The Politics of the I-Thou

Martin Buber, the Anarchist

Erhard Doubrawa

2001

still remains mutual relatedness, openness of one person towards another ... the dialogical relationship is based also on how open people are for surprises ... (Buber 1985a, 304).

The second quotation is a fervent prayer to heaven of the political activist Paul Goodman:

Father, lead and direct me, homeless animal that I am,/ for I am stumbling ahead/ unerring/ I do not notice the wonderful sidetracks which/ make this world full of surprises, nor/ the gaping abyss./ Oh, give me firm ground under my feet for the next step ahead / so that I may wander, reeling, in my sleep (Goodman 1992, 26).[3]

_____

[3] Translator's Note: Quotations appearing in the original German text have been rendered into English for the purposes of this translation only. They are not taken from the official English translations of the sources quoted.

ple ill. Actually, meeting understood in this sense is not intended in our society, and this lack of relationships makes people ill. The kind of relationship intended is that of the 'I-It.'

Thinking further along these lines I realize that a healing therapeutic relationship is not all it takes to heal lives. It takes a healthy society where healing through meeting is intended and wanted.

Society should be constituted in a way which allows for people to encounter one another directly and openly. Therefore smaller social units are needed where people may enter into dialogue with others whom they know personally and together shape their lives. A federal structure of society in the real sense of the word. Where smaller units voluntarily combine to form larger ones with the aim of shaping their lives together: 'a union of unions of unions.' And thus in the end all of mankind. The state will have disappeared by then, unless, according to Buber, it is retained to help with the organization of such units.

Psychotherapy today sometimes reminds me of the labor of Sisyphus. With great effort he pushes his rock up the side of the mountain (during a therapy session) only to see it roll down again (in the everyday lives of this our society). The situation is paradoxical in any case: Naturally, I would not wish to give up this labor of Sisyphus — I know that the journey is itself the destination.

And yet I must be aware at all times that social change also needs (public) statement and social commitment. Therapy is political, certainly. But political work is more than therapy.

Gestalt therapy aims at enabling people to live autonomous lives. Therefore it also must make people able to act politically, able to look after their concerns in the *polis.*

Martin Buber was also aware of this. For the 'I-Thou meeting' to take place, a specific social climate is needed. Buber saw this, as did Landauer, in anarchy or 'free socialism.'

I should like to end this paper with two quotations: the first is a summary of the political statements of the religious philosopher Buber: for him, the basis for communal life — (life in a group)

Contents

and whether in turning towards another we really mean him, in his being-in-the-world and how he has become. (Buber 1985a, 302).

Conclusions for Gestalt therapy

From my work as a Gestalt therapist I know that society always plays a part in therapy. People come to me suffering from the effects which living in this society has brought about. Changing social definitions determine what we consider an 'illness' and what we see as 'health,' definitions which do not merely serve to describe the well-being of an individual but also — and often enough — the interests of the ruling powers.

As a Gestalt therapist I concentrate my efforts on establishing a dialogical relationship with my clients. I know that the best conditions for the healing of the soul are present when we meet in an atmosphere of equality and partnership and permit our souls to touch. In the final instance this is the healing act, as it tends toward Martin Buber's 'I-Thou' relationship.

By saying that it *tends* in that direction I mean that the therapist-client relationship cannot sustain the 'I-Thou relationship' to the last consequence. The meeting of therapist and client is one between a person in need of help and a member of a helping profession. This meeting is better for the person seeking help than all other possibilities society offers. But there remains a part in this relationship which is *instrumental*: for the therapist, the client is the 'instrument' which permits him to earn a living. From the client's point of view the therapist is the 'instrument' which enables him to find his way in the coldness of this world. There is inherent in this relationship the Utopian expectation of a future society where we will not have to resort to 'instrumental' relationships anymore.

Nonetheless I must be aware that even a meeting on *instrumental* terms between (almost) equals is rather the exception in our society. The absence of meeting in this world is what makes peo-

elaborating since 1913 was crystallized in his text *I and Thou* (Buber 1973). Even in this early text (1923) the political dimension of his writings is hinted at, albeit cautiously, four years after Landauer's death.

Buber speaks of 'community' of 'brotherhood' of 'true public life.' In his later book *Pfade in Utopia* (Paths in Utopia) published in 1950 (Buber 1985a) he goes on to place greater emphasis on the connection between his understanding of the dialogical and his social Utopia.

