

THE 'ACTIVIST CLIENT': SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, THE POLITICAL SELF AND CLINICAL PRACTICE IN PSYCHOTHERAPY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Andrew Samuels

Society of Analytical Psychology, London; University of Essex, UK

Correspondence should be addressed to Andrew Samuels, 565 Caledonian Road, London N7 9RB, UK. E-mail: andrew@andrewsamuels.net

ABSTRACT: The idea of the 'activist client' is intended to be taken both literally, and also metaphorically - applying to some extent to a wider range of clients than actual activists. The paper develops a set of ideas about a 'political turn' in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, using the tag 'the inner politician'. There is a focus on working directly with political material in the session, and the pros and cons of this practice are reviewed. Wider issues, such as social responsibility and social spirituality are discussed, as well as an exploration of the limits of individual responsibility. Some specific topics covered in the paper include: the political roots of depression, difficulties with the concept of the therapeutic alliance from the point of view of democratic perspectives on clinical work, and a challenge to the unquestioned valuing of empathy (based on a reading of therapy through a Brechtian lens). There are numerous clinical examples.

'I rebel, therefore we are' (Camus, 1951, p. 111, original emphasis)

The main aim of this paper is to fly the idea of the 'activist client'. The paper is focused and somewhat exaggerated, to make a point. It may seem cheeky or wrong-headed to some, or as having only niche utility due to its militancy. Yet a strong single beam of light is shone across a stage, brightly illuminating what is in its direct path, hence also revealing something on either glimmering side of the beam. So the paper is not only about clients who are already activists, though it is clearly relevant to them. Other clients with other therapists may also come into the picture - for all clients and all therapists are citizens with the rights, responsibilities, burdens, hopes and despair of citizens. I hope what I am suggesting will resonate with a wider range of

clients and therapists than might seem apparently to be the case, if not with every single client at all times. With this wider applicability in mind, I suggest that the ‘activist client’ is to be taken metaphorically as much as literally. In many ways, the linkage I am making is between two kinds of client activism – *the mobilization of political activism in society, and the discovery of a kind of clinical activism in session.*

In general terms, the paper is intended to contribute to the emergence of a ‘critical psychotherapy’ (Loewenthal, 2015; Samuels, 2015a) in which psychotherapy and psychoanalysis reflect on and problematize their own practices. On an anodyne level, that is why I call citizens who want therapy ‘clients’ rather than ‘patients’. And their paid professional would then be a ‘therapist’. Throughout, I have been careful with my use of the terms ‘therapy’, ‘psychotherapy’ and ‘psychoanalysis’.

More specifically, the ideas in the paper stem from the long-standing project of bringing therapy thinking to bear on politics, and political thinking to bear on therapy (Samuels 1993; 2001; 2015b). I felt it was necessary to explore some key themes stemming from this project before introducing the ‘activist client’ in a more direct manner. In the background lies our ever-deeper understanding that the self is a political self, that one form of psychic energy is political energy, that people have a line of political development and experience that can be elucidated and even theorised, that the unconscious is ‘normative’ to use Layton’s term (e.g. 2004). Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy generally are professional acts that cause us to discover (or maybe to rediscover) that they are by nature political. In and out of session, we are often dealing with what I call ‘the inner politician’. Isn’t the task of the therapy to facilitate people in stopping thinking like the state wants them to think, just as we try to facilitate judicious freedom from persecutory, authoritarian and judgemental parental introjects?

Social responsibility and social spirituality

A political or social focus does not remove clinical work from the psychological field. Social responsibility, freely and fully entered into, contributes to individual psychological vitality, not only in Daniel Stern’s sense of ‘vitality affects’ (e.g. 2010), but also in terms of life itself, of the principle of life itself. This piece of therapy thinking could contribute to a revitalization of our democracy: increased liveliness, energy, spirit, dynamism, passion, fire, vigour, élan, vivacity,

exuberance, bounce, verve, vim, pep, brio, fizz. (These words are just a few of the synonyms one finds for 'vitality'.)

I think there is a variant of social vitality, which I call 'social spirituality', to consider. Some clients (and probably some therapists) have never or rarely experienced this, and I think the absence is as much of a psychic problem as its opposite: an manic over-involvement with or fetishization of politics. In social spirituality, people come together to take action in the social sphere, doing this in concert with other people. When this happens, something spiritual comes into being. Being actively engaged in a social, political, cultural, or ethical issue, together with other activists, initiates the spiritual. This is a very different perspective from one that would see social spirituality as being something done in the social domain by spiritual people. On the contrary, there is a kind of spiritual rain that can descend onto ordinary people who get involved with others in political and social issues (see Samuels, 2001). For example, the Occupy movement or the protests against global capitalism and planetary despoliation come to mind - and, sadly but inevitably, do less salubrious movements of the right - xenophobic, populist and demagogic. Spirit has no politics as such; God has a right hand and a left hand after all!

What people are doing when they get involved in the anti-capitalist movements and the environmental and ecological movements is to participate in a general 'resacralisation of culture' (Samuels, 1993). To play on the word 'politicised', many activists also become 'spiritualised' via their involvements and engagements. When one gets involved in idealistic politics, sometimes, not always, one gets spiritualised, and so something like the anti-capitalist movement is creating its own spirituality and, in turn, is being reflexively informed by the spirituality that it creates. Political action leads to spirituality of some kind and spirituality informs political action. Of course, eventually it may all fall to pieces; either the police wreck it or people (allegedly) 'grow up', but there is a basic resacralising tendency worth recognising.

