

COMMENTARY

On Brigitta Mowat's 'Climate Change on the Couch'

Guy Gladstone

Whereas once upon a time the impact of human greed, cynicism, fraudulence, apathy and disavowal was relatively localised (though a decolonialist perspective might give a different reading), today the impact of human failings, as they translate into a climate and ecological emergency, is planetary. This is recognised and mourned within Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Deep Adaptation, to speak of social movements rather than the individualised carriers of a more subliminal and atomised despair. A neoliberal commentariat can speak of those behavioural deficits as 'priced in', without really taking on board how their impact is globalised and Gaia-ed, and thus entails the likely eventual end of us all, never mind the end of 'free enterprise' and 'the market'.

Who Pays?

So, dear therapists, you of kind hearts and enquiring minds, must we leave it to the executive coaches to inveigle their way into the boardrooms of the corporations as panzers of metanoia? No; *they* are mostly on the payroll too, despite recent signs in that helping community of climate-change engagement. What of 'the lower orders', then? – especially children and youth and non-human species, like most of us without power or structural leverage, all those whose sufferings and relative helplessness are typically the concern of psychotherapists and counsellors? Thunberg and Attenborough calling.

Converging Hyper-Objects

Furthermore, what of the fact that humanity is currently struggling with not one but at least four hyper-objects; i.e. phenomena so overwhelming for individual subjectivities that we cannot really get our heads around them? In Mowat's paper, the focus is on the CEE; however, there are three further concurrent extra-psychic totalities that weave in and out of the CEE: the Covid pandemic, intensifying social-justice crises, and augmented virtual reality (expansion of information technologies, social media, artificial intelligence and mass surveillance). Perhaps the pandemic, in its immediacy and uncertainty, provides a kind of home ground portal through which therapists and their clients can acknowledge that, like the CEE, they are both immersed in it and equalised by it. Its greater proximity, at least in the UK, gives the profession a rehearsal space for an encounter with the 'thirdness' that Mowat speaks much of. With both totalities we are still mostly having to wing it. We have not been trained to deal with the psychic impact of one hyper-object, let alone four, though trauma theory can provide some resources.

An Objection

It's one that some readers will find objectionable. The unegoic pose of the paper under consideration is unbecoming to this reader. Where is Mowat? Almost nowhere to be seen! It

is not until the ninth page of the copy I’m reading, under the heading of ‘Methodology’, that at last that little word ‘I’ appears; and again on the tenth page under ‘Participant Demographics’, like a *deus ex machina*, she manifests; and then not again until the nineteenth page under ‘Evaluation of the Study’, where it/she appears almost as a footnote of apology. Thank goodness it was at least explicit in the abstract that she is taking up a social-justice stance. Given the enormity and horror of the CEE on the one hand, and on the other hand the acknowledged small scale of her direct evidence base (six respondents), this reticence in taking a personal position more transparently is perhaps her solution to an academised angst that she will not be taken seriously, were she to show more of herself. At any rate the result is that the bulk of the paper (and it *is* a paper rather than an article or opinion piece) labours to sustain what for me is a rather dense but faux objectivity. Put another way, too much head and not enough heart. Of course readers may retort that Mowat is only observing the correct protocol of publishable research. As a commentator I am at liberty to splash about, in ways she isn’t. But how about the humanistic paradigm of co-operative enquiry (Reason & Rowan, 1981), which might have given her more latitude?

Nonetheless, it is as if Mowat is personally outside of what she writes. In an odd way the style and tone of the paper, with its extensive marshalling of theoretical content and relevant references, is in tension with the meaning of it all, the critical existential level of its subject matter, the impact or otherwise of the CEE on the psy field, and moreover, I would add, all of us. Through my assorted self-disclosures in this response I try to reverse this effect. As a writer prone to polemicising and a polarising style (heaven forbid polarising if, as Mowat does, one identifies as an integrative psychotherapist within UKCP!), I will own to a pleasure in briefly setting the cat among the pigeons. Do I detect – and here I am being mischievous – the veiled inferiority complex of the integratives, neither one thing nor another, neither psychoanalyst, the esteemed and hegemonic, nor humanistic, the often decried? So perhaps ‘Climate Change on the Couch’ sits a tad

awkwardly in this journal, the one-time house magazine of Humanistic Psychology in Britain. The very title of Mowat’s piece rather gives the game away. As one who spent years literally on the couch and daily save weekends, I have a certain licence here.

