

# Citizens as Therapists

Andrew Samuels

How can we translate our emotional, bodily and imaginative responses to Bosnia, to ecological disaster, to homelessness, to poverty worldwide, into action? How can we begin to make political use of people's private reactions to public events?

There is a sense in which this is the key political issue of our times: how we might translate passionately held political convictions — shall we call them political dreams? — into practical realities. I think it is possible to take a subjective approach to a political problem, maybe one that has been fashioned out of personal experience, and refashion that response into something that works — actually works — in the corridors of power.

In common with many analysts and therapists, I would like to see politics become more 'psychological', taking on



board a deeper understanding of people's emotions and what goes on inside them. In this piece, I'd like to make a contribution from the professional world of psychology and therapy towards a strategy for empowering the powerless.

But, before that, there are a couple of important caveats to make, sort of health warnings and dampers on excessive enthusiasm.

First, we must concede and recognise the limitations of a psychological approach to politics. Freud, Jung and the founders of humanistic psychology like Maslow had ambitions to be of use in the political world. But they and their followers have on occasion gone in for ridiculous psychological reductionism. Hence, objections to psychological theorising about politics cannot all be put down to resistance. The impression one gets that some

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analysts think that everything would be OK with the world if only the world would attain 'the depressive position' reveals nothing more than the maddening rectitude and mechanistic, circular thinking of some psychoanalytic critics of culture (myself included, sometimes!).

Second, it's equally important to renegotiate what can be meant by 'politics' so we can engage with the issue of empowerment and disempowerment in a more psychological way. In the late modern world (to use Giddens' phrase), politics and questions of psychological identity are linked as never before. This is because of myriad other interminglings: ethnic, socio-economic, national. The whole mongrel picture is made more dense by the exciting and rapid course of events in the coruscating realms of gender and sexuality.

The emergence of feminism as a political movement introduced us to this new kind of politics. It is sometimes a feeling-level politics, or a politics of subjectivity, that encompasses a nodal interplay between the public and the private dimensions of power. For political power is also manifested in family organisation, gender and race relations, in connections between wealth and health, in control of processes of information and representation, and in religious and artistic assumptions.

### *Citizens as Therapists*

I will turn now to my main point which is to suggest a *strategy for the empowerment of citizens as therapists of the political world*.

It is clear that everyone, and I think I do mean everyone, reacts to either the political issues of the day or to the political

dimension of experience in a private and often heartfelt way. But most of us diffidently assume that our cloistered responses are not really of much use in the objective world of 'real' politics. Even though we all know there is no objectivity when it comes to politics, we behave as if there were, in obedience to an ideology of civic virtue that cannot abide passion in the public sphere. For the powerful fear the dissident fantasies of the radical imagination.

Clinical analysis and therapy ponder the same kind of problem: How to translate the practitioner's private and subjective responses to the client (what gets called in jargon the 'counter-transference') into something that can, eventually, be fashioned into a useful intervention?

In their widely differing ways, therapists and analysts have managed to do this — and this is my point. Therapists and analysts have already managed to give value to their subjectivity, seeing that its very construction within the therapy relationship can provide a basis for useful intervention.

Analysts and therapists already have texts that teach them how to translate their impressions, intuitions, gut responses, bodily reactions, fantasies and dreams about clients into hard-nosed professional treatment approaches. They already have the idea that their subjective responses are precious, valid, relevant, effective — and there is some knowledge about how to do something with those responses.

So, perhaps without realising it, we in the world of psychology and therapy do possibly have something we could share

with the disempowered, with political activists — or make use of when we ourselves get politically active. For example, most clinicians know that their bodily reactions to the client's material are a highly important pathway to the client's psychic reality. Similarly, it is possible to honour and deploy the bodily reactions citizens have in response to the political world and the culture's social reality. Just as client and therapist are in it together so, too, do citizen and political problem inhabit — quite literally — the same space.

Citizens could start to function as therapists of the political world, learning to use their bodily and other subjective reactions as organs of political wisdom, helping them to understand the problems of the political more deeply and guiding the course of their actions. It would be another way to speak the political.