Now the clinical point concerns the people I mentioned who have never experienced this. When meeting a prospective client, or interviewing a prospective candidate, shouldn't we ask them about their political histories - non-judgementally, accepting that some will not have always been on a progressive, 'lefty' path? As I said, spirit is not always 'good', whether we like that or not, and experiences of social spirituality are available to fascists, rednecks, and homophobes. So, too, are the services of therapists, and that is as it should be.

Nevertheless, whatever the politics of the therapist or the politics of the client, shouldn't we explore why, if there has been little engagement with public issues on the part of an individual, this has been the case? Not 'Why have you been so manically political?' but 'Why haven't you been involved in politics at all?' It's important to do this in the knowledge that there are no correct answers, for many reasons for quiescence might exist, such as reacting to experience in a hyper-political family in which individual feeling was an apolitical luxury. But the point is that not to go into these areas is a truncation of what is possible in therapy.

Political material in the therapy session

Yet I believe we continue to struggle to find ethical ways of working *directly*, as opposed to making symbolic interpretations, with political, social and cultural material as it arises in the clinical encounter. Many of us seek to fully meet such material, in a responsible and relational manner. However, we still experience the psychoanalytic dead hand, the penumbra of criticism that this *Weltanschauung* is non-analytical, and that the analyst will simply foist his or her political views on the patient. When we add a 'political turn' to the relational turn, it may be asserted that we are acting *ultra vires*, beyond our authority or responsibility as analysts. It is a serious and important critique which can only partially be rebutted by saying – as I and others do – that yesterday's bad or impossible practice may be the cutting edge for today's clinicians. The purposes of the present paper include (a) the development of an adequate theoretical model to use as a basis for responsible handling of political material in the clinical session, and (b) discussion of how a supportive context for such work might be created.

Let's recognise that psychoanalysis and the psychotherapies are not alone in making a discovery or rediscovery of a latent political mission. For example, as will be discussed later in the paper, liberation theology sets out to engage with societies experienced as unjust and destructive despite criticisms from the Church establishment. So, too, have practitioners and theorists in the arts, despite criticisms from critics who regard the results as 'boring' and a betrayal, nothing to do with 'real' art.

Empirical research via international and multi-modality questionnaires (Samuels, 2006) shows that, in many countries, clients bring political, social and cultural material to therapy much more than they did (and, I would add, they will bring even more when they know it is 'permitted' to do so, that the rules of the game allow it). Therapy becomes a place where, in dialogue, client and therapist can work out their political attitudes and engagements. This can be as psychologically

transformative for each as a purely personal alchemy - and may be done even when one of them finds the political positions of the other to be horrid or reprehensible. It remains necessary to acknowledge professional fears of exerting too much influence and of 'foisting' one's political views on the client. But, apparently, the risk of 'foisting' strikes some commentators as being greater when the context and material is political than when it is sexual, aggressive, spiritual, or developmental. I am not sure this is so. The risk is there, and we should respect the history of our clinical theory about boundaries, suggestion and neutrality. But I am not sure there truly is a special problem when it comes to politics – or, if there is, whether that should give us cause to retreat immediately into neutrality and the eschewing of the political dimensions of life.

Emergence of an activist client

Here is a brief example of how a client got in touch with his inner politician. An Italian man, who came to therapy because, he said, of an intense depression, dreamt of *a beautiful lake with clear deep water*. He said this represented his soul and then immediately associated to *the high level of pollution on the Italian Adriatic coast*. The image of the lake, and the association to coastal pollution, suggested, in the form of one symbol, the client's unconscious capacity for depth and his present state, of which he was all too conscious – a state of being clogged up by 'algae', like the coastal waters of the Adriatic.

The client gradually became aware of the tension between the individual and the political presences of the imagery. What, the client and I asked together, is the role of pollution in the soul, or even in the world? What is the role of pollution in the achievement of psychological depth? Can the soul remain deep and clear while there is pollution in the world, in one's home waters? Did the lake, with intimations of mystery and isolation, clash with the popular, extroverted tourism of the Adriatic?

Eventually, the client's concern moved onto the social level: who owned this lake? Who should have access to such a scarce resource? Who would protect the lake from pollution? These were his associations. From wholly personal issues, such as the way his problems interfered with the flowering of his potential, we moved to political issues, such as the pollution of natural beauty, not only by industry but also by the tourism. And we also moved back again from the political level to the personal level, including transference analysis. I do not mean to foreclose on other

interpretations, but rather to add in a more ‘political’ one so that the client’s unconscious political commitments can become clearer.

He subsequently made a choice to return to Italy and, in his words, to ‘get more involved’, perhaps in environmental politics. Therapy supported what was there in him, rather than encouraging his activism. But, without therapy, would this particular individuation have taken place? I remain open-minded about this question – for ‘spontaneous remission’ is not a notion to be dismissed lightly.

‘For Samuels, politics plays an almost ontological role’ (Mitchell, 2000, p. 506)

Continuing to look at clinical phenomena, we come to this rather strange section heading. But the section illustrates, I believe, that the introduction of political language and dynamics into the session requires both an adequate supportive theoretical model and also a context in which there is support for the act itself. In this section, the accent is on the context; later, in a section on a Brechtian take on therapy, I work up the theoretical aspect.

