

Containing Tensions – Psychoanalysis and modern policy-making

Andrew Cooper

What can contemporary psychoanalysis offer to modern policy making and progressive political practice? Psychoanalysis today offers a distinct vision for politics, bringing learning from the dyadic encounter between therapist and patient and from interventions across the strata of society. It posits that there is an urgent need for emotionally intelligent policy making, which grapples with and roots itself in the complex realities of social relations, and forges negotiated solutions. We have become used to rational-linear, 'top down' policy making, but such processes fail to contend with the messy and often conflictual systems and domains in which we live, where our fears, desires and agonies inevitably play a role. Modern psychoanalysis asks that policy thinking uses this understanding of society as a departure point for theory and action.

At a time when neoliberalism is the dominant ideology, psychoanalysis today also offers a critique of its reductionist view of human nature. Psychoanalysts daily witness the dehumanising impact of neoliberal forces on our organisations, relationships and subjective identities (Cooper and Lousada 2005; Rustin 1991). This essay begins with a series of vignettes, which trace the pathway between psychoanalytic practice and policy thinking, and between personal experience and social experience.

Among the people

In a disadvantaged inner city community centre a multi-ethnic group of residents sit in a circle recounting their painful personal histories, conflicted relationships, struggles with everyday poverty and helplessness in the face of local bureaucracy. This is a 'Thinking Space' (Lowe, 2014), a weekly community therapy project started by a psychoanalytic therapist in the aftermath of the 2011 riots. The therapist facilitates the encounter by listening intently, linking different experiences and contributions, and occasionally commenting on the painfulness of a member's story. This project owes something to the spirit of Paulo Friere's philosophy of 'conscientization', first articulated in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, but its founder was drawing on his own experience as a black therapist, concerned to take a psychoanalytic sensibility beyond the clinic and into the messy arena of lived experiences in fractured communities. This work is about developing understanding of social suffering, and enabling supportive connections – among people who might never speak to one another but share common predicaments, and between the realm of personal pain and social conditions of disadvantage, racism and exclusion. Private troubles and public issues (Wright Mills 1970) come into relationship.

In an East London children's centre, a psychoanalytically trained social worker welcomes a dozen children who arrive in various groupings with their foster carers. The children are members of three sibling groups, all of them in local authority care and in the process of being adopted or placed in long term foster care. The adoption worker had noticed something which no one else had registered – that large sibling groups are routinely split up when they enter the care system, and then planning for the futures of sub-groups proceeds on separate lines. Professionals 'forget' the wider sibling system, and cease to consider its meaning from the children's point of view. The series of groups she facilitates brings the sub-groups back into connection, and then helps them say goodbye, but now in the context of a system that 'remembers' their relationships and will enable future contact. Her

work was fiercely resisted at first by her managers, by judges, by Children's Guardians. They all voiced the same reaction – this process would be too painful for these children and the work would harm them. But she won them round, helping them discover that this response was mostly about the pain evoked in *them* at the prospect of these meetings and mournings.

A psychoanalytically trained psychologist is consulting to a GP in an inner city health centre about one of her patients who uses the service frequently, but for whom conventional physical medicine appears not to work. The GP feels useless and helpless, but obliged to continue seeing the patient. The patient doesn't get any better but seems adhesively attached to the health centre. Something more is going on, and the consultation aims to understand what, and then how best to alleviate the GP's burden while providing the patient some help he can use.

'Containment' is a central concept in modern psychoanalysis, denoting a capacity for emotional receptivity towards other people's psychic and relational conflicts, traumas and anxieties (sometimes known as the 'contained'). The containing faculty promotes psychological growth and maturation by tolerating the turbulence of unspeakable anxiety or conflict, rather than jumping to 'problem solve' it or deny its reality. Successful containment reanimates groups, organisations and individuals, and this generates authentic depth in our understanding of social relations, resonating with Jonathan Freedland's (2015) recent appeal to Labour in its search for a revitalising narrative, to master 'an emotional rather than a rational idiom', and speak in a language people actually use.

Deep or shallow welfare?

The adoption worker described above is doing more than just advocating for the needs of a specific group of disadvantaged children. She is doing the work of a 'boundary spanner' (Williams 2012), conveying thickly textured emotional and social intelligence from one domain to another in search of a more attuned and grounded policy response rooted in authentic recognition and understanding of lived experiences. She is insisting that the policy process must begin from such understanding, shape itself around such complex realities, and forge solutions that are negotiated between these different domains and systems. Psychoanalytically, she is asking the social 'container' to relate to, incorporate and digest the quality of experience of the 'contained' before it delivers a solution or policy response. She is resisting the baleful impact of what Foucault termed 'governmentality', the dominance of expert systems of ordering and control that shape social relationships and subjectivity, especially those populations without 'voice', through the medium of policy and bureaucracy. These sibling groups have a better chance of a more connected life when decisions made *about* them by a 'container' are decisions forged in dialogue *with* them.

