

Book review

Against therapy: Emotional tyranny and the myth of psychological healing (1988)

by Jeffrey Masson

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An archive of the misdemeanours of psychotherapy

The following two passages come from the conclusion of Jeffrey Masson's latest book entitled **Against therapy: Emotional tyranny and the myth of psychological healing**: "Every therapy I have examined in this book (with the exception of radical and feminist therapies, which are beset with other problems) displays a lack of interest in social injustice. Each shows a lack of interest in physical and sexual abuse. Each shows an implicit acceptance of the political status quo. In brief, almost every therapy shows a certain lack of interest in the world" (p240); "Psychotherapy cannot be reformed in its parts, because the activity, by its nature is harmful. Recognizing the lies, the flaws, the harm, the potential for harm, the imbalance in power, the arrogance, the condescension, the pretensions may be the first step in the eventual abolition of psychotherapy that I believe is, one day in the future, inevitable and desirable"(p254).

From the above quotes it is clear that the controversial author of **The assault on truth: Freud's suppression of the seduction theory** (1984) (for which he was fired as archivist of the Freud library) and **A dark science: Women, sexuality and psychiatry in the nineteenth century** (1986) should be prepared for another salvo from the multi-billion dollar profession that "profits from other people's misery" (p239). The argument against therapy consists mainly of identifying a fundamental theoretical flaw that underlies all therapy, of illustrations of the abuse of clients and the reactionary politics of certain prominent therapists.

Masson posits that the basic problem of analysis is the coupling of a "situation in which there is a superior and a subordinate" with the assumption that patients "cannot distinguish between what really happened to them and what they imagined happened to them" (p83). In the treatment of Dora (which is often regarded as the beginning of modern therapy) Freud did not believe that the friend of her wealthy industrialist father had really tried to seduce her, but that she was suffering from "internal fantasies". The origin of her illness was internal, not external; fantasy not reality; libido, not rape. To assume that the cause of mental suffering is in the person and not in the external world laid the basis for the denial of sexual abuse in childhood and the general retreat from the world "out-there" into the isolated intra-psychic world of the individual. In the **Assault on truth** Masson disclosed unpublished papers about the dispute between Freud and his earlier disciple Sandor Ferenczi over the reality of sexual abuse in childhood. Masson regards the abandonment of the "seduction theory" as the great initial error which set psychoanalysis in the wrong direction; not only did it give therapists licence to ignore the reality of the client, it also contributed directly to the concealment of child and women abuse within families.

Apart from collaborating with the cover-up of abuse in male dominated society, male therapists themselves violate children and women. Masson starts the catalogue of abuse by citing examples of famous psychiatrists like Carl Emminghouse and Hermann Oppenheim, who at the turn of the century sent children to mental institutions for "paranoia" or "sexual hallucinations" when they were fearful of their parents. To illustrate how psychiatry contributed to the social control of women during the nineteenth century the cases of two exceptional women who were institutionalized (for amongst other things "moral insanity") while clearly struggling with emancipation from male oppression, are cited.

Celebrated therapists like Freud and Jung continued the tradition. Freud not only disbelieved Dora, he thought that if she had reacted differently, a possible solution for all the parties would be for her to marry the lecherous industrialist (p55). When Dora left Freud's analysis in disgust, Freud blamed Dora for transferring qualities of the industrialist onto him. Masson argues that in reality, Freud had deceived her in a manner not dissimilar to the industrialist. When Jacques Lacan calls the Dora case a "misalliance" and claims that the fundamental problem for Dora (and all women) is to accept herself as an "object of desire for the man", Lacan "merely substituted prejudices of his own for those of Freud" (p73).

The sexual abuse of women patients by male analysts takes a different dimension in the case of Sabina Spielrein and her "affair" with Carl Jung. During analysis Sabina fell in love with the married Jung who had been

preaching polygamy to his client. Romantic ideology turned exploitative and Spielrein wrote to Freud claiming that Jung was the first man to kiss her and that he had written a letter demanding that "a kiss without consequences cost 10 franks". Freud immediately sent the letter to Jung and enquired: "What is she? A busybody, a chatterbox, or a paranoiac?" It is to Freud's credit that he wrote an apology to Spielrein after Jung himself confirmed her version. Fritz Perls ("father" of Gestalt Therapy) was quite explicit about his "therapeutic" sexual exploits, apart from writing in his autobiography about "thousands" of women who are "...provoking and tantalising, bitching, irritating their husbands and never getting their spanking" (p213).

