BORDERLINES AND BOUNDARIES

A New Therapy for Politics

Andrew Samuels

Politics in the West is experiencing a paradigm shift in which old definitions, assumptions and values are being transformed. While politics will always be about struggles for power and the control of resources, a new understanding of all that is political has evolved since feminism introduced the phrase 'the personal is political'.

This new kind of politics is often a feeling-level politics, or a politics of subjectivity, that encompasses a key interplay between the public and private dimensions of power. For political power is also manifested in family organization, gender and race relations, connections between wealth and health, control of information, and in religion and art.

Few would disagree that politics in Western countries is in a mess. We urgently need new ideas and approaches. Political energy has left the political parties and the old, formal political system. They have obviously still got the resources and most of the decisions will in the future still be taken via the electoral system. But political energy and imagination has moved on into a plethora of seemingly unconnected social movements: environmentalism, consumerism, ethnopolitics, human rights movements, liberation theology, feminism and so on.

The growth of these social and cultural movements has been a striking feature of the past twenty years in modern societies like Britain. More and more people are involved in such networks — increasingly aware that what they are doing may be regarded as political. The elasticity in our idea of politics is not something done to it by intellectuals. It is rather something politics seems actively to embrace. These new social movements operate in isolation from each other, seeming to have quite different agendas and programmes. Yet their collective impact, if it could be garnered without damaging the spontaneity and creativity of what is going on, may be just what Western societies,

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starved of these features in their politics, crave and need as we stumble towards the end of the century.

But these disparate social movements do have something in common, something psychological in common. They share an emotional rejection of 'big' politics, its pomposity and self-interest, its mendacity and complacency. They share a philosophy or set of values based on ideas of living an intelligible and purposeful life in spite of the massive social forces that mitigate against intelligibility and purpose. They share a disgust with present politics and politicians — sometimes people report a quite physical disgust, the gagging reflex, an ancient part of the nervous system, absolutely necessary for survival in a world full of literal and metaphysical toxins.

What may be going on in this paradigm shift is the frank pursuit of a transformation of the political process itself involving a sacralization or resacralization of it. The attempt is to get a sense of purpose, decency, aspiration and even holiness back into political culture. Even if such a state of affairs never really existed, most of us behave as though it did — hence re-sacralization.

One issue in politics these days is how to translate our emotional, bodily and imaginative responses to Bosnia, ecological disaster, homelessness, poverty worldwide, into action. Can we begin to make political use of our private reactions to public events? There is a sense in which this is a core political problem of our times: How we might convert passionately held political convictions — political dreams — into practical realities. (I tried to address this in my article 'Citizens as Therapists' in *Self & Society*, Vol. 22, No. 3.)

Nowhere is this problem more clearly illustrated than in questions of economics. At the moment, the old debate between free market economics and centralized state-planned economics is played out and dead. A new and much more complicated debate has arisen between what can be called the 'modified marketeers' and the 'alternative economists'. This debate will be critical for the directions the changing political paradigm will take. It is a debate between two groups of progressives, which makes taking sides rather difficult. On the one hand, the modified marketeers want to deal with poverty, unemployment and other social evils by altering the thrust of production, cultivating fresh patterns and policies of investment and saving, and espousing flexibility in employment. They do not lack sensitivity to ecological issues. But they seek to do all of this within a framework of economic ideas and values (and hence political ideas and values) that already exists. The Blair-Brown Labour Party exemplifies this approach.

On the other hand, the alternative economists propose the adoption of a sustainable lifestyle, radical policies to remedy the wealth imbalance between North and South, and a whole host of innovative schemes to build on local knowledge and initiatives. When the alternative economists propose retraining schemes to combat unemployment, they do it as part of an attempt to redignify and redefine work — not just to get a better set of figures. In fact, ideas about there being a measurable 'bottom line', cost benefit analysis, uncritical acceptance of economic expansion are all thrown over

by alternative economics. Blair and Brown are operating within another, older paradigm altogether.

The political theme generated by this debate is today's version of the age old struggle between feasibility and idealism. In many ways, this is a psychological problem — to hold the tension between the side of ourselves that is only interested in what will definitely work and the side that enjoys and suffers aspirations — whether spiritual, social, economic or political. But it won't be enough merely to note that today's idealism is tomorrow's realism. That would be politically passive, for we ourselves can help the process along.

In order to move things along, we need to think again about what we expect a citizen to be, shifting our assumptions in the direction of the 'psychological citizen'. This citizen is a 'politically self-aware' citizen, knowing already that the personal, inner and private levels of life connect up with the political, outer and public levels. But the culture in which he or she lives is very reluctant to make this connection. In a way, this reluctance is surprising because people have always spoken about politics and politicians using emotional terms such as 'character'. Similarly, a good deal of political debate boils down to disagreement about what is human nature (what, if anything, lies beyond self-interest, to give an example).

If new connections can be made, then we will get more used to talking a mixed language of psychology and politics. In this new, hybrid language we will want to know not only what is being said, but who is saying it — and maybe which part of a person is talking. As therapists know, everyone teems with inner people ('sub-personalities') and this is always a difficult thing to acknowledge. In the same way, we could develop an approach to politics that understands that no society has a single, unified identity. In our world, 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.

