

Invitation to the Barbecue: Political Correctness, Social Criticism and Family Therapy

Andrew Relph and Marta Lohyn

Marta Lohyn and Andrew Relph were asked to read and comment on two recent works by Australian-born social commentators: Germaine Greer's *The Whole Woman* and Robert Hughes' *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*. As they searched for what relevance these two books could have to family therapy practice, Andrew and Marta found themselves discussing political correctness, the fear of voicing an opinion that differs from the dominant one, attitudes to the personal and the political, and the state of male–female relationships in 2000 .

Andrew has the First Word

I read the first 30 pages and was alarmed. Once again my naiveté had led me into trouble. Sure, I'd review Germaine Greer's new book for Refrains. I'd already read and enjoyed Robert Hughes' book, which was to be the companion volume (some companions!) And I remember meeting Marta. No doubt the four of us would be okay together. Naïve Relph, stupid Relph — and now scared Relph! I read some more but that didn't help. I started talking. Clients, colleagues, friends, mostly women — no man I talked to had read *The Whole Woman*. Some of the people I spoke to read the book because I was reading it and asking questions about it. None of them had as much trouble as me. None of them had to review it. None of them were men.

This was not a book for men to read. This was not a book a man could say anything about. *Manhood* (Steve Biddulph) had been purchased by millions of women and given to the men in their lives in the hope that it would help them understand themselves. My mind boggled at the thought of *The Whole Woman* as a gift from women to men — or from men to women. This was not a book written to aid understanding. This was a book with incite, not insight, on its mind. There was nothing wrong with that being the object of a book. The problem was me, me as a man. My mind nervously toyed with the idea of taking on a pseudonym. My Mozart treble voice would sing the part of a man acting like a woman to avoid the nasty consequences of detection. Tentatively I told some people of my reactions; that was fine, they said, just say that. But they knew me and this was not a review to be written for my friends, col-

leagues and clients. People who did not know me would not understand my comments. Was that true of me not understanding Greer's comments? She didn't care; she was famous and I was not. Clearly, Hughes didn't seem to care — why wasn't *he* writing a review of Greer? Perhaps he had, his manifesto, in part about the terrible restraint of political correctness and how it distorts thinking and stops people from saying what they mean. He could call something a 'lumpen-feminist diatribe'; he could nominate a 'victim-rhetoric'. But I was a simple man saying what I thought, not a well-known critic. In any case, when it came to the content there seemed little, as a man, that I could validly say. What did this growing feeling of disquiet in me say about our community of family therapists? Had all debate been scared off by the huge tide of political correctness?

The psychologist in me mulled over what kinds of people these authors were. I felt a kind of personal respect for the way they could both say exactly what was on their minds. Respect, but not liking — I'm not sure I'd want to have a barbecue with either of them. As a teacher or therapist, although neither were offering these services, I'd certainly choose Hughes. Simply, Greer doesn't allow room for the reader; she finds the material to support her argument, quite indiscriminately at times, and then hits you with it. You take it her way or you leave it. Shock therapy would be the 'therapeutic' metaphor for her approach. Hughes researches carefully, places the material in front of the reader and lets the material and the reader have a bit of air before he says what he thinks of all that. Always the caustic bombast, yes, but with a lightness of touch, a great sense of humour, and panache. Greer is dreary, self

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righteous, and self-consciously inelegant and tawdry. But, still being a psychologist, perhaps I would situate them as the patients, the Other. The father in Germaine, the mother in Robert, and everywhere this drive to put things right. Surely both of them came from families where they were prized as children but somehow felt deprived. What work for the therapist! My mind was spinning on again.

Why had the editors chosen these two books? What has social criticism to do with psychotherapy? Surely this is one of the most fundamental questions in our family therapy system. Many of us came to family therapy from individual psychotherapy and many of us held onto that original model while embracing the new. Part of the new was the importance of context, the family context, the social and cultural context. But as time went by, the contextual

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became preeminent and it was as if the individual didn't matter any more. Conferences filled up with social, cultural and gender concerns. It looked as though clinical and individual concerns were becoming extinct.

And so to the very apogee of this cycle in family therapy — the review of two books with nothing at all to do with psychotherapy and everything to do with a critique of social context. These two books are grist for the continuing debate in our field — is the personal always political? Essentially, the two authors take opposing views.

