

The French Psychotherapists Fight Back

by Marc-André Cotton

In France, the practice of psychotherapy is under attack and legislation has been adopted to restrict the practice of psychotherapy to medical professionals. Fédération française de psychothérapie et psychanalyse (FF2P) held a conférence in Paris last November to address this crisis of the profession. I represented the IPA at the conference and facilitated a workshop on psychohistory. This is my report and reflections on the relevance of psychohistory to these developments.

The first Congress organized by the Fédération française de psychothérapie et psychanalyse (FF2P) took place on 28 and 29 November in Provins, near Paris, and rallied two hundred professionals. The theme for the meeting was: *Identity and belonging, what role for therapists in a world of change?* In my workshop on psychohistory, I presented Lloyd deMause's childrearing modes as well as a psychobiography of Barack Obama. Discussions showed that for the dozen therapists attending the workshop—who were all women!—the psychohistorical approach not only raised interest, but could prove useful in understanding today's upcoming confrontation between French therapists and public authorities.

Founded in 1995 with the aim of defending the right to psychotherapy, the FF2P now gathers 1,500 practitioners such as psychologists, physicians, psychiatrists, psychotherapists and psychoanalysts. Despite this success, the FF2P is struggling today with the government's intention to standardize the profession under cover of an anti-cult law aimed at combatting "sectarian aberrations."

While 36.8% of all Europeans face emotional distress according to a recent survey, the French authorities decided to reserve the title of psychotherapist to medical doctors and psychologists only, without requiring any personal therapy in their curriculum. Conversely, many certified therapists claiming a long practice but with no medical background are currently losing the right to exercise their profession—in violation of a legal principle of equity.

From now on, the FF2P "*will fight against the enemies of freedom,*" in the words of board member Isabelle Crespelle, and there is a great deal to do. FF2P members are deeply disturbed by the prospect of losing both their professional identity and their sense of belonging—hence the title of this Congress. The Federation now promotes recognition of the new professional title of *psychopractitioner*, knowing too well that the public might get confused with a proliferation of mental health providers.

From my standpoint, psychohistory's framework of interpretation could offer a meaningful perspective on this conflict, reaching far beyond the scope of such professions. On the one hand, we indeed find genuine therapists—mostly women—dedicated to helping their clients heal unresolved grief and trauma by offering trust and empathy. On the other, politicians and bureaucrats, serving the interests of the pharmaceutical giants and organized medicine, are seeking to delegitimize such work, which will most certainly prove counter-productive in terms of public mental health. I see this as a clash of what psychohistorians call "psychoclasses," one of which believes in imposing bureaucratic order, reflecting their intrusive childrearing, while the other believes in the crucial relevance of listening, reflecting their experience of nurturing. Let us hope that the latter prevails!

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