Retro Review Classics

Review by **Helena Bassil-Morozow**

The Political Psyche

By: Andrew Samuels, Routledge, London, 1993

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The Political Psyche (1993) is a revolutionary book. It calls for dialogue between depth psychology and politics, and aims to reveal the obvious points of connection and interaction between the two. In fact, it acts like a trickster, challenging assumptions, uncovering the shameful and the hidden, introducing fresh new ideas and showing ordinary things from extraordinary angles.

Contrary to what politicians and other 'men in masks' might want us to think (or even to what they themselves might think), political decisions are never entirely objective, and nor are they free from the influence of the unconscious, be it desire for power, 'mother issues', racial prejudice or a distain for a particular social class. The issues which, at first sight, seem to be exclusively personal and intimate – for instance, father–son relationship and fear of effeminacy – are revealed in the book as being profoundly political; while events and phenomena that seem to be devoid of psychological content – market economy, recessions and depressions, ecological crises – are shown as having subjective and irrational aspects. In the mean time, patients bring their financial and social problems to the consulting room. In fact, in our day and age, they 'introduce political themes more often than they had before' (Samuels, 1993: 209).

The book fights off the normative view on both psychology and politics, always finding unusual, tricksterish angles to discuss cultural phenomena: the father is a role that can be adopted by the carer of whatever sex; gender confusion is good; the capitalist economy is run by the trickster, and therefore has as its base the theft of property as exemplified in the Greek myth of Hermes stealing Apollo's cattle; many aspects of Western politics are not at all rational but psychoid; and naïve individualism is good for you. It is time for politics to be resacralised, Andrew Samuels argues, and psychology can help it regain meaning and restore trust in the communal and the social. Devoid of meaning, this mechanical, narcissistic political world can only evoke 'a growing, collective sense of disgust, in both Western culture and the once-communist states' (1993: 13). These words are as topical today as they were 20 years ago, shortly after the Gulf War. Having since survived several military and terrorist catastrophes, the Western world is struggling to deal with a range of chronic economic and military issues, including the 'war on terror' and the global recession. Politics still needs to be resacralised, and brought to its senses before its false confidence and complacency lead to truly disastrous consequences for humankind.

It is not just contemporary politics that gets a lot of stick in the book. Equally, *The Political Psyche* exposes depth psychology's most conservative, stale, outdated, delusional and defensive moments. Some of its branches are so cosy in their little worlds that they react defensively to any external influences, challenges, attempts to introduce change – or even to the very idea of dialogue. They protect their shrines, their idols and their taboos. For instance, the object relations consensus is biased towards a developmental time-frame, and is obsessed with complementarity and wholeness. It tends to imply that (in direct contrast to the trickster) we all should be responsible, mature individuals, and prescribes ways of achieving this artificial state of wholeness. The object relations paradigm rejects the very idea of the trickster

as a chaotic, immature 'part-object', and 'tyrannizes' the 'numinous image of mother and infant' (1993: 274). The result is patriarchal, conservative and patronising: society and institutions are treated 'as if they were babies' (1993: 274), while all relationships are goaded towards rationality, maturity and internalisation (1993: 275). In such a society, the collective would lose its meaning as it would consist of robotic individuals incapable of spontaneity and emotional exchange.

Jungian analytical psychology, too, has its pitfalls. In fact, they are the opposite of the pitfalls exhibited by the object relations group. Unlike its rival, analytical psychology is obsessed with the collective, and has a relative disregard for the personal. With his deep interest in myth and the collective layer of the psyche, it does not come as a surprise that, at some point in his life, Jung felt an irresistible urge to follow the Nazi Pied Pipers; that he missed even in himself, self-reflective as he was, the warning signs of responding to the lure of the collective shadow. This failure is inextricably linked to his lack of interest in the basics of interpersonal interaction (which dominates the object relations school), in the intricacies of projective–introjective exchange, in the almost imperceivable (due to its psychological nature) chain of events when the personal becomes interpersonal, and then becomes collective. Analytical psychology is in love with the collective, but by the time the shadow reaches the collective level, it is too late to cure separate individuals from it, or to accuse them of being evil. The whole society has become evil, and Jung's tragic late realisation of this nearly cost him his reputation and career – to say nothing of the internal turmoil through which he must have gone.

Chapter 13 of *The Political Psyche* discusses subjects that are taboo for many Jungians who believe in the innate goodness and righteousness of their spiritual leader: Jung's anti-Semitism and his fascination with the Aryan myth. It is apparent that Jung is not a saint; that he has a shadow, too – and the Jungians should learn to face this shadow; they have to learn to deal with their leader's darkness. Jung himself wrote:

> The mirror does not flatter, it faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely, the face we never show to the world because we cover it with the persona, the mask of the actor. But the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face.
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> (Jung, CW9/I: para. 43)

Therefore, pretending that 'nothing happened' is not going to popularise the message of analytical psychology or to help the cause of its resacralisation. Renewal can only happen when 'Jung the man, the flawed (and hence overanalysed) leader, has been mourned can anything be learned from "Jung" the social and cultural phenomenon' (Samuels, 1993: 326).

Ultimately, the book argues, both the political and the psychological are deeply influencing each other, and are full of unsaid, hidden messages which call for illumination and discussion. Generally, resacralised depth psychology, just like resacralised politics, would have an internal trickster keeping it alive and challenging its stale assumptions, questioning its pseudo-rationality and confronting its systemic habits. For it is not the trickster, the chaotic, which gives birth to all kinds of oppression and fascism – it is his enemies, society's systemic and structural elements, the Nietzschean false idols that make hollow sounds when struck with a hammer.

References

Jung C.G. (1987) *The Collected Works* (CW), edited by Sir Herbert Read, Dr Michael Fordham and Dr Gerhardt Adler, and translated by R.F.C. Hull, London: Routledge

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