Greer I found dictatorial in her approach to the reader. It seemed as if she'd conferred some right on herself, presumably as a consequence of her success and status, to tell people what they should think and caution them about their vulnerabilities and shortcomings. A harangue which I think, if I'd been a woman, I might have felt mildly oppressed by because of the style, but which as a man I reacted to with a profound sense of hopelessness. As a psychotherapist, it still surprises me to read opinionated and browbeating books about subjects as personal as gender. As *political* as gender, I hear you say. Hughes comes from a discipline (art), which, like gender, lies at the collision crossroads of the personal and the political. But his arguments are put quite differently. Like Greer, Hughes is never short of an opinion, but his writing encourages opinion-shaping, while Greer's style gives rise to agreement or disagreement. As a result, those who agree with Greer don't need to read the book and those who disagree probably won't. So, I venture to say that Hughes' book will have a much greater effect on people's thinking.

It seems to me that Hughes, always mildly ironic and reflexive, is arguing against unthoughtful foreclosing on

important questions which may well appear to have been answered by public opinion and the political process. In particular, he is sceptical about activist or political art, claiming that it is often badly mad and lacking in any aesthetic merit. This made me think of the times I have recently witnessed, in our family therapy circles, activist or political therapy which ignored the basic principles of psychotherapy — tolerance, understanding, and empathy for a start. This activist therapy often seems to have lost sight of the original purpose of therapy — a kind of evolving change, *whatever* that may be. Instead, it aims to stamp out aberrant behaviour. When I see this, I see the liberal and liberating effects of family therapy turning into a new tyranny. As Hughes says: 'One would be glad of some sign of awareness of the nuance that distinguishes art from slogans' (159).

Greer, it may be said, is all slogans. For her, it seems that the personal is always the political. Take for example: 'The great appeal of blow-jobs is that the real and present woman is least able to impose her personhood on the interaction when her face is impaled on the penis' (184). Or: 'A woman's sadness derives from her powerlessness' (178). Note the use of the singular form which has the effect of making a political slogan sound like a personal experience. But enough of subtleties — I found nothing subtle in *The Whole Woman*. I found it poorly argued and badly written. In particular, I found Greer's use of science and statistics to bamboozle and cajole rather than to illuminate, annoying. Family therapists trained in systemic thinking will find Greer's thinking unbelievably linear, contradictory at times, but linear.

Though she provoked some troubled and perplexed thinking in me, Greer's book left me feeling dispirited. If such an intellectual leader feels a lack of progress for women so far, a pessimism about future progress, and an almost complete lack of enthusiasm for many possibilities between the sexes, what hope is there? Hughes' book is hopeful, his thinking is often deeply systemic and one gets the impression that, bad as things are, there are always new possibilities around the corner. Partly, this is to do with the humour which punctuates even his most serious thesis. Family therapists value hope, self reflexiveness, and occasional lightness in the face of oppression, so if you've only time to read one of these books, the choice is clear.

Marta Lohyn Responds

Andrew has rightly made the point that while these two books have nothing to do with psychotherapy and everything to do with a critique of social context, the one thing that links them nevertheless is their differing views about the personal being political. Hughes says (amongst many other things) that when the personal is political in art, it undermines tolerance and discernment of quality. Hughes definitely does not want the personal to become political, while Greer says it is inescapably so.

I started reading *The Whole Woman* with enthusiasm and interest, not only because Germaine Greer has been such a

significant feminist, but because it is now almost thirty years since the book which catapulted her into notoriety, *The Female Eunuch*. I was intensely curious about her current thinking, and how it may or may not have changed over time. Well, Germaine Greer is still, as the back cover says, provocative and challenging. As she says at the outset, 'It's time to get angry again' (3); she then proceeds to address the issues in four main sections: body, mind, love, power. Her conclusion, drawn in the first few pages, is reiterated at the end, namely, that while some things have changed for women, the fundamentals of male oppression still express themselves unrelentingly in a variety of ways in women's lives.

There is a lot to agree with, for example some men *are* extremely violent towards women, many women *do* live their lives without honouring their own needs, women *do* do more work than men, and so on. But I also found this book singularly depressing, because Greer's view seems so extreme at times, and there are so many generalisations about how men and women are that I simply could not identify with, for example: 'A few men hate women all of the time, some men hate some women all of the time, and all men hate some women some of the time' (281), or: 'The man is not born who will not hate some woman on occasion' (287). Greer's argument here rests on figures about

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domestic violence, example of extreme violence against women, as well as familiar observations that the judicial system frequently favours perpetrators of violent crimes against women. But where is the curiosity or analysis about those many men who are not disrespectful, and behave in ways consistent with a feminist perspective? They do exist, at least this has been my experience, something which frankly gives me hope when I hear the stories of abused women.

So how would one's work as a family therapist be influenced if approached through the lens of *The Whole Woman*? I personally could become despairing; getting angry is only helpful if it is a step towards something better, whether it be manifested in altered behaviour or in simply feeling better within. If I were to try and persuade a woman client who had been abused, harassed or victimised in some way by a man or men, of the extent of the problem as described by Greer, my own view is that there would be little place for hope or optimism.