OK, then, but surely there is a related and of course much more serious issue, beyond the boundary of Mowat’s study. A properly ecosystemic perspective must consider humans and their values as co-participants in the vagaries and vicissitudes of the environment; instead of its rational manager, a common erroneous and problematic form that a so-called ‘scientific’ environmentalism takes on. Ironically, is not relational psychotherapy pre-positioned through intersubjective theory and practice to avoid this pitfall? The very detachment of that scientised environmentalism is a large part of why dealing with the CEE has made such desperately limited progress over the last 40 years. It simply leaves people cold, and is too easily forgotten. A science story rarely moves people towards engagement in the way a social-justice story can.

An Achievement

That said, Mowat has found her way to develop the foundations of a very necessary synthesis. As a fellow member of the Climate Psychology Alliance, her paper was bound to resonate strongly with me. The references, quite a few of which I am familiar with as a reader, have been pulled together and articulated in such a way that the scale and severity of the CEE becomes inescapable for the psy field. A concern I would have is that it is *too* radical and subversive for most therapists to stay with, thus confirming its somewhat pessimistic findings. Oh, to escape the circularity of writing for the converted!

As someone who, rather than publishing, focuses his efforts on face-to-face delivery of a range of emotional methodologies already available to address the CEE and its impact, I thank her for her diligent research and thematic analyses, along with the copious linkages to some of the most cutting-edge writing in the psy field on the subject. Lots of food for thought. I can feel another workshop coming on! For a start I would

single out her illumination of the psy field’s typical, and I assume largely unconscious, valorisation of independence as a badge of psychological maturity: and how this presents an obstacle to an ecosystemic consciousness.

A Necessary Distinction

Here, therapy slips into serving the performance principle that drives a capitalist social order. However, we are now collectively at a point in the CEE where a conscious decision to ditch the related industrial growth model of Gross Domestic Product is the mass psycho-political shift required. Mowat emphasises the untangling of the power relationships of oppressor and oppressed. Augusto Boal, Brazilian theatre director, guerrilla, writer and politician, created ‘The Rainbow of Desire’ (Boal, 1995) as a workshop precisely for the undoing of internalised oppression. Sometimes the best and most relevant resources are to be found on the edge of the psy field. Mowat sees this untangling as

emotionally challenging as it demands of us to step into vulnerability and humility. This is highly problematic when our sense of entitlement to Earth’s resources, reinforced by capitalism, exceptionalism and neoliberalism (Weintrobe, 2021) – and even religion (Sancton 1989) – overrides sensibility, humility and regard for others.

While I would not disagree with the above values-based sentiments, I think it is insufficient. If value systems are collectively maintained – here in this instance via neoliberalism and religion – then their supersession needs must be collective. Insufficient, first because it needs to be complemented by the kind of solution-focused psycho-social analysis advanced in *Doughnut Economics* (Raworth, 2017). Kate Raworth has laid out the parameters within which societies will have to remain in order to avoid geophysical and social-economic collapse. To be fair, Mowat does touch on this issue in referencing a paper by William Rees (Rees, 2010).

Secondly, as with Boal, where are the possible vehicles for achieving transformation? Here the launch by psychotherapist Rosemary Randall and Andy Brown, an engineer, of *Carbon Conversations* (Randall & Brown, 2015), a small group intervention that addresses ordinary citizen’s contribution to climate change, relating the psychology of consumerism and questions of identity to the practical reduction of carbon footprints, stands out as a primer.

The question I am posing here is, what are the most effective pathways to simultaneous consciousness-raising and practical action to arrest the CEE? – with the proviso that these may well be beyond the domain of the couch. Put another way, what are the limits of therapy?

Though change begins at ground level, axiomatic for therapists, a focus on *individual* consumer psychology can obscure the urgent need for a psychology of *collective* action. That old joke about how many therapists does it take to change a light bulb comes to mind. The psy field has not been immune from infection by the neoliberal doctrine of responsabilisation (meaning, you are to blame as an individual, therefore there is no need for system change). Margaret Thatcher’s disgusting maxim ‘There is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families’ is now long past its sell-by date.

If there is one further personal reservation I must declare regarding ‘Climate Change on the Couch’, it is the profession-centric presumption that hovers behind it. What I mean by this will be clearer when I try to address why therapists in general are not, so to speak, hurrying to get on a climate couch and thus be of real service to their clients, who in turn will certainly need more encouragement. This is kind of where activists and therapists will tend to part company. Activists lose patience, and therapists scratch their heads wondering why.

The Conservatism of the Psy Field

Mowat highlights one participant in her research expressing doubt regarding whether the CEE will create a cultural shift in the psychotherapy profession. I would agree with him; very little

chance, don't anybody hold your breath. Why? This question merits further enquiry in the context of Mowat's paper and this commentary. One obvious reason is that the profession, with its micro-level emphasis on personal histories and transference resolution, has a gaze that looks backwards towards the past, rather than forwards towards a possible future context (for which coaching is more suited).

