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**Martin Milton (2018). *The personal is political:  
Stories of difference and psychotherapy.*  
London: Palgrave, pp. 177**

Psychological and pedagogical support (including counselling) as well as psychotherapy seem to function as if they were outside the socio-political reality, even though the topics they tackle are always closely related to the so-called outside world experienced by individuals (i.e. clients) as problematic, burdensome, taking away the sense of agency, threatening their dignity, etc. Counsellors/therapists are contacted by people having troubles with coping with painful experiences or various difficulties either independently or with the support of kind people from their immediate surroundings. Those who provide assistance, however, notice that the discoveries of psychology concerning, among other things, the concept of a human nature, do not provide the right tools and turn out to be too superficial and conservative (cf. e.g. Orford, 2008, pp. 3–4), as the socio-political world, which for the specialists still remains an insignificant, although irritating, background for what happens during therapy, impacts the lives of clients and must always be taken into account. This is all the more irritating as the ideal that therapists often encourage their clients to achieve is a consciously independent, self-sufficient, efficient, entrepreneurial *self-made man* (Orford, 2008, p. 8). This extremely widespread, but essentially unsociable or even anti-social, “project” of a human was first widely criticized in the 1960s by American feminists. However, psychology (practical and theoretical) had been long refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the allegations made by various socially marginalized groups and individuals against the dominant culture (and itself). Therefore, although not without some difficulties, multiculturalism in counselling and psychotherapy was recognized in the United States as an important intellectual and aid-oriented trend (the so-called “fourth force” – after psychoanalysis, behaviourism and humanistic psychology) only less than four decades ago, when it became clear that it is impossible to undo political and moral changes as ethnic, national, “racial”, gender, etc. minorities began to play a significant role on the public scene. Since then, many articles and monographs on multicultural counselling have been published around the world; in Poland, however, this issue is still

poorly understood, and therefore rarely applied to professional assistance practice<sup>1</sup>. Polish society, until recently basically monocultural, only now experiences a change related to, among others, the multidimensional “migration crisis”. On the one hand, the crisis was triggered by the emigration wave lasting since 2004 (i.e. since Poland’s accession to the European Union), resulting in the departure of over 2 million citizens (see e.g. Bobrowska, 2013; Słowik, 2013). On the other hand, the moral panic around refugees from countries affected by wars and/or natural disasters aroused by the media and those in power (see, e.g., Łodźński, 2019) as well as a growing number of economic immigrants, especially from Ukraine, contributed to the crisis. Furthermore, other marginalized social groups have recently been politically “activated”: women protesting against the deprivation of their right to decide about their reproductive health and to self-determination, LGBT+ people who, described as a false ideology, must pretend to be human entities unlawfully deprived of human rights, and finally people with disabilities – isolated and condemned to a life in poverty and social isolation. Voices proving the existence of social injustice are heard louder and louder in the public sphere (e.g. at street protests), but the diversity emphasised and practiced there has not yet been appreciated in Poland, both mentally and formally.

One of the institutions in which the West is increasingly expected to engage in mental and social change is counselling (see, for example, Collins et al., 2013; Guichard, 2016). This trend has emerged only recently; earlier, despite various psychologists’ ideas for changes in the social world (e.g. Freud, Jung, Maslow or Rogers), this trend was neither ready nor willing to “respond” to the invitation and “appear” at a therapy session (Samuels, 2004, p. 825). As the author of the book *Politics on the Couch* (Samuels, 2015) states, not taking this idea into consideration by the world was not only a matter of resistance. More crucial in this case was the therapists’ need to dominate the world and, more precisely, the fact that they “so much want and need to be right”, including calling everything professional jargon and striving to reduce complex socio-political issues to “simple” psychological tasks to be performed (Samuels, 2004, p. 826). At this point it can also be mentioned that for many decades counsellors, psychologists and therapists did not take the side of people to whom they provided assistance services (see, for example, Moi, 1981). It was easier and more convenient for them to take the side of the dominant culture and “universal reason” than to see injustice or abuse experienced by the victims of the system (of which they themselves were a part). The situation, however, started to change, as the voice of the aggrieved, rejected, and betrayed people could be heard very clearly – although maybe not so much in psychotherapists’ offices, but primarily in the broadly understood public space.

<sup>1</sup> The exceptions are the monographs: *Podjęcie wielokulturowe w doradztwie zawodowym* [Multicultural approach in career counselling] (Kownacka et al., 2007) and *Transnational counselling networks of Polish emigrants* [Transnational counselling networks of Polish emigrants] (Słowik, 2016).

