ANDREW SAMUELS

INTERVIEWED BY RUTH WILLIAMS

On the publication of his new book,
Politics on the Couch: Citizenship and the Internal Life,
Andrew Samuels is interviewed by Ruth Williams.
Part 2 of the interview will appear in the next issue.

On Writing the Book

RW:

You say this is the last book in a trilogy. Is it necessary to read the other two volumes in sequence, or can this be read as a stand alone volume?

AS:

I wish I had said that I *now* see it as a trilogy. It was not conceived as a trilogy so it is in fact perfectly possible to get all the juice out of this book without having opened the other two. Why did I want to claim that it is a trilogy? I think it is something to do with the narcissism of a writer. I wanted to establish an oeuvre, and to point out to those people who might get interested in my work more academically that there are real connections between these books. If I can give one simple example: in *The Plural Psyche* I talk about the need for diversity and competition between different viewpoints in psychotherapy. That is a political point. In *The Political Psyche* I took that whole approach (called pluralism) and applied it to diversity in society. And in *Politics on the Couch* I go in much more detail and in a much more accessible way into some of the issues around unity and diversity in society as these are lived out by individual citizens. So there is a direct line between these three books and the feedback so far is that this third one is much more easy to read than the other two.

RW:

That's exactly what I was just going to say. Your writing has developed over the course of the three and I found this one much easier to read. I was not sure if it was because I am used to your style of writing, or whether you think it has actually changed in some way.

AS:

As time passes, you distil things. You go on the road with your ideas. I have been lucky that the psychotherapy world, the academic world and the general world of culture and politics have given me so many invitations to speak that I've been able to test things out and see what works. The risk of it's being an easier book to read is that there are some slogans in it, some preachiness in it, there are some arguments that really needed more footnotes and so forth.

RW:

So, is that a deliberate attempt to reach a more general audience?

AS:

Yes. I want to make my work as popular as necessary, but not as popular as possible, if I can coin a phrase. I haven't tried to write a 'How to do psychological politics' book.

RW:

I kept on thinking of the book in terms of reaching to a wide audience. And yet there was quite a lot of psychotherapeutic language which I realised would not be accessible. So it was almost as if it fell between two stools.

AS:

I think it probably does fall between two stools and I cannot see any way out of it. There is very little technical language in it. But every now and again you get a major burst of jargon that only a therapist would easily understand, like the passage about the primal scene and how that connects with people's political patterns and energies and attitudes and strengths and weaknesses.

On Influences

RW:

You seem to approach politics from such a fresh perspective. I was wondering about where your ideas came from. What or who are your influences?

AS:

Although Jung's own politics are a matter of dismay to many contemporary Jungians, he did pave the way for a cultural psychology and he left a whole bunch of ideas, for example about energy and about transformation and about how opposites, while not exactly uniting, interplay in a way that's much more creative than just staying as polar opposites. Things like that helped me and other Jungian analysts to think about politics in a way that's different from psychoanalysts. That's one source. The other source is scanning the texts, the manifestos, the brochures and leaflets of activist groups that I admire, whether it's Amnesty or environmental groups, or people for example who are interested in inner city issues, poverty and ethno-politics. I began to see how redolent of psychology their aims and goals are. So that's a second source. Thirdly, I practice what I preach. I observe my own bodily and fantasy reactions to politics; I observe how I'm silenced when I don't know things. In the world of therapists, I probably know more than the average about politics – know in the sense of factual knowledge. When I go out amongst journalists or academics, as a typical therapist, I know less. And I've often found that it's very hard – I become, if you like, the silent suppressed 'woman' figure in a group of factually switched on high energy dominant sort of men. I've learnt how difficult it is to get your own bodily and soul reactions to political things into conversations with such people.

On career

RW:

Tell me about some life experiences that led you to this work.

AS:

To make sense of what I'll tell you, you need to know that I dropped out of university, so I'm a Professor without a degree!

RW:

How do you manage that?

AS:

Well, there was a 'second chance' course at the London School of Economics where I got a diploma in Social Administration. And, if you got a distinction in that diploma, you could get on to a Post Graduate Social Work course. So I'm a post -graduate social worker. Then, with a very good social work qualification, I was able to use that to get into the analytical training. But my background – why I dropped out – was drama. I was a theatre director and ran a commune-style radical theatre company in the late 60's and early 70's in and around Oxford. Then I got seduced into applying for a job at the RSC [Royal Shakespeare Company]. Got the job.

RW:

Doing what?

AS:

To be an Assistant Director. I was only 22. Then I just had a change of heart and went off and started a drama and youth counselling project in South Wales. Then I realised I needed to get much more knowledge about the psychological side of things, working with these very difficult deprived kids. That's when I came and did the social work. Then I went into analytical training. The academic thing came along later, as a kind of a bonus when my Society (The Society of Analytical Psychology) decided to fund a Professorship. I applied for it and got it. I share it with Renos Papadopoulos, as you know.

