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Psychoanalysis and Politics: Juliet Mitchell Then and Now **Lynne Segal**

‘Well. I’ll think about women then’, Juliet Mitchell proposed in 1963, suggesting a topic to research as she sat, the lone woman, on the editorial board of *New Left Review* - alongside her husband, Perry Anderson, the freshly minted editor of the journal. (As it happens, although less typically nowadays, there was still only one woman on the editorial board of that journal with its re-launch in the year 2000 - another editor’s wife!). The inevitable response greeted Mitchell’s startling proposal in such circles at that time: ‘there was silence’ (Mitchell, 1995). A decade later, and Mitchell’s next move seemed just as eccentric, at least to many of the women who had by then raced in to erase that earlier embarrassed silence on the *second sex* once and for all - during the passionate early years of Women’s Liberation. She turned, increasingly, towards psychoanalysis for assistance with her *political* task. The challenge, obviously, was not just the serene sovereignty of male domination, sexism and misogyny which had constituted almost every cultural fibre in the 1960s, but the infeasibility of disclosing its elemental presence within the prevailing political languages of the Left: of class, colonialism, or imperial aggression.

Juliet Mitchell would seem the ideal authority to turn to if one wants to discuss the fraught issue of psychoanalysis and politics. This is not only because her book, *Psychoanalysis & Feminism*, was seminal for so many women radicals in the 1970s, busy attending their Marx and Freud reading groups*. It is also because she has, ever since, remained steadfastly attached to the political - even in these very different times, when many have discarded their former political ideals as yesterday’s folly. *Psychoanalysis & Feminism*, she would later recall, ‘was asking if we could use psychoanalysis to bring feminism into the socialist project. That project has to take off from there’.* Or, as she put it elsewhere: ‘The question for me in that book was that if patriarchy is so entrenched, there must be *historical* circumstances which a politics could work on, where that entrenchment could be undermined and eroded in some way’ (Mitchell, 1995, p.125). Today, it is Mitchell herself who worries that psychoanalysis, and in particular feminism’s embrace of it, may have served to displace politics. ‘Does [psychoanalysis’s] self-described, non-political discourse draw all potentially radical use of it into the apolitical?’, she recently queried. Or conversely, and perhaps more surprisingly, she wonders: ‘does the recurrent demise of feminism ... turn a radical investigatory mode which is psychoanalysis into an apolitical discourse?’ (Mitchell, 1999, p.186). Good questions! Her worries are just the ones we need to address if we want to ponder the conjunction of psychoanalysis and feminism over the last three decades. The former, at least, expresses some of my own misgivings.

Yet, oddly, while regularly fielding the exactly right questions, Mitchell’s replies often seem equivocal and puzzling. Her theoretical and professional engagement in psychoanalysis, although critical and creative, does not itself direct us to any particular social, let alone historical, circumstances which she seeks either to erode, or even to change, in order to further her feminist goal of increasing the cultural power, agency or personal happiness of women. On the contrary, she has tended to neglect if not dismiss ‘the sociologising of psychoanalysis’ by theorists like Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin, who have always stressed the importance of the particularities of culture - especially the shifting dynamics of parenting - in the psychological domain.* Mitchell’s

own resolute, now less than fashionable universalising of psychoanalytic explanations of the structural/symbolic origins of sexual difference seem more symptomatic of what many have seen as the obstinacy of a psychoanalysis which works to fix or naturalise, rather than to diminish, coercive sexual and gender binaries. Psychoanalytic insights, in my view, can be used - often must be used - to help us grasp aspects of the political moment and, especially, the belligerence and dread so often greeting change in the personal and sexual arena. Yet, as Freud's most compelling feminist, Foucauldian and nowadays newly born Deleuzian critics all insist, its traditional dilemma is that in practice psychoanalysis has routinely been deployed, and often still serves, to reinforce a coercive normalizing of heterosexual, reproductive sexuality and identity rather than to call them into question. This is most apparent in the arena where it is routinely invoked - in sexual and gender politics, as I think we can see in the work of Juliet Mitchell.

