



FTA Newsletter



Why the systemic therapist must become a social activist at the present time

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I first wrote about this in 2017, after the Relates (Association of Latin American and European Schools of Systemic Psychotherapy) General Assembly accepted a motion that I presented reaffirming its unconditional support for democracy as the best system of government. Brazil was under Bolsonaro, an extreme right wing fascist, who was very destructive to Brazil and the planet, with his policy of deforestation of the Amazon. The situation was so bad I believed therapists needed to start introducing political issues in our professional meetings.

I felt I had support for that in important pioneers and in the origins of our movement. Family Therapy started in the sociopolitical context of the success of many national liberation movements and the decline of the colonial powers. In the sixties and early seventies in the USA there were large mobilizations for civil rights, and against the Vietnam war. In France happened the important protests of May 1968. There was the presence of community psychiatry in the USA and in England appeared innovative inpatient therapeutic communities, where staff and psychiatric patients lived in close proximity.

Many of our pioneers were progressive people, who believed that scientific and social advances could take humanity to a higher level of evolution. Bateson, with the theory of the Double Bind in schizophrenia, denounced the “no way out” situation of the psychotic patient. Minuchin in *Families of the Slums* described the indigence, the disorganization and at the same time signaled the resources that the poorest had; later with his team, he continued working with the neediest families and the agencies that managed their destinies. Don Bloch, president of the Ackerman Institute, raised the red flag of nuclear destruction and lobbied for the elimination of atomic weapons, frightened by the Soviet missile crisis in Cuba. Antipsychiatry contributed much to the view that individual illness was connected to family dysfunction and family dysfunction to a larger social dysfunction.

Together these pioneers proposed a therapeutic approach that took into account the political and sociocultural dimensions as the larger context for individual and family dramas. My impression of my family therapy training colleagues at that time was that they also were a progressive group.

In the seventies, pioneering research by the Lewis group showed that the healthy Western family is a flexible group, with shared power, dialogue, and tolerance for differences.

Feminist contributions highlighted how power imbalances towards women had to be addressed both in the consulting room and through societal change.

By the end of the twentieth century, the mobilization of millions of people in many places brought many advances in social justice, democracy, racial and gender equality, sexual diversity as well as mechanisms of social protection like free health and education in many countries. However, historically these advances are very recent and there is a permanent tension between progressive and conservative forces.

For these nascent achievements to become established, there is a need to develop a cultural and political context that supports them, but in the recent past many of these

developments and rights have been under threat of being blocked or have been outright dismantled. Opposite values like authoritarianism, hate language, fake news, violence, inequality and exclusion are on the rise. In most countries the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. We are already observing in a growing number of countries a real setback of civilization and democratic values. In the Middle East, radical groups have returned and all over the world the migrant crisis continues to be politically manipulated by conservatives to strengthen social hate and exclusion.

Recent wars in Europe, the Middle East and Africa are highlighting some of the worst humankind has to offer. This second election of Donald Trump is accelerating this trend of civilizational setbacks, and plunging the world in a lose-lose commercial war. Thanks to Trump is quite an irony that his “main adversary”, the government of China, is seen now as a beacon of wisdom.

We have learned from Social Psychiatry that poverty, abandonment and abuse in childhood are associated with long-term serious psychopathologies and criminality. It is very clear that the rules of dysfunctional major systems increasingly condition the dysfunction of the minor subsystems -- for example with nationalism and individualism reinforcing each other.

I suggest that the systemic therapist is in a privileged position to understand and contribute to the maintenance of our civilizational advances and resist the present conservative wave. Much of what happens in the political arena resembles what we see, for example, in dysfunctional couples who blame each other, cannot listen, speak with hate language and hold rigid stances. If we want things to be different, historical experience shows that social changes need to come associated with individual, family, cultural and now most important now, climate regulation. My opinion is that together with our colleagues in mental health we need to assemble and take a stand about the main issues in the field, such as the fragility of public mental health policies, the influence of "Big Pharma" in the medicalization of Psychiatry, and the limits and fees of private health plans. But that is not enough. When I say that the systemic thinker has to be a social activist, I am not saying that we have to jump to join political parties, but rather that we need to get out of our comfort zone -including the four walls of our offices- and find practical ways to support movements that promote the values we believe in, and that are now being fiercely attacked. Otherwise we run the risk of continuing isolated as a movement, enjoying beautiful congresses in “autistic bubbles”.

Concluding, I propose that systems thinkers, as conscious and coherent citizens, should join the more general effort against these regressive tendencies, supporting the values that promote the formation of healthy families and communities. This renewed appreciation of social and political issues, the *Macrosystem*, is at the very heart of the Systemic Vision.

Upcoming international events



64th Conference in italian language

Family Therapy Academy Presents

WAR AND FORCED MIGRATIONS

LOSSES AND FAMILY TRANSFORMATIONS

64TH CONFERENCE IN ITALIAN LANGUAGE
July 4th & 5th 2025
Seraphicum Auditorium, Rome

The poster features a background image of a city skyline obscured by thick, grey smoke or dust. The text is centered and uses a mix of bold, black, sans-serif fonts and a white, typewriter-style font for the subtitle.

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