

Mind, reality and politics

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Caroline New's *Agency, Health and Social Survival* is a survey of various psychoanalytical and other therapeutic psychologies, from a standpoint which is critical realist in philosophy and ecosocialist and feminist in politics.* Since I share both the author's interest in psychoanalysis and her critical realism, and much of her politics too, it is not surprising that I find a great deal of what she has to say valuable and important. The book is also a good read, and questions many of the shibboleths of radical psychology. Every socialist or feminist with an interest in psychotherapy should own a copy. However, I have reservations about one central theme of the book: it is largely motivated by the question 'what does the human mind have to be like, if socialist and feminist aims are to be achievable?' (p. 2). (Ecological aims are actually even more salient in the text.) This question arose from the author's dissatisfaction with the attitude of her Althusserian comrades who regarded psychoanalysis as a science, yet 'seemed totally uninterested in things personal or psychological' (pp. 1–2). While such uninterest may be a neurotic defence mechanism, the belief that facts about psychology or human nature are irrelevant to the question of whether socialism, feminism and ecopolitics are achievable is a rationally defensible position – even though there are doubtless *some* political aims which are incompatible with *some* views of human nature (anarchism with Hobbesianism, for instance).

This is not a plea for the nonsensical claim that 'there is no such thing as human nature'. There are quite a lot of things which no one can seriously dispute belong to human nature: we breathe oxygen, use language, cannot survive unassisted in infancy, fear death, dislike intense pain, get scurvy if deprived of vitamin C, get tense if sexually frustrated, get drunk if we imbibe too much alcohol, die if we are plunged into boiling water, and so on. Anyone could extend

this list a few pages without getting controversial. Some of the facts about human nature have clear implications for legislation. For instance, the fact that our physiology is such that the present level of motor pollution in the UK leads to nearly thirty deaths a day implies that, other things being equal, we ought to ban private ownership of cars. But I suspect that these political implications of human nature will all be at a nuts-and-bolts level like this one. None of the time-honoured examples of 'facts of human nature which show that socialism is impossible' stands up to a minute's examination. Suppose we are inherently competitive: it is still true that competition has only been the dominant economic mechanism anywhere for about 400 years, and we had lived in settled communities for about ten thousand years before that. And as Trotsky points out, competitive sports give an excellent harmless outlet for such instincts; that way they can be kept out of the economy, love-life, and the academic community, where they do real harm. Feminism is a more complex case because it is often taken to include not only the political aim of equal empowerment of men and women, but also different personal relations between the sexes. But the two issues are distinct. It is hard to see any plausible grounds in human nature for doubting the possibility of equal empowerment; whether men and women would start being nicer to one another under such conditions we will have no idea until we get there. On ecology and human nature, examples will emerge in the discussion of the rival psychologies. But I shall return to the question of the general relation, if any, between psychology and politics after discussing Caroline New's account of these theories and therapies.

In Chapter 1, after her discussion of her motives for writing the book, she defends critical realism and some aspects of the Enlightenment (rational agency,

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the project of universal emancipation) against post-modernist critics. Like other recent realist feminist writers (for example Kate Soper in *What is Nature?*, Alison Assiter in *Enlightened Women*) she does so in a surprisingly friendly way, and hands out one or two quite gratuitous bouquets – for instance ‘Postmodernists rightly insist that knowledge is always partial and always situated’: who doesn’t?

She goes on in Chapter 2 to indicate the grounds for her politics, particularly the ecological aspect. The first half of this chapter makes a powerful case for ecosocialism simply by cataloguing facts about the ecological destructiveness of capitalism (drawing on the Brundtland report) and theorizing this in terms of Dyke’s concept of dissipative structures, which ‘maintain their internal order at the cost of increasing the disorder of the environment’ (p. 13). There is no appeal to psychology here. In the second part of the chapter, though, the claim is made that to show that the necessary change is possible we need a psychology. Apart from the almost tautological point that changes come by people and people are ruled by psychological laws, the argument seems to be based on the point that we can have irrational wants which may sap our will to change, and that psychology can explain these wants. How much psychology can help here will depend on whether we read irrationality as essentially the misconstrual of reality, or in some other way.