Back in 2000, this journal produced a ‘Jungian issue’ (10:3), for which I acted as the liaison person. Seven Jungian analysts set out their stalls as clinicians and then commented on an extract from Stephen Mitchell’s book *Autonomy in Psychoanalysis* (1997, pp. 155-164). This extract concerned a piece of work with his patient, given the disguised name of ‘Andrew’. (*En passant*, I would add that this was a marvelous project and is still the single best way to discover the range of what contemporary Jungian analysts from across the world actually do.)

The interaction and dialogue between Mitchell and me, characterized by a high degree of agreement, may bring out many of the topics and issues covered in the present paper more convincingly than an assertive solo piece of my own could. I’d like to add as a personal note that I was working on this paper and had a dream of a political scenario in which Stephen Mitchell played a part and in a political context. This gave me the idea to present the fragment of dialogue as part of my paper.

In the extract, Mitchell described his work with ‘Andrew’, who had made a switch from being a music composer to being a businessman. He brought to analysis his profound sense of meaninglessness and of having no personal value. ‘Andrew’s’ father was ‘economically marginal’. Work with ‘Andrew’ led Mitchell to remember and reflect on certain experiences of his own and

to evince concern that he was getting too muddled up with this patient and/or using too much suggestion.

In the book extract we were given, Mitchell was clarifying his views as opposed to those of other leading contemporary psychoanalysts. Believing the context of intellectual work to be significant, and polemic to be at the heart of advances in any field, I wondered if Mitchell was perhaps a bit too worried about getting professionally smeared for showing that relational analysts get too mixed up with their patients, work only in the positive areas, disclose their autobiography including their political histories – blah, blah, blah. (In fact, if I had a criticism at all, it was that Mitchell was too cautious in his evaluation of the marked Trickster elements in the clinical narrative.)

Whatever, the relevance of this illuminating dialogue to the current paper are illustrated in this comment I made on some dream imagery that Mitchell reported: a prestidigitator (sleight-of-hand-artist) was doing tricks with coins and there is a ring made of gold:

The clinical material is full of economic and related imagery. The prestidigitator uses coins, the ring is of gold. Mitchell tells us that ‘Andrew’s’ father was ‘economically marginal’. ‘Andrew’s’ corporate life is reported as lacking meaning and value. Although the principal association on the part of the analyst was not economic, it was markedly political, and in any society the economic and political realms are connected – not only in terms of results and bottom lines but also in terms of meaning and values. Hence, the economic is psychological.

I think that one way into ‘Andrew’s’ pain would have been through a psycho-economic exploration of what he job actually was and what it meant to him. Early on, I found myself wondering why the move had to be so huge, from composer to executive. It is an example of what Heraclitus called *enantiodromia*, the swing of one extreme into its opposite: the artist, all pure and high-minded, into the venal (though comfortable off) businessman.

The way I work these days [this was published in 2000], I would have engaged Andrew in what I now openly call a discussion of some of these economic and political themes. Maybe (in my fantasy) it would lead him to find a job somewhere between the two extremes.

I think I would also have explored as much as possible what the relations were between his father’s economic situation and his own. To what extent is he still terrified of poverty? To what extent engaged in oedipal rivalry via his economic success? If there is a rivalrous element here, then could it not be the case that, at an unconscious level, Andrew actually strives to be less successful than his father? Obviously, one cannot say what the outcome of any particular line of exploration would be but this is what occurred to me.

I got the impression that what Andrew lacked was connection to any sense that involved *communitas*, a sense of emotional investment in his own society. I see this missing connection as imaged in the dream by the

filaments that link the moving coins. Andrew has yet to realise that the work he has chosen could be work that has contributed to there being no filaments in existence between him and other parts of the world. (Samuels, 2000, pp. 421-422)

Mitchell replied:

Samuels raises fascinating questions about my concerns about influence. He wonders about the intrusions of conventional morality, my fears of being smeared by my colleagues, and possible regrets about my own life choices and defenses against unconscious analytic sadism. Politics and economics play a fundamental, almost ontological role in Samuels's sense of life, so he would want to use the dream to open up questions in these areas. Mitchell, 2000, p.506.

Class and the inner world

Mitchell's account of the work with 'Andrew', and the psycho-economic aspects of his relationship with his father, serves as an introduction to a brief consideration of class issues in therapy work. As Corpt writes, in an incisive and moving account of social class in the context of psychoanalysis: 'When client, analyst, and the very profession of psychoanalysis disavow the psychological complexities of social class, important conflicts and injuries are inevitably overlooked and therefore are unavailable for analytic understanding' (Corpt, 2013, p. 65).

The topic of economic inequality is discussed everywhere these days (e.g. Picketty, 2014), though little is done to challenge the fundamental sadism of the financial arrangements in Western polities. Thinking about inequality for a moment, it is clear that a relationship exists between *class* and the individual's *inner world*. Many people have achieved a higher socioeconomic status than their parents. And yet, in their inner worlds, encountered in therapy, in dreams perhaps, the social class they grew up in is still the social class they are in in terms of psychic reality and narrative truth.

A client who worked as a banker dreamed frequently of the coal mine where his father had worked. The (male) solidarity of the miners – for example, when there was a disaster underground - struck him as different from the atmosphere and ethos of his large Wall Street investment bank. We did of course play a little with what we were 'mining' in the analysis, but the main thrust of our dialogue about these dreams was in terms of a thorough, many-layered, compassionate and healing *comparison* of his entire situation with that of his father's. Not competition with the father. There's more to intergenerational male relating than Oedipus – and

the Oedipus complex is not a politically neutral idea.

