ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Book Review by Chris Wood

for

Art Psychotherapy Groups in the Hostile Environment of Neo-Liberalism: Collusion or Resistance?

edited by

Sally Skaife and Jon Martyn (2022)

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This book contains a lot to think about. Reviewing it has taken me a long time because it concerns a discussion of many important issues in my life and my work. It unpacks the challenges of working and living in a world dominated by austerity politics. In particular, the book looks at the impact of austerity on art therapy and art psychotherapy groups. Sally Skaife and Jon Martyn explain how their experiences of political activism enabled them to work together on editing and shaping their book. It is unusual and yet welcome to me when therapists discuss the effects of the political world on their theory and practice.

Skaife and Martyn explain how the approach to austerity economics comes from right-wing politics, known as neoliberalism. An example of neoliberalism in contemporary France is the attempt to impose austerity (partly by raising the pension age) during the spring of 2023. It led to massive demonstrations. Posters from the protests show President Macron's face. He has been given a new bouffant hairdo because the image is a composite of the faces of Emmanual Macron and former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. It is Margaret Macron. Thatcher was one of the early architects of neoliberal economics and has become its global symbol. All conservative prime ministers since Thatcher and some aspects of Labour politics in the UK have made unsuccessful attempts to emulate Thatcher, and they have overseen the wrecking of much British societal infrastructure. Yet ominously, Sunak and Starmer seem ready to follow from their slightly different political perspectives in Thatcher's wake. In the UK, we also see demonstrations and people in many industries striking for sustained periods for more pay and better conditions. Such disputes against austerity and neoliberalism persist across Europe and other places worldwide.

It seems to me and others that neoliberalism disadvantages many people with tragic consequences whilst providing a greedy, corrupt elite with colossal profits. The book describes what the editors see as some of the human implications of neoliberalism before moving to accounts of groups in different contemporary settings (the book chapters on groups are written by art therapists Rudnik, Lambert, Caldecourt, Cavaliero, Collier, Omand, and Hollingsbee and Miller). One tenet of Skaife and Martyn's argument is that it is not helpful for therapists to act as though the distress caused by austerity is somehow separate from the world of therapy and that the misery and pathology are all in the client. The idea of not locating pathology in the client echoes what service user movements are asking mental health workers to understand. Despite the grimness of their analysis, the editors aim to offer a discussion suggesting that art therapists and other professionals might avoid being sunk by the economic challenges they, their colleagues, and their clients face.

When she was Conservative Home Secretary in the early part of this century, Theresa May used the phrase 'hostile environment' to indicate her government's approach to people who are undocumented migrants (Kirkup and Winnett, 2012). It was a policy announced by billboards driven around city centres on the sides of lorries. The billboards gave the message 'Go home or face arrest!' aimed at anyone considered illegal in the UK. Later the policy was included in UK legislation. There were some scandalous results: for example, the Home Office's response to British people who were part of the Windrush generation meant that too many suffered injustice and were deported.

Skaife and Martyn's *expansion* of the term 'hostile environment' is helpful. The book stretches the term to reveal how successive governments over four decades have ignored how austerity measures mean that many people face a hostile environment in their living circumstances. The many include those needing to use benefit systems (who regularly lose benefits through sanctions), health workers, people working in schools and higher education, social care, the civil service, and other industries. Many people in these UK industries faced with a cost of living crisis have taken strike action between 2022 and 2023. The impact of austerity on workers and on service users is cruel, and it seeps into many areas of life, including the difficulties of renting affordable housing.

The second chapter indicates how fraught political contexts can potentially trap clients, therapists and co-workers. It examines the painful constraints of contradictions from the economic approach in the NHS, University Education, and the Art Therapy Professional Association. We are pointed to how bell hooks (1982) wrote about the contradiction of the women's liberation movement in the early 1980s being racist because it excluded many non-white women. She urged everyone to face our fear of being unpopular and struggle to voice these contradictions along with our concerns.