After school I spent a year in South Africa – actually in Swaziland in Southern Africa. Officially I was working for the Colonial Office but in fact I had been recruited by the ANC. I got into terrible trouble, got discovered, got expelled from Swaziland, got imprisoned in South Africa, got expelled from South Africa. It was a fairly exciting year! I was only 17 or 18 at the time. That was pretty grim – prison wasn't very nice.

On Gender and Sexuality

RW:

You talk a lot about gender and sexuality. You make the powerful statement that: 'Homophobia is a political defence of the family as capitalism has defined it'. Perhaps you could elaborate on that:

AS:

In terms of being perceived as a group in society (and they're not really a group, of course), homosexuals are a terrific threat. Although of course they are men or women themselves, they represent a symbolic threat to that clear-cut definition of the two sexes. The cultural association is that they don't have families and that puts them outside the family structures which are still very central to capitalism. And lastly the fear of being effeminate or 'homosexual' is very much used to stop men becoming more involved, active, hands-on fathers.

RW:

In your chapter on a 'new deal for men and women', you bring in the idea of ambivalence (in the psychological sense) and 'the capacity to have simultaneous hating and loving feelings towards the same person' which I think is really helpful.

AS:

If you take something like equal opportunities legislation (which is 25 years old this month), the statistics

show that, while some things have changed, it has not achieved as much in 25 years as something so centrally positioned in society and backed by government should have achieved. And I'm wondering if that is because the psychological dimensions have been overlooked. It's a male dominated society. And, are men going to give up their power that easily? Are men going to give it to women who I think they have on the whole rather negative feelings about, as well as positive feelings? (And that means they are ambivalent.) The point is that government is terribly unhappy with thinking about citizens being sexed citizens. It is getting better - with the Women's Unit. But there's no Men's Unit – although I understand men's issues are going to be dealt with by the Women's Unit! The point is though that politicians – especially male politicians – are very reluctant to get into this way of talking and I have developed a whole idea about what I call sibling politics which is a sort of brother-sister model used to suggest ways in which male and female citizens might work together in spite of their ambivalent feelings about the other.

RW:

Now I want to play devil's advocate for a moment. Picking up on your reference to gay couples and families, and in particular gay people bringing up children outside of what I might call the 'traditional' heterosexual model (which could be thought of as the natural order)?

AS:

I think therapists are a very strange group when it comes to issues about different – or what I call transgressive - family styles because they above all know that growing up in the conventional nuclear family is no guarantee of happiness and mental health, so that they might be a bit more tolerant of these sorts of new style families that are emerging. However, what interests me about the therapists is how conventional they are! They are happier with straight people. They are happier with nuclear families. It is a very odd thing that we deal so much with the unconscious; we deal with the kinky – and yet we are a very conventional group of people. And I don't know what that is all about. It worries me that, even those therapists who are rather radical in many ways, stop being radical when it comes to sexual and family matters. And there's something I want to say here that is also very naughty and provocative – the personal lives of therapists do not reflect this professional conventionality at all. They are always having marital breakdowns and multiple affairs, and they know from their analyses that their sexuality is not as clear cut as it seems to be on the surface and so on. Why are they so conventional – many

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of them if not the majority – when it comes to public pronouncements?

When we set up PCSR (Psychotherapists & Counsellors for Social Responsibility) we were a group of therapists who thought were able to make public pronouncements of a more radical kind; we had lived lives that were not conventional and were prepared to valorise and support other people whose lives were not conventional. Otherwise you get situations where you'll find a middle aged female psychotherapist who has not had a relationship with a man for 25-30 years, who has not had sex for maybe longer, who will, when she talks about her clients, discuss them in terms that are really quite moralistic and judgemental as if her own life were somehow irrelevant to this discussion. (I'm not attacking such therapists, just pointing out the contradiction - they are aware that they, too, are 'weird' clients.)

RW:

Where do you stand on the question of same-sex couples having children?

AS:

The issue of same sex couples having children, whether the children are adopted, from test-tubes or come from previous unions with other people ...

RW:

Well, those are all very different categories.

AS:

They are very different. But that issue of same sex people looking after children is something there should be a national debate about. And lots of viewpoints will come in, and the context will vary in what will be said. I've noticed that, when you get a 'conventional' therapist talking about same sex couples having children, and you then introduce into the discussion a religious objection to it, then the therapist starts to become more radical!

RW:

I have no objection to same sex couples bringing up their own children – that goes without saying. Adopting is also another category that is less contentious. But producing babies in a test tube could be seen as going against nature, as in cases like Diane Blood (whose husband died and she wanted to produce a baby from her dead husband's sperm). These are deeply psychological problems.