The reluctance of the profession to deal with the sexual exploitation of women is demonstrated by the fact that it was only in 1974 that the American Psychological Association adopted a resolution that "sexual activity with a patient is unethical". Less than twenty-five years ago a petition demanding the resignation of an established analyst was circulated in New York because he had requested a study into therapist-client sexual relationships. The most recent survey (1983) shows that fifteen percent of therapists acknowledge that they have sexual contact with their "patients", which must be an under estimate because imagine "...attempting to find the number of incest victims in a community by asking all the fathers in that community how many of them had committed incest" (p181). Masson must be credited for attacking psychotherapy for the way in which it participated in the oppression of women and children and for criticising the feminists for their reluctance to take psychoanalysis to task for its chauvinism. However, demonstrating the chauvinism of therapists during an age of rampant male domination is not a valid argument against psychoanalysis; it merely shows how embedded therapists are in the prejudices of their time. A much more serious charge would be to demonstrate the chauvinism inherent within the theory of psychoanalysis. It is not only with regards to the exploitation of women and children that psychotherapy has lagged behind progressive movements and even other professions; it has been reactionary with regards to most other social concerns, which is understandable when reality is determined within the four walls of the consulting room.

The indifference of the profession to abuse, even of a criminally certifiable nature, is illustrated through the cases of John Rosen, the American Academy of Psychotherapists' Man of the Year (1971) and Ewen Cameron, president of both the American and the World Psychiatric Associations. Rosen in his radically new "direct psychoanalysis" argues that the therapist must use "cunning, guile, shrewdness, and seductiveness" to hunt out the secrets of the patient. In 1983 Rosen surrendered his medical licence in order to avoid prosecution on over 100 accusations of violations of rules and regulations of different medical boards and pleaded guilty to abandoning a woman patient to the care of his employees who had beaten her to death (after Rosen had

used her as a prostitute for a prominent judge), to keeping a male patient shackled and bound in a security room and to "being unable to practice medicine with skill and safety for his patients". Apart from a lack of public condemnation by the profession (and no criminal prosecution) a well-known analyst from Rosen's university said in an interview that the issue is comparable to the phenomenon of trying to sell the New York Brooklyn Bridge; what is interesting is not the seller, but the psychology of the buyer - a typical, but diabolical example of blaming the victim.

The American Journal of Psychiatry ascribed Ewen Camerons worldwide success to a combination of his intellectual brilliance and the "softness (even loveliness) of his personality" (p245). One of Camerons innovations was to give more than fifty patients (mostly women) megadoses of "sleep therapy" - up to 65 consecutive days of intense electroshock treatments in order to induce complete amnesia. This "research" was funded by the CIA who hoped it could be used to obliterate the memories of agents who had undertaken sensitive missions. In December 1988 the CIA was ordered to pay approximately 10 million dollars compensation to those patients who were still alive. Masson concludes by asking whether these are exceptions "or is there something in the very nature of psychotherapy, that tends toward such abuses" (p147).

In trying to demonstrate the fundamentally harmful "nature " of therapy Masson slides between attempting to develop a theoretical argument and citing examples of abusive therapists. By not developing the theory, the practise of abuse becomes the cornerstone of the argument. Even on this foundation a more powerful case could have been constructed by teasing out some of the more subtle manipulations (and abuses) of clients that occur during most routine therapy sessions; describing modern day Franksteins gives the book a sensationalist tone which provides the possibility for superficial dismissal. It also does not counter the argument that all professions have "madmen" and that most are ultimately censored or discredited. The selective use of famous or prominent therapists does not overcome the problem, because the question still remains how widespread is abuse amongst the ordinary do-gooders who are "just" making a living by listening to peoples "everyday unhappiness". Analysing the professionalization of therapy (which would explain why therapists can be so disproportionately remunerated for the limited services offered and why there is such inordinate reluctance to institute controls to detect and prosecute abuse) would have been a much more fruitful basis for an attack on the privileges and abuses of the "therapeutic" profession. Such an analysis would also shed light on the inequality and potential abusiveness in all relations between experts and lay people. This would have prevented Masson from slipping between naive ideas of democratising therapy (mutual analysis in which the therapist gives up authority - as if it is some commodity you hand