How does the psychological citizen grow and develop? An individual person lives not only her or his life but also the life of the times. Jung told his students that 'when you treat the individual you treat the culture'. Persons cannot be seen in isolation from the society and culture that has played a part in forming them. Once we see that there is a political person who has developed over time, we can start to track the political history of that person — the impact the political events of her or his lifetime have had on the forming of their personality. So we have to consider the politics a person has, so to speak, inherited from their family, class, ethnic, religious, national background — not forgetting the crucial questions of their sex and sexual orientation. Sometimes people take on their parents' politics; equally often, people reject what their parents stood for.

As far as socio-economic background is concerned, there is an interesting relationship of class and the inner world. Many people have achieved a higher socio-economic status than that of their parents. And yet, in the inner world, the

social class wherein they function is often the social class into which they were born. There is a staggering psychological tension that exists within the socially and economically mobile citizen between what he or she is and what he or she was. I think this tendency brings with it an optimistic message for a progressive political and social project. To the extent that the typical move is from working class to middle class, and to the extent that a passion (and need) for social and economic justice exists in the working class, it is possible to access within the middle-class client concerns for economic and social justice appropriate to their inner world location of themselves as working class and possibly poverty-stricken or deprived in other ways.

In workshops on the 'economic psyche' I ask participants to imagine what would happen if they were told that the job they do was about to be made totally unnecessary for some reason. What other jobs could they do? What new skills would they need? How long do they think it will take to become competent in the new areas of work?

Probably most of us know someone whose employment is threatened by technological innovation, international competition, or cultural shifts. Even analysts are susceptible to such pressures! This is why the exercise produces such extraordinarily powerful emotional responses, with people from many different backgrounds breaking down in tears over the issues thrown up. Many political commentators have noted that in most Western countries the well-known employment problems of male manual workers whose rustbelt industries are moribund are just one aspect of a global transformation in labour economics. In countries like Britain, Germany and the United States, the fear of vocational extinction has spread deep into the middle classes. And, as we know, when social stresses hit the middle classes, the world is going to hear about it. For these are not people in the traditionally disempowered groupings. Nor are they rednecks or dinosaurs. They are people very much like those that I imagine are reading this piece.

The fact that no-one can assume they have a job for life means that in the course of a working life each of us is going to have many jobs. This means that our employability will be directly connected to our adaptability and flexibility. We will have to convince employers and maybe tell ourselves that we can learn, meaning that we can learn on the job. These qualities of adaptability and flexibility are, of course, psychological characteristics and hence subject to all the usual psychological vicissitudes that we know about. But they are not yet much discussed by therapists.

At the workshops, one thing that we have experimented with is what it feels like to start to train oneself to do a new job well before the old job is played out — a kind of constructively schizoid attitude to work. Women's balancing acts between parenting, work and self-development have been a useful model here. Another thing that has emerged is that training will be more effective if it is placed within a generally enriching framework and not confined to precise techniques learned and applied at the workplace. What the politicians consider to be 'education' may be psychologically demeaning. There is no reason in principle why work should not

be a form of self-expression, but we have to start by treating it as such. If education becomes too work-oriented, its capacity to release people's political and other potentials will be stunted.

But all of this may perhaps be a bit too rational. If there is something inherently political about humans — and many people think there is — then maybe the politics a person has cannot only be explained by social inheritance. Maybe there is an accidental, constitutional, fateful and inexplicable element to think about. Maybe people are just born with different amounts and types of political energy in them.

If that is so, then there would be big implications both for individuals and for our approach to politics. What will happen if a person with a high level of political energy is born to parents with a low level of it (or vice versa)? What if the two parents have vastly different levels from each other? What is the fate of a person with a high level of political energy born into an age and a culture which does not value such a high level, preferring to reward lower levels of political energy? The answers to such questions shape not only the political person but the shape and flavour of the political scene in their times.

The questions can get much more intimate. Did your parents foster or hinder the flowering of your political energy and your political potential? How did you develop the politics you have at this moment? In which direction are your politics moving, and why? I do not think these questions are presently on either a mainstream or an alternative political agenda.

My interest is not in what might be called political maturity. No such universal exists, as evaluations by different commentators of the same groups as 'terrorists' or 'freedom fighters' shows. My interest is in how people got to where they are politically and, above all, in how they themselves think, feel, explain and communicate about how they got there — hence the political myth of the person. From a psychological angle, it often turns out that people are not actually where they thought they were politically, or that they got there by a route they did not know about.

An awareness that politics is psychological is also the theme that links all engaged in the discussions about the loss of meaning, purpose and certainty in communal and personal life. Yet such is the Western fear of the inner world that its implications are barely recognised, let alone discussed or made use of. It is tragic how little discussion there has been about the socialised, transpersonal psychology that will be needed to make visions, current on both sides of the Atlantic, of community and communitarian politics viable. But there are psychological theories in existence that focus on the transpersonal ways in which people are already linked and attuned to one another, living in connection in a social ether. In this vision of humanity we were never as separate from each other as so-called free market, neo-liberal politics — which had its own tame psychological theory in there somewhere — claimed us to be. These kinds of pre-existing connections between people, which politicians and citizens urgently need to explore, expound and cultivate, may be largely non-verbal, working on a psyche-to-psyche level. We are stalks growing, feeding and flowering from the same rhizome.