
Interview

Andrew Samuels in conversation with Angie Voela

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Abstract In a relatively informal style, Angie Voela interviews Andrew Samuels. In a wide-ranging conversation, they discuss Samuels' perceptions of the relationship between academic life and political activism, and between political activism and psychotherapy and analysis. There is a clinical focus on the management of political material in the therapy session. Samuels explains why he is so concerned that the role of the individual in progressive politics should be emphasised. Spiritual dimensions of socio-political engagements – referred to as 'resacralisation' – also receive attention. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-018-0096-x>

Keywords: activism; individual; politics; resacralisation; spirituality; writing

On Writing

AV

Andrew, *PCS* wanted to interview you because you are an internationally recognised political consultant who has worked with politicians and groups in Europe, the Americas and the Middle East. You have published extensively on politics and the psyche. You have had a distinguished professional and academic career, and you are the founding member of organisations like Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social



Responsibility in the UK (1995) and the International Association for Jungian Studies. You have developed a unique approach to Jung and your books have been translated into many languages. Your writing style is also unique, erudite, but not always *academic* in the narrow sense of the word. I would like to start this interview by inviting you to comment on your writing style.

AS

I think there is something you can call the writer's ideal, like the ego ideal. I dropped out of university. I had a scholarship to Oxford but 1967 was a tumultuous and optimistic time, so I left the university and started a radical theatre company. Perhaps because I dropped out, I retained an inordinate respect, at the beginning of my writing, for academic approaches and so-called rigour. Well, now I sometimes think the only rigour is *rigor mortis*. I did not want to write in that way and I did not like the latent violence in academic writing, especially in the psy-field.

Gradually, I started to write in a looser, more interactive way, asking my readers to do small exercises, by themselves or with other people, that were relevant to the material in a particular chapter. This is a good way to bring the experiential dimension into a book. Experiential exercises have a bad reputation, as they often appear in shaded boxes and remind people of self-help books. I tried to challenge that view. Every single thing I write begins life as a workshop or a lecture and I mostly lecture in a workshop style, without a fully written text. I have notes, a lot of notes. Everything has begun in a spoken way. Academics are extremely averse to writing like they speak. But I have had some great teachers in the Jungian world. The famous archetypal psychologist James Hillman taught me that it is a sign of success if people are saying 'you are writing like you speak'.

On Clinical Work

AV

You are known as a Jungian analyst. What does that mean in terms of your current clinical work?

AS: My clinical style is a blend of post-Jungian, relational psychoanalytic and humanistic approaches. I was a founder board member of the International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy (IARPP), and served for sixteen years. It is amazing to me that within the relational field a new interest in Jungian and post-Jungian thinking is emerging. The humanistic piece is also extremely important because of the new work therein on the role of



the client. I expect we will talk about the ‘active client’ and the ‘activist client’ later.

I believe that the client sets the pace, chooses the topics and gives me feedback on how it is going (and on how I am doing). I believe in learning from the client. There is a growing conventional wisdom in Britain at the moment, based on what is happening in the NHS and public sector, that you have to bring a named problem to therapy. Well, you don’t! Just the desire to explore things is enough. Many (but not all) clients bring dreams, fantasies and creative productions such as art, poetry and movement. I may have specialist skills here, because of my training as a Jungian analyst.

AV

How do you integrate Jung into your other areas of interest, for example, into your more political writings?

AS

I still find what Jung wrote about the relations between the individual and the collective interesting, though challenging. And I have really tried to learn from Jung’s political misjudgements, especially in relation to his anti-Semitism (Samuels, 1993, pp. 287–336). One area where Jung is very useful is his typology. I don’t do psychological testing or anything like that, but typology is an interesting way to approach individual citizens’ political experience and behaviour. We are not the same when it comes to what I now call ‘political style’ and you can see how a person prefers to ‘do’ their politics in their own style, often to the exclusion of other stylistic possibilities: ‘It ain’t what you do, it’s the way that you do it’. I’ve developed a model of political styles that I use in organisational consultancy, for example, with Britain’s National Health Service.

The Individual

AV

You mention the individual and, in a recent article (Samuels, 2017), you draw attention to the role the individual plays in processes of political and social change. While accepting that relationality and context are important, you argue that too much emphasis on them might get in the way of thinking about the individual’s role.

AS: For many people, a big and positive change was that we stopped thinking about atomised individuals and started thinking about relationships, networks, communities, contexts and so on. I think this has gone too far and we have



tended to lose sight not only of the individual as herself, but of the role of the individual in politics. I think this is a great pity because the individual's take on politics and the experience of politics is clearly important, not only at the higher levels of policy formation or political philosophy, but in everyday life. I am interested in the relations between the individual *and* society or the collective, and I think a lot of contemporary sociologists are, too.

AV

Political scientists still use the concept of 'agency'. Do you see the politically engaged individual as an *agent* of change?