During training there is an inevitable reliance on predecessors for theory, people who wrote long before the CEE became an issue. This is especially marked in psychodynamic training, with ancestor worship of the great ones of psychoanalysis: less obvious with the humanistic therapies, whose finest hour was probably the sixties (in the USA) and the seventies (in the UK). This was precisely when, as documentary film-maker Adam Curtis illustrated in his film 'Century of the Self', the hippies, drop outs (I was one) and the growth centres that sustained them spread the new therapies that were in the ascendant. As usual, business rapidly caught up with this surface revolution, and with skilful niche media advertising that mirrored Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays' invention of public relations in the 1920s, recuperated much of the alternative society back into the mainstream, bar the real communal outliers. And this even as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) announced the ecological crisis.

That very same mainstream today is merely passively aware of the CEE and is also largely in disavowal. For example it is only recently, in the last decade or so, that some therapists on the fringe have moved sessions outdoors, inspired by Nick Totton's *Wild Therapy* (2011) and 'walk and talk' therapy, the latter more often in reaction to the pandemic than as a proactive response to the CEE. Such reframings represent an opening up of possibilities, now needed more than ever.

A further and more telling explanation for why the CEE is unlikely to create a cultural shift in the near future within the psy field lies in a more peculiar British story. Within the psy field itself the countercultural potentials of the once-new humanistic therapies have drained away over the

last 50 years. How? In my view, UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) and British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) trainings have a lot to answer for: *academisation* – essays as a mode of qualification, with formerly independent trainings now in a training market, boosting recruitment through university-sponsored Masters programmes, student trainees referring to their course as 'uni'; *medicalisation* – the status lure of 'clinician', subjugation under National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) (indeed!) and the evidence-based bandwagon (in the vain hope of government funding?); *bureaucratisation* – the continuing, now more covert, drive towards state regulation, ScopeEd being its latest backdoor incarnation.

This slow-motion triple whammy has categorically reduced the psy field's capacity to engage with the CEE. Together these amount to a powerful pressure towards conformity with the neoliberal status quo, sucking therapists at the start of their career into the metropolitan maze of the consumer society. The National Counselling Society offers its members a veritable catalogue of consumer benefits and purchasing deals. Required reading here might well be *The Tragedy of the Commons* (Hardin, 1968), an object lesson in (environmental) limits for the naive optimists of 'growth industries' and their promoters.

Contributions from the Psy Field to CEE Awareness

Before going any further into Mowat's paper it must be acknowledged that the psy field is a very broad church, and wherever one looks there are always individual exceptions; so generalisations are tricky. At the risk of being accused of being 'schoolist' and thoroughly opinionated, I will now briefly unleash my inner rude boy and be brutal regarding different positions *vis à vis* the CEE. I take it that practitioner readers will have been trained to tell themselves not to take 'stuff' too personally. Thank you, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), but no thanks to your mob as lackeys of capital, adaptiveness and the performance principle. You are due a wake-up slap, and need to read Marcuse (1964).

As for the transpersonals, whose speciality is levitation, perhaps even dissociation, we shall need your ministrations at the end of days. In the mean time, you may prepare us for the fourth and final strand of Deep Adaptation (a new kid on the block), known as Reconciliation. However, at the edges of the psy field there are at least two American players, transpersonally inspired, who have already for some years been making a vital contribution to CEE awareness. Most will have heard of *The Work That Reconnects*, the brainchild of Buddhist scholar and activist, Joanna Macy (2006). The third stage of its four-stage Spiral, *Seeing with New Eyes*, is extraordinarily impactful, through utilising a trans-generational spiritual lens.

Less well known, though they have performed in the UK at least twice and can be followed online, are the mock evangelists, *The Reverend Billy and The Stop Shopping Choir* (Talen, 2003). Their street-theatre exploits, climate-change protests, anti-racist actions and invasions of department stores feature a deadly serious humour and a radical courage that the British psy field could benefit from. *Earthalujah!!* – they chant in praise as they engage their target audiences.

That leaves the Psychoanalytics and Humanistic Psychology. The psychoanalytic grasp of unconscious defences provoked by the CEE is unrivalled; and the pessimism of its metapsychology demonstrates a willingness to get to grips with the age-old problem of radical evil. This means that a range of psychoanalytic thinkers are now explicitly on the case of the CEE, following in Searles’ (1960, 1972) footsteps. Mowat draws on many of them in her paper, and they punch way above their weight on the level of theory. It is hard to assess their ground-level influence (how many today deliver or receive four or five times a week, the classic full monty?), but academic influence through cultural studies is likely more promising.

