and group psychotherapy came directly out of a political, emotional, intellectual need and desire to understand how the social subject who is also a personal subject, a me, is constructed and reconstructed at the psychic inside level and how the outside social individual brings that subjectivity to the world which it both shapes and is shaped by. In other words, for me psychoanalysis is among other things a way of understanding an individual agency within a social context. Contemporary psychoanalysis problematises the notion of the individual — here are Stolorow and Atwoodon on this point: 'the concept of an isolated, individual mind is a theoretical fiction or myth that reifies the subjective experience of psychological distinctness . . . the experience of distinctness requires a nexus of intersubjective relatedness that encourages and supports the process of self-delineation throughout the life cycle . . . the experience of differentiated selfhood is always embedded in a sustaining intersubjective context.'

Contemporary psychoanalysis also problematises the actions, desires and passions of the individual with reference to how he or she internalises and experiences actual relationships in the world. Psychoanalysis is not so much about freeing us from constraints as about revealing constraints which make us who we are. We internalise, bridle against, enact, modify and restructure these restraints and constraints as individuals qua individuals and as individuals in group contexts.

Psychoanalysis, for me, is not instead of politics and does not offer a more profound understanding of the individual or the group. Nor are there political interpretations and non-political interpretations, for all interpretations reflect ways of seeing and understanding the world.

The Institute for Group Analysis implicitly embodies a set of assumptions, as does the Tavistock or The Women's Ther-

apy Centre. Frequently, the assumptions that are isomorphic with the prevailing cultural ideology are taken as non-political rather than as the expression of a particular way of seeing; those which highlight a different way of seeing are dismissed as political. Thus the WTC is seen as feminist, interested in understanding the particular experience of women, aware of both the conceptual and critical categories of gender. This stance towards gender informs the work that comes out of the Centre as it problematises a whole range of psychic functioning that was not problematised before. Similarly, the Tavistock doesn't display to the outside world that as far as gender goes it encodes and adumbrates normative values which could be classed as patriarchal.

I could go on, for between differing psychoanalytic theories lie political differences often concealed by the abstractions of theoretical discourse. One could quite easily do a political dictionary of psychoanalysis. But my point is rather to argue that the political is a complementary explanatory and dynamic discourse about the meanings of human organisation, human interaction at an intrapsychic and interpsychic level. As Joseph Sandler said in his Presidential address to the 38th International Psychoanalytic Congress in July last year, commenting on the multiplicity of analytic perspectives: 'The analyst selects different charts or maps to spread out on his inner chart table'. These theories may clash with one another and yet they all provide different reference points, different ways of understanding that allow us as clinicians to grasp and interpret the differing dimensions of experience that must inform our work with our analysands.

I came to an interest in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis and the unconscious out of the cultural turmoil which beset Britain, continental Europe, Latin America and North America in the late sixties. In the aftermath of the civil rights movement in the United States and the challenge to class society in Britain, in the wake of Laing's critique of the family, and with the exuberance the New Left on both continents felt about its capacity to influence society, the notion of personal power and personal responsibility became current. Together with an understanding of the power of the group, there emerged a sense that who one was as an individual and who one could be as an individual was in itself political.

The phrase 'the personal is political' which became the maxim for a whole generation of young men and women led to a transformative political practice in which the consciousness-raising group (or, as it was more widely known in Britain, the rap group) brought women together for the first time to speak of their individual experience within the family, work and sexual structures they inhabited.

The consciousness-raising group in contrast to other political formations took as its starting point the personal, subjective experience of the individual women. Through personal testimony women first tentatively, then sometimes angrily, sometimes despairingly, found the words as we would say in psychoanalytic speak — to symbolise and therefore make conscious, known and thinkable the texture, the feelings, the confusions that lived within them as individuals.

The consciousness-raising group was concerned with making sense out of practices which caused people all sorts of confusions and distress without their comprehending much about the basis of their participation in these practices. So, for example, many of the women recognised that they compulsively cared for others, were midwives to the activities of others, felt at a loss if they weren't actively caregiving. Many of the women recognised that they felt deeply insecure and jealous. They feared other women and they were competitive with them in the quest to find an identity through a heterosexual alliance which somehow once accomplished never quite stilled the anxiety of insecurity.