Buber does not introduce the notion of 'We' in his work until the late Thirties, whereby he means the 'We of spiritual being' (das 'wesende Wir'). 'The special quality of the 'We' in his (Buber's) thinking manifests itself thus, that between its members there exists a kind of substantial relationship — at least for a time — i.e., in that 'We' there is expressed the ontic immediacy which is the decisive prerequisite for the 'I-Thou' relationship. The We potentially *includes* the Thou. It is only people able to say 'We' in this true sense who may truly say 'We together.' (Buber 1962, 373f.).

From this we may understand that at the basis of society there must be many small communal cells where people may say 'Thou' and 'We.' Besides individualist and collective forms of living Buber speaks of a third basic possibility of existence, the sphere of the 'Between.' This is shared by two or several beings but extends beyond the personal spheres of each of them. The substance of this sphere is dialogical and it constitutes the true nature or substance of 'We' ('wesenhaftes Wir').

To Buber, one such basic unit or cell of a living society is the 'kibbutz.' It plays a significant part in Buber's thinking and in his social actions: he states, however, that a kibbutz deserves this name only

… if the number of its members does not exceed that of the circle of people any one person may know personally … The vital question is, whether direct contact from one person to another exists

Thus our community is not aspiring to revolution, it is revolution.

(Martin Buber 1978, P. 187)

The Political Side of Martin Buber

It is generally known today that the teachings of Martin Buber (1878 — 1965) on the I-Thou relationship have been the single most important influence on Gestalt therapy. There is one side to Martin Buber, however, which has been much neglected — his *political* side.

What I have set out to show in this paper is not only that Buber did indeed understand his philosophy as having a political dimension, but also that he wished to be politically effective, and *how* he sought to be so.

I also mean to continue the discussion on politics and therapy which has always been central to my work as a Gestalt therapist, director of an institute, teacher and editor. The discussion has changed since its inception in the Eighties, and it should not cease today.

The Anarchistic Roots of Gestalt Therapy

I remember being in the study of my friend Stefan Blankertz some years ago. I had got to know Stefan as a specialist on Goodman (Blankertz 1988/1984 and 1996, 15 ff.). He had explained to me that the cofounder of Gestalt therapy, Paul Goodman (1911 — 1972), had been an anarchist, i.e., that he rejected people living together under state rule. Instead he propagated organizing a community of self-determined individuals responsible for their own actions. The term 'anarchy' made troubled me somewhat, as what I considered (good) politics at the time lay somewhat to the left of the Socialist Democratic Party (SPD) and this meant looking for more (not less)

state intervention. I clearly saw, however, that Goodman's anarchistic ideal of society fits in much better with the individual aims of Gestalt therapy: after all, we are talking about being responsible for our actions and accepting that responsibility, and also about 'organismic self-regulation.' This obviously does not leave any room for power structures or state.

It was Lore Perls who first instilled the idea in me that Gestalt therapy has always understood itself as *therapy in society*: people should be enabled to determine their own lives. Lore emphasized that this was 'political work' in 'societies which were more or less authoritarian in structure' (L. Perls 1997, 126).

So there I stood, glancing at the dust-covers of the books on Stefan's shelves: what was the reading matter of an anarchist? A black hardback copy bearing the title *Master Eckharts Mystical Writings* in gilded lettering caught my eye.

I was truly astonished. The (new) edition had been published by the most important publisher of anarchist writings — *Büchse der Pandora (Pandora's Box)*, founded by Stefan together with a friend. But why on earth would they publish religious books?

Stefan pointed out the name of the man who had translated the writings of the German mystic into modern German: Gustav Landauer (1870 — 1919), author, philosopher and politician. The same Landauer who in 1919 had proclaimed the Räterepublik[1] in Munich. After its suppression by volunteer troops called in by the SPD, he was murdered on his way to prison. My astonishment grew: I had come upon a strange, unexpected connection between religion and politics. But this was not all — Stefan also pointed out to me the editor's name: it was Martin Buber, who had edited it after Landauer's assassination. Buber and Landauer had been close, Landauer being for Buber something between a friend and a fatherly teacher, and both were Jews. Whereas Buber identified with his Jewishness both in a philosophical and scientific sense, Landauer developed

---

[1] Republic governed by commissars.

'automatised state,' i.e., 'the social' and 'the political' (Buber 1985a, 244 ff.). In his view the social principle rests upon 'union and mutuality,' while 'the political principle is fed by the drive to rule over others.' (Schapira 1985, 447).