The typical move – or at least it used to be typical, it may not be so for much longer – is from working class to middle class. To the extent that a passion for social and economic justice exists (for good reasons) in the working class, you can see how destabilizing and ego-dystonic their ruthless rise to the top is for some people. I have had several clients like that. This specific point about class and the inner world applies with particular force when the client is a member of a minority ethnic community. What can't be avoided is that we may be up against a psychodynamic barrier to social mobility and economic equality. The good news is that I think, clinically and culturally, we can do something about it. (I develop these points at length in Samuels, 2014b.)

Political roots of depression

This paper probes the political phenomenology of clinical work in the therapy field. It was observation and conversation with colleagues that led me to suggest that some, maybe many, clients suffer from a kind of repression of their political selves. They are cut off from the vitality of social spirituality. They are struggling to get in touch with their 'inner politician'. Other clients have intense political engagements - but doubt that, as an individual, they can 'make a difference'. Hence, their idealism goes underground and may be sometimes understood, incorrectly in my view, as political apathy or even political despair. But is it? What looks like apathy is actually a pervasive sense of powerlessness, often coupled with intensely guilty self-criticism. Sometimes apathy follows on from what is believed by the subject to be failed activism. It is a special kind of depression, with political roots.

What does it mean when people use a psychological word – depression - about a political or social issue? About a general election? If you say you feel depressed or guilty about the election, the environment, climate change, or species depletion – what are you saying? Many psychotherapists understand depression as resulting from feeling angry and destructive towards someone you basically love and need. The classic example is at a time of bereavement. The mourner may feel at some level that their bad feelings towards the dead person somehow caused the death. Or they may be angry at having been left. In either case, there is a feeling of being responsible that leads to guilt, self-reproach (often of delusional proportions), and very low spirits with a lack of emotional, cognitive and physical energy. The capacity to act is vitiated.

That feeling of guilty responsibility interests psychotherapists who want to bring 'therapy thinking' to bear on political problems. In terms of climate change, for example, we can see similar dynamics (though it's important to be careful in mapping off from individual psychology to collective psychology). We love the earth yet we can see how destructive we can be towards it. Our guilt then paralyses us and we enter a political depression that we struggle to overcome. In order to avoid the depression, some may even deny that climate change is taking place. Hence it is reasonable to suggest that depression has social and political roots beyond revulsion at mainstream politics - and does not only have to do with parents, partners, relationships, and all the usual therapy lines. Paradoxically, political depression also has to do with commitment and activism themselves.

The question of anger comes up in therapy in relation to almost any political theme: economics, multiculturalism, war, leadership. It doesn't matter which side of a debate you are on to feel angry. In addition, you do not have to be directly affected to feel angry, though excluded and disadvantaged people are, of course, more likely to feel it. The point is that when you have political anger in a form that cannot be managed or resolved, you will find some kind of depression and guilt and, as mentioned, this works against a sense of political agency and possibility.

I recall this vividly from work with a client, called, for the purposes of this paper, Lorraine. She was a very active feminist, undertaking spectacular public events that found their way into the media. As time passed, she began to feel it was all a waste of time and futile. She became depressed, a burned-out activist by the age of 25. I am not going to narrate that therapeutic exploration rekindled her political ardor to its former intensity and efficacy – but it did enable her to see how it was her very passion and anger, not their shameful dribbling away, that led to her intensely painful depression. She was angry with herself, her 'sisters', her parents, men, the patriarchy, the corporations and me. She had begun to feel destructive in the political sphere and this was implicated in her depression. Gradually, Lorraine came closer to accepting that political perfection is unattainable. She discovered that if she asked of herself only that she be a good-enough citizen, she might be less mired in her sense of depressive despair. Then a small degree of political hope might re-awaken, as it did in her case.

Focusing on the client

The preceding sections of the paper offer an essential backdrop and introduction to a consideration of the politics of being a client. What we are currently seeing in the literature, and hence we may assume is taking place in practice, is the emergence of a rather new conception of the client, a perspective that sees *the client as the motor of therapy*. This client is a heroic client, a client who knows what she needs, a client who can manage her own distress. Some clients engage less in a process of healing or cure and more in a process of ongoing personal and political enquiry. This multi-faceted new client is potentially a healer of others, especially the therapist, and, in a sense, of the world.

Summarising a mass of research findings, Norcross (2011) has forced us to consider whether it truly is the therapy relationship that does the business. Is the private and highly personal therapy relationship the main thing that makes therapy work? Not really. In common with other leading researchers, such as Lambert and Wampold, Norcross summarises that ‘unexplained and extra-therapeutic factors’ amount to 40% of efficacy, ‘the client’ accounts for 30%, the therapy relationship 12%, the actual ‘therapist’ 8%, the ‘school or tradition or modality’ of the therapist 7%.

Of course, Norcross would be the first to admit that therapy is a melange of all of these and I would add that the findings do not do more than behave us to re-consider our ideas about our clients. These figures are far from veridical. But let’s take them as heuristic, stimulants to critical thinking about clients. Who they are, what do they want, and what point in their life journey have they reached? What stage have they reached in what Norcross calls their ‘trajectory of change’?

As we know, there are some clients from whom one learns great and healing lessons. My first training ‘case’ had a dream early on in the analysis. She dreamt: ‘I visit a doctor who is ill in bed. He begs me to stay’. Her associations to ‘bed’ were of illness not of sexuality. How else could we understand this dream? Was the doctor in fact me?! Or was this an assumption, intended to justify what has been called a ‘you mean me’ interpretation (a here-and-now transference interpretation)? Was there denial here, in that she is the ill one and I am truly the doctor? Or is she in the grip of an inflation, taking herself as the one who brings life and succour, like a mother to her therapist-child?