The psychological discussion starts in Chapter 3 with a contrast between two concepts of health, ‘positive health’ and ‘normal functioning’, to which I shall return. Perhaps the most striking point in this chapter is that ‘Freud ... took the ability to face reality as a key criterion of mental health’ (p. 40); yet reality includes not only our personal situations but the threat of destruction of our planet. A striking feature of modern life is that we go on as if our species will live for ever – making plans for our grandchildren’s lives – while making it likely by our habits of consumption and voting that those lives will be nasty, brutish and short. Caroline New herself questions whether ‘denial’ (in the psychoanalytic sense) of our likely future is really any crazier than a person with a fatal illness living ‘as normal’; indeed, most of us take our individual mortality fairly lightly most of the time. But this whole issue of ‘realism’, not now as a philosophical position but as a psychological achievement, is the psychopolitical pivot of the book.

The conclusion of the chapter lists four psychological conditions of political change:

1. Agency. ‘Agents must be capable of the sustained will to change, of envisioning a better society and

remaining confident of its possibility and committed to the process of getting there’ (p. 42).

2. ‘Realism’ in the sense just mentioned. These two conditions are closely linked according to Freudian theory. In one essay, ‘The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis’, which is regrettably not one of the twenty-eight Freud texts referred to in the book, he contrasts alloplastic (world-changing) and autoplasic (self-changing) behaviour, and defines normality as recognizing reality as it is and changing it where it is unsatisfactory – an attitude which might be called alloplastic realism. Neurosis by contrast is autoplasic – the neurotic adapts to reality by changing himself – while the psychotic changes reality in fantasy only. Alloplastic realism is a welcome aspect of Caroline New’s conception of the relation of psychology (both the discipline and its object) to politics. But it has consequences which may undermine another theme of the book, the attempt to map psychological positions onto political positions. My main contention in this article is that we should follow the alloplastic realism that is one of the main themes of this book, at the expense of this other theme of psychopolitical mapping.

3. The third condition does not seem to have much to do with human nature at all. It is ‘that movements have to be built whose internal processes do not sabotage their aims by reproducing the oppressive features of the society they aim to transform’. That revolutions tend to go wrong and produce new oppressive structures is undeniable. But if this were simply due to the internal processes of revolutionary organizations, the solution would be simple, and need no contentious psychological conditions. If, for example, the Russian Revolution went wrong because of the internal structure of the Bolshevik Party, then perhaps next time we should organize like the Mensheviks, or like the syndicalists. Nothing in human nature prevents us doing so, as the actuality of such movements shows. But if the fate of Russia was due to encirclement by powerful capitalist enemies, the case is different. All revolutions are so encircled, and none has yet found a way of fighting them off without using oppressive political measures. The question is rather whether effective oppressive political structures can be set up with an inherently temporary character. But this question has nothing to do with psychology.

4. Something similar applies to Caroline New’s fourth condition: ‘that we be able to live in the better society we aim to build’. She gives as an example, ‘if the global commons are as certain to be vandalized as the swings in our parks – we are in deep trouble’. But a child can nick his dad’s spanners and demol-

ish the swings in the park; the global commons are vandalized using multi-million-dollar equipment, by multinational corporations licensed by governments. Corporations and governments are not people driven by destructive lusts, but institutions driven by the need to compete in the market, or to pay off debts to the banks. Psychoanalysis can reveal the motives of individual agents; corporate agents' motives come with the economic system.

The central part of the book – Chapters 4 to 8 – is a guided tour of various psychotherapeutic theories: Freud, Klein, Lacan, humanistic psychology and radical approaches. Each position is expounded sympathetically, but alleged problems arising out of the attempt to combine it with radical politics are spelt out. This critical survey is an extremely valuable one, based on a thorough inside knowledge both of psychological theory and therapy and of radical politics.