That in all social structures there is a degree of power, authority, hierarchy ... is well known; but this element is never found at the basis of unpolitical social structures ... All forms of rule have this in common: each wields more power than the given conditions require. (Buber 1962, 1019)

Elsewhere he writes:

> Political function means that the ruling caste has more power than it needs to fulfil this function. Even in a modern democratic state there is a surplus of power. (Buber 1985a, 303)

Thus a 'political surplus' is generated by all states, which, following Buber's thinking, constitutes a danger that may be fended off by means of decentralization.

Stefan Blankertz, while remaining in the tradition of Buber, Landauer and Goodman combines therapeutic sociology and political therapy as follows: The State receives its legitimization from 'occupying social functions necessary to everyone.' This is how power interests and the state are made safe from criticism. 'Each anti-state movement is [now] confronted with the central problem of returning to the individual his 'awareness of autonomy' (Goodman) and to 'reconstruct' society (Landauer), i.e., to empower people to live together without state interference' (Blankertz 1998, 78). Clearly this is the political meaning of Gestalt therapy, as its manifest therapeutic approach is that of enabling the client to live an independent life and to determine what he wishes to do in life (A. and E. Doubrawa 1998, 10f.).

The social philosophy of Martin Buber forms the background to his understanding of the dialogical in man which he had been

tween people" (Buber 1985b, 702). Buber stresses the importance of communities. These had the decided advantage that immediate relationships were still possible between their members. From these living communities the 'communal spirit is to emerge, in the form of strong and realistically fulfilled communal cells.' Finally, "mankind was to become an association of such communities." (Buber 1985b, 120):

> Landauer's idea was also ours. It was realizing that there was not so much a need to change existing institutions, but rather a need to change human life, the way people related to one another. That Socialism was not the result of developing economic circumstances but rather something that would never become real if it was not lived here and now and by us. That was Gustav Landauer's idea and it is ours … Let us, who were not ready for the living be ready for the dead, for his teachings: for the teachings of creative Socialism which is our very own truth, let us be ready with heart and soul. (Buber 1985a, 82).

Buber and Landauer imagined the socialist community as a 'union of unions.' Their concern was "socialist restructuring of the State into a community of communities.' (Buber 1985a, 82). Seen from this angle, Buber's "insistent distrust of social order and the centralist state' is more readily understood" (Schapira 1985, 439).

Although in agreement with the views of Gustav Landauer and Max Weber, Buber makes one important sociological distinction between what he calls 'Community' and what he calls 'Society.' 'Community' stands for "a social organism founded upon immediate personal relations." In 'Society' on the other hand he sees a "mechanistically amassed accumulation of human beings" (Schapira 1985, 435). These polar opposites further appear in other terminological pairs Buber uses: 'loving community' and

greater interest in medieval communal Catholicism. This difference did not detract from their friendship, however. Their views met in the joint consideration that religion without socialism was 'disembodied spirit,' whereas socialism without religion was 'physical nature void of spirit' (Buber 1985a, 284).

Once I had been made aware of the Buber-Landauer connection, I hit upon Landauer again reading Fritz Perls: "Times were restless after the First World War. There were political groupings everywhere hatching revolutionary ideas. I was fascinated by Marx … and then the Russian Revolution. Mostly, however, I was gripped by the ideas of Gustav Landauer — he has nothing whatever to do with our analytic mind in Frankfurt. I had read his *Call to Socialism* in Berlin, and 1919 was the year when some of these ideas could come to fruition. But it happened very differently." (Fritz Perls, quoted by Petzold 1984, 13). Fritz and Lore Perls understood themselves as 'left-wing' and were members of the Anti-Fascist League, which was why they had to flee Germany when the Nazis rose to power (L. Perls 1997, 123).

Following Hilarion Petzold, Heik Portele also called attention to the fact that Fritz Perls' project of a 'Gestalt Kibbutz' in Canada during the last years of his life might have been a return to the ideas on anarchistic communities of Buber and Landauer (Portele 1993, 28).

Petzold and Portele are also deserving of praise for their work on the anarchistic roots of Gestalt therapy (see also Petzold 1984, 12ff. and Portele 1993, 22 ff.)

The Political Ideas of Gustav Landauer and Martin Buber

Gustav Landauer's ideas had a profound influence upon Buber. Like Landauer, he believed in — and fought for — communities of peoples without a state. "What we Socialists want is not state but

society, i.e., a union which is not the result of coercion but emerges from the spirit of free, self-determined individuals." (Landauer: About Marriage, quoted from Wehr 1996, 119).