AS:

I am more libertarian about this than you. But I know you're not prejudiced against gay people. In a way you're saying gay couples can't decide not to have their cake, and then eat it.

After the big campaign to get the major psychotherapy trainings to abandon discrimination against gay and lesbian candidates, we had a big conference and the audience was by definition highly liberal. And yet it was the question of gay parenting that produced the steam. At that conference there were therapists who were gay men or lesbians who had children in all kinds of different ways, and not one of them departed from the objective way of arguing. Not one of them said 'Look, I'm doing it. It's fine'. I thought that was bizarre. I could understand why they didn't, but I thought 'what a chance missed'.

The first longitudinal study of lesbian couples' children has been done and I am happy to learn that the results are completely uninteresting. They didn't

show anything. They're just normal kids.

RW:

I probably sound very conservative, but never mind. I probably am!

AS:

You are. Absolutely typical therapist! You're dead radical when it comes to politics, but when it comes to family stuff you remember you're a therapist and not a socialist! I remember a psychoanalyst disagreeing with me once saying 'Look, I'm a left winger too, but, as a professional analyst I have a different set of values'!

On Leadership

RW:

You talk about turning to siblings 'as an image of an alliance between female and male citizens' and that to me is a very novel idea which I think is really helpful.

AS:

It's in the zeitgeist. Juliet Mitchell's book on hysteria talks about sibling relationships. Of course neither of us had any idea what the other was up to. Hers came out before mine but was delivered before hers came out and, rather lazily, I did not go and check what she had done. Sibling politics resurrects the notion of a horizontal politics not a vertical politics. It is a model of politics in which a person's sex is very important and ambivalence is acknowledged.

RW:

It is very challenging to think in terms of politics along horizontal lines of power, but – and I don't know whether this is just my personal experience – sibling relationships are lethally rivalrous. I'm not sure that it would be an advance.

AS:

Of course the ambivalent alliance at the heart of sibling politics will break down. But all radical political organisations break down. We know it, sadly. In my book, what I say is that I am interested in the way siblings relate *before adolescence*. Because there you get often quite a playful rather nice relationship which does involve a joint alliance against the parents. It's only when puberty hits – and when the siblings become very powerful threats to the parents – that you find the really vicious aspects of their relationship coming up. You start to get the notorious stand off where brothers and sisters literally walk past each other in the corridors and rooms of the house without saying a word. Now of course the conventional psychodynamic explanation is that they are so hormonally charged, being adolescents, that they'd better ignore each other or they'd end up going to bed. But I think it's also got something to do with the politics of the family. If they did not ignore each other and got together in an alliance against the parents, they'd be a real threat.

The things that therapists know about brothers and sisters are very relevant to the question of what I call the sexed citizen. And the big discovery of the multicultural debate is that it matters whether you are a man or a woman, it matters whether you're black or white, whether you're gay or straight, Christian or not Christian, it matters whether you live in the north or the south. There is no citizen – there is only a citizen with specifics.

RW:

That's what you mean by the sexed citizen?

AS:

Well, the sexed one is the most interesting one for me because I'm a therapist and that's my background; that's what I'm interested in: sex and gender. Other people will be very concerned with the 'race' and ethnicity

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aspects of all of this. Still others – government policy people – will be very concerned with north-south. And believe you me that is a big divisive thing. I come from Liverpool. The heart of Liverpool and the heart of London could not feel more different. It's devastated still. There are still bomb sites from the war. It is a very jagged under-nourished urban environment in spite of trendy bits like the Tate Gallery at the Albert Dock. And, since you've been asking me about the autobiographical aspects of all this, although I had a middle class background and I went to boarding schools, I was terribly aware of the poverty in Liverpool. My grandfather on my mother's side of the family was essentially a slum doctor – a wonderfully dedicated GP. I was just aware of the gap between the haves and the have nots and the social problems. My mother started to do voluntary work and had a very productive and successful career in the voluntary social services and eventually became Vice Chair of the Area Health Authority, a Mental Health Commissioner for England and Wales, Chair of the Juvenile Bench and High Sheriff of Merseyside. I think she was shocked by what she saw when she began this work. She would come home and I would listen to her telling us about the cases she had at the Citizens Advice Bureau. And I think, looking back now (as people are always asking me 'why are you into this?'), I think this stuff played a part.

Being Jewish makes you radical and sensitive to oppression, even if somewhat blind to the fact that you're contributing to it - my family are business people.

Further Reading

Andrew Samuels, *The Plural Psyche*: Personality, Morality and the Father.

London and New York: Routledge, 1989.

Andrew Samuels, *The Political Psyche*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

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