The third chapter continues in the vein of bell hooks. It returns to the idea that the use of art and aspects of the psychotherapeutic relationship are potent and might potentially subvert some but not all elements of the hostile environment for clients and therapists. It considers art therapy as having the potential to be a form of resistance because it can provide a forum where brutal truths can be spoken. Skaife points to the

poet Pat Parker's words as capturing the call for a pivot of honesty which does not attempt to resolve contradictory tension.

For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend

The first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black.
Second, you must never forget that i'm Black.
You should be able to dig Aretha,
but don't play her every time i come over.
And if you decide to play Beethoven – don't tell me
his life story. They made us take music appreciation too.
Eat soul food if you like it,
but don't expect me to locate your restaurants
or cook it for you.
And if some Black person insults you,
mugs you, rapes your sister, rapes you,
rips your house, or is just being an ass –
please, do not apologise to me
for wanting to do them bodily harm.
It makes me wonder if you're foolish …

I think this tells us to remember that we are equal but not to forget that we exist in a system of austerity and oppression, which means that many (even those who might not anticipate it) have the daily experience of not being treated as equal and worthy of respect.

Skaife and Martyn describe this as a painful tension underneath the work of art therapists travelling from the countries of the colonisers to work with those who have been colonised. Along with other Arts Therapists, they recognise this as similar to the pain underneath more local art therapy where both client and therapist are marginalised. As an art therapist, I have sometimes been conscious of this when working with marginalised mental health service clients.

This last point seems relevant to the way the editors present their work. Even though they offer a psychodynamic perspective, they do not try to resolve the tension in the terms used to name the profession: *art therapy* and or *art psychotherapy*. This seems wise because the terms are widely used in different frameworks.

I understand both terms in the UK as the interchangeable statutory description of the profession. In contrast, some indicate that *'art therapy'* is used by therapists focusing on art-making and *'art psychotherapy'* by those working in the relationship and encouraging exploration. This seems to introduce a polarising hierarchy, implying that the distinctions between the different terms are less complex than in practice. I sympathise with some of the defences that might be at play in difficult political contexts, which persuade practitioners to choose the term *'art psychotherapy'*. Whereas, I see the ability to use either term as enabling me to try to ensure that clients might understand what is on offer. I use different terms in response to what seems to fit client perspectives. For example, some members of a therapeutic community did not want anything which included the word *'psycho'* in it, though they just about tolerated the idea of *'art therapy'*. The objection seemed a complicated response based on protecting their class dignity and not wanting to be seen in pathological terms.

Whereas other clients seem to like the name '*art psychotherapy'* and feel it is more likely to offer them a respectful exploration of their difficulties.

The editors invited art therapists running groups with an *art psychotherapy* perspective to contribute chapters from different settings. They wanted authors open to reflection on the politics of therapy. The aim was to consider how art therapists providing groups respond to issues of power in the context of austerity Britain. The results included accounts of groups running in the NHS, schools, studios in community centres, a women's prison and a refugee camp in Greece for men. This brought to mind an enlivening discussion with a social worker and group analyst, Frank Denning, who regularly worked with people with a long-term history of psychosis who would not usually be offered a place in group analytic sessions. He gave me (Denning, in Wood, 2011:98) the following quotation from Foulkes, which strongly indicates how good practice might upend usual power dynamics.

> *'What is group-analytic psychotherapy? ... it is not psychoanalysis of individuals in a group. Nor is it the psychological treatment of a group by a psychoanalyst. It is a form of psychotherapy by the group, of the group, including its conductor. Hence the name: group-analytic psychotherapy' (Foulkes, 1975: 3).*

Several of the practice chapters helped me think about what is a workable response to challenging political circumstances. The accounts by Susan Rudnik, Beulah Lambert and Holly Caldecourt about different parts of their work following the Grenfell Tower fire are powerful. They show the gradual development of a group approach that could offer containment of the raw tragedy of the fire and the seventy-two deaths.

Rudnik quotes Renwick (2019) describing the tower as clad in solidified petrol, to all intents and purposes, as the council sought austerity measures for the refurbishment. Faced with this, it is hard to know how the art therapists and their colleagues from different professions contained their anger. Not surprisingly, the issue of what therapists do with their feelings about political injustice is a theme that flickers to the surface in several places in the book. The delicate tightrope between activism and therapy is not an easy balancing act.