In talks and interviews delivered in the 1990s, Mitchell suggests that the depoliticizing of both feminism and psychoanalysis in recent decades has something to do with the increasing academic interest in sexuality and representation at the expense of kinship, ideology and the reproduction of society around sexual difference. The former, she suggests, attempts to valorize motherhood and the pre-Oedipal as an alternative sphere of female and feminine dominance. In contrast, she argues, it is only attention to kinship and ideology which can explain how and why women and men are positioned differently in 'patriarchal' kinship structures (Mitchell, 1999, p. 190-1). Despite her subsequent clinical training in psychoanalytic object-relations and the Independent School, expanding her theoretical schooling in Freud and Lacan, Mitchell seems to remain, by and large, faithful to the claim she made in the early 1980s, following Lacan (and along with Jacqueline Rose), that 'the strength' which psychoanalysis brings to feminism resides in its claim that the category 'women' is an empty one: women are 'defined exactly as - and only as - their difference from men'. There is no positive content to be given to women, or to femininity. Only from here, Mitchell suggested in the early 1980s, can we begin to think psychoanalytically, can we begin to see 'how gender is constructed and how sexual differences are lived' (Mitchell, 1999, p.186).

Mitchell is well aware that any such emphasis on structural determinants, like kinship, and the ineluctable hold of the classic oedipal narrative, is seldom the direction taken by those - non-Lacanian - feminist clinicians who have been most effectively engaged in critically using psychoanalysis as a tool for reworking notions of gender. I am thinking, in particular, of several New York analysts (none of whom are mentioned in Mitchell's latest book) such as Virginia Goldner - who in 1996 helped found the journal *Gender and Psychoanalysis* (relaunched in 2000 as *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*) Gouldner, 2000. They all emphasise that sexed identity is never internalized as a single entity (as a positivity or a negativity), but operates subjectively within an array of always conflictual mental representations and self-perceptions. These are sedimented out of the unique identifications each child makes with its own parents, siblings and significant others, however much these interactions are always already permeated with the polarising effects of symbolic phallocentrism and the still prevailing - though increasingly diverse and disputed - social and familial patterns of male dominance.

A somewhat different account, although not dissimilar in its consequences for the psychic formation of sexual difference, comes from those influenced by the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche (promoted most comprehensively in Britain by John Fletcher) Laplanche, Fletcher). Laplanche explains the inevitable installation of the unconscious in the child as not so much the effect of the child's identifications as, from the outside, the implantation of an always unique bundle of enigmatic signifiers or

untranslatable messages coming from the unconscious desires of the mother, or other significant adults (via what he terms 'seduction').

Either way, it can be argued that while the child is imbued with unconscious sexual desires through its interactions with the seductive and desired attention and ministrations of adult others, there is no necessary or primordial sexual binarism in the unconscious. Indeed, this is precisely why gendered and sexual identifications are so confusing, and so chronically in danger of 'collapsing under the weight of their own contradictions', as Goldner puts it. From this perspective, the psychoanalytic message and goal of treatment, she continues, here quoting her analytic colleague Adrienne Harris, is not so much the achievement of an appropriate gendered or sexual identity, as the ability 'to tolerate the ambiguity and instability of gender categories' (Goldner, 1991, p.249). Here, the acceptance of gender ambiguity and instability signals mental health. These more recent psychoanalytic trajectories re-thinking gender and sexual difference often draw upon the post-Foucauldian, post-Derridian influences authorizing queer theory's account of the inevitable instability and fluidity of identities and desire, with Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick, if at times reluctantly, still its reigning theoreticians.* [leave]

Returning to Mitchell, she obviously knows, just as well as Freud, Lacan or any other reflective clinician, that 'masculinity' and 'femininity' have no clear or certain content. She is all too aware of what the Lacanian Moustafa Safouan sums up as 'simply the state of affairs confirmed by all analysis': 'that the energy with which the subject declares himself [sic] man or woman is proportional to that with which the reverse is stated in the unconscious'. Indeed, Mitchell would add, this is the whole point of psychoanalysis, to understand and acknowledge how 'masculinity' and 'femininity' become 'differentiated out from sameness'. But, she goes on to add, when feminist psychoanalysts see only gender ambiguity and uncertainty, 'they forget the problem of engendering' (Mitchell, 1991, p.357). It is this which for Mitchell, as for Freud, binds sexuality and sexual difference to a reproductive, heterosexual teleology: 'for generation there *has to be*', she spells out, 'a categorical difference'. And from this assertion, we soon have lined up all the ingredients of the normative oedipal developmental narrative. Thus Mitchell explains: 'The infant must come to acknowledge that it was born of two parents in their sexual desire. Sexuality is the process that enables one to find the gendered other as different from oneself so that she or he can be used as other for the purposes of engendering.' What is surely most striking here is that Mitchell falls back on the very reproductive biologism she once turned to Lacan to avoid.

