IS POLITICS THE LAST TABOO IN PSYCHOANALYSIS?

A Roundtable Discussion with:

Neil Altman, Jessica Benjamin, Ted Jacobs, and Paul Wachtel

Moderated by: Amanda Hirsch Geffner

Introduction

On a warm spring evening in early May, four prominent Manhattan psychoanalysts (Neil Altman, Jessica Benjamin, Ted Jacobs, and Paul Wachtel) got together at the invitation of Psychoanalytic Perspectives to talk about

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politics and psychoanalysis. Each participant in the discussion had been provided with a list of questions, composed by the journal’s editorial board, to reflect upon in advance. Some of the questions were later selected by the group as foci for the evening’s conversation, while others, although not directly asked, helped serve as a shared ideational context, and remained accessible as reference points for the hovering attention of those involved.

The process of formulating these questions is a story in itself, to be told, perhaps, at a later date (also see *Political Identity: A Personal Postscript*, below). Suffice it to say that in this post-9/11, post-invasion-of-Iraq, pre-presidential-election time period, a number of us have found ourselves more moved by things political than we have been in many, many years. This sentiment has come to infuse our lives, our patients’ lives, and our in-session lives with patients. Emotions (fear, sadness, anger, even excitement) about things beyond the immediate, familial-social sphere are running high, finding resonance with—and magnifying—many of our more personal concerns in the process. The consequences of political action or inaction have become, it seems, more vivid, more tangible. In many cases, we find ourselves entering into unfamiliar and often volatile territory with family, with friends, with colleagues and (dare it be said out loud?) with our patients, as well.

In a collaborative effort, the editorial board of *Perspectives* set about constructing and peopling a mental space meant to be hospitable to an ongoing exploration of these concerns. The following roundtable discussion and accompanying written responses are the result. It had been our desire to provide an intimate, collegial setting for the discussion—perhaps oxymoronically, one in which the participants would feel relatively contained and sheltered from the very public and political forces they were convening to discuss (see below, Neil Altman’s and Paul Wachtel’s related comments on, respectively, a tension between the “real-life” dangers often faced by patients and the constructed “safety” of the analytic frame [Neil Altman] and the wish to find alternatives to the dualistic concepts of “inner” and “outer” worlds. [Paul Wachtel]). Accordingly, other than the panelists themselves, only a small circle of those who had a role in moderating, hosting, and taping the event were present: *Perspectives* editors Kenneth Frank, Judith Becker Greenwald, Amanda Hirsch Geffner, Sheldon Itzkowitz, and Mary Sussillo (who was also our gracious host), and the audiographer Michael Geffner.¹

¹ My deep appreciation to the above “team” for their extensive intellectual, technical, and emotional support in preparing for and moderating the discussion, as well as to the *Perspectives* editorial board for helping to fine-tune the project’s concepts. Thank you, also, to the panelists and the discussants, and especially to Andrew Samuels for his enthusiastic response to the germ of an idea, his ongoing useful feedback, and steadfast interest in the project’s evolution.
In the interests of creating a lively and spontaneous experience (for participants and readers alike), we asked that the panelists not prepare written statements or papers, and editing of the transcript of the discussion (for publication purposes) was kept to a minimum. By virtue of this less formal approach, the panelists, each an experienced scholar/clinician in his or her own right, are in addition presented here in a vital, in-the-moment, rawer way, as complex individuals, as citizens. As the questions were many and the time and word-space limited, responses and ensuing discussions were, in places, halted, left dangling and under construction, in order not to have left unturned the next ideational stone. Despite the multiple mini-cliffhangers this stone-skipping, ripple-making method may have produced, we hope that the accompanying frustration for the reader will be optimal, and inspiring of the impulse to embellish or to fill in the blanks with thoughts (reactions, protestations, provocations, speculations) of his or her own. We welcome—and will consider for publication in Perspectives—such responses (in the form of essays, commentaries, letters to the editors, etc.). Along with panelist Paul Wachtel, we’re “curious to know [what is] the case for others . . . ” So, tell us please: What do you think?

Amanda Hirsch Geffner, June 2004

Welcoming Remarks

Amanda Hirsch Geffner: Thank you for being here tonight to participate in this roundtable discussion on the topic of psychoanalysis and politics. We hope for you to explore the relationship between these two spheres of action and interaction, the one typically private, intimate, dyadic; the other basically public, utilizing group energies, and broadcast via mass media. We will be asking you for your thoughts on if, where, and how the two processes of mutual influence and change overlap and interact (or have the potential to), and if, where, and how they do not. This discussion (taking place in the private consultation room of a Manhattan group psychoanalyst) is, of course, being held in the context of an upcoming national presidential election in a post-9/11 world, a world “presenting,” so to speak, with powerful international and political tensions.

