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There is never a psychopathology without the social context

An interview with Juliet Mitchell

British feminist and psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell talks to *Cogito* about her role in the British New Left in the 1960s. Mitchell was at the centre of the movement: as editorial board member of the *New Left Review*, as participant in Third World and anti–psychiatry movements, and as co–organizer of grassroots initiatives, including the "Anti–University", founded on the steps of Shoreditch Church in East London. Here, Mitchell outlines her intellectual trajectory from her early Marxism, to feminism of the mid–1960s, and to psychoanalysis in the 1970s.

E. Efe Çakmak: As one of the most influential figures of second–wave feminism and contemporary psychoanalytic theory, you have emphasized that your reading of Freud was "initially triggered by the hostility of American feminism to Freud". I also remember that you once spoke about your childhood memories of Wilhelm Reich, which went back to the 1940s. I am curious to hear what you feel about the origins of your thought today. How do you feel about Reich, for example?

Juliet Mitchell: I go back and situate myself in the 1960s, even in the childhood of the 1940s before that, immediately after the Second World War. I was in a communal school where my mother taught –– a very progressive, radical school called Summerhill in England. I was born in New Zealand, really by accident of the war. My parents were in Canada; my mother went on to take a research science job in New Zealand when war broke out. She didn't want to go; she wanted to stay in Canada. But the person she exchanged in the fellowship research programme was already on the high seas. So she went on and I was born there. Everybody thought the war would be short, but it wasn't. She felt very isolated. We lived in a German Jewish refugee community in Christchurch, which, I think, remained terribly important to me. The Jewish community in Christchurch, as I understand it now, was very interesting. Karl Popper had been there, for example, and he kept all the other Jewish refugees out of everything. I think it was a sort of European enclave. My mother didn't like being isolated; we came back to England in nine weeks in a boat in 1944, not knowing which way we were going. The Japanese were still at war, and we were a convoy on our way. The ship behind us was blown up, our ship was blown up on its way back. Three and a half, I had to do the lifeboat drill, getting my panic suit, turning on my red light, and climbing into lifeboats. Such are my early memories.

Anyway, we made it back to England, and the only thing my mother found out returning to England was evacuation of small children from the centres of cities. She wanted to make sure that I would not be sent away. So she became a schoolteacher, which meant she kept me with her. It was a school in North

London, which was dominated by left–wing anarchists. Reich was just part of the air we breathed.

EEÇ: Reich was in the United States then, wasn't he?

JM: Yes, Reich was there by then. Norway forbade him, and then he went there. He was still seen as a political figure. He was quite an important person for left–wing anarchists after the war; but I don't remember thinking about that in the 1950s, which was a very different era. He came up again in the 1960s, with the student movement in Germany. A lot of his early works were reprinted by the SDS in Germany. And when I came to think about psychoanalysis, it was in the 1960s. I came in an environment where nobody would be interested in psychoanalysis, because that would have been bourgeois.

Going back to the 1940s, I had a job when I was eleven years old, looking after three children under the age of three –– twins and a girl of eighteen months. Their mother was trained to be a psychoanalyst. I was very interested in what she was doing. Her husband was the discoverer of interferon, which was a major scientific breakthrough. I was rather impressed by them when I was eleven years old. Maybe they had an influence.

The 1950s was such an enclosed sort of time. It is hard to express how freeing anything felt in the 1960s, and how the 1940s felt retrospectively. In the 1950s most teenagers were incredibly restricted by conventional narrow gender definitions. It began to break out with Teddy Boys and rockers in the late 1950s. Until then it really did feel like a straightjacket sort of existence. I remember my first years as a student, we were camping in Scotland. By then we were interested in the existentialism of Sartre and de Beauvoir. I wanted to buy *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir's book, and went to the closest bookshop. I was asked to leave the bookshop, because it was regarded as pornography. The 1950s were like that. People now ask me about the 1960s, if there was a real sexual revolution. My answer is that certain things had changed and certain things were dramatically different from the past, particularly everyday instances.

Anyway, my first degree was in English literature, I loved English literature. But I didn't finish my PhD because when I was twenty–one I found a job lecturing in English literature at Leeds University in Northern England.

EEÇ: I am not sure whether it is popular among your readers today, but I remember reading an early article of yours on William Golding!

JM: William Golding? Published in *New Left Review* in about 1962, I think. That's when we were scraping the barrel, I was part of the team for *New Left Review*. We were really writing the journal ourselves, we had taken it over from the earlier group, which involved Stuart Hall, Raphael Samuel, Dennis Bart, and before them, E. P. Thompson. Perry Anderson and I were married around that period, too. I was working in Leeds and we were living in London. This is about a five–hour train ride. Leeds was the stronghold of the on–the–ground political work, of the old Left embedded in the English working class and the Workers Education Movement. I knew the older generation of people, and I was some sort of bridge between Leeds and the "New Left" of London. The younger group had been seen by the older as totally continental. We were indeed very influenced by existentialism. E. P. Thompson told us off for "tree–top Marxism", for not having our feet on the

ground. What we were trying to bring in was theory. We of course we had respect for the wonderful British historians and thinkers such as Raymond Williams, but they were ultimately suffering from British empiricism. We wanted to bring in continental theory, basically. That was the splitting point. I felt rather in two worlds, namely the pragmatism of the north of England and the theory of London and Paris.

And women came in that context. I remember I wrote on Doris Lessing as well as William Golding. I suppose psychoanalysis did come through Frantz Fanon, and Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre's attacks, which were very informed attacks, not just antagonisms. They knew why they didn't support psychoanalysis, why they didn't agree with it.

