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PSYCHOANALYSIS
AND FEMINISM



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For my mother

5 *A Woman's Place*

The feminist critics whose work has been discussed, and Wilhelm Reich in his early sociological writings, all praise Freud for the accuracy of his *observations* on the psychological characteristics of middle-class women who are oppressed under patriarchy. They condemn, however, his *analysis* on the grounds of its biological determinism and lament that he did not see the reality of social causation that was staring him in the face. There is justification for this attack only in so far as Freud often gave up on this question when he reached the 'biological bedrock' that underlay his psychoanalytic investigation. But what Freud did, was to give up precisely because psychoanalysis has nothing to do with biology – except in the sense that our mental life also reflects, in a transformed way, what culture has already done with our biological needs and constitutions. It was with this *transformation* that Freud was concerned. What we could, and should, criticize him for is that he never makes his repeated statements to this effect forcefully enough in the context of his accounts of psychological sexual differences. To the contrary, disastrously as it turned out for the future of the psychoanalysis of femininity, it is just at these points that he most frequently turned back from the problem, leaving the reader with a nasty feeling that Freud's last word on the subject referred her to biology or anatomy.

But clearly it was just such a taste of biology that 'post'-Freudian analysts savoured. As a criticism of this aspect of *their* work, the condemnations of Freud hold good. If any analysis of feminine psychology is to take place, it is high time that a decisive break was made both with biologism in general and with the specific contribution it makes here: that a so-called biological dualism between the sexes is reflected in mental life. Psychoanalysis is about the inheritance and acquisition of the

human order. The fact that it has been used to induce conformity to specific social mores is a further abuse of it that largely has been made possible on the theoretical level by the same biological preoccupation of some post-Freudians. If anatomy were indeed destiny, as Freud once disastrously remarked, then we might as well all get on with it and give up, for *nothing* would distinguish man from the animals. But Freud made this fatal remark in the context of a science concerned with exploring human social laws as they are represented in the unconscious mind.

Both Reich and the feminist critics attack Freud for his ignorance of the determining effects of patriarchal culture, but ironically, in their own analyses, they forget exactly what they have remembered in their denunciatory rhetoric. In all the accounts the asymmetrical specific of a *father-dominated* social structure is forgotten in favour of male-female opposition with male domination. The general notion of opposition and social dualism is likewise an important feature of Laing's work. If such social dualism replaces biological dualism, circularity will be the inevitable result of the debate. The principle of dialectics is *contradiction*, not simple unity: elements contradict one another, resolve themselves, join together, and enter into further contradictions with other aspects – any 'unity' is a complex one containing contradictions. Even looking at the concept from a simplified, formalistic viewpoint, there must be at least *three* elements and the third cannot be the simple unity of the two, as Reich, Firestone and Laing (the authors who are interested in dialectics) would have it.

Freud's analysis of the psychology of women takes place within a concept that it is neither socially nor biologically dualistic. It takes place within an analysis of patriarchy. His theories give us the beginnings of an explanation of the inferiorized and 'alternative' (second sex) psychology of women under patriarchy. Their concern is with how the human animal with a bisexual psychological disposition becomes the sexed social creature – the man or the woman.

In his speculative works on the origins of human culture and man's phylogenesis, in particular in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism* Freud shows quite explicitly that the psycho-

analytic concept of the unconscious is a concept of mankind's transmission and inheritance of his social (cultural) laws. In each man's unconscious lies all mankind's 'ideas' of his history; a history that cannot start afresh with each individual but must be acquired and contributed to over time. Understanding the laws of the unconscious thus amounts to a start in understanding how ideology functions, how we acquire and live the ideas and laws within which we must exist. A primary aspect of the law is that we live according to our sexed identity, our ever imperfect 'masculinity' or 'femininity'.

The determining feature of Freud's reconstruction of mankind's history is the murder of the primal father in a prehistorical period. It is this dead father that is the mark of patriarchy. In an imagined pre-social epoch, the father had *all* the power and *all* rights over *all* the women of the clan; a band of sons – all brothers, weak on their own, but strong together, murdered the father to get at his rights. Of course, they could not all have his rights and, of course, they must feel ambivalent about the deed they had committed. Totemism and exogamy are the dual signs of their response: in the totem, or symbolic substitute for the father, is guaranteed that no one else may kill him, or by then his heirs (each one of the brothers). Furthermore, not one of the brothers can inherit this father's right to all the women. For as they cannot *all* inherit, none shall. This is the start of social law and morality. The brothers identify with the father they have killed, and internalize the guilt which they feel along with the pleasure in his death. The father thus becomes far more powerful in death than in life; it is in death that he institutes human history. The dead, symbolic father is far more crucial than any actual living father who merely transmits his name. This is the story of the origins of patriarchy. It is against this symbolic mark of the dead father that boys and girls find their cultural place within the instance of the Oedipus complex.