back) and calling for the abolition of all therapy. One cannot help but feel that while Masson diagnosed a serious malady, his superficial analysis of the problem leads to quackish remedies.

The third theme deals with the politics of famous therapists such as Jung and Rogers. Starting with "Jung among the Nazis" he convincingly demonstrates the complicity of the famous therapist with the nazi regime as well as his racism. About South Africa Jung wrote : .. "the Dutch, who were at the time of their colonizing a developed and civilized people, dropped to a much lower level because of their contact with the savage races" (p115). Masson asserts that Jungs "innovative" lack of interest in the past of his patients was a repression of his own unsavoury past.

Skipping the implicit fascism of Skinner (the omission of an easy target) Masson turns to the benevolent despotism of Carl Rogers, who certainly never abused clients himself; but also never challenged abuses in his acceptance of the status quo. The cases quoted by Rogers reveal either little or no reports of abuse in the history of the clients or shows a lack of sensitivity when it occurred. In commenting on the plight of a group of inmates in a mental hospital who he had treated with client - centered therapy, Rogers stated "to stand up for the patient or to fight for what are perceived as his rights is to intrude on the hospital administration in a way that will surely and naturally be resented" (p200).

Since the resentment of the administration would have scuttled the research project, the violation of patient rights is conveniently ignored. The political naivete of Rogers is demonstrated by his belief in the potential for constructive personality change in repressive institutions such as jails and the American military (which he claimed had undergone a "deep transformation"). Another example is his attempts to bring "together racist whites and angry blacks in South Africa in American-style encounter groups: one cannot but question the lasting effects" (p194).

Masson's own ideology is apparent in the way he treats these examples - both he and Rogers share a belief in liberal humanism within a capitalist system. It is erroneous to depict Rogers as "naive"; Rogers is an important proponent of bourgeois individualism and an active agent for adjustment within exploitative systems - a classic example of what Althusser would regard as being part of the "ideological state apparatuses" that help to reproduce the existing relations of exploitation and domination. Masson's lack of understanding of politics seriously undermines the potential power of his attack. Trapped within the same paradigm that he discredits, his call for the abolition of therapy rings hollow and is difficult to take seriously. His suggestion that within modern, alienating industrial societies therapists could easily be replaced by "well-informed friends" can be dismissed as naive romanticism,

particularly since it is not located within another conception of society.

Masson's critique also does not address how one would dismantle an industry in which it is estimated that in the USA alone in 1980 there were more than 50 million visits to psychiatrists and therapists. A multi-billion dollar industry is not dismantled because of the sensational revelations of even an insider, rather it will simply discredit the one who cries wolf (which is what happened previously when he was viciously attacked for amongst others his physical appearance, his relationship to his father, his analyst and Anna Freud). By not being located within a movement (or an organization) that aims to bring about social change, individual challenges to an established, self-interested institution ends either with nasty dismissal or is accommodated as part of the diversity of liberal critique which ultimately strengthens, rather than weakens, exploitative institutions in liberal capitalist societies.

Masson's book is essential reading for people who want to confirm their suspicions about how bad the entire "enterprise" of therapy is, the countless women who have been abused by their therapists and to find out how venal certain "great men" in the history of therapy were. It should also be required reading for starry-eyed MA clinical students. **Against therapy** is however not recommended for those who want a serious analysis of how to control the abuses by therapists or how to transform psychotherapy into an emancipatory project.

REFERENCE

Masson, J (1988) **Against therapy: Emotional tyranny and the myth of psychological healing**. New York: Atheneum.