Mention must be made here of an early and overlooked French ecosystemic text, *The Three Ecologies* (Guattari, 2000), the work of Felix Guattari, activist analyst and colleague of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, both better known

for their *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1977).

It has often been claimed by humanistic people that, far from having had its day, Humanistic Psychology is alive and well beyond the confines of mainstream psychotherapy, that it has percolated out into other domains. I am pleased to confirm that it has suffused Extinction Rebellion. Namely, Active Listening Circles – Person Centred; the First Demand, ‘Tell the Truth’ – Encounter; action methods, spontaneity, imagination and the power of the group – Psychodrama; movement, catharsis, grounding practices and care for the trauma of activism – Body Psychotherapy; joy and carnival, the massed samba bands – Human Potential.

Now let’s hear from the late John Rowan, father of Humanistic Psychology in Britain and co-founder of the IPSS (Institute of Psychotherapy and Social Studies), a training initiative that in its early days pioneered an integration of humanistic, existential and psychoanalytic approaches – not that successfully, I would add (I trained there then) – hence its eventual absorption into the Psychodynamic Psychotherapy Section of the UKCP. Here he is advocating for ‘the fourth ear’ (1983), by which is meant the capacity to listen for the extra psychic, external shackles and social forces in a client’s material:

In all counselling and psychotherapy, the unspoken assumptions of the therapist can have a profound effect on the client, in what she says or does not say. It is not necessary for the therapist to do anything wicked to miss all this important material – all that is necessary is that the therapist pays no attention to the fourth ear.

If that doesn’t sum up Mowat’s argument, I don’t know what does. This segues into the next section.

Shortcomings in Psy Field Training

The strapline of Mowat’s paper is ‘How psychotherapy can respond to the climate and ecological emergency’, and this must involve

pointers for training. Race and gender issues tend to receive some attention – and this is in accord with Mowat’s call for the CEE to be viewed as a social-justice issue (this is where two hyper-objects converge).

If it is possible to generalise about current training syllabi, I would hazard a guess that another key component of social justice is commonly silenced through omission: class. The middle-class identities and life styles (a CEE issue) of almost all therapists recede into invisibility and escape auto-critique. Hasn’t class long been a topic the British don’t *really* want to develop a consciousness of through talking *seriously* about it? And that is despite its contemporary salience in the 2020s, as an intensified structural issue under neoliberal capitalism. What’s more, like the CEE it is often another elephant in the room. The space of a therapy session should be one where absolutely anything can be spoken of. When training is sorely behind the curve and mimics the mainstream, that complicity should be put in question.

I am reminded that back in the period 2010 to 2014, myself and Amadis Camell, a fellow body psychotherapist, designed and ran at London’s Open Centre two ambitious two-year-long multimodal courses entitled ‘Humanistic Alchemy’, pitched to both therapists and non-therapists who were interested in their personal and professional development. The deprofessionalising mix was intentional. It was staffed by ourselves plus numerous guest facilitators, and also featured a Self and Peer Assessment process. There were four strands: the Bodymind, the Expressive Arts, the Transpersonal and the Ecosocial. I have not forgotten that the Ecosocial was distinctly the least popular. Many of the participants just didn’t get it, and couldn’t connect the Ecosocial with their own lives and their onward development. Were we to run a third course, we realised we would have to recruit participants from outside the psy field for this not to happen again.

Investigation of the extra-psychic force fields, whether or not a given therapist recognises these

as penetrating the consulting room, would seem to remain just a matter of taste, an angle to pursue for the odd therapist here or there. But what if such investigation were actually a critical necessity for the very survival of psychotherapy as a human praxis? No therapy on a dead planet. Long before that outcome, a collapsed economy and social conflict would anyway have put most therapists out of business. Referring to the divorce from an ecosystemic perspective, Mowat’s respondent, Peter, voices the paradox thus: ‘People are [...] adapting according to the same basic criteria that caused the problem in the first place’.

Mowat draws attention to Van Susteren and Al-Delaimy’s (2020) concept of a ‘pre-traumatic stress condition’ as a useful guideline for addressing client concerns regarding the uncertain, predictably unpredictable future that the CEE implies. She cites and draws on a battery of texts that make the case for considering extra-psychic factors and processes as part and parcel of any adequate contemporary therapy. But how many therapists read them? And how many therapists apply these perspectives in their client work?