Or was this dream, perhaps, *an accurate political perception*? I did need something from her, and not just that she sticks with me so I could get through the training. Crucially, there would be a further accurate perception in the dream: that she could in fact help/heal this doctor. This was in early 1974 and, at that time, pre Searles (see below,) it would have been difficult to think of the client as healer of the therapist. Much has changed. (I write at length about working with this client, 'D', in Samuels, 1985.)

Recent thinking about the client has moved in this general direction of envisaging the client as 'active'. From the person-centred approach, we find Bohart and Tallman referring to the 'active client' (1999). This is an important corrective to the psychoanalytic expectation that the role of the 'patient' is to provide unconscious material via free association. Whilst often very important, it is not hard to see how this perspective may reduce the value given to the client's active involvement in the work.

Rogers (1951), in the era when the discourse was of 'client-centred' therapy, makes it clear that the client knows for herself what is needed, where she wants to go. Jung (1946) writes of entropy in the client, an innate process of self-regulation. From relational psychoanalysis, we read that Hoffman (2006) regards the client as having responsibilities to the analyst and the analysis, more than just for the co-creation of the therapy relationship.

So the therapist is, in a way, adjunct to the therapy process. But she is also a contingent figure, product of a particular social circumstance. Frank (1961) suggested that what makes the therapist is not only training, techniques, wounds – but also having been socially sanctioned as a therapist, a sort of over-arching placebo effect. The therapist is socially sanctioned, granted permission to be a therapist – by society, *and, I must add, by the client*. Hence it behooves us to have in mind that all the analytic creativity and innovation that we rightly applaud is an epiphenomenon of the client's having sanctioned the therapist to be so safe, smart and related in the first place. As Paul Atkinson (personal communication, 2015) puts it: 'The client's gift to the therapist - firstly appearing at their door and then constantly activating the work - is the most energetic factor in therapy'. This is, I think, still, even now, a rather new version of a client: a person who does not want the therapist to be the one who knows, or even the one who is supposed to know.

This paper began life as part of a project for a more critical psychotherapy and has the frank aim of valorising the client's contribution. But, in true critical fashion, one needs to remain aware that active clients have the potential to ruin as well as to fashion the work. Co-creation cuts both ways, destructive as well as creative, hard as that is to take in sometimes.

Be that as it may, let's see what happens if we revision the therapy relationship with all of these thoughts about the client in mind. It has gradually dawned on me that clients sometimes do not dare to deploy their tacit knowledge and emotional literacy. We therapists are fine with this because it leaves us free to do our work. But that could, and, from critical and political perspectives, maybe should change.

The 'activist client'

These observations on the politics of the therapy relationship lead me to suggest that the new model client, the client as the motor of therapy, is increasingly a politically aware client at some level. But not all politically aware people are activists; nor are all clients. Yet the argument of the paper is that how deeply 'activist' a client remains something to be curious about and explicate in therapeutic dialogue. One possible outcrop of therapy might be that, during the work, the client may develop her capacity for alterity, meaning, amongst other things, an empathic concern for the other. Yes, this does mean other people – but there is a more-than-personal version of alterity to consider. For example, for a client living in a multi-cultural world, meeting his or her inner psychological diversity in a new and positive spirit could lead to developing an analogously positive attitude to outer diversity in society, one which had not been there before. This, in turn, might lead to active support for those discovered by the client as hitherto subject to social exclusion. The move would be from self-acceptance of previously disowned or marginalised elements in the personality to political acceptance of similar elements in culture. In general, therapy work often leads to a sharpening or awakening of various latent political 'commitments', possibly entered into without full buy-in from the conscious ego.

To the idea that a client is an active client, we could now add that activist clients have the potential to be citizen-therapists for the wider world with its environmental problems, economic injustice and ubiquitous violence. The therapy client, revisioned as a socio-political healer, may now be understood to be a socially responsible agent of *Tikkun Olam*, the drive to repair and restore the world.

Back in 1975, Searles published his paper 'The client as therapist of his analyst'. In summary: if part of 'mental health' is to want and be able to help and heal others, then isn't this something to work on in analysis? If so, said Searles, then isn't the patient the obvious person to practice being a healer on the analyst? In a sense, I am extending Searles's vision. His arc was the move from healing the analyst to healing other people. I extend it to embrace healing beyond specific human

others, to reach out to the social and political crises of our times. This, I am saying, is good for the soul. Activism is good for the soul. Mostly. I enter this caveat because it has to be admitted, as I have done on previous occasions (e.g. 2001, 124-125), that you can't guarantee that the activism in question is one of which you approve. Sometimes, what unfolds is of a prejudiced or extreme right wing nature. Sometimes, it may strike the therapist as extreme from a left-wing perspective. Whatever the therapist thinks about this, she must stay true to her task of facilitating the client in whatever direction the client has chosen to go.

But the therapist, too, may have to change direction, eschewing, possibly temporarily, what she has typically thought and done in the session. Such a change of direction in theorising practice is the focus of the next section.