AS

We, in the psy-professions and the university, live in the age of the collective. We have decided that one-person psychology is a very bad thing. Well, it may well be. But I do not write about one-person psychology; I write about someone called *the individual*. My version of the individual is not at all identical to the humanistic liberal individual. I don't much think about agency *per se*. The individual in my mind is much more broken up than that. Traditional approaches to politics mostly envisage political involvement as based on party or group or movement membership. This is of course important, but I am interested in what a human being, on her own, can think, do and contribute, how she suffers and dies on her own.

Camus said 'I rebel – therefore we exist'. Rebellion is not in the first moment a collective thing. *I* rebel – therefore *we* exist; not we exist – therefore someone can rebel. This is very different from an approach which prefers to see how everybody is in a group, or belongs to a culture or community or a collective. The emphasis on belonging is not 'wrong', but the downside is to diminish the role and the right of the individual.

AV

And yet, individuals can always dominate a group. History is rife with examples of seductive-destructive characters. Today we tend to call them narcissistic leaders.

AS

No individual can *plan* on dominating in my particular way of looking at things, because, in private or in public, another individual will say no. Heraclitus said πολεμος πατηρ παντων (*polemos* – war or conflict – is the father of everything). This is what polemic can achieve. It is the most profoundly democratic way to



develop ideas and to sharpen your ideas against somebody else's. You react against them and they react against you and sometimes it goes too far one way, sometimes too far another way. In totalitarian societies, we have learned how much of this resistance goes on behind closed doors, and at great risk. But you cannot totally eliminate the drive to political difference that lives in individuals.

AV

But does not this process presuppose a community of like-minded individuals with very highly developed dialogic skills and democratic values?

AS

No, because the individual I talk about is a bum, a nomad, a *schlemiel*, a no-good. Not a mature person by any means. In the liberal individualistic tradition, the individual is a kind of god. In my version, which is inspired by clinical work, the individual is anything but this elevated creature. I am interested in different individual styles of doing politics and different styles of being a citizen. As I said, we don't all do politics in the same way and this does not refer to the fact that there are rich people or poor people, or educated or not educated, or males or females; it cuts across all these conventional categories.

Politics and Psychotherapy

AV

How do you see the relationship between politics, philosophy and clinical work?

AS

My first serious book in 1989, *The Plural Psyche: Personality, Morality and the Father*, drew on philosophy, especially William James, Michael Walzer and Michael Oakeshott, a very interesting right wing philosopher. Pluralism is a philosophical approach to psyche and also to politics. Yet, as a therapist, I am not drawn to philosophical abstraction. I am drawn to the body, to the passions, to the impasse, to where things don't work, rather than to where they work. The problem with so many psychoanalytic understandings of politics is that they replicate the schools of psychoanalysis. For me, they are often not *bricolage-y* enough. Everyone is addressing the problem from the point of view of their training and their beloved ideas, which means that the field is riddled with people who want to prove themselves right, me included. We can lose our



empathy for the people who are suffering, for the people not in the psy-field who we are supposed to ally ourselves with. We want to show that our psychoanalytic ideologies are better than another person's and, at its worst, as a friend said, we are drowning in the maddening rectitude of the psychoanalyst.

Back in 1993, in *The Political Psyche*, I was already saying that psychotherapists who want to contribute to society were part of a much wider movement that I called 'resacralisation'. It wasn't just therapists. Environmentalists were there; economic and social justice people were there; gender and sexual equality people were there. What holds this rainbow together is something in the spiritual area, not something primarily in the political area. I called it 'resacralisation' because I wanted to say that, if you intend to make a coalition in which therapists play a role, the foundational element should better be in the sacral rather than in the material area. I think this is still true today. Missing from many accounts of intersectionality is the spiritual dimension. As Charles Péguy put it, 'everything starts in mysticism and ends in politics'.

Gradually, I started to talk about the spiritual benefits that come from doing politics with other people. So, individuals come together to do politics. If you are in a group of like-minded individuals doing politics, something comes down from 'heaven', like dew or manna, and the group changes. It isn't any more solely a working group, or a campaigning group – it is a spiritual group. People get a lot out of politics of a spiritual nature and that's what what I call 'social spirituality' is about. These two ideas go together: that there is a spiritual foundation for disparate social movements; and, getting involved in a political grouping will bring spiritual results or spiritual outcomes to the individual.

I first wrote about social spirituality as such in 2001 in *Politics on the Couch: Citizenship and the Internal Life*, and the transpersonal dimension remains as a backdrop to my interest in the individual. I do not want to be understood as saying that 'there is no such thing as society', but I believe that behind the individual there is not a social organism but a spiritual one.

Activism

AV

You have written extensively on therapy and activism, and therapy and politics. Many of your colleagues would be reluctant to bring politics into the consulting room. What are your views on that?

