



## FTA Newsletter



### **Reflections on the political role of systemic therapists**

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We live in an era characterised by two opposite trends: on one hand, the globalisation of economy, the rapid development of digital technologies which enhance free connection and exchange among people and circulation of scientific knowledge, the speed of transportations transcending national borders, the hope towards global fraternity, social solidarity, distribution of wealth, and the common preservation of the Earth's environment. On the other hand, we are witnessing, once again after decades, an escalation of conflicts, resolved by archaic methods, first and foremost war, the imposition of one's own power, intimidation, protest suppression. National borders are closed to immigration, even at the cost of a country's own impoverishment, democracy is used to establish

authoritarian, illiberal regimes. We are witnessing the age-old role reversal in which the aggressed becomes the aggressor, perpetuating the intergenerational chain of trauma, hatred and revenge. These are primitive mechanisms of conflict regulation, fuelled by the weapon industry and powerful economic and geopolitical interests. Archaic mechanisms that are not only hetero-destructive but also self-destructive.

In this current political framework, systemic therapists, who have developed non-violent conflict resolution practices with couples, families, and organisations based on decades of study on human systems, communication, neurosciences and clinical experience, must take position. We cannot remain silent and allow those who govern us to use archaic tools such as weapons and war to assert and maintain power, to solve internal governance problems or to accumulate wealth in the hands of few.

Systemic therapists developed dialogue practices, put attention to power issues in human relations, allowed subjugated narratives to find expression, considered psychiatric disorders connected to dysfunctional family and community dynamics, and highlighted their relation to how the larger society functions. Thus, systemic therapists promote a complex view of how human systems function and interact, rejecting simplistic and dichotomic interpretations of reality. Being systemic therapists mean taking a position which is both social and political: we are *polites*, citizens of our *poleis*, the communities where the law governs human behaviours and relationships through democracy. Human communities are flourishing only when peace is guaranteed and peace is possible only when and where freedom and social justice exist.

Almost ten years ago, Jochen Schweitzer<sup>[1]</sup> wrote a text on why and how systemic therapists should act politically. It was a time between two crises: the financial crises and the Covid-19 pandemic. In his intervention he stated:

*"Systemic political positioning typically includes (1) to name and to blame what we find unjustifiable ("protest") (2) to understand how unjustifiable developments are maintained ("contextual analysis") (3) to reflect whether or how we are a part of the problem that we complain about ("systemic self reflexion") (4) becoming clear about our desired solution ("if the miracle happened") and our preferred strategies ("which way to go") to overcome the current situation (5) looking for allies to join forces ("coalition building") (6) change activities: civil disobedience acts and campaigning" (Schweitzer, 2016).*

He indicated *"seven basic values as guidelines to judge political developments by whether they support or whether they are a danger to (1) peace/ non-violence (2) freedom (3) equality (4) solidarity (5) participation (6) ecosystemic balance and (7) self determination*

*concerning my personal data." Thus, he encouraged systemic therapists to "speak out and act against (1) militarization (2) human rights violations (3) increasing gaps between the rich and the poor (4) too much competitive individualism (5) authoritarian rule (6) unsustainable economic growth and (7) the rule of Google, Facebook etc over us."(ibid.). Furthermore, the systemic community should focus "on three political domains: (1) Poverty – how to reduce it and how to allow dignity in the life of poor people. (...) (2) Work in companies – how to slow the speed of work, how to limit overwork and burn out, how to foster mental health in the work space. (3) Refugees – how to create a culture of welcoming, support traumatized and particularly vulnerable refugees." (ibid.)*

These guidelines sound even more relevant today: values of peaceful conflict resolution, social justice, equality, respect of minorities and diversities, condemnation of weapons use and war in Ukraine and of the genocide perpetrated in Gaza, are minoritarian voices. Peaceful positions are often trapped in a paradoxical discourse: support to Palestinians sounds as support to their government (Hamas), condemnation of Israel's government sounds as antisemitic. Systemic therapists should avoid this "double bind" and strongly support peace.

[1] Jochen Schweitzer (1954-2022) was Professor of Medical Psychology and Psychotherapy at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. He was co-founder of the Helm Stierlin Institute in Heidelberg and President of the German Association of Systemic Therapy and Family Therapy from 2007 till 2013.



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