

Psychotherapy and solidarity with the vulnerable other: from sacred interruption to global liberation

Phenomenologists since Husserl have understood social groups as ‘personalities of a higher order’ and have shown the nation-state model to be a non-essential form of human grouping. The state is essentially a sovereign social entity that makes its own laws equally applicable to all citizens. Due to the nature of human individuality and autonomy, as described especially in the existential-phenomenological tradition, the nation-state cannot meet the conditions for a just and humane society. This paper presents a soft critique of contemporary psychology, psychotherapy, human-science research and their function within the nation-state. Psychotherapy is broadly understood to lie on a spectrum with ‘social work’ on one end and specialized forms of ‘psychoanalysis’ on the other. Psychotherapists, psychologists and institutionalized researchers can be seen as technocrats that work to secure (sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly) the social dynamics of the state. Levinas suggests the possibility of a just society through nothing less than ‘permanent revolution.’ His philosophy leads us to the transcendence of the state and the messianic age. Therapists, psychologists and researchers might begin to reconcile their practice with concepts of universal justice by suspending attitudes of devotion to the state (the ‘national attitude’). This might begin with rejection of the unquestioned acceptance of the ‘cesar state,’ with which each of us identifies. Just as breaches of totality punctuate therapeutic movement in the one-to-one of the therapeutic encounter, they may serve as such for personalities of higher order. Dis-eased intersubjective patterns can be made adaptive and healthy through psychotherapy, so might national and international patterns. If we exploit sacred interruptions - the empathic contact with the most vulnerable in our communities and in distant lands - we may yet see progress towards a genuine human society (Husserl’s ‘authentic We’) characterized not by fought and avoided wars, market economics, and new apartheid, but by the universal bond of brotherhood. For this we above all others are responsible.