It seems that in Poland, where the cultural changes are delayed in various areas by an average of about two or three decades in comparison to highly industrialized countries, in some time counselling will also correct its mission and undertake actions to equalise the life chances of representatives of various minority groups which are today disadvantaged. Few Polish psychotherapists and counsellors have already emphasized the need to “understand culture and social phenomena from the perspective of a psychotherapeutic office” (Józefik, 2018, p. 213; cf. also Bilon & Kargul, 2012; Słowik, 2016). Preparing slowly for the implementation of future tasks, it is worth to read Martin Milton’s book, *The personal is political: Stories of difference and psychotherapy*.

In the title of his publication, the London psychoanalyst refers to the slogan promoted by American second-wave feminists (“the personal is political”), who noticed that gender oppression is structural in nature and its source lies in unfair politics having a strong impact on the private life of every individual, especially women. While explaining this issue, Milton distinguishes two types of politics: one with a capital *P* (referring to Brexit, homophobia, misogyny, etc.) and one with a lowercase *p* (here: he mentions the problem of organising aid-oriented actions, the ethical dimension of professional support, personal clients’ experience of discrimination, etc.). Politics in psychotherapy or psychological and pedagogical assistance can, however, be understood or appear not only as the “context” of clients’ problems, but also in other ways. For example, it may be a topic picked up by a counsellor or the disclosure of their views on the economy, government, etc. (see e.g. Solomonov & Barber, 2019). It is known from history that many therapists around the world, not only in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union or South Africa, supported the regimes or participated in oppressive activities and “normalizing” practices on citizens disobedient to or not fitting into the accepted standard (Samuels, 2004, p. 826). The situation remained unchanged despite the fact that in psychotherapy for many decades there was a “doctrine of being apolitical” in contact with clients (Avisa, 2017, pp. 126–127). Nevertheless, as it can be observed, it was rather declarative and served in fact the maintenance of the *status quo* (Samuels, 2004, pp. 826–827). Even more general, one can speak of “self-politics” as the construction of the self both reflects and influences the fundamental issues of an individual’s life and the community one is a part of; at the same time an individual’s self is usually, if not always, subject to political struggles and moral negotiations on what it means to be human. “The moral meanings that constitute the self are continually interwoven with the political structures of the social world – interwoven, intermingled, interchanged” (Cushman, 1995, p. 332).

It can be observed that Martin Milton, to a greater or lesser extent, refers to all these understandings of politics “entangled” in professional helping. Considering the mental state of clients, he notes that many people who contact psychotherapists/counsellors do not fully consciously internalize the prejudices functioning in society and/or, by becoming an “object” of discrimination as an “Other”, blame

themselves for the unpleasantness they experience. These “Others” (e.g. in ethnic terms), even having observed inequalities in the social world from the earliest years of their lives, often accept their existence because they are represented in the so-called dominant discourse as natural, obvious. Thus, according to common social logic, they begin to see themselves as a problem or cause of their difficulties and often become “scapegoats” in their close environment (Milton, 2018, p. 39). The author of the reviewed book, seeing it as a serious threat to the proper development of an individual, believes that, if only for this reason, the work of a specialist should not focus on helping clients to adapt to the existing situation or change themselves in order to gain acceptance from the environment. In a sense, it should help to identify unfair social structures. He also claims that in order to support their clients in a competent and adequate manner (including, for example, understanding how social origin, material status, education, etc., affect people, what are the consequences of experiencing stress by minority groups; minority stress), therapists and counselors should use current sociological, feminist, anthropological and political analyses, and not rely solely on psychological – often problematic – knowledge (Milton, 2018, p. 27; see also Bilon, 2016). He illustrates his theses with stories heard in his office from people belonging to different nationalities, ethnic groups or social classes. The reviewed book consists of 11 chapters, most of which present individual clients’ narratives focusing on the personal consequences of experienced injustice and the “different therapeutic journeys” they undertook with Milton (2018, p. 7). Such voices are not only individual products; because they arise in a specific social context and are formulated from a certain social position, they are also regarded cultural and ideological products showing the existing power relations (including e.g. racism, sexism, homophobia) (Bell, 2003). As a proof, it is sometimes pointed out that the stories of white Americans, which usually refer to the past in terms of development and desired change, are quite different from those of other members of American society (here: *People of Colour*) who have been discriminated against for generations in every aspect of their lives (Bell, 2003, p. 4). Previously, the voices of these groups were muted, ignored or banned, now they are finally shaping history and culture. Moreover, these publicly presented stories are heard also in the dominant group, including, for example, therapists and counsellors, who see them as an expression of cultural trauma (e.g. Eyerman, 2004).