The group processes employed at Latimer in the community centre and nearby schools were non-directive and skilled. The practitioners worked to establish good collegial and community relations with others working in the centre and, where possible, in the schools. The extent of the tragedy of Grenfell meant that the work needed to be well integrated with the community, and the whole community helped contain the groups and other different forms of help that were needed. Anything else would have been too much for lone therapists. Much collaborative work between those living and working in the shadow of Grenfell must have been required. It offers a helpful glimpse of the sort of practice necessary in the aftermath of such a disaster. I am mindful of the World Health Organization publication, *'Psychological First Aid: Guide for field workers* (2011). It aims to respect the dignity, culture and strength of people who face disasters.

The sheer spilling of paint in artwork made by the young people in the shadow of Grenfell shows something of the skilled, psychologically informed way the art therapists managed to help contain raw emotion until it could be worked out by people using art therapy services.

Cavaliero's writing and that of Hollingsbee and Miller on working with displaced people, whether *immigrants or refugees,* shows the complexity of what is needed. Fundamentally their chapters show the difficulties of offering brief work alongside people who have had to leave everything (often families, homes and countries). Meeting people amid such upheaval points starkly to the limits of what is possible and to the need for therapists to take care of themselves if they are to be able to help. Much has been learnt from working with displaced people that is resoundingly relevant to work in any service facing austerity.

In reading the chapters on group practice examples, I was reminded of the writing of Renos Papadopoulos. He asks us to find ways to acknowledge the need of clients to *thaw* out from their experiences and what is often terrible trauma before they might be able to engage in therapy (2002).

Jessica Collier writes the chapter ‘prison cells' about her work in a women's prison. She does not attempt to resolve all the contradictions of work on the edge of the hard lives of prisoners. Nevertheless, she writes honestly about the psychological and contextual struggles she faced as a therapist. The chapter addresses many of the same political tensions outlined in earlier chapters by Skaife and Martyn. Collier offers an honest account of how her approach to prison work changed, and the changes she described help me, as an art therapist, think about practice and its complexity. Her account seems to me to describe adaptations that many art therapists (and probably other workers) have historically made in response to the effects of austerity on different services. Initially, she tried to provide an open group on the substance misuse landing.

She inherited this group. She was not naïve about the circumstances of the female prisoners' lives and how they brought so much from their difficult lives into the prison.

> … a long dark corridor permeated with the strong odour of vomit, faeces, and unwashed bodies. Each week the group was formed by the first eight women arriving in the room. This was extremely difficult to manage and contain. The art materials were stolen, and drug dealing and medication trading was overt. The group was characterised by mess, chaos, loss and conflict (Collier, 2023, 133).

She managed to work using an open group approach for two years, but in the end, she felt emotionally drained, exhausted and exploited. She decided to change her practice to offer a closed group to try a more focused approach, but many of the difficulties in the women's lives found a hoarse echo even in that closed group. Collier described how she still found it hard to think. She changed her practice again to work alongside a colleague in a briefer structured way using a manualised mentalising approach for a series of twelve-week group sessions. She had many misgivings about moving to a briefer, more structured manualised approach. 'I imagined I was surrendering my agency to the management' (138). Nevertheless, the briefer approach alongside a colleague was easier to sustain and better understood and received by the prison community.

There are many examples in the contemporary practice of how art therapists adapt what they offer to sustain a service. Collier's chapter describes something of how this happens. Overall, the book contains several examples of how doing such difficult work

alongside a colleague (from art therapy or other disciplines) can help therapists sustain themselves and not be alone in the work. Also, sometimes using research and manualised approaches can provide the ability to maintain a service (although the response to research may provoke thorny issues). I recognise the misgivings and the feeling that such an approach may be a form of collusion or capitulation. However, where we can, it seems wise to enlist help, whether in the form of good colleagues or good research practices. The questions about collusion or resistance posed by Skaife and Martyn are complex and require expansion.