Beyond empathy – a Brechtian angle on the therapy encounter

You can call it the 'alienation effect, or 'distanciation', or 'estrangement'. In German, *Verfremdungseffekt*. Bertolt Brecht's much-studied attempts to avoid empathic identification by the audience with the characters in a drama seem at first sight to be utterly foreign to the values and practices of all the therapies, including psychoanalysis. Empathy is our stock in trade, isn't it? Can you imagine relationality without empathy and a degree of identification with your client? Surely 'analytical distanciation' would just be a return to the bad old days of neutrality and abstinence? Let's suspend quick reactions and discuss these points for a while. I hope to persuade readers that Brecht's take on human and social dramas can be perceived as coming to the aid of the practitioner who seeks to work with the political dimensions of social experience in therapy – but may feel that there is little extant theory to act as a heuristic guide.

Brecht did not invent the idea of drama with a social conscience, but he developed the theatre as a space for social and political debate (Willett, 1959). The goal was to change the status and role of the audience leading to the creation of an 'active spectator', participating in an argument rather than identifying with a heroic character.

In the old theatre, the individual human being was taken for granted. But, for Brecht, the characters in a play are not heroic, but ordinary persons in a social context, engaged in an episodic narrative, often expressed – paradoxically – in lyrical language. Brecht developed a raft

of techniques to carry out the distancing, including the use of placards on stage during the performance.

What does all this mean for clinical work? Earlier I was discussing the problematic of working with openly expressed political material. Now, as I suggested earlier, this is still a minefield, though it is clear that many of us want to pick our way through such dangers, sensing there is gold-dust to be found.

I am proposing that Brecht's theories of theatre practice are challenging and inspiring in this context. If therapist and client think together, argue together (whether it is with one another or as political allies in relation to some opponent or crisis), then it still stays in the affective realm, still contributes to vitality. *Connection and distancing function as two poles of the therapy project.*

The suggestion I am making is that clients, and their relationally involved therapists, start to practice 'ex-volement', a neologism that implies standing outside the play of images, affects and bodily processes that constitute the therapeutic (or any other) relationship. So the analysing couple might, in some circumstances (not all the time) reverse the poles of what they ordinarily do, and distance themselves from emotion. It is pretty extreme, actually, this suggestion of a de-privileging and radical reframing of the personal level. Affect, emotion, even intimacy itself – all become things to interrogate

As far as the client is concerned, for me these lessons from Brecht chime with what was referred to above, coming out of person-centred humanistic psychotherapy, as 'the active client' (Bohart and Tallman, 1999). I've added, with a little help from Brecht, the notion of what the role of a more active or even activist therapist might be.

Here is a very brief clinical vignette of ex-volement in the clinic. Yasmine is, let's say, Egyptian and a TV reporter on politics. I've disguised her identity. She came to analysis hoping that something might be done about her virginity at the age of almost 40. She was feeling an intense sense of failure as a woman both in terms of her background in an Arab culture and also in her lived experience in a Western country. She could not comprehend how this double blow had come to pass.

Yasmine chose a Jewish male therapist on purpose. I had decidedly mixed feelings about being informed that Jewish 'doctors' were legendarily smart and that the Indian general practitioner she had consulted was 'useless' on account of her origins. The idealisation of my Jewish nackground was, of course, both defensive and reactive. When the conversation turned to the Palestine-Israel

situation, she was not slow to link Israel's 'sadism' (her word) with the Shoah experiences of Jewish people.

It became clear that Yasmine had never really explained her sexual symptomatology to a health professional. With the general practitioner, she had ducked the issue out of shame and embarrassment. It took a long time for her to be able to trust me with a description of her sexual experiences and what she told me reminded me of what a girlfriend of mine had gone through almost 50 years ago. I invited Yasmine to the side of the room where the computer was located and together we Googled 'hymenitis'. On subsequent medical examination by an 'English' gynaecologist, it turned out that there was a physical problem and the next step was to consider surgery.

All of this needs to be understood as going on against a backdrop of Yasmine's belief that, despite no actual memories, she had been sexually abused by someone in the family. There were dream images and narratives that she felt supported this hypothesis, and I considered that it was likely to have been the case. This mixture of material involved some psychological and cultural issues of great profundity and delicacy concerning femininity and the female ideal at work in Yasmine's consciousness and unconscious.

I do not think I could have worked with her through the emotional densities attached to all the apparently outer world themes if I had not practised a kind of ex-voivement. The Brechtian place was one that provided a foundation for a series of 'arguments' about ethnicity, geopolitical conflict, fertility and sexuality, with a two-way didactic flow. Maybe neither of us used placards, but we came very close to it. To be clear, I am not saying that a therapist without the Brechtian bee in his bonnet could never have achieved a rather positive outcome. But the vignette does show, I contend, that without some kind of theory upon which to base interventions into the 'real', there is a greater risk of it going wrong.

Drawing back the camera a bit, the question I am introducing on the basis of this brief clinical summary concerns the potential deceptiveness of the personal dimension. We know this often hides and leads to a wider issue. Brecht's ideas are useful for providing a back-up for the temporary avoidance of the personal and the highlighting of the political. He says to the clinician (and also to the supervisor, I think) 'Follow the story, follow the argument – don't only get caught up in the human drama'. Brecht might well say that empathy is itself often achieved by a suspiciously heroic effort and therapists and analysts need to see through that and question whether, in empathy, they have found their gold standard.

A note on some conservative aspects of relational psychoanalysis

I think there may be some institutional or even ideological obstacles to what I am putting forward, and I would like to anticipate and explore them. (A fuller account of the ideas contained in this section of the paper may be found in Samuels, 2014a).