Specific Domains

The findings of the paper are organised into three superordinate themes or domains, some of which I have already commented on. These are

Socio-cultural and political factors and how they may link to the culture of therapy and therapy training, an ecosystemic approach to counselling, and participant’s experience of clients talking about the CEE. The other three domains – perception of past, present and future in relation to life on the planet; emotional engagement with the CEE; and personal meaning of the environment to the individual...

...are promised to be discussed in a follow-up paper. My review of the current paper has already strayed into commenting on some of these further themes.

Silences and Myopias

The first domain is illustrated through examples of ‘normative unconscious processes’ (Layton,

2020). Mowat homes in on racism as a legacy of British colonialism, while noting how frequently that and other forms of oppression are intersectional and the wounds trans-generational. One of her respondents brings up the Western neo-colonialist practice of exporting our unrecycled consumer waste to the East, a topic addressed in *Carbon Conversations* (Randall & Brown, 2015). Mowat goes on to discuss how participants in her research identify clinical issues related to the CEE in both therapy and therapy training, all of whom remarked upon its relative absence in staff rooms, supervision groups and the therapy setting itself. This would seem to attest to the widespread defence of disavowal, not just the dissociation Mowat identifies. I mean I have difficulty believing that all these people are simply numbed out and wholly in flight from the CEE, as opposed to being simultaneously at least somewhat aware and not wanting to know. It also suggests a corresponding need for psy practitioners to take a good look at both their personal and professional back gardens.

Through another respondent, Mowat names a need to shift away from seeing ourselves as separate from the more-than-human world. This, I would add, is actually a major population-level form of denial, one of four such identified by the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF) collective in their chapter within *Deep Adaptation: Navigating the Realities of Climate Chaos* (Bendell & Read, 2021). Here, mention might be made of ‘The Council of All Beings’ (Seed et al., 1988), a vehicle for giving voice to the non-human as a ritualistic procedure that sits within the larger canon of *The Work That Reconnects*. In my experience, groupwork rather than individual sessions is the medium of choice for working through the majority of topics Mowat addresses. But as so often in the psy field, this is not acknowledged – a curious erasure (Gladstone, 2002).

An Ecosystemic Approach

Mowat then goes on to address her second domain: ‘Ecosystemic Approach to Counselling and Psychotherapy’, within which the first theme is ‘Relationship with nature’. Next, under the

heading of ‘Ecosystemic View’, her argument is developed to include cultural dissociation from interdependency with the Earth, the alienation that industrialisation entailed, and the oppressor–oppressed dynamic, citing both Blake and Marx. Here the case is building for psychotherapists to heed the pre-Freudian prophetic that arcs forward and across to a future of strife, beyond but impacting upon the consulting room. So to what extent, then, is what is happening in the world a parallel process to what is happening in the psyche? Might what is deadened, suppressed and silenced out there – e.g. our protest – also be subject to the same dynamic within us?

A Disordered Relationship with Place

As a child of a member of the armed forces, with a parallel rootlessness to that experienced these days by many children of globalised corporate executives, I immediately resonated with the next theme: ‘Separation from the more-than-human world’. Prior to training as a therapist I re-enacted my uprootedness and transportedness by becoming for nine years an international household remover, on the road as an owner driver. Being half-Australian, I kept faith with both the national and the natural by painting a huge yellow kangaroo on the green sides of my Flux Trucking pantechnicon. The baby kangaroo in the pouch announced in a speech bubble, ‘A Kind and Careful Carrier’. The object relations metaphor prefigured my subsequent immersion in other’s often very moving stories (*double entendre* intended).

These days as an electric car owner, in retrospect I have to admit that my diesel carbon footprint was dreadful; likewise the air miles clocked up as a long haul flier, wont to offset (*double entendre* intended) the hours of confinement to the therapist’s cushion or chair by disappearing in breaks to far-away exotic islands; these CEE sins, the guilt and shame now mitigated (another one, unintended this time!) by nostalgia plus new and better habits.

There is the bias in therapy towards the interpersonal and intrapsychic. But this can eclipse recognition by the therapist of the greater significance for some clients of their relationship

to place(s); i.e. in some cases a relationship with environment is actually of more importance to the client than their relationship with specific persons. This has interesting transference implications, perhaps especially where activism is part of the client’s agenda. I am reminded of this by Mowat referring to the human-centric focus of the talking therapies.

CEE Issues in Therapy

The third domain investigated through her respondents is what Mowat terms ‘Clinical issues related to the CEE in therapy and therapy training’. It is worth quoting from the lead-in to this section of the paper:

All the participants consider human-centric activities as the key driver of the CEE. Some participants express concerns about consumerism, the current political system, the ‘technological fix’ society and unsustainable economic growth as amongst the main causes of the CEE. Most participants find that clients often express their eco-anxiety by commenting on the unusually hot (or whatever) weather.