In the situation of the Oedipus complex (which reiterates the rules of the totem and of exogamy) the little boy learns his place as the heir to this law of the father and the little girl learns her place within it. The Oedipus complex is certainly a patriarchal myth and, though he never said so, the importance of this fact was doubtless behind Freud's repudiation of a parallel myth for

women – a so-called Electra complex. Freud always opposed any idea of symmetry in the cultural ‘making’ of men and women. A myth for women would have to bear most dominantly the marks of the Oedipus complex because it is a man’s world into which a woman enters; complementarity or parallelism are out of the question. At first both sexes want to take the place of both the mother and the father, but as they cannot take *both* places, each sex has to learn to repress the characteristics of the other sex. But both, as they learn to speak and live within society, want to take the father’s place, and *only the boy will one day be allowed to do so*. Furthermore both sexes are born into the desire of the mother, and as, through cultural heritage, what the mother desires is the phallus-turned-baby, *both* children desire to be the phallus for the mother. Again, *only the boy can fully recognize himself in his mother’s desire*. Thus *both* sexes repudiate the implications of femininity. Femininity is, therefore, in part a repressed condition that can only be secondarily acquired in a distorted form. It is because it is repressed that femininity is so hard to comprehend both within and without psychoanalytic investigation – it returns in symptoms, such as hysteria. In the body of the hysteric, male and female, lies the feminine protest against the law of the father.¹ But what is repressed is both the representation of the desire and the prohibition against it: there is nothing ‘pure’ or ‘original’ about it.

The girl only acquires her secondary feminine identity within the law of patriarchy in her positive Oedipus complex when she is seduced/raped by, and/or seduces the father. As the boy becomes heir to the law with his acceptance of symbolic castration from the father, the girl learns her feminine destiny with this symbolic seduction. But it is less important than the boy’s ‘castration’, because she has to some extent perceived her situation before it is thus confirmed by the father’s intervention. She

1. It is the language or graphology of the body symptomatology, the traces of repressed femininity in hysteria, that the French women’s liberation group, *Psychanalyse et Politique*, is deciphering. It was here in the analysis of the hysterical symptom in his earliest psychoanalytic days that, they consider, Freud stopped short. I am not sure that I would agree with the stress that I understand they put on the father’s Oedipal ‘rape’ of his daughter, as it seems to me that the girl precisely has to learn the arts of seduction, of *winning* love.

has already acquired the information that as she is not heir to the phallus she does not need to accept symbolic castration (she is already ‘castrated’). But without the father’s role in her positive Oedipus complex she could remain locked in pre-Oedipal dilemmas (and hence would become psychotic), for the Oedipus complex is her entry into her human heritage of femininity. Freud always said that a woman was ‘more bisexual’ than a man. By this he seems to have been hinting at the fact that within patriarchy her desire to take the father’s place and be the phallus for the mother is as strong as is the boy’s ultimate right to do so. The bisexual disposition of her pre-Oedipal moment remains strong and her Oedipus complex is a poor, secondary affair. An affair in which she learns that her subjugation to the law of the father entails her becoming the representative of ‘nature’ and ‘sexuality’, a chaos of spontaneous, intuitive creativity. As she cannot receive the ‘touch’ of the law, her submission to it must be in establishing herself as its opposite – as all that is loving and irrational. Such is the condition of patriarchal human history.

With the ending of his Oedipus complex and the internalizing of the ‘castrating’ father as his authoritative superego, the boy enters into the prospect of his future manhood. The girl, on the contrary, has almost to build her Oedipus complex out of the impossibilities of her bisexual pre-Oedipal desires. Instead of internalizing the mark of the law in a superego to which she will live up, she can only develop her narcissistic ego-ideal. She must confirm her pre-Oedipal identification (as opposed to attachment) with the mother, and instead of taking on qualities of aggression and control she acquires the art of love and conciliation. Not being heir to the law of culture, her task is to see that mankind reproduces itself within the circularity of the supposedly natural family. The family is, of course, no more ‘natural’ than the woman, but its place within the law is to take on ‘natural’ functions. For sexuality, which supposedly unites the couple, disrupts the kingdom if uncontrolled; it, too, must be contained and organized. Woman becomes, in her nineteenth-century designation, ‘the sex’. Hers is the sphere of reproduction.

This is the place of all women in patriarchal culture. To put

the matter in a most generalizing fashion: men enter into the class-dominated structures of history while women (as women, whatever their actual work in production) remain defined by the kinship patterns of organization. In our society the kinship system is harnessed into the family – where a woman is formed in such a way that that is where she will stay. Differences of class, historical epoch, specific social situations alter the expression of femininity; but in relation to the law of the father, women's position across the board is a comparable one. When critics condemn Freud for not taking account of social reality, their concept of that reality is too limited. The social reality that he is concerned with elucidating is the mental representation of the reality of society.

6 *The Cultural Revolution*

As we have seen, Freud often longed for a satisfactory biological base on which to rest his psychological theories, and yet the wish was no sooner uttered than forgotten. From the work of Ernest Jones through to that of contemporary feminist analysts such as Mary Jane Sherfy,¹ the biological base of sexual dualism has been sought. Although there is an obvious *use* of the biological base in any social formation, it would seem dubious to stress this. For there seems little evidence of any biological priority. Quite the contrary; we are confronted with a situation that is determinately social. This situation is the initial *transformation* of biology by the exchange system expressed by kinship structures and the *social* taboos on incest that set up the differential conditions for the formation of men and women. This is not, of course, to deny that, as in all mammalian species, there is a difference between the reproductive roles of each sex, but it is to suggest that in *no* human society do these take precedence in an untransformed way. The establishment of human society relegates them to a secondary place, though their ideological reimportation may make them appear dominant.

It is not simply a question of the by-now familiar thesis that mankind, in effecting the move from nature to culture, 'chose' to preserve women within a natural ('animal') role for the sake of the propagation and nurturing of the species, for this suggestion sets up too simple a split between nature and culture and consequently too simple a division between the fate of the sexes. The very inauguration of 'culture' necessitated a different role. It is not that women are confined to a natural function but that they are given a specialized role in the formation of civilization. *It is thus not on account of their 'natural' procreative possibilities but on*

1. See Mary Jane Sherfy, 'A Theory on Female Sexuality', in *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, op. cit., pp. 220 ff.