Such tensions take their toll—manifestly and in ways unrecognized—both on analysts and analysands, as well as on psychoanalytic relationships. We invite you tonight to jointly grapple with several questions that Psychoanalytic Perspectives has developed on politics and psychoanalysis, with an eye to deepening and extending our understanding of the impact of the current political climate on our work (and vice versa—of the potential impact of our work on our politics and on the current political climate). We especially hope that tonight’s discussion will stimulate and begin
to advance new ways of thinking about working with patients under these intense conditions. In recognition of a historical and ongoing sense of controversy and ambivalence regarding the intermingling of these two experiences, we have named (or set) this roundtable with the descriptive question: “Is Politics the Last Taboo in Psychoanalysis?”

The Questions

I: Psychotherapy and Social Action

AHG: The first question is: How do the experiences of conducting psychotherapy and engaging in social action have an impact upon each other? Is it appropriate, and is it possible, to engage in an exploration of politics in psychoanalytic treatment without closing down the analytic space and/or falling into binary patterns of dominance and submission? What other dyadic problems might come up? What about neutrality/anonymity/self-disclosure considerations?

Neil Altman: I’ll address part of this question. I think that the way that the two experiences impact on each other or influence each other in my mind has to do with the experience of impasses. Getting into impasses and trying to find a way out of impasses in psychoanalysis or psychotherapy seems to have a lot of relevance to how one thinks about how political disputes get engaged and then either get stuck or unstuck. So, experiences of—and here I draw on Jessica’s work a lot—the experience of getting into what she calls a split complementarity, wherein there is a kind of a splitting going on, where there’s an inability to see the other person’s point of view. For example, in a situation where you charged for a missed appointment and the other person, the patient, feels that that’s unfair. So, my point of view is that I’m entitled to be paid for the time and their point of view is they shouldn’t have to pay for services not rendered; both entirely valid perspectives, and the only way that that can be resolved is if each person can find a way to take account of the other person’s point of view.

To me, this is an analogue for the Israeli-Palestinian situation, for example, where, from my point of view, there are two perspectives, both of which are entirely valid, and it’s a split complementarity; neither side can see beyond their own point of view to the other side. And the question is, How do you work with that? How do you both get beyond that? You know, there’s the vicious-circle phenomenon. As Jessica points out in The Bonds of Love [1988], dominant-submissive relationships and violence are the ultimate result of needing to assert
one’s point of view at the expense of the other person’s point of view. The alternative is to find within oneself some resonance with the other person’s point of view, even as you retain your own point of view. And that’s the tricky thing that I think we, as psychoanalysts, get a lot of experience in doing—not giving up our own point of view, but at the same time finding a way to resonate with the other person’s point of view, so that they feel understood. And if they feel understood, then they’re more likely to feel free to resonate with your point of view.

We have a lot of advantages as psychoanalysts; we have a certain protection that political actors don’t have, and we also have the rituals of our work, which have to do with exploration of the other person’s experience, and so that’s a setup for being able to transcend these kind of splitting situations that don’t necessarily happen, that are very hard to make happen in a political kind of discussion. But I think that’s something that one learns as a psychotherapist that is very valuable for social action.

Paul Wachtel: I agree with that very much, but also I think we need to think about what are the limits that impede the extension from the analytic dyad to the group phenomenon. And what I’m thinking of particularly is: as you were talking, it brought back an experience I had back in 1969 when I visited the Soviet Union at a time when the Vietnam War was still going on, and I went with a group where we had lots of opportunities to discuss things with Soviet citizens—everyday citizens and people in somewhat official positions—and I sort of took a position (which was easy for me, because I was opposed to the war and I was critical of my own country in many ways)—and I took a position like what Neil is describing of conveying my appreciation of their point of view, but expecting at some point some reciprocation, which was totally not forthcoming, I think not because of the properties of them as individuals, but because they were part of a system that didn’t allow for that kind of reciprocation. So that I think that part of what happens is that when group mores reinforce a certain position, that’s part of why it becomes locked in much more tightly. So, I agree very much in principle, but it may be worth our thinking about what the obstacles are to kind of getting the spark to leap over from the individual to the group situation.

Jessica Benjamin: What I found myself thinking about was this—recently, I did go on a trip to Israel and the Palestinian Territories—how when talking with people, I found that something that I had suspected from my analytic work on the issue of recognition actually seemed to be very much the case: that acknowledgement of the other