

Weaving Voices Article (Aug-Dec 2001)

Contributions of the Members of the C. G. Jung Society of Sydney

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Andrew Samuels and Therapy as Politics

BY JON MARSHALL

Andrew Samuels, who is coming to Australia in November and who will be speaking to the Jung Society, is one of the most prominent post-Jungian thinkers, and perhaps the best known of those who are attempting to combine psychotherapy with political and social thought. In a brief interview he described his interests as being in: '(a) the politics of the profession; (b) the politics of the therapeutic relationship; (c) how to handle political material in the session; and (d) the application of therapy-thinking to politics'. He is the author of several books which deal with these issues, most notably *The Political Psyche* and *Politics on the Couch*. This short outline of his current thought focuses mainly on the letter work.

Therapy has almost always been separated from political or social involvement at anything other than the theoretical level. This is surprising, as social problems are known to cause psychological problems, and people bring the effects of their social life and their social concerns to therapy. Furthermore, therapists often use their experience and expectations about people of the particular social type of their client as a guide to interpreting what that client is saying. Samuels argues that the kind of insights that therapists bring to their clients, and the kind of experiences they have in dealing with the emotional, and sometimes hidden consequences of social life, can be used to give a form of therapy, or insight, to politics itself.

The position seems so eminently sensible that it needs to be remembered how unusual it is. James Hillman, for example, has responded to similar issues by deciding to stop practising as a therapist – in effect largely becoming a theorist interested in changing ideas, but apparently unengaged with political processes. Samuels also recognises that the claims of therapists to make comments on political life might seem unreasonable to those in political life and asks, as a first step, what has rendered therapists incapable of making useful interventions in political life. This is partly, he argues, because therapists have tended to reduce the social to the purely psychological, thereby trying to keep the therapist in a superior position; and partly because of the tendency to universalize prematurely about human experience and thus alienate those who do not experience in that kind of way. Particularly, he remarks in an interview, therapists tend not to deal with standard family organisations very well, preferring to deal with, or even demand, the nuclear family of social myth. It might also be suggested, in extension of these factors, that therapy tends to pathologise human behaviour, otherwise there would be no need for therapy; that therapy often focuses on exploring deep-seated human darkness rather than on finding solutions to more immediate problems, and that much therapy has focuses on getting people to adjust to their life situation rather than getting people involved with others in changing these life situations. As Samuels remarks elsewhere, it is almost as if political aspects of the psyche have been repressed.

Thus Samuels questions the division between politics and personal creativity, and suggests that psychic energy can flow in political channels as easily as in sexual, or symbolic channels. Thus in therapy we need the person's political history and political dreams as much as we need to know

their histories and dreams. We need to know how their experience of political events contributes to their sense of self, how their politics relates to the family experience – not just to the politics expressed in the family but the politics between family members. We may also need to know how their self-identity is tied to political positions, or to some kind of identity politics, which may or may not be being expressed, and which may or may not be useful to them. To investigate economics, we need to know the effects of their jobs on people, and even the effect of what Samuels calls 'vocational extinction' – the rapid loss of particular kinds of work and the effects of this on people's sense of security and on their relationships with others. We need to know how their families approach economic survival and dealt with economic problems and distributions amongst the family members. We need to know their fantasies about these issues, and their fantasies about things such as the distribution of wealth in society.

One thing that comes out of such a therapeutic investigation is the discovery that people are far more political than they think they are. The therapist also becomes more prone to investigate aspects of social life which produce misery and which impede change in the person, and perhaps to encourage them to engage with these problems. Individuation becomes both a personal and political activity.

So then, what kind of suggestions does Samuels make about how we should approach politics?

Firstly, he suggests that rather than falling into one or other side of a polarity we should, in true Jungian style, encourage the ability to entertain multiple values, or the ability to maintain both sides, keeping them in creative tension. For example, rather than demanding that people be completely and benevolently co-operative, or that people should be ruthlessly competitive, we should recognise that both responses are human, and likely to arise within the same human in different situations. Such a response may allow us to have more realistic expectations of people and their needs. This encouragement or ambivalence is then tied up with the idea that we should let go of demands for perfection – that we should realise that any political activity is likely to fail, and that it is likely to be ongoing and subject to modification. Demands for success can mean that we ride over the opposition, whether that is other people or the nature of reality, and suffer from unforeseen and probably drastic feedbacks. The demand for success can also result in paralysis and despair, when activities do not work out exactly as we want. In fact, Samuels goes so far as to suggest that most political apathy results not from real apathy, but from people's hyper-demands for perfection in a necessarily imperfect world.

As a further tool for lowering the demands for perfection, Samuels suggests that instead of demanding perfect leaders, with the resultant air of unreality or blanket condemnation, we should look for 'good enough leaders'. The idea is based in Winnicott's idea of the 'good enough mother', the idea that the child must be let down from its demands for perfection, and come to realise its own identity and ability. The same is the case for leaders. They cannot satisfy the demands of everyone, failure is inevitable, and leadership might even be considered the art of managing failure. This is clearly a more democratic view of leadership than the current view in the West, in which the leader fixes everything and rides over the opposition to show how strong and perfect they are. He also suggests that we try and develop ways of measuring non-economic factors in programs and policies, conducting, say, an Emotional or Social Audit, by asking of the policies or behaviours produce a general sense of well-being or not, and asking how this sense of well-being, or despair, might be distributed.

In more general terms, Samuels suggests that we investigate fantasies about social life, and relate them to social problems. Thus the fantasy of the free market, and of the controlled market, powerful as they are, may need to be relinquished, or kept in ambivalence. Fantasies about gender uncertainty as a problem for men (the so-called 'crisis in masculinity') may need to be revised if we

realise that gender uncertainty can only come about if people have solid expectations about gender behaviour. Gender uncertainty depends, on the difference between gender certainty and people's actual or required, behaviour. Similarly we might investigate our fantasies about fathers when we deal with the issue of single parents, particularly single mothers, who we usually condemn for being unable 'to father', or to parent properly. We could ask what is involved with fathering, investigate our fantasies of children being incorporated or devoured by the mother and our fantasies about the need for fathers to separate the children from the mother into the world. We could see this kind of fantasy present in the ways that people often berate single mothers for devouring their income of the State. These fantasies cannot be dealt with simply by dismissal, perhaps because they will return in some other form, but need to be approached carefully, investigated and countered or otherwise dealt with. The social problem needs therapy, and the citizen needs a conscious familiarity with the intertwined internal and external realms of experience and action.

As well as writing, Samuels has set up two organisations, Psychotherapists and Councillors for Social Responsibility and Antidote, which he describes as follows:

'PCSR is an organisation of therapists who speak as therapists. It joins in on political campaigns, writes letters, and that sort of thing. It also runs topic groups on, for example, politics or ecology for the members. We have intervened on women's prisons, Northern Ireland, the Middle East. Antidote is a therapy-based think tank, taking ideas of emotional literacy and applying them in spheres other than the personal – especially in education. WE have produced an Emotional Index which companies can use.'

In even this truncated account, Samuels can be clearly see to have interesting things to say about the relationships between therapy and the world, which might well help us all in the search for a truly functional politics.