Ironically the manualized mentalization-based art therapy group (MBAT) in the women's prison was cut at the peak of its success. Collier's chapter mainly focuses on the painful nature of practice for therapists and clients in deprived circumstances, though in the end, her successful group was subject to cuts. Many people describe the pain of witnessing the good services they have built, facing cuts and closure. In the book, Helen Omand takes a different emphasis and focuses on the pain of watching the partial closure of a service.

Omand wrestled in thinking about whether to share the financial difficulties with the group members. Her initial instinct was to protect them from the knowledge of the coming cuts, but the knowledge of the cuts became apparent to everyone, and then she recognised that this knowledge was what she needed to work with.

The members of the community centre and many staff were devastated by the cuts, which happened quickly. But members made their voices known through a series of

visual artworks which contained their pain and anger. Also, a small thread of humour and resilience developed from the art made and the shared efforts to oppose the cuts.

The paintings and drawings showed some of the raw pain of closure, but they also showed ingenuity in how community centre members made sense of what the cuts meant to them. There were no easy resolutions; the realities of austerity were portrayed but difficult to digest unless with wry humour. Rachel Rowan Olive writes about her 'reusable protest placard':

> There's so much to protest; just have a reusable one. It just saves time these days. I made postcards of this image, and I feel tempted to just keep one in my bag at all times to bring out if someone is pissed off (laughs). Usually, the people who find my art funniest are people who've been in similar situations (in Omand's chapter on protested space: 156).

Another image by Rowan Olive plays with the word for austerity. 'Austeri*tea:* some piss in a cup'.

The chapter contains examples of five powerful pieces of artwork that speak to anyone who has had to face watching services dismantled. A painting by Andrew Mead is used on the cover of the book. It is a painting of a wounded bear. But the publishers did not think they could use the words Mead had put into the painting. 'Don't fuck with the wounded bear'. The image and the words are raw.

Although the centre did not escape making cuts, it seems that group members and affected staff were able to work together and find some solidarity in the potent art made.

The book contributes to the expanding political discussion about art therapy, which includes, for example, commentaries on collaborative work, accounts by experts by experience and about the many people who are invalidated by prejudice (e.g. Collier and Eastwood, 2022; Hogan, 2021; Huet, 2015; Morgan et al., 2012; Springham and Woods, 2011; Talwar, 2019; Waller, 1991; Watts, Gilfillan and Hills, 2018; Wood, 1997; Wood & Mckoy Lewens, 2023). Increasing numbers of art therapy practitioners and authors are trying to address the need to struggle with fraught socio-economic landscapes. We seem to be witnessing early steps in finding workable political responses to the circumstances in which contemporary art therapists find themselves. The chapters by art therapists that describe their group practice help provide examples of facets of the theory and practice discussed in earlier chapters by Skaife and Martyn. The book makes me think carefully about the relationship between political ideas and different forms of practice.

Much of the book helped me think about how I shape my practice in the political context of our time. In many ways, the book is a call to action. It asks us to gain political understanding. Nevertheless, I wonder if the title will appeal to enough people: *Art Psychotherapy Groups in the Hostile Environment of Neoliberalism, Resistance or Collusion*. I realise that the editors cannot steal parts of Gordon Brown's title (2023) about the latest version of neoliberal economics, 'Jeremy Hunt has left the UK to rot in poverty: So we must take matters into our own hands.' Brown's title does not grapple

with what stance to take, one of resistance or collusion, which Skaife and Martyn return to repeatedly, but their book might attract more readers with even a slightly more accessible title.

A publisher initially asked Jon Martyn to present a book about how art therapists increasingly work with refugees. The book's early discussion unpacks how political pressures invade and damage our thinking. The power dynamics in working with many different kinds of vulnerable people mean therapists must regularly contemplate how they ensure they work respectfully alongside people. Martyn wanted to show refugee work as being alongside equal human beings and not present refugees as either victims or villains (which too often has become the dominant government narrative). Many art therapists and others working in mental health, social care, and education know that the same principle applies to working alongside all service users and staff in related areas. Severe restriction of resources can lead educators, health workers and their clients to feel hopeless and inadequate. This often interrupts the ability of people to think and function. I think that the book is an excellent first step in examining things that damage our capacity to think and resist.

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