Chapter 4, on Freud, contains a balanced discussion of Freud's rejection of his early view that all neurosis stemmed from child abuse; this is refreshing after the spate of texts blaming Freud from both sides – some accusing him of dishonestly covering up the 'facts' of child abuse, other blaming his ideas of repression and abreaction for legitimating the sort of counselling that induces false memories of abuse. Freud's alloplastic realism is endorsed, but his earlier and later metapsychologies (conscious and unconscious; ego, superego and id) are sharply contrasted, favourably to the former. I think that Caroline New reads too much of Anna Freud's ego-psychology (which she also discusses in the chapter) back into Freud's later theory; the formula 'where id was, there shall ego be' is as much a prescription for alloplastic realism as the earlier position.

A more serious objection to Freud's theory is the tendency to see sociality as a later acquisition of an initially isolated individual. Here Melanie Klein, the subject of Chapter 5, provides the corrective. 'Whereas Freudian theory had the individual develop first and then form object relations, for Klein individual development happened *through* object relations – through real interpersonal relationships as represented in phantasy' (p. 71).

The political problem about Kleinian psychoanalysis is that it tends towards universal symptomology, towards treating every mental fact as a symptom, and therefore losing the reality principle altogether. A telling example of this is a paper called 'Psychoanalysis and the Current Economic Crisis' given by Elliott Jaques in 1956 (in *Psycho-analysis and Contemporary Thought*, Hogarth, London, 1958). Perhaps

like me you were unaware that the British economy was in crisis in 1956, but according to Jaques 'despite the fact that each wage increase no longer means any very real consequent gain in standard of living, there is no immediate sign of abatement of wage pressure', and worse still, this wage spiralling continues 'Despite government exhortation'! Naturally, Jaques explains this in terms of the self-destructive impulses in the trade unionists' unconscious. But perhaps it was that the trade unionists' reality-principles were functioning more normally than Jaques's, and they were aware that at that time very real gains in workers' income could be and were made through trade-union action. Unless we can have some ideas that are not symptomatic but realistic, we are left no form of political argument but abuse of one's opponents as neurotic.

There is a notion of health in Klein that could make room for alloplastic realism, but only on condition that 'applied psychoanalysis' of the Jaques type is avoided. 'To be mentally healthy in Klein's terms implies having reached the depressive position' (pp. 80–81). According to Klein, children are born into the paranoid-schizoid position; they cannot relate to whole objects (the mother) but only to part objects (the breast); they cannot accept the idea that satisfaction and frustration come from the same source, the breast; so their image of the breast is split into two images, the good breast and the bad breast; since they feel aggression against the bad breast, they expect it to retaliate in kind. When the child becomes able to relate to the mother as a whole person, and realizes that the sources of satisfaction and frustration are one and the same, they enter the depressive position, as well they might. It is always possible to slip back into the paranoid-schizoid position, so leaving this behind and attaining the depressive position is a condition of health. And, in terms of interpersonal relationships, the depressive position obviously includes much more recognition of reality than does the paranoid-schizoid: people are 'whole objects', satisfaction and frustration do come from the same sources. However, at the risk of letting every believer in 'applied psychoanalysis' take pot shots at me as paranoid-schizoid, it seems to me that there are many political realities which correspond more closely to the paranoid-schizoid position than to the depressive. A 'depressive' account of capitalism, for instance, would be that certainly capitalism creates injustice and unemployment and ecological devastation and wars, but also it provides us with a high standard of living and liberal societies, and, to parody Job, 'shall we receive good at the hand of capitalism, and shall we not receive evil also?': the depressive would



urge us to take the rough with the smooth. Might not a paranoid-schizoid account be more accurate? An account, that is, which while recognizing that capitalism does produce some good things, argues also that these could be produced without the attendant evils by another system, and therefore treats the political defenders of capitalism as, quite simply, enemies. No facts about the psyche can decide this question. It is the empirical question: could some possible society into which we could transform capitalism provide most of what is really valuable about liberalism and high living standards while abolishing exploitation and environmental destruction? If so, 'paranoid-schizoid' politics (revolutionary socialism) is more consonant with alloplastic realism than 'depressive' politics (social democracy); if not, the opposite holds. One cannot transfer the superiority of the depressive position in micro-terms to the broad screen of social reality. We need to know, not what political ideas are symptoms of, but whether they are true.