It is this reading of the oedipal narrative which underpins Mitchell's latest account of hysteria, although - to be sure - it is augmented by an expanded and compelling analysis of the potentially catastrophic effect of sibling envy and displacement within the more familiar drama. Overall, her comprehensive description of hysteria is, as usual, innovative and subtle. She tellingly emphasises the ideological slippage which falsely collapses into the 'feminine' the dreaded passivity and helplessness of infancy, the consuming envy, the ceaseless longing and the feelings of emptiness or non-existence which are symptomatic of the hysterical condition: 'it would appear that women and hysteria are found synonymously unattractive, so a hysterical man is "feminine"'. In her reclaiming of hysteria Mitchell is at her most persuasive in her charting of this process which turns hysteria into 'femininity'. Freud's mistake, she explains, was to see as a universal repudiation of femininity what should he should have seen as a repudiation of the hysterical condition. She is equally convincing as she explores the banishing or dissolving of hysteria (in her view an inevitable feature of the human condition) into its component categories - whether of anorexia or other conversion symptoms. My misgivings all arise from her theoretical denouement of the origins of hysteria. It is then that we learn, in line

with reproductive normativities, that the pathology of hysteria always returns us to the rejection of sexual polarity: 'Hysteria ...is essentially bisexual'.

The hysteric, who - when faced with unbearable fears of self-annihilation - regresses to the helplessness of infancy, is the man or woman who has been unable to find his or her place within a future where they are positioned differently in relation to procreation. Thus we learn: 'what the hysteric unconsciously cannot face is sexual reproduction as opposed to parthenogenetic procreation'. Mitchell now wants to add a new universal prohibition, which she calls 'The Law of the Mother', to sit beside the more orthodox 'Law of the Father'. The Law of the Mother decrees: 'you [the child] cannot be a mother now, but you, a girl, can grow up to be one, and you, a boy, cannot'. The Law of the Father refers to the role of 'the Father's Phallus' in defining the object of the mother's desire: neither the boy nor the girl can possess the phallus, but you, a boy, can align yourself with the position of the father, with the fantasy of having the phallus, but you, a girl, cannot! The old law, of course, installs the castration complex. The new law, the maternal prohibition, if successfully surmounted, will allow the girl, but forbid the boy, to grow up to be 'in the position of the mother (in whatever way - actual or symbolic - she may use it)'. The hysteric is the person - male or female - who refuses this Law of the Mother.

With her accounts of parthenogenic fantasies - often triggered by the birth of a sibling - keeping the male as well as the female child perpetually allied to the mother, Mitchell provides many suggestive vignettes of hysterical symptoms, especially in men. But I am not convinced by her obedience to a psychoanalytic imagination and explanatory framework which can only lock identity and sexuality into normative reproductive discourses, assumptions and prescriptions. Indeed, her examples do not seem to me to justify any such conclusion. We can look at one of the first and fullest she offers, of a woman suffering from multiple hysterical and suicidal symptoms drawn from Enid Balint's case study of Sarah, 'On Being Empty of Oneself' (reported in 1963). Sarah is empty of herself because 'her mother has never recognized her', refusing 'all the messages her daughter sent out for recognition'. Furthermore, at six or seven, Sarah's older brother began having sexual intercourse with her, a practice which continued for next five years. Sarah's father is reported to be a violent man, 'without any self control'. As a child Sarah 'had lain awake at nights terrified of death, too scared to call out, imagining that something was going to crash on her head'. Sarah's 'rampant' adult sexual experiences were bisexual. Reflecting upon this case history, Mitchell rightly criticised Enid Balint's work for (in line with that of Donald Winnicott and other psychoanalytic mentors of her day) locating Sarah's mental illness solely with the mother, rather than considering either the role of the violent father (who had wanted only sons) or the older sibling (who had drawn her into premature incestuous sex). It seems to me, however, that of the many overdeterminations of Sarah's adult pathologies, the argument that she has refused fully to accept the normative, procreative position is somewhat superfluous.