Other revelations concerned the inability to feel or express certain emotions or desires such as anger, sexual longing, hunger, and so on. In the group the endeavour was to make sense of how and why we felt as we did. To find out why women, at that point in history largely disenfranchised from the public sphere except through affiliation with their men, should come to hold so many feelings and experiences in common and why many of those experiences should be the subject of personal shame. The group was not designed to be therapeutic but through its communally honed understanding a kind of catharsis was achieved, a group- and individually-felt 'Eureka' that put comprehension in the place of confusion. This empowered the individuals in the group to begin the process of transformation that is the hallmark of both politics and psychotherapy.

The consciousness raising group led me and many others to be interested in the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. It led us to raise the question of how, in the absence of political change, we might begin to contest our participation in our own subordination. And it also led me to try to understand how the structure of the group, combined with the internalisation of modes of being, freed up certain kinds of thoughts, feelings and desires, while it constrained and curtailed others. I am referring to a well-observed phenomenon within women's groups of that period that while we were developing a confidence in our newly-found power and capabilities we were simultaneously discovering how hampered we were by a group, a gendered, ethos which discouraged difference and disagreement. In other words there came to be a notion, sometimes made explicit, sometimes implicit, in which dissimilarity could not easily be contained. The group, in seeking to be the bridge to an enhanced identity for its individual members, unwittingly enveloped its members into a sense that they must conform, through affiliative and relational bonds consistent with the felt parameters of femininity. These bonds both underpinned the development of its members and constrained and disparaged differentiation.

It was the bittersweet nature of this phenomenon that led me into an interest in the intrapsychic domain or, to be more accurate, in the inter-relationship between psychic and social phenomenon, private and public domains. I'll say in passing that many of us were grappling with the problem, posed by the Frankfurt School of which Foulkes was a member, of the seeming adaptability of capitalism

and its ability to reinvigorate itself and to create allegiances out of false consciousness which then dispersed and rendered dissent ineffective. We were also concerned to understand the relationships between monogamy, sexual repression, the family and authoritarian social structures. In our endeavours to apply the lens of politics to the dimensions of the personal, we were led down roads where many others had walked — Reich, Adler, Ferenzci, Fenichel, Laing, Langer among others.

But it was the women's group that first and most persuasively exposed the conflation of private and public, personal and political. And it was in the women's therapy group that, by the containment, reflection and interpretation of unconscious material through the manifest content and through felt transferences and countertransferrences, that we could observe in most detail the psychic costs and benefits of the construction of femininity. We could see how individual women embody within their most intimate sense of selves the social mandates of femininity, how their very essences incorporated both the relational and affiliative imperatives that are a feature of femininity as well as a sense of deep insecurity, unentitlement and even deep ignorance as to their own desires which are similarly a mark of contemporary femininity.

From a social perspective of course this made sense, could even have been anticipated. A structure of inequality creates persons who embody a sense of inequality. Social subordination implies an acceptance of that subordination at a personal level for there are no guns trained on women and yet we voluntarily do much worse than bind our feet.

But what was shocking from an intrapsychic perspective was how deeply the taboos on dependency and on initiating, which are two of the markers of femininity, form the individual women's intrapsychic structure. It wasn't possible to think what she wanted, to go after what she wanted, for the question itself was out of range and couldn't be focused on. It was oxymoronic . . . an impossible clash of ideas.

Within the groups it became clearer how much these taboos, these girdles of restraint, were not put on and taken off, but formed the shape of the person. The individual could not enter the imaginative space that would allow the kind of reverie from which alternative ways of being could be conceived. The alternative space was itself constrained by a set of facile rebellions mainly of either a romantic or a non-conformist nature. And if the intrapsychic didn't do the job efficiently enough, then the interpersonal world of women, the interpsychic, would conspire together to reinforce those girdles through disapproval or rejection.