On the other hand, as a therapist I could develop some of the positive suggestions Greer makes in passing, and only in passing, as she is not really concerned with solutions but rather description and analysis. For example, Greer cau-

tions against investing anything in the fantasy that a relationship with a man will answer all our needs as women. Instead she says, and rightly so, that we should live without such expectations and simply get on with our work and life. Developing this theme could lead us into a number of helpful conversations about definition of self, influence of family and social pressures and so on. One would in fact be talking about both the personal and political, without even necessarily being overt, thus encouraging clients to develop their own understandings on this matter. If I were to summarise how one might use *The Whole Woman* in one's therapeutic work, it would be through developing conversations about women resisting some of the pressures Greer talks about, defining clients' own sense of themselves, ceasing to minimise their own needs, and most importantly, seeking out men who are respectful and affirming of women.

So, if you want some inspiration and hope about the state of things between men and women, don't read *The Whole Woman*, but if you want a wake up call, some reasons to 'get angry'; and then find ways to make something positive out of it all, this may be a book for you.

Robert Hughes's book on the other hand is a ripper! He is an intelligent writer who uses language like a skilled surgeon wielding a scalpel. This example, in regard to Ronald Reagan, is especially satisfying if you are not a fan:

Reagan educated America down to his level. He left his country a little stupider in 1988 than it had been in 1980, and a lot more tolerant of lies, because his style of image-presentation cut the connective tissue of argument between ideas and hence fostered the defeat of thought itself (39).

I must admit that while enjoyable, I also found Hughes book difficult at times, because he thinks and writes densely, and seems to like expressing many ideas in one sentence.

However, Hughes' style is definitely snappy and tart. He argues that the PC (politically correct) belief that the personal is the political has led to American art, and museums in particular, being caught in the vice of conservative and liberal forces, as both struggle for dominance in determining the agenda. But Hughes' commentary is not only about art; he examines American culture at large, and divides his book into three sections: Culture and the Broken Polity, Multi-Culti and Its Discontents and Moral In Itself: Art and the Therapeutic Fallacy.

Hughes argues that in a number of domains (including multiculturalism and academia), making the personal political really undermines tolerance, appreciation of intellectual traditions and discernment of quality. His complaint is that accepting the personal as political is just a fad, which interferes with our capacity to reason and argue critically. We just accept certain premises because it is the politically correct thing to do.

How then would our therapy look if we applied the lens of *Culture of Complaint*? Answering this is a bit like looking for a needle in a haystack, but I must admit to

being surprised at finding a few little needles. For example, in his first section (Culture and the Broken Polity) when he discusses the influences of the Right and Left in American academia, Hughes makes the point that the ideas in French poststructuralism (as exemplified in the writings of Foucault and Derrida) are profoundly unhelpful if you want to change social systems:

Did Vaclav Havel and his fellow playwrights, intellectuals and poets free Czechoslovakia by quoting Derrida or Lyotard on the inscrutability of texts? Assuredly not: they did it by placing their faith in the transforming power of thought — by putting their shoulders to the immense wheel of the word (64).

In response to this paragraph, I found myself thinking about the various theoretical trends that have dominated the family therapy landscape over the last twenty years or so, and their prescriptions about the therapist's language, attitude, and response to the client. When I started out in family therapy, the Strategic and Structural schools of family therapy were mainstream, and then came Systemic family therapy from the Milan school. Then Milton Erickson became very popular and one of our currently dominant models is Narrative Therapy. I found myself thinking about how often we just accept the prevailing wisdom, especially when we are at the start of our family

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therapy careers. How often do we embrace theories about therapy because everyone else is excited about this new way of thinking, without ourselves reading source material from which the therapies claim to derive? Are we critical enough about the premises underpinning the theory? Does our acceptance of theoretical frameworks interfere with our ability to listen with compassion and genuine care when our clients talk about their pain, trauma or impossible and unchangeable circumstances?

I wonder whether Hughes might say that the feminist dictum about the personal being political has been accepted simply because it is PC, thus rendering impossible any rigorous analysis of the views put by Greer. I suspect that Hughes would find *The Whole Woman* as Andrew has suggested, poorly argued and full of insupportable generalisations. But Hughes is not a therapist, so perhaps he would not be able to see the possibilities for development of some of the Greer material in a therapeutic context that I have proposed above.

In the course of writing this piece, I have inevitably considered my own position. The best I can do is to say that sometimes in therapy it is abundantly clear to me that

the personal is intensely political, particularly when I am talking with a woman who has been deeply disrespected by a man in one form or another. At other times, all that seems to be relevant is clients' inner world and emotional pain as they struggle with the issues that brought them to therapy in the first place. An example of this is a woman trying to deal with a highly unsatisfactory relationship with her partner, also a woman. In this instance, Germaine Greer's assertions about who we are as women seem to miss the mark, especially when I witness the sheer pain of vulnerable people sharing their story.