In my view, the imposition of any such overarching blueprint, or any set of laws mandating the production of healthy human development, is not only superfluous, but can operate to diminish the potential of psychoanalytic thought for embracing psychic complexity. In line with its predominantly conservative history, it will also serve to suppress the potential subversiveness of psychoanalysis in the sexual and gender domain. Let us imagine another vignette, based on a person I have studied particularly closely for many long years. This woman (call her X) has all her life closely identified with, and always worked hard to impress, her mother. (Her father seemed to have little direct impact on her emotional life, as a chronically childlike, endlessly demanding, habitually angry, promiscuous adulterer - whom her mother appeared to regard only with embittered

contempt.) X has never had the least difficulty in identifying herself as 'feminine', in successfully pursuing heterosexual relationships and giving birth to a son. Has X therefore come to terms with herself as a woman, and avoided neurotic feelings of worthlessness through acceptance of the normative procreative position? Not at all. The mother with whom X identified was herself, in contrast to her daughter, completely invested in her father and older brother (both of whom strongly identified with her as a particularly successful child and sister), having only contempt for her own mother. In line with the intensely patriarchal repudiations of femininity of her day, this mother could find worth only in men and 'masculinity'. X, identified with and receiving all her mother's repudiations of femininity, will always have problems with her own self-worth as a woman, despite being both heterosexual, procreative and all-too aware of her own feminine identity.

The point is this, while Mitchell is nowadays willing and able to provide telling descriptions of psychic experience, she often seems to have little interest in social context other than to posit structural determinants of a very normative kind. Thus she cannot address her own queries on how psychoanalysis (with its account of the life-long significance of intrafamilial dynamics and generational haunting) might serve as any sort of feminist or radical *political* tool for combatting the still pervasive denigration of women (whether as hags, whores or hysterics). For this she would need to do more than merely inform us that there is a 'tension that haunts feminism even now between wanting to be equal to men and different from men'. She would need rather to suggest how we might keep striving to create a world where woman's awareness of her difference from men might no longer serve to make her feel inferior. Yet in the 350 pages of *Mad Men and Medusas*, she abstains from any such reflection. Her own tale of the necessary acceptance of sexual difference in terms of gender-differentiating laws of procreation might be thought to contract the diverse ways in which we live our embodiments as women or men to one particular form of hitherto patriarchal kinship structure: the very structure many feminists have for some time been calling into question, not attempting to shore up.

Moreover, Mitchell does her work of reinforcing reproductive, heterosexual normativities precisely at a time when one would have thought there are many other options open to her. The point of the Oedipal triad, of the child recognizing that it cannot have babies, like the point of symbolic castration, is that this little creature must sooner or later - preferably sooner rather than later - detach itself from its earliest, most original object of desire, from mother, or her substitute(s). It must renounce the supposed plenitude of its fantasized auto-erotic libidinal union with that original primordial other. Fair enough! But, from where do these oedipalized Laws arise which alone guarantee the psychic separation of the child from the mother, which ensure the child's awareness that it is not the sole object of the m/other's desire. Where is it writ that the independent or (as it is usually called) 'third' term which interrupts the libidinal dyad of mother and child must be imagined as the biological Father? (Now with the addition of a specifically procreative prohibition from Mother).

It is not necessary to downplay the persistent, inescapable power of actual mothers and fathers in the psychic life of the child, nor the immense symbolic weight of Mother and Father in cultural narrative and the continuing purchase of contemporary nuclear family ideology, to suggest that what turns the mother's desire away from the child is not, of necessity, the Father's Phallus. The actual mother, in practice, may desire and passionately invest herself in any manner of others, not just the threatening arrival or existence of siblings (Margaret Cook, in her biography, sadly recalls her mother's perpetual, loving gaze directed outwards at the cows). Neither is it necessary, as Jessica Benjamin does, to draw upon more recent research in developmental psychology which

depicts the child as already an active, social, interpersonal creature from an early age, with capacities which enable 'an emergent awareness of self and others'. (This, as empirical research by child psychologists like Daniel Stern suggests, is no doubt the case. But here we are not talking of intrapsychic experiences of such traumatic or emotional intensity that they overwhelm the child, threatening its libidinal investment in the mother, and hence remaining unconscious) Rather, what we would have to agree is that the notion of the reproductive Oedipal triangle is too simple to encompass the possible permutations of parental or other adult libidinal investments in the child, and vice versa.