What could be observed in the group beyond the individual woman's struggle to recognise her conflict around her desires was a group collusion. The women's analytic psychotherapy groups created what Luise Eichenbaum and I have termed an emotional ambience of merged attachment in which one source of strength for the group came from a capacity to identify commonly felt wounds and to heal these out of women's highly developed capacities of caring. This solidarity was enormously important and magical

and its value should not be underestimated. Women felt understood, seen and validated. And their longing for attachment was partially met within the group. But paradoxically the experience of being seen then produced a psychic crisis for individual women because the recognition they were gaining and internalising within the group created new problems. The search for recognition, the pleasure of being seen, was so unknown that it was individually and collectively threatening. Unable to hold onto the new, precarious and long-wished-for recognition, a defensive stance was adopted. Individuals felt that the recognition they had received from the group allowed for a degree of separation but their individual desire for separation endangered the group's merged attachment, an attachment contingent on identification, empathy, support, similarity and the denial of difference. Thus in the underbelly of the merged attachment lay all that was conceived of as dangerous and threatening — desires that dispersed the viscous nature of that merger through the interposing of difference and differentiation.

The group policed the women as they internally policed themselves. It took over both the enabling and disabling aspects of the mother-daughter relationship. A gender-conscious psychoanalysis allows us to see the ways in which the mother (both as social category and as psychic object) introduces her daughter to the world she will inhabit through identification, through mapping the interpersonal sphere, through direct instruction and through the withholding of consistent attention herself lest the daughter foolishly imagine that recognition is what is in store for her in a patriarchal world. In the same way the group allowed us to see how the individual women had taken these imperatives into and onto themselves. They incorporated the deprived, scared, rebellious, empty feelings of their mothers so that inside lodged feelings of self-hate, of low self-esteem, of unworthiness and unentitleness which they battled against.

The challenge for the group was not simply to reveal these processes but to transform them; to both anticipate them as possible outcomes of the internal structuralisation of femininity and to create an atmosphere in which accommodation was not the only alternative; in which understanding was the handmaiden to change.

What became a problem in these groups as well as in subsequent work I have done over the years with women in group, individual or couple therapy is the difficulty of imagining, and then creating, a relational self whose attachments could be relatively secure without the sacrifice of the achievement of subjectivity — what Luise and I have rather clumsily called separated attachments.

The notion that the achievement of separated attachments or connected autonomy is desirable is an instance of the way in which critical political and psychoanalytic perspectives are entwined. ('Connected autonomy' is another equally infelicitous phrase Luise and I have found to try to describe relations to self and others, infelicitous I believe because the concept is disharmonious with ideas of femininity and thus sticks out like a sore thumb.) A therapy informed by a different politics would not hold this notion as either desirable or problematic. As I have

argued elsewhere, much effort in psychotherapy is often expended in trying to get the woman to separate but behind this effort is really a notion that she is too needy and should give up her longings, own up to her destructive greed and accept less. I know I'm being a bit crude here but I have observed many instances of clinicians saying such things and then going on to try to shore up defence structures so that their patients will be less troublesome, less demanding, less apparently insatiable. This has made me wonder what on earth frightens people so very much about women's neediness. Why can't that issue be engaged with rather than condemned. Why can't these forms of defence — which is what they are in essence — be deconstructed? Why isn't neediness also seen as a fear of exposing need?

The answer must lie somewhere in a notion that genuine separated attachment is either unattainable or undesirable in women. The only option is thus to reinforce a defence structure. If we then ask why, we are forced into an answer which speaks to the politics of the therapist. To be engaged in helping to erect a barricade against a woman's defensive insatiability is a fear of her being a proper size. She can either only be too much or too little. This is, of course, just what the patient herself fears, but for the therapy to collude with this notion rather than explore the desire behind the defence or the fears, anxieties and longings is to avoid doing therapy. It is rather to be resocialising and doing so from a political position which influences the technical level of our work.

I think you will have got the point that for me the arbitrary distinction between public and private is a nonsense. In closing I want to say simply that although these ideas are new again for our time, they have a long history. Psychoanalysis is itself a critique and indictment of the normative. Psychoanalysis arose at much the same time in history as other critiques of the normative — of feminism in the United States and Britain, the emancipation of the serfs in Russia and the slaves in the United States, the organisation of the skilled and unskilled workforce in Britain, and the revolutionary movements in Austria, Germany and Russia. This seems to me to be no mere accident. These were novel ways of understanding and transforming the world, of placing the subject in their personal and collective setting, of giving agency to self-conscious activity while exposing the cobwebs of the unconscious.

As we approach the end of this millennium, it is time to unite these two disciplines rather than contest the space in which they could best co-operate.