Both men were committed Zionists. They had set their hopes on a Palestine where men and women could build a community without finding power structures already in place. In his *Call to Socialism* of 1911 Landauer extended the Zionist ideal: everywhere in the world people should end allegiance to the State and build free communities. (Landauer 1978/1911).

Buber was pleased to find that Landauer's ideas seemed to be realized in Palestine, if not elsewhere. He declared "the Jewish comparative communities in Palestine … to be "new ground for social configuration." (Wolf 1992, 96).

He called for voluntary 'joint ownership of land' and 'the freedom of the settlers to determine the rules of their life together'; this he termed "socialist Zionism" (Buber 1985b, 377, 385).

Just as he was in favor of federalism and socialism based on common property, Buber was strictly against the foundation of an *Israeli State*. When it became clear to him that there would be a State of Israel after all, he fought in vain for a secular State where Jews and Arabs would be able to live and work together in a free and tolerant society. Buber's writings on that subject have been collected and published in *One Country and Two Peoples' (Ein Land und zwei Völker 1983)*. How much suffering could have been avoided and could still be avoided in future, had Buber's ideas been looked to for orientation. Although Buber was unable to give his ideas any political weight, he still believed that Jerusalem could become *the* center of free socialism in the world in the early Fifties, the opposite pole to Muscovite authoritarian socialism.

Buber explained his ideal of federalism as follows:

> True humanity [is] a federation of federations … an
> association of many people may call itself thus only
> if it consists of small living communities, strong cells

by chance, that his had been a fateful visit, that he had come not simply to chat but had sought me out in this hour for a decision. What does a man expect who is desperate but still seeks out another man to speak to? Most likely a presence that will assure us that there is meaning to this life after all. Since then I have given up this 'religious' aspect of my life, which is but an exceptional state, a being outside of oneself, ecstasy — or it has given me up. I possess nothing but my everyday life out of which I am never taken … I do not know any other fullness of life but that which claims my responsibility every mortal hour. (Buber 1963, 22)

This 'conversion' had a decisive influence upon Buber's biography.

As a result of a [this] traumatic experience, and to a degree also to a slow process of inner change during the First World War (he himself speaks of being 'converted'), Buber began to get a hold on the reality of this earthly existence. From then on his thinking turned toward life as an historic reality with all its resistances and demands. Against this background his dialogical *weltanschauung* took form." (Schapira 1985, 425f.).

The idea of 'community' is at the core of Buber's social Utopia. The choice of this term reveals some of the *Zeitgeist* of the day: in the early 20th century it was possible to say 'community' without thinking of the distortion it suffered during the National Socialist Regime. The Nazis defined community as 'Germanic' and society as 'Roman.' Without entering further on the history of terminology it will suffice to clarify that Buber's and Landauer's community had nothing in common with such an absurd racist definition of the word. Referring to Landauer's phraseology, Buber said: a new society, "a new culture, a new totality of spirit may come into being only if there will again be true community and togetherness, actual living together and with each other, a living immediacy be-

The I-Thou relation of Buber "extends … into the greater social space" (Wehr 1996, 204); while it is true that his work encompasses various disciplines, this does not make it fall apart into self-contained areas or subjects; his writings treat of questions of philosophy and faith, concerns of anthropology and psychology, ethics, art and education, sociology, the state and others … in his dialogical *weltanschauung* there is found both a moment transcending time and space and a response to the problems of man and society in our time.' (Schapira 1985, 424 and 426).

Since the beginning of the century Buber had occupied himself with a "Utopian anarchistic dream of community, which at first had no connection with socio-political reality." (Schapira 1985, 427). During this time Buber lived a remote life, separated from the concerns of the world in a 'mystical dream.' He immersed himself in (ecstatic) states of mind where he could not be reached.

Thus he tragically failed to meet (*vergegnen* or to *mis*meet) a person in great distress who had come to see him. The paragraph headed "A Conversion" from Buber's *Autobiographical Fragments'* reads as follows:

> It happened that, after a morning spent in 'religious ecstasy,' a visitor arrived, a young man unknown to me, whom I received without being present with all my soul.
>
> I did not fail him for kindness, did not neglect him in any way by comparison with all the other young men his age who would call on me around this time of day, as if I were an oracle one could have a talk with; I talked to him attentively and openly — I only failed to guess the questions he did not ask. The essence of what these questions were I learned later, some time after the visit, from one of his friends — he himself had died (he was killed during the first weeks of the First World War) — I learned that he had not come to me

of organismic and immediate community all of which are participating in direct and vital relationships like those of its members and which, in an equally direct and vital way unite to form this association, like their members have united." (Buber 1985a, 70, 262). Landauer's explanation in his *Call to Socialism* reads as follows: "Society is a society of societies of societies; a federation of federations of federations; a communal spirit of communities of communities; a republic of republics. (Landauer 1978/1911, 131).