The problem of universal symptomology in Kleinian theory is brought out by one way in which Caroline New draws the connection between that theory and ecopolitics.

The edifice of science is rooted in (though not reducible to) early curiosity about the mother's body. But, for Klein, epistemophilia becomes closely linked to aggression stemming from the death instinct. In her clinical work with young children Klein concluded that throughout their first year, babies phantasise destroying their mothers' bodies in all sorts of horrific ways, which she termed 'sadism'.... The symbolic link with postmodern and feminist accounts of modern science and the destruction of nature is striking. (p. 76).

I have long thought that the linking of knowledge with destructiveness in the accounts that Caroline New is alluding to can only be explained as an irrational

legacy of an infantile identification of knowing and destroying. But she seems to be suggesting that, far from debunking these epistemophobic accounts, Klein is confirming them. In the conclusion to this chapter, she lists possible accounts of 'the phantastic origin of human attacks on our mother earth', and the first is 'epistemophilia with its sadistic components evidenced in the notion of science as controlling nature'. But surely fast-food chains bulldoze down the rainforests so that they can sell more burgers, not in order to satisfy infantile aggression against their mothers. Indeed, fast-food chains don't have mothers. And if we accept the anti-scientific import of these remarks, we will deprive ourselves of the one resource we have for conserving nature: knowledge of nature.

Lacan is often seen as *the* psychoanalyst for radicals, but Caroline New argues that he has least of all to offer. First of all, he claims that our 'wholeness and our agency are simply stories we tell ourselves' (p. 87). Since wholeness and agency are among the conditions of political action, this is not encouraging. One could go further and say that since it is capitalism that shatters our wholeness and disempowers our agency, Lacan's theory serves to normalize capitalist damage. Lacan's account of our psychological alienation makes it 'deeper' than other theories, and this has been taken to mean that this theory has more revolutionary consequences; but in fact this alienation is made so deep that nothing we can do by way of transforming human societies could alter it. Therapeutically too, Lacan is deeply pessimistic, rejecting cure or happiness as possible goals. This is unsurprising since for him the ego – the only part of the psyche that is capable of thought and action – is the villain of the piece (though he does distinguish the ego from the I, as Freud could not, for in German as in Latin the words are the same). On the relation of Lacan to feminism, Caroline New credits him with trying 'to render the phallus gender-

neutral', but argues that he fails to do so; the irony is that in Freud the phallus really is gender-neutral, since the term covers both penis and clitoris. I think that here she is a little unfair to Freud: 'for [Lacan], as for Freud, penile superiority is self-evident' (p. 95). Surely for Freud penile superiority is an infantile mistake, not an adult assumption. Finally, Lacan is often credited with holding that the unconscious is socially formed, but as she points out this is not so; rather, he treats it as formed by language, conceived as a social invariant; the material reality and effectiveness of society disappears behind language. This 'linguistic idealism' renders Lacan's theory unusable politically. When Caroline New comes to make explicit the politics of the rival theories in Chapter 9, she justifiably leaves Lacan out as irrelevant.

Humanistic psychology, defined as 'united only by the principle that the true, original self is naturally social and co-operative and that both inner conflict and social evil are environmentally produced', is a wide enough concept to cover radical analysts like Fromm, Horney and Reich, as well as the explicitly humanistic movement of Rogers and Maslow. Along with the Rousseauesque optimism, there is a tendency to see the rational self-directing ego as stronger than other schools do, except for the ego-psychologists. All of which, if true, would give us grounds for hope that all problems can be solved; but one is left feeling that it is too good to be true. It smacks of 'positive thinking' and can have the same conservative individualistic consequences 'in that it maintains that however appalling the social situation, the road to self-actualization is possible' (p. 113).