The above vignettes also offer an implicit critique of rational-linear policy making, echoed in the work of systems theorist Jake Chapman (2002) who argues that governments must learn to 'think differently' about the relationship between policy processes and the social realities in which they intervene. The latter can never be fully controlled, and the unanticipated consequences of their independent agency, resistance, or expression of alternative desires inevitably disrupt and distort the best laid policy plans. Better policy making means relinquishing some control, and hence power. More meaningful, thickly textured social relations are the gain.

Healthy organisations

The marriage of psychoanalytic and systems thinking in organisational development work is long established. Intensive 'Group Relations Events' (GRE), involving up to a hundred participants, are the medium for learning here, not the therapeutic dyad. But the focus is similar, the close study of the interplay of primitive, affective and irrational forces with rational, structured, task oriented purposes that produce the messy, conflicted reality that is institutional life. Learning to tolerate and understand the former, in order to detoxify their impact on the latter is one key objective. Again there are echoes of the 'container-contained' relation. People often find they are disproportionately scared in these events, and deeply suspicious of the intentions and good faith of the staff. They lose voice and agency as a result, but exploration and working through of these fears enables 'recovery'. Groups regain their power to do business with the staff group, and negotiate successfully for their aims and projects. The temporary institution of the GRE starts to resemble a participatory democracy, a form of interaction central to the work of therapeutic communities.

There is a duality in the application of this work with organisations. One strand emphasises how the management task must take its lead from a close appreciation of the character of the organisation's work. (Hutten et al, 1994) One size does not fit all, and each organisation has its own particular 'under the surface' struggles. Managing a care home for vulnerable and dying people is not the same as managing an airport. The existential anxieties of 'living with dying' as a day job may give rise to protective behaviours in staff that mitigate against the provision of close emotional attention to residents. Close analysis of an airport's 'task' discloses it to be all about 'flows' and disruptions of flow – passengers, baggage, planes, weather conditions, with disruptions in Hong Kong or Paris affecting London or Manchester. Our need for predictable, stable conditions in which to work and live is fundamental, but tolerance of instability and confusion as normal is a requirement for the airport manager. The emotional capacities required of staff in each context are particular, but the tendency to protect against their discomfiting aspects with anti-task behaviours is similar.

Thus the study of 'social systems as a defence against anxiety' is the complimentary contribution of psychoanalysis to institutional life. Protective strategies against task related anxiety become inscribed in organisational operating systems, and their normalisation disguises their negative impact. Unpicking them exposes everyone to more anxiety, but facilitates deeper, better connected and more fulfilling working experience. Recent work in human service organisations (Cooper and Lees 2015) proposes that the impact of the emotional strain of responsibility for children and adults 'at risk' intersect with governmental anxieties about 'failure', performance and standards, to produce a culture of fear in staff and management alike – fear, anxiety and guilt about doing harm to service users, but also fear for the survival of the self in case of external judgements of incompetence which lead to a perverse focus on meeting targets rather than meeting needs. This climate is not conducive of confident care. Tim Dartington's (2010) work on managing vulnerability then develops a higher order analysis of 'heroic' stances in health care, in tension with more 'stoical' dispositions in the less prominent but equally vital domain of social care. Neither leaves space for a more tragic perspective that embraces the brute fact of our mortality.

Towards emotionally intelligent policy making

In 2007 I shared a conference platform with a senior civil servant, just after the government first announced substantial funding for its Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme. He was heckled by sections of the audience of three hundred therapists of various

persuasions, and finally exploded. 'You're worse than my grandchildren! What are you complaining about? You've just been given 300 million pounds!' He seemed genuinely baffled. But in the eyes of many, the money had been given to the wrong kind of therapists. Psychoanalytic therapy was excluded from this vision, and to the dissenters Cognitive Behavioural Therapy had just won an unjustified victory in the scrap for political legitimation. The man's reaction was understandable, but not emotionally intelligent. In an instant he lost the sympathy of half his audience. Had he been better briefed, or had he cared more about the internal tensions in this community, he might have anticipated a partially hostile reception, absorbed it, and there and then done some useful work with it to help heal divisions, and moderate the toxicity of competition and rivalry. His leadership would also have benefited from an appreciation of the value of 'containment' as a capacity.

Emotionally intelligent policy making is an idea whose time is overdue and extends well beyond individual leadership. Episodically, the misleadingly calm surface of our social life is ruptured by violence and conflict. The 2011 riots, repeated eruptions of public anxiety about different forms of child abuse, and the controversy over the Liverpool end of life care policy are linked by the fact that the underlying sources of tension were known about, but also denied, ignored or inadequately articulated by those who do 'know'.

Sometimes our reactive mechanisms work to good effect, but often compound the problem. The 1979 Cleveland Inquiry into child sexual abuse decisively progressed our capacity to embrace dangerous knowledge and our work to combat its sources. We now accept that intra-familial sexual abuse has always been widespread across all social strata and communities, but when it surfaced on a large scale in Cleveland this emerging knowledge was fiercely contested by the media and significant sections of the establishment. The agents of disclosure were systematically scapegoated and their actions deemed a 'witch hunt' by the sitting local MP. It took a sensitively chaired major public enquiry to achieve a definitive social and political 'settlement' about the reality of this phenomenon. But other public enquiry processes default to accusation and blame and a familiar litany of mindless recommendations. Psychoanalytic practitioners have created and deployed more 'containing' methodologies of conflict resolution to great effect in Northern Ireland and on the international stage (Alderdice 2010, Volkan 2008). Their practices resonate with the work of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions established in many post-conflict situations. The tensions with which these processes work cannot be wished or legislated away, but they can be attended to. It takes years for communities and professions to recover from outbreaks of social or symbolic violence, but such ruptures can be prevented.