AS

I think you should say that 'some' colleagues are 'still' reluctant because there has been a 'political turn' in psychoanalysis, to set alongside the famous



‘relational turn’. With a client, I am also interested in what they do or do not do politically, what they belong to and campaign for, what petitions and demonstrations they participate in. I am interested in how they perceive their political utility, whom amongst the dispossessed and disadvantaged people have they reached out to – or the opposite, because not all clients are progressives. Activism is a big clinical theme, isn’t it? But therapists ‘lose the name of action’, as Hamlet put it, and favour deep reflection and a considered and supposedly mature middle way when it comes to political conflict.

When I started Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility in the UK in 1995, the questions I was asked were: ‘Will my clients see me on the barricades?’; ‘Will I have to do anything, will the clients see?’. It was a unique thing to have psychotherapists marching side by side on demonstrations. These days, my activism involves a seeking out of partnership with other activists in different spheres of endeavour. The theory for this is based on the notion of the ‘privileged ally’, especially with reference to race.

Times have changed, but I still think we need to question the balance between analysis and activism. Psychotherapists need to reach out to groups of people who are fighting for their needs and their rights and ask, ‘Do you want us to help?’. For example, right now I am involved in something called the Mental Wealth Campaign, which is working with groups of service users and campaigners in the disability area, specifically disability to do with mental health. Our government does not fully accept it as a disability, and it’s getting worse. Therapists play a part in the campaign, contributing both as therapists and just as members of it.

A related aim of mine is to reach out the political class. I have learned so much from working with leading politicians – people right at the top – in the UK and US. Politicians are often limited by their environment and turn out to be more emotionally literate than they seem. The interaction with them has to be a two-way street, learning from them while giving counsel.

My clinical aim is to make working with political material an everyday practice, not just on special occasions (Samuels, 2006). When there is a huge political issue, such as a major terrorist attack, or an unexpected election (or referendum) result, therapists and clients do engage with it. But I’d like to see the work on political material be part of everyday, ordinary and even boring clinical work. Not a high day and holy day practice. Just what we therapists do. The problem we face is that, when confronted with political material, many therapists get scared and don’t know what to do. Their training hasn’t (and still doesn’t) prepared them for this. So the therapist is interested but scared, because they do not know what to do with the political stuff.

I have done four international surveys over the years, asking therapists what they do when their patient talks politics. Most of the respondents admit that they want to work with the whole person, with the social and the political, but they add that they struggle to find a good way to work with politics.



At the end of the '80 s and the beginning of the '90 s, I found myself becoming annoyed when therapists used to say things like, 'When people talk about Mrs Thatcher, they are really talking about their mother'. And I used to say, 'This was not always the case, sometimes when a patient talks about their mother they are actually thinking of Mrs Thatcher!'. And Saddam Hussein was not only a shadow projection. Things have changed since then, in that we are not so quick to take everything as symbolic. There is an actuality of politics in the consulting room. When someone is talking about political issues like the environment, or climate change, there is no need to decode this. They are not necessarily talking about ravaging the inside of their mother's body. They are talking about climate change and their role in it, about the individual, asking, 'What have *I* done, what can *I* do?'. We do not usually take the political history of our clients or trainees, and this is probably an omission.

In my case, South African politics is where I learned everything. I was involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement in the '60s. I got a job in Swaziland, as a young man between school and university; it all went terribly wrong (or maybe terribly right); I ended up in prison and was eventually released with help from the British Embassy. This was a game-changing political and psychological experience and, when it became possible again, I've returned to South Africa many times. Now I am more interested in Middle East politics and in what austerity has done to welfare in Britain. One organisation I am active in is called the UK-Palestine Mental Health Network, in which British clinicians and Palestinian clinicians work together united in opposition to the occupation of the Palestinian territories.

The 'Activist Client'

AV

I've noticed that your latest work is on the 'activist client' (Samuels, 2017). What do you mean by this phrase? Are you talking about work with activists?

AS

Not only, because this is as much a metaphorical tag as a literal depiction. I am interested in focusing more on the client's role in the therapy, rather than on the therapy relationship as a whole. I think this is under-developed in clinical theory. We are only at the beginning of conceptualising what the client brings. The original phrase, culled from person-centred psychotherapy, was 'the active client', stressing how the client is the motor of therapy and analysis. An honouring and recognition of the client's contribution, not only as a suffering, dependent 'child' in need of a 'safe space'. A sort of hero client, really. I



extended it to include the individual client's role as a clinical activist, and then I linked this with being an activist in society (or the eschewing of such a role). 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. It is with this wider applicability in mind that I suggest that the 'activist client' is to be taken metaphorically, as much as literally.

About the Author

Andrew Samuels is Professor of Analytical Psychology at the University of Essex and works internationally as a political and organisational consultant. He is in private practice as a relational Jungian analyst. He was the joint founder of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility and is a former Chair of the UK Council for Psychotherapy. Relevant publications include *The Plural Psyche* (1989), *The Political Psyche* (1993), *Politics on the Couch* (2001), *Passions, Persons, Psychotherapy Politics* (2015), *A New Therapy for Politics?* (2016) and *Analysis and Activism* (co-edited, 2016). His website is www.andrewsamuels.com.

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