That last bit, of course, is one of those precious opportunities for activists to gently and casually ambush members of the public, whether strangers or familiars, and steer them into a climate conversation before they know it, thereby undermining the usual disavowal. The studious avoidance of linking by the TV weather forecasters is itself a good talking-point and facilitates discussion of XR’s First Demand of ‘Tell the Truth’, and leads on into the role of the media fronting for power... – but I digress.

Two examples are given under the theme of ‘Difficulties in emotionally engaging with the CEE’. The first concerns a therapist’s client who was using the CEE to legitimise her self-harming. Mowat hypothesises that the woman is perhaps carrying the disavowal and projected parts of those who are dissociated from, or in denial of, the CEE. The second concerns the kind of future children born today are going to face.

Generational Divides

In this respect I recall a 2019 session with an XR activist who was in great distress and who with some bitterness named three distinct ‘generations’ within the unfolding timespan of the CEE. The first comprises roughly everyone under the age of 20 who has never known another lifeworld than the CEE (The generation of Fridays for Futures and the School Strikes). The second for whom my client spoke covers those between 20 and 35 who grew up initially with an expectation of having a family and career and other elements of a foreseeable life trajectory, for whom all this is now dashed or in doubt (typified by the anguish of activists, especially in XR, who cannot decide whether or not to have children, from their awareness of dire future lifeworlds). The third ‘generation’ are the rest of us still alive. This typically includes psychotherapists, for whom therapy is often a second career, launched in their upper 30s or even later, often in lieu of or after having children of their own. I would suggest that this ‘generation’, some of whom ‘never had it so good’ or enjoyed the 1960s, must bear more guilt re the CEE and develop empathy for the first two. Frankly this session will always be among the most memorable of my career, and is so to speak bookmarked as an extraordinary example of ‘On Learning from the Patient’ (Casement, 1985).

Social Justice and Therapy as Commodity

The next theme is ‘Social justice issues in the consulting room’, and it is a relief to hear from one respondent: ‘I get from a lot of people that they can’t bear a world where everything is commoditised’. Might there be a message here to the therapist concerning therapy itself, a privilege that is generally delivered at a price and so over time is very expensive and, accordingly, a mainly middle-class pursuit? I wondered why Mowat didn’t make more of this, as I would have put that together with another respondent apparently referring to the tradition of psychotherapy being within a ‘sort of product consumption kind of model rather than my role,

my part, my place in it’. Yes, isn’t therapy a nice little earner... – for some!

But this of course opens up a further sticky subject: the commodification of both therapy and the training experience, along with the associated professional politics; a subject that would require a whole other paper. After all, we work from a love of the work, if not also from a love for the client, and at the same time we need to earn a living; and that entails an exchange of money, if not from the client herself, from a third-party sponsor. Oh dear: isn’t this, like class, all so embarrassing and excuse-laden?

Under this theme also falls the desire to move away from the city, in favour of community and nature. ‘Too true, blue’, says this reviewer, seven years after moving out of London for good.

Minimisation of the CEE

Appropriately, the final theme features a return to the culture of therapy and therapy training. Mowat’s respondents confirm my own experience during the period 2019–2020 of the relative paucity of references to the CEE. One out of eight in each of two weekly ongoing groups, none in the third group. Among individual clients, two out of ten regularly referred to the CEE, and a further individual made an occasional reference. Two out of eight supervisees spoke of it as their concern but not their clients. I would add that this refers to work with a politically critical therapist, who either inadvertently or intentionally would drop the odd hint that he had ears to hear such matters.

In view of this concerning situation I have recently begun, in the context of group-process facilitation for a five-year psychotherapy training, in either the fourth or fifth year, to introduce an active imagination exercise, the moment I pick up a relevant current in the group (on the most recent occasion, someone declared ‘It is easy to be invisible in the widening cracks. We are all here.’). The invitation is to take coloured pencils, felt tips or waxed crayons and quickly produce their images of the pandemic crisis, the climate and ecological crisis, and the social-justice crises, on three separate sheets of

A3, 5 minutes per sheet. This is a prelude to each speaking of and from what they have put down, including any emotional process they noticed during the creation of the imagery. The images tend to speak for themselves and function as a collective consciousness raising for the trainee group. The fourth hyper-object I referred to at the beginning of this commentary, virtual realities, is probably too ethereal to lend itself to depiction.

