

## RETRO REVIEW CLASSICS

### Psychopolitics and Mad Studies

**Psychopolitics**, by Peter Sedgwick, London, Pluto Press, 1982, 304 pp., ISBN 10 0861043529

I didn't read Peter Sedgwick when I was young and he was writing. I was never interested in what felt to me like the sectarian parties of the left and internal Marxist/Leninist/Trotskyist disputes. If I had been more aware of him, I expect I might have lumped him together with that category and moved on. At the same time I was never comfortable with the anti-psychiatrists like Laing and Cooper or the simplistic presentation of social problems in films and plays like 'Up the Junction', 'Cathy Come Home', 'Edna the Inebriate Woman' and 'Family Life'. So for me, Peter Sedgwick's *Psychopolitics* is not a rediscovery, it is a journey of discovery. It is also a journey I have made as a mental health service user/survivor – so not the same journey I might have made when I was young and without this experience.

I have to say, particularly in the light of the conference held at Liverpool Hope University in June 2015 to celebrate Peter Sedgwick and *Psychopolitics*, that I think he still has many helpful things to say to us in the twenty-first century – especially as psychiatric system survivors. If we can get past what may feel sometimes like the fustiness of old Marxist styles and forms, here is someone with genuinely current and important things to say.

It is also opportune to be revisiting Sedgwick now as we are seeing the development of a new movement in 'mental health'; the emergence internationally of 'Mad Studies'. The strongest signal of this was the publication in 2013 of *Mad Matters*, a major text from Canada, where the movement originates, but the movement's momentum has grown ever since, not least in the UK (Le Francois, Menzies, & Reaume, 2013).

Lucy Costa, the Canadian survivor/worker/activist, has offered a helpful definition of Mad Studies on the Mad Studies Network website. She says that it is:

an area of education, scholarship, and analysis about the experiences, history, culture, political organising, narratives, writings and most importantly, the PEOPLE who identify as: Mad; psychiatric survivors; consumers; service users; mentally ill; patients, neuro-diverse; inmates; disabled – to name a few of the 'identity labels' our community may choose to use. ... Mad Studies, right here, right now is breaking new ground. Together, we can cultivate our own theories/models/concepts/principles/hypotheses and values about how we understand ourselves, or our experiences in relationship to mental health system(s), research and politics. No one person, or school, or group owns Mad Studies or defines its borders. As explained in the book *Mad matters*, Mad Studies is a 'project of inquiry, knowledge production and political action'. Presently ... we need more action. (<https://madstudies2014.wordpress.com/2014/10/15/mad-studies-what-it-is-and-why-you-should-care-2/#more-127>)

Costa makes clear that she sees Mad Studies as a co-operative venture, but one led by the experience, ideas and knowledges of ‘mad-identified’ people. If we are honest, this stands in some contrast to the anti- and radical psychiatry of the 1960s and 1970s, of which Sedgwick was strongly critical. This entailed very limited, if any, ‘user involvement’; the thinking still strongly came from professionals, and if people like R.D. Laing were critical of the implementation of psychiatry, they certainly did not reject psychiatry itself, or stand outside its orbit and authority.

Yet the legacy of anti-psychiatry remains strong, and at an international Mad Studies event at Durham University in 2015, one speaker suggested the continuing relevance of R.D. Laing for Mad Studies, posing the question: if R.D. Laing hadn’t existed, would Mad Studies need to invent him? For some of us, including me and perhaps Sedgwick, this may be a sign of the lack of confidence among us as survivors in our own theories, ideas and experience, and a continuing search for insights elsewhere – not least from the professions and policy-makers who have historically shaped understanding and ‘treatment’.

Yet I would argue that the survivor movement has been strongest, and I suspect that Mad Studies are likely to be most effective in the future where such dependence is challenged rather than perpetuated. I believe that Survivors Speak Out, the pioneering UK radical survivor organization, still offers us and Mad Studies many more insights and a much more helpful road map for the future than the kinds of oppositional professional and populist developments that Sedgwick lambasted.

Sedgwick was not optimistic about the development of a survivors’ movement – and perhaps in some senses he was right. In the UK, it has been unduly dependent on the service system and has often been co-opted by it, and ideas which it has espoused like ‘recovery’ and ‘mindfulness’ have been subverted to reinforce neo-liberal social policy and the continuing dominance of the medical model in mental health policy and practice.

At a time when psychiatry seems to be in an ever-strengthening alliance with neo-liberalism, both of them individualizing analysis and placing blame and responsibility on each of us for the social, economic and psychological difficulties we encounter, Sedgwick’s explicit left-wing critique demands to be reconsidered. It is set out most fully in his *Psychopolitics*, which offers detailed critiques of all his straw men: Foucault, Szasz, Laing and Goffman. But hopefully the renewal of interest in Sedgwick will also remind us of the much greater body of work he produced, which may now also become more readily available again.

Sedgwick raised two major issues which still need to be addressed. First, he was critical that mental health movements over-emphasized liberty issues and individualistic solutions. We might have grown much more wary of the individualistic solutions imposed on us, but I would argue that concerns about individual liberty should no longer have to be seen as conflicting with commitments to collective rights. The continuing question that faces us is how we more effectively reconcile and advance the two.

His second concern continues, in my view, to be a fundamental and inadequately addressed one. How do we approach issues of madness and distress in ways that are less likely to impose and perpetuate divisions between mind and body? This was a fundamental failing of psychiatry when Sedgwick was writing, and 30 years later it continues to be a major problem.

Now, as I have said, we are at the beginning of a new development, expanding international interest among service users/survivors, their families and progressive

professionals in Mad Studies. My great hope is that, whatever our starting point and whatever our perspective in this venture, we pay close attention to Sedgwick's work in trying to make sense of what has gone before. Sedgwick was committed to leftist politics, but as he put it, he was also preoccupied with the 'victory of humanity'. He saw the way to achieve this as a 'socialized and organized' humanity. He ends *Psychopolitics* by saying that the achievement of this 'is the central problem of psychiatric care. It is also the central problem of social liberation' (p. 256).

This also holds true for those of us who see a way forward in Mad Studies, and should be at the forefront of our minds as we seek to take it forward. Mad Studies combines a concern with the political, the psychological and self-liberation. If it is to have an enduring importance and impact, it must stay true to, and stay engaged with, all three.

### Notes on contributor

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### Reference

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### Therapy at the still point

**The art of Zen creativity: cultivating your artistic life**, by John Daido Looi, New York, Ballantine Books, 2005, 272 pp., £12.69 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-345-46633-4

The biggest clue to this book is right here in the title – art is not presented as a tool in the box, a qualification or a profession. Rather, it is presented as a form of life itself. Art is the scene of our life, and the scene of our life is Art. It became obvious to me in reading this book that therapy is also the scene of our life, which is also the nature of Zen, and so I found myself unable to escape the phrase looping in my mind: zen-as-therapy-as-art, or any permutation of that phrase. The phrase, though, came sometime after I had experienced something of a delight in my body. Looi's book helped me to clarify a number of threads that I had been holding for some years, not only during my work as a therapist, but also threads of my life as a whole. In the spirit of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the ladders I had climbed suddenly fell away, presenting me with inevitable new ones – a perpetual climbing we cannot escape – or as Zen would have it, perpetual beginnings.