According to a resume of Landauer's and Buber's position by religious socialist Leonhard Ragaz, their 'socialism' neither meant social democratic socialism nor had it anything to do with the Soviet dictatorial state: theirs was a "nonviolent socialism, free of state structures and practiced in a true community founded upon love." (Ragaz, quoted from Wehr 1996, 203). In Buber's understanding "the very truth of socialism is neither doctrine nor tactics but means standing amidst and facing the abyss of real and reciprocal relationships with the mystery of man" (Buber 1985a, 285). He aspired toward moments of interpersonal immediacy' (Wolf 1992, 95). Landauer and Buber centered their thinking on 'volition,' the calling into life of free socialism, the *beginning*. The revolution was to begin at once: " … in any given place and under the given conditions, meaning 'here and now' to the extent possible." (Buber 1985a, 149). Landauer's call to socialism took place in 1911; Buber in 1950 described his paths *in* Utopia, not *toward* Utopia (Buber 1985a). It was his belief that the beginning of human life should not be put off to an indefinite future, when an ideal society would have been built, but should begin in the here and now.

We are not on the way to Utopia but should recognize that we may already move within it.

Both Gustav Landauer and Martin Buber recognized that a revolutionary transformation of society could not be reduced to polit-

ical and social processes alone. A revolution in the minds seemed more important to them. Both saw the individual and a new beginning in his/her personal life as central. Their Utopia was not a future world but always remained anchored in the present. (Wolf 1992, 131f)

In the Spring of 1908 Gustav Landauer and some of his fellow thinkers founded the 'Socialist Union.' Martin Buber was one of its first members besides Erich Mühsam.

The union's aim was an exemplary 'beginning' toward a free society. This 'beginning' was to take place according to the principles of autonomy and free joining together in cooperative and federative associations without a central body. (Wolf 1992, 131f.)

Buber's motto: "All real life is meeting"[2] (Buber 1973, 15) marks the place where politics and therapy join together. Whoever does not reduce societal change to the revolution of political structures must first address human consciousness — this is the concern of Gestalt therapy. Buber's central interest was to hold at bay the increasing "World of It" (meaning the increasing functionality of living conditions in modern civilization) by the counterbalance of living relationship. [According to Buber] ' … The citizens of a modern state, a bureaucracy, find human togetherness more and more difficult … Social relationships therefore effectively counter the increasing World of It, i.e., the growing functionalisation of the outside world.' (Wolf 1992, 152).

The Therapeutic Politics of the I-Thou

Where now do these political considerations link up with Buber's I-Thou, which is quoted and called upon again and again by Gestalt therapists and others, so-called humanistic psychologists?

_____
[2] Translator's Note: The Encyclopedia Britannica (entry Buber, Martin) prefers *encounter* over *meeting* in the rendering of this central notion.

The 'substantial We' (Buber) is a *political* aim also requiring '*therapeutic* intervention' (Goodman):

> One special quality of the 'We' shows in the substantial relation that exists — or at least temporarily exists; i.e., in the 'We' dwells that decisive ontic immediacy which is a necessary prerequisite for the I-Thou relation. We includes the potential of Thou. Only people who are truly able to call each other Thou, may go on to say We and speak the truth (Buber 1982/1938)

Today the political dimension of Buber's I-Thou is generally left out; it is understood as a 'human attitude' related to a personal vis-à-vis whom I 'meet' as an equal and whom I do not 'treat' in any material sense (I-It). There is also a politically *naive* interpretation of the I-Thou: if I change myself, then that will have an effect upon the social system in which I live; it will change too, as a result. Actually, this is a first step in the right direction. But it is just that, no more. While not negligible it must remain insufficient on its own. To complete it, there must be a response from society: Buber did not hesitate to provide one. Here is an example of how Buber joins together his I-Thou philosophy with a political statement:

> Thou, encased as you are in the shells of society, state, the church, school, the economy and your own arrogance, mediator among mediators, break your shells and become immediate, move thou to move others! … Unmix the crowd! The shapeless substance has grown from powerless, lonely people, people who have got together because they were left alone and powerless — lift the individual out of the crowd, form the shapeless (or Gestalt-less) into communities! Break the reserves, throw yourselves into the surf, reach out and grasp hands … unmix the crowd! (Buber 1953, 290, 293)