The evolution of a kind of political knowledge analogous to the therapeutic encounter would reflect the fact that so many people already possess a therapeutic attitude to the world. Many of us want to participate in nothing less than the resacralization of our culture by becoming therapists of the world. But it is hard to see how to go about it.

I certainly didn't invent the notion that citizens have bodily and other subjective reactions to the political — we all know of that from our own experience of our own bodies and our own subjectivities in the political world. But it may be a novel contribution to suggest, as I do, that the political, with its problems, its pain, its one-sidedness, may actually be trying to communicate with us, its therapists. Does the political really want therapy? Will it

come to its first session? Will the unconscious of the political and the several unconsciousnesses of us, its therapists, get into good-enough communication?

So I am trying to do something with what is already known about citizens and the political — but not, as yet, much theorised over. I don't think I am the only one working in this area by any means. I see this 'therapeutic' way of speaking and doing politics, not as something regrettable, an over-personal, hysterical approach to politics. Rather, I see it as one path left open to us in our flattened, controlled, cruel and dying world. What official politics rejects as shadow — and what can undoubtedly still function as shadow — turns out to have value. Isn't that a typical pattern of discovery in therapy anyway?

Putting the citizen in the therapist's seat is itself a dramatic and radical move. For, in many psychoanalytic approaches to politics, the citizen is put firmly in the patient's seat, or on the couch: citizen as infant. Then the citizen has to be regarded as having only an infantile transference to politics! It's not as empowering as having a counter-transference and it's the therapist's right to speak — the therapist's power — that I want to spread around.

### *The Personal is Political*

This strategy for empowerment is a psychological extension of the feminist insight that the personal realm reflects the political realm, that what we experience in the subjective world can be the basis of progressive action and change in the political world.

I am trying to explore these ideas at public workshops. At a workshop in New York, shortly after the LA riots, I asked a

largely non-professional audience to imagine themselves as 'therapists' of a 'client' called 'the LA riots' and to record their physical, bodily and fantasy responses to their client (i.e. to track the 'counter-transference'). Unexpectedly, just doing the exercise itself created a cathartic effect. Participants eagerly reported how they had often reacted somatically or in other markedly subjective forms to political events. But they feared these responses would not pass muster in everyday political discourse. Their conception of politics was conditioned by the notions of 'objectivity' that I mentioned earlier; they had bought the con trick of the powerful.

A whole range of novel, imaginative and practical ideas about urban and ethnic problems came out of the group process of this audience. Moreover, 'the political' was redefined, reframed, revised. Most of those present did not believe that there were avenues available in official political culture for what often gets stigmatised as an irrational approach. I think their assessment is right. Utilising a perspective derived from one hundred years of the practice of therapy, in which so-called irrational responses are honoured and heeded, is a small beginning in creating a new, more psychological approach to the problems of power and politics.

Lest it be thought that only an American audience could manage to do the exercise described just now, let me say that I have found similar reactions in Brazil, working with people in liberation

theology, and in Leningrad (as it then was) working with young Russian therapists hungry to marry their inner worlds with what was going on around them.

I feel that this kind of politics, this other way of speaking the political, favours participation by those who are presently on the margins of power: women, gay men and lesbians, members of ethnic minorities, those in transgressive families, the physically challenged, the economically disadvantaged. These are the people with whom psychologists and therapists should stand shoulder to shoulder — in the same ethos of unknowing and humility and respect for the wisdom of the other that characterises all good clinical work.

For those diverse groupings should not be regarded as Marx's hopeless lumpen proletariat. Rather, they are the last untapped sources of new energies and ideas in the political and social realms. Disempowered people certainly do need the kind of economic and financial transfusions that only politics of the official kind can presently broker. But they also need validation from the profession that makes its living and derives its authority — its power — out of working with the feelings, fantasies, behaviours and embodiments that are banned and marginalised in life in the late modern world. There is a potential in everyone to be a therapist of the world. Throughout our lives, all of us have had private responses to politics. We need to raise to the level of cultural consciousness the kind of politics that people have carried within themselves secretly for so long.