Have psychoanalysis and psychotherapy overdone the stress on providing a secure container within which a therapy relationship can thrive? Safety and security will always be needed at some time or other – but all the time? There may be a risk of a tilt in the direction of behavioural conformism and a corresponding moralism. This isn't going to help the activist client.

What are the disadvantages of the current stress on the frame, on boundaries, on the container? Doesn't this lose the element of surprise, the risk inherent to psychotherapy, the exposure to danger that is involved in any radical or revolutionary process of self-understanding and/or growth? Are we witnessing the deformation of psychotherapy in the relational mode into nothing more than an attuned offer of nurture, safety and a secure parental base. Is this not therapist as parent – or, more often, therapist as mother? Could it be that when we valorize attachment and intimacy we are not aware of the political and cultural structures we have created and instead put our own conceptual needs first?

Democratic art, democratic analysis and the therapeutic alliance

I want to push this critique of relational work, including my own, a little further, to consider whether we have created an elitist or at least non-democratic ethos in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. I need to pull the camera back a little to look at how an orthodox doctrine with elitist tendencies and a top-down history was tweaked so as to develop its emancipatory and inclusive potential. I am saying the same can be done with psychoanalysis.

Liberation theologians, mainly in Latin America between 1950 and 1990 re-oriented the Roman Catholic Christian project in their countries. As Seligman (personal communication, 2016) put it, 'they added Christian universalized charity-love to Marxism in a political activist direction'. To achieve this, liberation theologians took issue with Marx. Marx considered that the lowest of the low, the lumpenproletariat, were incapable of making a revolution. Liberation theologians, such as Leonardo Boff, challenged this Marxian elitism. For Boff, it is the poorest, most

downtrodden, most out-of-it, most derided and excluded who will make the revolution. Was Boff thinking of the Psalmist's image (118:22) that 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone [of the Temple]. Another critic of Marx's elitism, George Orwell, got there too: 'If there is hope, it lies in the proles', thinks Winston Smith in *1984*. Orwell wasn't concerned with Marxist theory so by 'proles' he means those of whom Boff was writing - people not considered fit to make revolutionary changes.

These thoughts about liberation theology introduce a succinct account of what I am calling 'democratic art', with the aim of producing an initial sketch of what a more 'democratic' and inclusive therapy might look like. One that extends beyond the conventional clinical office with the usual range of clients, and one that is truly open to all, including those clients, not all of them male, who are 'hard to reach'.

I am not referring, on this occasion, to the power dynamics of the therapeutic relationship and process, or to its micro-politics. Nor to analysis and therapy as social institutions with a precise places in culture, one that varies from locale to locale, era to era. Nor do I have time and space in this paper to join in the recuperation of how it was in the past - the Polyclinics, Marx-Freud projects, red therapy, and so on. All these are tremendously important topics that many colleagues have worked on. But my focus right now is a little different.

So – democratic art. In the Ice Age, 40,000 years ago, something recognisable as art gradually appeared in Europe. It was sophisticated and intentional, involving highly developed cognition and applied imagination. Curators of exhibitions (Cook, 2013) of such art asked: why do people make art at all? Why do they shape figures to look like women and men? Why do they record their ordinary daily lives? Why do they make symbol-laden art that is not based on 'reality', like the Lion Man sculpture with human body and leonine head?

Humans have needed to make art, just as they have needed to make religion or politics. My suggestion is that client and therapist alike can be inspired by the democratic realisation that imagination and creativity are not reserved for the Special Ones whose culture makes it easier for them to 'do' analysis. There should be no psychoanalytical equivalent of the 1% in the economic sphere!

This means that there are some significant challenges to how many of us envision the work. We value the therapeutic alliance, but could it not be said that there is a secret elitism in this core concept? Even something esoteric? The parallel is with the professionalization of art, so to speak, since the Ice Age. The therapist is the professional who belongs always already to the

secret society of the therapeutic alliance. She is inviting, or, rather, hauling up the client into the alliance. We might question this exclusivity more than we usually do.

I sometimes imagine this dialogue:

'I am the initiated analyst, ready (trained) to enter into an intense, mutual, empathic relationship and therapeutic alliance with you that, though it will benefit us both, is at your disposal, whether for relief of your symptoms, or for growth, or simply for exploration.'

But the client all too often replies, in effect: *'Fuck off, you narcissist, you are so self-centred and self-important. You have put yourself up on a pedestal and you reach down to me with an out-stretched hand to haul me up to your level. Big deal. Are you really and truly so much above me to start with? How can we have an "alliance" if we come from such different starting points?'*

It is something I have heard from the mouths of clients who are not white, not middle-class and not straight. But I have also heard it from the mainstream as well, and particularly from men. My imagined protest speech could be what a lot of male clients want to say and, even if I am only partially correct in this, we should be very cautious at dismissing those male traits which have been researched: the reluctance to admit that something is wrong (and this pertains to physical illness as well as psychological distress); the emphasis on quick solutions; the lack of emotional expressiveness and communicativeness. My experience, and that of others who work with men with whom I am in contact, is leading me to wonder if we have maybe under-estimated men as a group when it comes to analysis and psychotherapy. Hence, holding working with men in mind, there may be a need to consider the notion that the existence of democratic art might breathe life into the hope for a democratic therapy.

Concluding thoughts

Over the past fifteen years, I have built an international practice as a political consultant working with leading politicians (including during presidential or general elections), with their advisers and parties, and with activist groups.. What I have written here is grounded in these experiences (see Samuels, 2004). In particular, I seem to have gravitated to work in the general area of nationalism, national identity, and nation building - in South Africa, Brazil, Poland and Russia (see also Samuels, 2001, pp. 186-194).