Milton in his book refers to the phenomena of racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, religious intolerance, ableism (i.e. discrimination on the basis of health and physical condition) that are severely experienced by his clients but poorly understood by them as sources of personal problems. He tries to emphasize that “while they [i.e. racism, homophobia, etc.] are experienced individually they are supremely political, subject to regulation, social policing and control” (Milton, 2018, p. 71). As the author claims, standing out from the mainstream environment means that one is constantly exposed to the view and (critical) assessment (Milton, 2018, p. 33), increased stress and discomfort, unfair treatment and deprivation of various

opportunities (e.g. educational, professional, economic), which to “normals” seem obvious and quite accessible. Therefore, he argues that an important part of psychotherapeutic work is helping clients to reach the meanings that they give to the world, including understanding what certain behaviours (theirs and those around them) mean for them, and consequently supporting them in recognizing the shapes of the political world and better understanding their opportunities or limitations in achieving goals (Milton, 2018, p. 34).

It seems that in the case of providing help clients from minority groups, a phenomenological method based on three principles is worth considering: suspension of assessment while getting to know the clients’ world (here: *being epoche*); the use of description instead of immediate explanation; *horizontalization*, i.e. the equating rule (Milton, 2018, p. 76). Ernesto Spinelli, referred to by Milton, states that therapists should remain open to various possibilities of understanding the client’s world, and thus, for some time, should put their pre-understandings and preferences (including political ones) aside, which, however, does not mean that they should be completely removed or erased (Spinelli, 2014, p. 13). Getting to know a client’s experiences should therefore be about standing next to them and listening to what they have to say, and not about explaining what they feel and pointing out what they should think. The third rule (here: *horizontalization*) refers to the location of a client’s statements in the horizon of their existence and to the therapists treating their position on an equal footing with the client’s (Spinelli, 2014, pp. 14–15). Milton believes that adopting and following these principles will allow counsellors and psychotherapists transcend their professional limits:

“Traditionally, psychological and psychotherapeutic theory has offered assistance by helping clients recognize the ways in which their own thoughts, behaviours or relationships affect their experience. More recently, these fields have recognized the impact that the world has in constructing distress and therefore has been considering how we might engage with this fact” (Milton, 2018, p. 87).

Among the many options available here, Milton mentions two: questioning the existing theories (as conservative or inadequate), and understanding the problem in a broad, contextual way as conditioned by various social and cultural factors (Milton, 2018, p. 87). In his opinion, therapy becomes a kind of movement between understanding and acting, a transition from theory to practice (Milton, 2018, p. 89), but one should not expect the impossible from it, i.e. that it will heal everyone and find a remedy for every – also very serious – social problem (Milton, 2018, p. 91). Furthermore, many modern therapists consider dealing with socio-political issues, such as injustice and discrimination, negation or departure from the real, actual clients’ difficulties (Milton, 2018, p. 99). Moreover, clients from disadvantaged social groups may experience a sense of inadequacy and/or misunderstanding in contact with a counsellor/therapist whom they perceive as a privileged person, representative of the dominant culture, and thus may not want to talk to them about

their inferior political position. Milton does not, however, suggest to his readers, psychotherapists and counsellors that they share their own differences with clients, i.e. that they tell clients about their experiences as “different” (e.g. that they are gay, immigrants, etc.). In this way the conversation with a client about a therapist’s own experiences and problems instead of building understanding and fostering mutual empathy could turn into bidding on cultural humiliation, competing for who is more discriminated against, and thus creating a gap in this helping dyad (Milton, 2018, p. 41). Nevertheless, the author suggests how to consciously use such experiences and reflect on them for the benefit of the assisted. Additionally, he cautions readers-therapists not to be tempted to name the significant differences between them and their clients, as they will then bring their own findings to the agenda and reinforce inequality in the relationship, thus contradicting the principles of the phenomenological method described above. In the description of one of the therapeutic processes, Milton uses his own example to indicate the negative effects of such a procedure. The purely “racial” differences that he focused on in the relationship were considered by his client to be as important as those resulting from age, professional status, and material condition. Only inviting the client to create a list of differences resulted in conversations about the impact of each of them on their life and, thanks to this, understanding the source of their (cultural) fear and becoming ready to introduce changes in their world (Milton, 2018, pp. 43, 48). The author of the reviewed book adds that due to the fact that our mental health depends greatly on the socio-political context, completing the therapy should be associated with discussing a client’s ability to independently deal with various external factors, often of a systemic and structural nature (Milton, 2018, p. 49).

Martin Milton’s book is a very valuable guide in understanding the complexity and political nature of the counselling process, both for specialists and their clients. Counsellors/psychotherapists will find out how the author worked with people experiencing oppression because of their otherness and will find many tips for their own work, while potential and current clients will be able to realize how politics “works” in their lives and what they can do with this knowledge to cope better with the difficulties they experience, as well as with various hidden social forces.

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