Contemporary psychoanalysis asks that policy makers ground themselves in the complexity of social relations and negotiate solutions based on our lived experience. This means more listening, hearing, digesting and ultimately validating painful, conflicted and aggrieved personal and social experience (Cooper 2009).

Between evidence and policy

Recent years have seen a spike in books concerned with the various side effects of neoliberal policy, which tread familiar ground for psychoanalysis. Wilkinson and Pickett's tour-de-force *The Spirit Level* (2009) which should have revolutionised public policy, but is sadly fading into intellectual history, showed how rates of mental illness are rising in the more neoliberal and unequal countries on our planet. Their book lent empirical support to the idea that mental health is 'psycho-social',

rooted in a complex interplay between individual and family biographies, and socio-economic, gender and ethnic relations. More recently, William Davies' *The Happiness Industry* (2015) has provided a stirring critique of the way in which neoliberal thinking has tied itself to positivism to commodify subjectivity and promote an individualist concept of mental health and wellbeing. On this account, we can 'choose happiness', or not, and by this logic, which seems to suit the policies of the current Government, our personal suffering becomes our responsibility, and failure to surmount it our fault.

And yet, such books aside and Feminism notwithstanding, the Left remains uncomfortable with discourses on feeling, subjectivity and 'interiority'. Modern psychoanalysis, rooted in a diversity of modes of practice with groups, organisations, families, individuals and couples (Taylor 2014) makes the case that policy making simply cannot afford to ignore our lived experiences. To do so is to ignore the reality that we are not entirely rational, positive beings who fit into neat policy constructs.

Historically, the psychoanalytic community has been slow to advance its ideas and practices – there has never been a 'movement' to promote its vision for 'human flourishing' and emotionally intelligent policy making. Today, the British Psychoanalytic Council is working with vigour to position the full spectrum of psychoanalytic work in the public domain and to publicise the growing evidence base (www.bpc.org.uk).

Modern psychoanalysis engages with a vast range of sequestered domains of social reality and insists on 'surfacing' them for social and political work and attention. This generates a different culture of political and policy processes than traditional discourses of rights, opportunities or redistribution, one which insists on the thick textures of social and personal suffering, desire and aspiration as its point of departure for theory and action and points to the inherent value of participatory democracy. This concept of society and social action also challenges the dominance of mechanical metaphors that pervade and construct mainstream policy discourse. Society is not a machine, but a nested tangle of complex systems in which human desires, fears, hopes and agonies play a major role. A revitalised progressive politics must embrace all this.

References

- Alderdice J., Lord (2010) 'Off the couch and round the conference table', in Lemma A. and Patrick M. (eds) *Off the Couch: Contemporary psychoanalytic approaches*, Routledge. Hove
- Chapman J. (2004) *System Failure: Why governments must learn to think differently*, London. Demos
- Cooper A. (2009), 'Be Quiet and Listen: emotion, public policy and social totality' In Day Sclater (eds) *Emotion: new psychosocial perspectives*. London: Routledge, pp.169-82
- Cooper A. and Lees A. (2014) 'Spotlit: Defences against anxiety in contemporary human service organisations' in Armstrong D. and Rustin M. (eds) *Social Defences against Anxiety: Explorations in a Paradigm*, London. Karnac Books
- Cooper A. & Lousada J., (2005) *Borderline Welfare: Feeling and fear of feeling in modern welfare*, London. Karnac Books

Dartington T (2010) *Managing Vulnerability: The underlying dynamics of systems of care*, London. Karnac

Freedland J (2015) 'Labour must learn to speak human, whatever its policies', *Guardian*, 17 July

Hutten J., Bazalgette, J., Armstrong D. (1994) 'What does management really mean?' in Casemore, R. *et al* (eds) *What Makes Consultancy Work – understanding the dynamics*, London: South Bank University Press.

Lowe F. (Ed) (2014) *Thinking Space: Promoting thinking about race, culture and diversity in psychotherapy and beyond*, London. Karnac Books

Rustin, M. (1991) *The Good Society and the Inner World*. London: Verso.

Taylor H. (2013) 'UK Psychoanalysis: Mistaking the part for the whole', British Psychoanalytic Council Discussion Paper

Volkan V. (2008) 'Large group identity, international relations and psychoanalysis', Paper given at "Deutsche Psychoanalytische Gesellschaft e.V. (DGP) Meeting" Gasteig Cultural Center, Rosenheimer Platz. May 23, 2008.

Wilkinson R. and Pickett K. (2009) *The Spirit level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*, London. Allen Lane

Wright Mills, C. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*, London. Oxford University Press.

Williams P. (2002) 'The Competent Boundary Spanner', *Public Administration*, vol. 80, 1, pp103-24