



## THE NEW POLITICS OF EXPERIENCE AND THE BITTER HERBS

**Theodor Itten and Ron Roberts**

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This is a fascinating and provocative presentation of the ideas of two highly original thinkers who came under the spell of R.D. Laing during and after the 1970s, through personal contact and through his writings. Itten and Roberts abandon the traditional academic separation of personal history and academic analysis in favour of a more integrated approach in which a broad sweep of stimulating ideas is developed in the context of very personal accounts of specific incidents, from childhood onwards.

Childhood experience has certainly played a part in shaping the careers of the two writers, but in contrasting ways. Itten was, as he describes himself, a 'missionary orphan' who has perhaps compensated for the lack of a warm and close relationship with his mother and father, missionaries who left him in the care of others, by forming strong attachments to his intellectual mentors, R.D. Laing, the anthropologist Francis Huxley, and a number of other influences, both during university days and in the world of therapy. The attachment process has been productive and Itten writes with great warmth and compassion, especially when discussing his experiences as a therapist with patients.

Roberts' childhood in the Liverpool area was one of brutal conflicts, family feuds, hostility experienced as a Catholic at a Protestant school, and mindless violence at the hands of gangs of thugs, on one occasion being kicked unconscious for no reason whatever in the middle of a game of football. It is perhaps not surprising that his subsequent career has involved many personal battles with the academic establishment in psychology, psychiatry and in other fields in which he has been involved as a researcher. It seems to me that he identifies

with Laing the rebel to a greater extent than Laing, the humane therapist. You can see this in the anger he expresses towards the impersonal nature of modern psychiatry, the malign influence of the pharmaceutical industry, the alienating character of modern university education, which he tries to overcome as a teacher, and in the mindless violence, which seems to be increasing throughout the world.

The two authors have also been shaped by contrasting experiences of their university education. Itten had the good fortune to attend a university, which was at the time a focus of radical social thinking and interdisciplinary study; while Roberts endured a very orthodox and narrow psychology degree dominated by computer modelling of cognitive processes and little awareness of existential phenomenological approaches to human psychology. In the ways in which they have reacted to this and developed their subsequent careers, these two talented individuals illustrate two sides of Laing's own complex personality. Itten develops the compassionate approach of the young psychiatrist, who was shocked by the cold unsympathetic approach of 1950's psychiatrists to the mentally ill, and sought to put something better in its place. Roberts develops the work of the Glaswegian rebel, always ready to go to battle against powerful oppressors on behalf of their victims.

We live in troubled times. Laing's writings had their greatest impact at a time when there was a widespread belief in human progress in all areas from the better treatment for disturbed individuals to the liberation of oppressed groups. Sadly we now live once again in a time where the rich and powerful are confident in their power to exploit the weak and poor, where troubled individuals are unlikely to find a sympathetic and understanding ear, more likely an antidepressant pill or a short course of 'cognitive behaviour therapy', perhaps delivered by a computer programme. At least we can derive some comfort from the fact that the torch lit by R.D. Laing and many other 50 years ago has been passed on to some fine campaigners today.

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