

# The Political Person

Andrew Samuels

We live in what has been called the 'late modern' world. In this age, questions of politics and of personal, psychological identity are linked as never before. The emergence of feminism as a political movement introduced us to this new kind of politics. It is sometimes a feeling-level politics that encompasses an 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.

Where the public and the private, the political and the personal, intersect, I think there is a special role for psychology in relation to political change and transformation. The tragicomic crisis of our *fin de siècle* civilisation incites us to challenge the boundaries that are conventionally accepted as existing between the external and the internal world, between life and reflection, between extroversion and introversion, between doing and being, between politics and psychology, between the political development of the person and the psychological development of the person, between the fantasies of the political world and the politics of the fantasy world.

My interest is in what I call the political development of the person. My idea is to develop a portrayal of the clinical setting of therapy and analysis as a bridge between psychology and politics, rather than as the source of an isolation of psychology from politics. Critics of therapy, such as James Hillman or Jeffrey Masson, have noted this isolation — and their observation is



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not totally wrong. But I want us also to see the potential links, to create a truly radical revisioning of what therapy can be about and not a simplistic huffing and puffing aimed at closing all the consulting rooms. This means that therapists and analysts have to learn a new language.

The problems a client brings to a therapist should be linked not only to their personal situation, or to the internal conflicts from which they suffer. Links also have to be made with their culture, its traditions and history, and to their ethnic, religious, national and socio-economic origins — not to mention the question of their sex and sexual orientation.

An individual leads not only his or her own life but also the life of the times. Jung was supposed to have said that 'when you treat the individual, you treat the culture', meaning that people cannot be seen in isolation from the cultural matrices that have played a part in forming them. Acknowledging that there is such a thing as political development makes us build into our understanding of a person the impact of the political events of their life — we could call this their political history. These events will have contributed, over time, to the state of political development they have reached. We have to consider, too, the politics someone has 'inherited' by reason of family, class, ethnic, religious and national background, not forgetting accidental, constitutional, topological, fateful and inexplicable influences: the non-rational element.

I think that there is something innately political in human beings and that the political is not a derivative of something else, such as sex or aggression. If political potential is inborn, then one could ask: what

happens if a person of innately high political potential or energy has parents with a low level of it? Or vice versa? What is the fate of a person with a high level of political potential born into an age which, taken as a whole, does not value high levels, but prefers to reward lower ones?

These questions can get more personal. Did your parents foster or hinder the flowering of your political potential? How did you develop the politics you presently have? In which direction are your politics moving?

The idea of there being a political development of the person is not without its risks. But my interest is not in what might be called 'political maturity'. No such universal exists. My interest is in how people have got to where they are politically and, above all, in how they themselves think about, feel about, explain and communicate how they got to where they are politically. We could call this the political myth of the person. In politically sensitive therapy, clients sometimes discover that they are not where they thought they were politically, or that they got there by a route that they did not know about. Often, the client discovers that he or she has developed a political commitment or concern without having realised it. In fact, my clinical experience suggests that people are already much more political than on a conscious level they thought they were.

So, in this revised therapy, we ask how a person has become a Hampstead (or Manhattan) liberal — not whether being a Hampstead or Manhattan liberal is a good thing. Moreover, not all Hampstead or Manhattan liberals have got there in the same way. We want to know how they have experienced becoming Hampstead or Manhattan liberals.