I am not saying that every client should become an activist, only that failure to recognize the political dimensions of personal growth is not helpful to our clients. Nor am I proposing unlimited and unending exercise of social responsibility. There are limits to individual responsibility and we need space to reflect upon *not* making a difference.

What, then, is the scope of our individual responsibility for others and for the world? What are its moral and ethical bounds? The roots of the word ‘responsibility’ lie in *spondere*, to promise or pledge, but what happens if we promise too much? In politics—and, I suppose, in life—there is a problem of people being too demanding of themselves. If we cannot live up to these demands, our idealism and energy go underground and are self-suppressed. ‘Activist client’ burn-out?

Let us think about how an exaggeration and idealisation of political energy and idealism affects *Tikkun Olam*. This is, as I see it, a necessary balancing and cautionary note on which to end the paper. If one tries to do *Tikkun* from too perfect a self-state, it won’t work because the only possible way to approach and engage with a broken and fractured world of which one is a part is, surely, as a broken and fractured, stunted individual: an individual with death in mind: the ‘good-enough activist’. Hence, failure to make a difference in the world to the extent one had hoped becomes something to explore in therapy, something much less shameful so that one becomes less self-denigrating. It becomes okay to fail in politics. This is important because shame at failure is what leads to depression and guilt and so destroys the impulse and the capacity for action. Activists in particular need a different attitude to their failures, particularly the failure of their political hopes, aspirations and projects.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments and feedback on drafts of this paper from Matt Aibel, Sue Austin, Sissy Lykou and Jutta Stamp.

References

Bohart, A. & Tallman, K. (1999). 'Empathy and the active client: an integrative, cognitive-experiential approach'. In A Bohart & L. Greenberg (eds) *Empathy Reconsidered: New Directions in Psychotherapy*. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Camus, A. (1951). *The Rebel* (Trans J. Laredo). London: Hmish Hamilton, 1953.

Corpt, E. (2013). 'Peasant in the analyst's chair: reflections, personal and otherwise, on class and the forming of an analytic identity'. *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology*, 8:1, pp. 52-69.

Frank, J. (1961). *Persuasion and Healing*. New York: Basic Books.

Hoffman, I. (2006). 'The myths of free association and the potentials of the analytical relationship'. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 87.

Layton, L. (2004) 'A fork in the royal road: on defining the unconscious and its stakes for social theory'. *Psychoanalysis, Class and Society*, 9(1), pp. 33-51.

Lowenthal, D. (Ed.) (2015) *Critical Psychotherapy, Psychoanalysis and Counselling: Implications for Practice*. London: Palgrave.

Mitchell, S. (1997) *Influence and Autonomy in Psychoanalysis*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.

Mitchell, S. (200) Response to commentaries. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 10:3, pp. 505-507.

Norcross, J. (2011). *Psychotherapy Relationships that Work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Rogers, C. (1951). *Client-Centered Therapy*. Cambridge, MA: Riverside.

Samuels, A. (1985). *Jung and the Post-Jungians*. London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Samuels, A. (1989). *The Plural Psyche: Personality, Morality and the Father*. London and New York: Routledge.

Samuels, A. (1993). *The Political Psyche*. London and New York: Routledge.

Samuels, A. (2000). Post-Jungian Dialogues. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 10:3, pp. 403-426.

Samuels, A. (2001). *Politics on the Couch: Citizenship and the Internal Life*. London: Karnac.

Samuels, A. (2002) 'The hidden politics of healing: foreign dimensions of domestic practice'. *American Imago: Studies in Psychoanalysis and Culture*, Vol. 59, no.4, pp.459-482 (Winter, 2002).

Samuels, A. (2006). 'Working directly with political, social and cultural material in the therapy session'. In *Psychoanalysis, Class and Politics: Encounters in the Clinical Setting*. Eds: L. Layton, N. C. Hollander and S. Gutwill. London and New York: Routledge.

Samuels, A. (2012) 'Putting imagination to work'. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 22:5, pp. 555-561.

Samuels, A. (2014a). 'Shadows of the therapy relationship'. In *Relational Psychotherapy, Psychoanalysis and Counselling*. Eds: D. Lowenthal and A. Samuels. London and New York: Routledge.

Samuels, A. (2014b). 'Economics, psychotherapy, politics'. *International Review of Sociology* 24:1, pp. 77-90.

Samuels, A. (2015a) 'Everything you always wanted to know about therapy (but were afraid to ask): fragments of a critical psychotherapy'. In *Critical Psychotherapy, Psychoanalysis and Counselling: Implications for Practice* (ed. Lowenthal, D.) London: Palgrave.

Samuels, A. (2015b). *A New therapy for Politics?* London: Karnac.

Searles, H. (1975). 'The patient as therapist to his analyst'. In *Tactics and Techniques in Psychoanalytic Therapy, Vol. II*, ed. P. Giovacchini. New York: Jason Aronson, pp. 95-151.

Stern, D. (2010) *Forms of vitality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Willett, J. (1959) *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*. London: Shenvall Press (1964).

CONTRIBUTOR

Andrew Samuels is a psychotherapist, professor, writer and activist. Founder of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility (UK), former chair of the UK Council for Psychotherapy, founder board member of IARPP. His most recent book was *A New Therapy for Politics?* (2015). www.andrewsamuels.com