I refrain from comment or interpretation unless the offer precipitates obvious transference resistance, e.g. ‘Why do we have to do this?’, or an individual looks pissed off and declines to put any words to their pictures (as an analytical body psychotherapist I consider symbolic speech as the essential end-point in the register of experience – see Gladstone, 1998). In which case I might ask, ‘So who am I to you when I give you this to do?’. Resistance in this instance could also be reformulated as a form of dissociation, even disbelief, expressed in summary form as ‘What on earth has this got to do with therapy?’. However, given the plethora of echoes from all four hyper-objects I have heard in snippets from their placements, my retort, in this commentary, would be, ‘Plenty’. The resistance to linking to extra-psychic realities mirrors that of the population at large. Inner worlds and outer worlds are persistently disconnected.

Taking a Position

In Mowat’s ‘Discussion’ section, the conclusion from her findings, I was heartened to read her really taking a position on how the social-justice issues of race and colonialism are implicated in the CEE. This is uncomfortable stuff for white Brits to get to grips with. Concerned readers, post Black Lives Matter, might like to have a go at *Me and White Supremacy* (cf. Saad, 2020), a peer self-help manual we are currently working through in my local XR Regen sub-group. A psychotherapist member of the group recommends *Intersections of Privilege and Otherness in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (Turner, 2021).

Key Readings

While on books, if there were just one book amongst Mowat’s copious references that from now on should be required reading on every psychotherapy and counselling training’s reading list, and beyond; that has to be Sally Weintrobe’s *tour de force*, *Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis: Neoliberal Exceptionalism and the Culture of Uncare* (2021). I will go so far as to say that this book will prove to be the 2020s equivalent of Wilhelm Reich’s 1930s book *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1975); because this time round, it is the key text for understanding the mass psychology of neoliberalism and its central contribution to the CEE.

Plus one which is a close second: *Deep Adaptation: Navigating the Realities of Climate Chaos* (Bendell & Read, 2021). Here, the essentially tragic perspective evoked by the potential collapse of all human societies is one that should resonate within a profession well versed in dealing with tragedies at the personal level, if not yet at a global level.

Material Conditions

A disposable income and sufficient social stability in Britain have enabled the widespread availability today of therapy provided by therapists in private practice, who in turn have arisen out of a growing training sector. Some term it a ‘growth industry’, while others would advise it to heed ‘limits to growth’. So it is as well to bear in mind that therapy depends on the societal resources available, including a complex and interdependent material infrastructure. In the 70-odd years since the Second World War, conditions have allowed it to flourish, particularly in the last 50, at least in middle-class circles. The future promises clusters of collective crises, both engendered by and aggravating the CEE. These will impact the lower levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, eventually pivoting round issues of survival. Crops fail and food prices go sky high, energy supplies become intermittent, housing and travel are severely impacted.

Human misery is perennial, and affords therapists a guarantee that they will always be, to a degree, in demand, even during recessions. However, ahead lies a great contraction, which will make the previous recessions resemble a vicar’s tea party. As neoliberal society unravels, capital will likely have left its legendary capacity for adjustment too late to avert the dynamics of the earth system catastrophes that the CEE has in store for us. Naomi Klein put it presciently, in her title of the same name, *This Changes Everything*, subtitled ‘Capitalism vs the Climate’ (2014). But Klein rather swerves the psychological element raised in my very first opening sentence of this commentary: the question of human nature, one that no therapist worthy of the name can disregard, and what within us also needs to change or be better regulated.

Accordingly, my vote goes to Joel Kovel (in 2000 he was the US Green Party’s nominee for the Presidency), who studied psychoanalysis and psychiatry as well as politics and ecology, and in 2002 published a similar sounding title, which in my view goes much deeper and is more visionary (than Klein’s blockbuster) – *The Enemy of Nature*, subtitled ‘The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?’.

Mark Fisher, author of *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009), cites a saying attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that ‘it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. Fisher appears to have missed Kovel. As I argued earlier, if only on the level of the literature, the value of Mowat’s research depends on its bigger picture contextualisation, freeing it from its profession-centric shackles.

A Necessary Politicisation of Therapists

My argument here, and I venture to add it is *implied* in Mowat’s paper, is for a politicisation of therapy. The case for this has already been conclusively argued by Professor Andrew Samuels (1993), the distinguished Post-Jungian and former Chair of the UKCP. Otherwise I foresee this is a profession destined for eventual

irrelevance, outpaced by the accelerating speed of arrival of impending catastrophies. What the South and the Middle East in particular are already suffering by way of the warming climate is a warning for the West. To repurpose what the analysts are wont to say, ‘It’s time’.