With characteristic, but this time far from foolish, exuberance, Leo Bersani, lays out ten permutations of possible desiring positions for the child which may occur within the classic Oedipal triad. The basic psychoanalytic account of the Oedipus Complex (including bisexuality, incestuous and murderous impulses), he suggests, distorts 'a more consequential drama' in which the identity and the sex of the agents are irrelevant. He also reminds us:

'The major function Freud speaks of as the rival father is not to be either a sexual rival or a parent, but rather to redirect the child's attention, to suggest that there are other modes of extension in the world. It doesn't matter if the agent doing that is a real father in the traditional nuclear family, or another woman, or indeed another man when the desired adult is also a man or, finally, the several agents that may compete for the child's interest, re-direct its curiosity, in the single-parent family. the crucial thing is to get the child out of the family, although such a reading may appear to be forestalled by Freud's relegating of that function to the father.'

The child must indeed be able to let go of its first objects of desire. Parents must too, of course, and in particular in the mother, must let go of the child. But I can see no Laws, other than strictly normative ones, which insist that awareness of sameness and difference, and hence true object - as distinct from strictly narcissistic - sexual desire, can and must derive from unconscious acceptance of the a biological narrative of procreation. And only from acceptance of such a narrative.

Given what we know of the near total collapse of strictly patriarchal kinship laws, as almost 50% of marriages end in divorce, as more women choose (or are forced) to mother without a biological father, or as some try to insist on men's equal involvement in childcare, it nowadays seems somewhat perverse (in the non-Freudian sense) for Mitchell to hold fast to the symbolic and structural positioning of men and women within traditional kinship structures and reproductive ideology. Weirdly, Mitchell is again aware of the problem, even indicating to us some years ago - as others already had - that there are two Freuds struggling with each other (more than two, I would suggest!). One she calls the 'Enlightenment' Freud (though some may feel this does scant justice to the complexities of many Enlightenment thinkers) who wrote of the concepts of the Oedipus and castration complex: this is the one 'who was looking backwards, saying something about sexual difference as it has been established'. Almost, she adds, in self-consciously Marxist mode, 'as if something feudal were still existing within capitalism; something classical still existed in something which was becoming deconstructed within modern life, within late capitalism.' The other Freud, she reflects, used concepts like 'deferred action', and is the one who takes us nearer to notions within deconstruction.

Quite so! But there seems to me only one Juliet Mitchell. And she is the one who has trouble with the second Freud, has trouble with any letting go of the primordial nature of sexual difference and its fundamental role as origin of sexual desire. Remember Mitchell's original questions: 'Does [psychoanalysis's] self-described, non-political discourse draw all potentially radical use of it into the apolitical?'. Not necessarily, but in her hands it often has a decidedly conservative ring. Is it the fault of 'the recurrent demise

of feminism'? I think not. But it might seem that one aspect of its continuing conservative message is assisted by some rather peculiar ways of deploying it supposedly in the service of feminism. But then, perhaps, Mitchell is no longer the thinker to turn to if we want to use psychoanalytic insights to assist feminist or other political goals. If we compare the contents of *Feminism & Psychoanalysis* with that of *Mad Men & Medusas* it is interesting to note that not only does the latter fail to carry through Mitchell's earlier interest in the vicissitudes of Marxism, capitalism and the thinkers who have engaged with them, but it also has little interest in the vicissitudes of feminism, or the actual fate of women. What seems constant is a now surely an increasingly peculiar commitment to the inevitability of formations of non-pathological subjectivities via acceptance of one's place within traditional kinship structures and patriarchal ideology. Not quite all that what one might hope from three decades of reflection on the place of psychoanalysis in politics.