And so, in the end, despite the challenges of this assignment, I did enjoy meeting both Greer and Hughes, and unlike Andrew, I definitely would invite them both to a barbecue!

Andrew Responds

But what kind of barbecue would it be? I'd be fearful of a political or personal roasting!

How things change, how contexts change. Some months have passed since I first wrote, and Hughes now has a new notoriety, particularly here in Western Australia. The *West Australian* ran an editorial vilifying him and telling him to go away, back to America. Hughes defiantly blustered on about the difference between being a snob and being an elitist. Now substantially recovered from hospital and court, Hughes once again imposes himself on the lounge rooms of millions of Australians, and shortly, millions more in the world in his television program *Beyond the Fatal Shore*.

I was somewhat relieved when I read Marta's review. I had felt vulnerable writing irreverently about such an important feminist icon. Marta's mission to illuminate our work as therapists from an examination of the two books reminded me of the positive, practical attitude of being a psychotherapist. I think I had been in need of what we used to refer to as a 'positive reframe', and here was Marta being therapeutic with the content of two books that had worried me more than helped me.

I feel a sharper divide between the personal and the political than Marta seems to. When she writes: 'One would in fact be talking about both the personal and political, without even necessarily being overt, thus encouraging clients to develop their own understandings on this matter' (3), I think of this as the essence of psychotherapy, and entirely personal. Political intrusions into therapy are exemplified for me by dicta like: all children should, as part of therapy, be asked if they've been sexually abused, or, young women with anorexia should always be encouraged to write protest letters to *Vogue* magazine, or, as a white person, you should never undertake therapy with a black person. Many such dictums come to my mind, and while they may have originally been well-intentioned, they have the effect of robbing the therapy of its profoundly personal nature in the same way as broad diagnostic statements do.

One other point of difference between me and Marta is that I think of theoretical frameworks, however new and

faddish, as different from the politically correct. While something is called a model or a theory, it is open to scrutiny and challenge. Sure there will be some uncritical and inexperienced therapists who are more persuaded by the model or theory than they are by the need to listen with compassion and care to the particular client. But if they are following a model or theory, by its nature, it is there to be questioned. The opposite is true of the politically correct dictum (PCD). Like the restraints we often see on families, these dicta are mostly implicit, and go unquestioned because they are part of what one should do or not do.

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There's often a suggestion with the PCD that one should have known it already. Most pernicious of all, the PCD, unlike the theory, is not open for discussion. It is somehow just morally appropriate and as such, it has potentially the same effect on therapy as Hughes says it has on art. It interferes with reason and undermines tolerance and the discernment of quality.

And so back to the barbecue. Because of my reassurance that in the hands of a therapist like Marta, the optimistic and the practical can prevail over the tawdry and the pessimistic, and because of my hope that dialogues like this can change views as they do in the therapy room, I have decided that I will after all be attending the barbecue. Now Marta, do we invite those Cragos?


Marta Concludes

Yes, Andrew, we definitely invite Maureen and Hugh! Without them — no idea for the barbecue in the first place, so we should acknowledge them by feeding them well (old Ukrainian politically correct dictum: *always over-feed the visitors otherwise they won't get the hospitality message*). And Andrew, I'm very pleased that you will be attending the barbecue, because then I can indulge my culturally inherited PCD and over-feed you as well!

On a less frivolous note, I agree with Andrew's point about PCDs often being implicit, and sometimes obstructing compassionate and caring listening. But I don't think it has to necessarily be so. I, like Andrew, find this sort of politicisation of therapy abhorrent. But as therapists, does it not behoove us to be regularly reflective about our beliefs and practices, and to at least attempt an understanding of what is implicit in our stance to the world? Surely it is very important not only to be well aware of current trends in thinking (both in our professional domain and in the popular culture), but also to understand how these trends shape our responses in our work?

For me, this sort of reflection is a crucial aspect of therapeutic practice, because it allows me to see the overlap between the personal and political, but not necessarily feel compelled to comment whenever it is obvious to me. Except when it comes to hospitality and feeding your guests well! (There are some PCDs that are just too satisfying to give up!) So thank you Andrew, for the fantasy of the barbecue and the stimulating conversation we've had even before the eating's begun!

References

- Greer, Germaine, 1999. *The Whole Woman*, Sydney, Doubleday.
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“World War I generals will sell poppies in the streets on November 11th
The first daffodils of autumn will appear
When the leaves fall upwards to the trees”

Adrian Henri 'Tonight at Noon' in *The Mersey Sound*: Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, Brian Patten, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967.

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