Back in the 1930s, according to Myron Sharaf in *Fury on Earth* (1983), the definitive biography of Wilhelm Reich, when an anti-fascist demonstration was passing by the consulting room, Reich stood up and said to his client ‘Let’s go and join it’, and out they went together. Prepare to follow suit in the 2030s (or sooner): even if very nearly all forms of non-violent civil disobedience and protest have been outlawed in Britain by the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, an altogether unprecedented assault on civil liberties in Britain, at the time of writing looking likely to be passed in 2022. If this measure needs any demystification for those concerned with the CEE, whether therapists or their clients or the general public, it should be read as meaning that any interruption of Business As Usual (BAU) is now insufferable, threatening and outrageous as far as power is concerned, and therefore must be criminalised. It would be interesting to know in terms of Mowat’s research how many therapists and how many of their clients have signed the petition against it. Let us not forget that it is BAU, especially, but not exclusively, the fossil-fuel industries, plastics manufacture, airlines and industrial agriculture, all integral today to a Western lifestyle, that with our collective complicity are preventing any significant progress in resolving the CEE. BAU’s lobbyists were out in force at COP26 – over 500, more than any national delegation. Their business? To ensure it was largely a failure, while treating it as an opportunity for a green-washed trade show, furnished with over 30 pavilions for an array of technological gizmos with not even a remote potential to actually arrest the CEE within the necessary time frame, while providing cover for continuing BAU.

Set this situation alongside the for now (in 2021) failed private member’s bill, the CEE Bill introduced by the UK’s only Green Party MP, Caroline Lucas. It gathered well over a hundred

signatories from MPs of all parties bar the Conservatives (who provided not a single signatory). Again, it would be interesting in terms of Mowat’s research to know how many therapists and how many of their clients signed the petition in support of it. Quite probably many didn’t even notice the bill, let alone sign the petition.

The Glasgow Climate Clock, a literally up-to-the minute version of the original Doomsday Clock that tracked the minutes and seconds left before the midnight of a nuclear weapons holocaust, is a reality check. The countdown on 31 December 2021, as I am writing rather than revelling, gives us 7 years and 203 days left to keep the world below the safe (-enough) average temperature rise of 1.5 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels.

The recently released cinematic satire on the governmental, corporate and popular response to the CEE, *Don’t Look Up*, makes for uncomfortable viewing. The film satirises looking in any other direction but the one that matters. Another way of describing a dysfunctional response to the CEE is keeping your head down so you don’t have to look out at what is really happening.

Beyond the Session

For therapists to extend (the commonly fetishised) neutrality within sessions to their life beyond the consulting room, that can easily become a cover story for sitting on the fence or legitimising apathy and disengagement as a citizen. Is personally doing zilch with respect to the CEE a conscious choice or an unconscious default? Either way, I would suggest this represents a refusal of joined-up thinking, a failure of compassion, and above all an abdication from *savoir-faire*. An abdication from *savoir-faire* because, as therapists, we claim sufficient psychological *sus* to be of help to others. Bystanding the CEE is therefore unconscionable, when there are no end of ways therapists can contribute to the necessary consciousness raising regarding this existential crisis. Some have already been referred to earlier in my commentary. Mowat herself has already

ably demonstrated this with her paper and another one to come.

Beyond the ‘as if’ space of the session, what aptitudes and opportunities do you have that might be relevant? Ask yourself where you can exert leverage that makes a difference. Trust the Hundredth Monkey effect (Keyes, 1982) as you write, vote, meet, speak in your community, local or professional. To revamp a dated cultural motif, from over a hundred years ago, as Baden Powell told the Scouts, ‘Be prepared’. In particular, be prepared to move from being a spectator of the spectacle – the situationist (Debord, 1987; Vaneigem, 1994) term for the organisation of appearances in everyday life that the survival of capitalism depends on – to a spect-actor, i.e. the citizen reflectively engaged as an activist that Boal speaks of.

Be prepared also for the de commodification of therapy and its eventual redirection into a variety of forms of community support, as the CEE overtakes us. This will be outside of and beyond many of its current framings, the spirit of which is evidenced in the International Coalition for Transformational Resilience (Doppelt, 2016), pioneered within communities in the USA where social-justice issues and the climate emergency are to the fore.

To end with an open question. Ye of kind hearts and enquiring minds, where do we go from here?

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About the contributor



Guy Gladstone recently retired from The Open Centre (London), after 37 years of running several weekly ongoing groups and a range of weekend theme workshops. He continues to supervise and provide group-process facilitation. A member of The Climate Psychology Alliance and since early 2019 in Extinction Rebellion (XR), he makes occasional street-theatre appearances as The Fossil Fool, and experiments with public outreach through XR Crisis Talks. He also contributes Climate Cafés for environmental organisations and pro bono support or coaching for activists.