Chapter 8, 'Four Radical Approaches', opens with a long discussion of prevalent opinions among various groups of therapists about their relation to politics. It then passes on to fairly brief discussions of consciousness-raising, feminist therapy, Re-evaluation Counselling, and a self-help group called CONNECT. Apart from their explicit commitment to radical politics, these therapies seem to have much in common with humanistic ones. But two related problems surface here, which are discussed without being resolved: that some radical therapies, especially consciousness-raising, tend to take the self-experience of the oppressed as self-validating, thus throwing out the whole concept of the unconscious, and with it the idea that therapy can be liberating precisely by disabusing you of enslaving illusions; and that if 'oppression is bad for your health', the oppressed will be likely to be less mentally healthy than the oppressors – yet this throws doubt on the values of the

oppressed, which may be the basis of their struggle. Caroline New seems worried by this 'deficit model', which many radical psychologists have rejected. Yet have there not always been two kinds of values among the oppressed, those that flatter their vanity concerning their existing oppressed identity, and those that project their liberation from it? The possibility of ending oppression depends on the politics of liberation prevailing over the politics of identity among the oppressed.

In discussing the final chapter, I return to the question whether there is any way one can map different psychologies (either in the sense of different theories or of different personalities) onto different political outlooks. For in this chapter, Caroline New attempts to draw out the political implications of each theory and therapy (Lacan excluded) under the four heads of will to change, awareness of reality, movements and human possibilities. Under the fourth head, for example, she concludes 'from a Freudian viewpoint, I suspect a benevolent authoritarian environmentalism, limiting but still relying on the market, would be the most hopeful way forward' and 'I suspect Rustin's social-democratic welfare society would be a more likely form from Kleinian environmentalism' (pp. 146–7). Yet there is nothing remotely like an argument to show these connections: she seems to think these political conclusions follow from the near-truism that we are capable of reason yet have violent impulses. Certainly something about future ecosocialist societies does follow from these theories, but it is all at the level of personal life. As long as we are born dependent on adults there will be psychoneuroses and as long as there are unrequited desires there will be actual neuroses; a society without 'ordinary human unhappiness' and a degree of 'neurotic misery' is unthinkable; imagined societies in which there is no anxiety, depression, sado-masochism, schizophrenia, domestic rows, or suicide belong to fiction. But with all these ills unabated we have managed, at one time or another, to build societies in which all citizens had a say in making the laws (ancient Athens), in which a woman could safely take her baby across England unaccompanied (Northumbria under King Edwin), in which gunpowder was known but banned (medieval China), in which racial differences were unimportant (pre-modern Europe), in which health care was without financial barrier (UK from Attlee to Thatcher), in which a large enterprise has been run democratically by the workers (John Lewis Partnership), and so on. I have yet to hear a reason why we greedy, aggressive mortals could not organize a democratically controlled

economy with equality between sexes and races, kindness to animals and respect for nature.

Everything turns on the idea that alloplastic realism is the criterion of mental health. Caroline New tends to think it is (though she does not use the phrase). But if it is, the healthy person's politics will not be determined by their unconscious, but by the political reality in which they find themselves. A psychological theory can only have political import if it recognizes a reality-principle, and in so far as it does so, the conclusions, whether deep or shallow ecological, reformist or revolutionary socialism, will depend entirely on the nature of the reality encountered. For instance, if the structure of parliamentary democracies is such that a transition to socialism is possible without revolution, then reformism is obviously rational; if socialism can't come that way and the alternative is world destruction by market-driven ecological disaster, then revolutionary socialism is rational. Whether one has resolved one's Oedipus complex or achieved the depressive position has nothing to do with it.

I think that the opposition between positive health and health as normal functioning may obscure more than it lights up, here. If positive health is another term for alloplastic realism well and good, but then why call it 'positive'? It might better be called 'negative health', since it involves the capacity to 'negate' existing reality. And unless normal functioning means statistically normality, which would be too ludicrous for anyone to use as a criterion of health, it presumably means coping with one's existing situation – and that surely is included in alloplastic realism.

My conclusion is that Caroline New is quite right to insist that what I have called alloplastic realism is central to the notion of mental health, and that only a psychological theory which recognizes this is compatible with any rational politics. But she does not draw the conclusion that psychological theory itself has no political implications, leaving these open to be determined by analysis of social reality. Let us go to Freud and Klein for our psychotherapy and to Marx and the environmental sciences for our politics, and not get our lines crossed.

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