And we were extremely interested in the Third World. Many people went to work in Ghana. This would look like the hope of the future, independence in Algeria, and independence struggles in the world in general.

And then, because we were writing the magazine ourselves at this point, people started to write articles for it on special topics of our choice. There was a meeting point, for example Raphael Samuel wrote a wonderful piece about housing in Scotland. Thompson, Mann, and Anderson all had debates. People were getting embedded in Third World struggles. People went out and spent time researching what was happening and its political meaning, the major activists who were struggling in countries like Ghana, Algeria, and so on. People actually went to live there for a year or more and wrote very substantial articles. I joined Perry to write an article on Brazil, on Portuguese colonialism and the Portuguese empire. This was the sort of interest. We were discussing issues that didn't obviously fit into conventional terms of orthodox Marxism. We were influenced by Althusser, and that got us onto Lacan. We published Althusser's *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan* in the mid–1960s, I think, quite early, this introduced Lacan into English culture. At that point, I decided not to work on the Third World any more, because the Third World here on our doorstep was women. Women who had not really been accounted for within Marxist theory.

It is interesting that it was Sartre who suggested de Beauvoir look at women. She hadn't thought about the subject before. They weren't coming from Marxism. If you think that Sartre wrote on Jews, Fanon on blacks, you could have introduced women's issues as well.

Existentialism is very open towards topics which were not class–based subjects such as Jews, blacks, or women. Marxism was not. A lot of us then gradually began to move out of the leftwing groups, and to see ourselves as Marxists who wanted to join up with feminism, the term we once absolutely denounced as "bourgeois deviation". We were calling this liberation, not emancipation, which was again a bourgeois concept. That was beginning to meet up with the liberationist movement, which was rising around situationists.

People like myself, coming from a Marxist background, found that orthodox class analysis wouldn't work for women. We were trying to look elsewhere. We were, of course, looking at existentialism through teenage years, early adulthood. It was Simone de Beauvoir's good theory, and it was probably one of the best single theories we have on woman or gender, when we have women on our agenda.

That was beginning to be met by the student movement, emerging at the same time. We were all involved in it. I was one of the founding members of the Anti−University of London in the late 1960s. Then I was working with anti−psychiatry people, Laing, Cooper, and so on. *New Left Review* published the first Laing. Then we published his series of articles on the critique of the family. It was a coming together of radical directions. The anti−psychiatrists were using existentialism; they translated Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. With the anti−psychiatry people, we started the Anti−University on the steps of Shoreditch church in the east end of London. That's where I organized seminars with women, one of the first of the women's groups as a political group in the late 1960s. That was a very interesting group we had. We had a journalist from Sweden, some housewives with young children from South London, a couple of liberationist people and a couple of students. One of the people in this class inherited two thousand pounds, and she was going to put it towards a refuge for women, because violence against women was quite a topic. I persuaded her to put the money into a bookshop instead, so she opened a very good bookshop in Camden Town called Compendium Books, which became a very important alternative political bookshop. I certainly felt guilty afterwards, but other people raised money for refuges, anyway. I wanted a good bookshop. There were no good political bookshops around.

Political for us in the 1960s was such an inclusive concept, it meant radical, critical change, whether in the psychological field, the governmental field, the world field, and so on. It could be Red Brigades, it could be situationists. There was a lot of sectarian infighting. But sectarian infighting is a mark of tolerance in a funny way. It means you actually know that everybody is there. It was unlike the political field of the 1950s, which really did feel like being in a straightjacket.

I had my first article in *New Left Review* in 1966. My first book, *Woman's Estate*, which used that article, was published by Penguin Books in 1972. I had to get Penguin to withdraw the first couple of thousand from the bookshops, because they put one of our demonstrations on the cover −− but they hadn't realized that there was a banner of the Women's Liberation Front, the ultra sectarian Maoist women's group. And I was absolutely one of their most outspoken opponents. And a lot of the time we thought positively about the Cultural Revolution in China. We learned our lesson: don't think of popular revolutions unless you know them very well.

When it comes to sectarianism, people not on the Left never understood that argument is actually the lifeblood of politics. The problem is when people stop arguing.

By the time I'd written "Women: the Longest Revolution", in response to the Third World within one's own country, my question was, what were women, not being a class or race, doing here? "Oppression" was the word we used instead of "exploitation", because exploitation has a specific Marxist meaning as taking the surplus. And oppression was a catchy term used for Third World struggles and women as well.

"Women: the Longest Revolution" surveyed what was on Babel and Engels, also using Althusser as a framework. Because what was important to Althusser about women was in the last instance the economic: getting an independence from ideological state apparatuses, so women obviously get both into ideology and into economics. Althusser was rearranging the Marxist map, which was very helpful.

The book wasn't Althusserian in the political sense as much as in using the structures that he set up. Althusserian journals were coming out by friends of mine such as Ben Brewster. They were very specific in Althusserian politics. I was using the Althusserian argument rather than a platform.

After I finished "Women: the Longest Revolution", I noticed there was something missing from it. What it does is look at forestructures in which women are inserted. You can't find out anything about women. You couldn't, for example, find out how girls did in exams. A woman on a census was either her father's daughter or her husband's wife. Women were hidden from history. Where you could find women was within the family.

In the meantime, sociology was on the rise. There were big educational changes in England, including the introduction by the Wilson government of comprehensive education, expansion of universities. The article argues that "In all this literature, you can only find women as embedded in a family. Let's dismantle that and find out what women are doing in a family." Women are producing children. Caring for children. Providing a sexual relationship. And those three structures are surrounded by economy.

After I finished it I very much felt that I wanted to ask for another identifier, which was ideology. Woman is so much a part of it: there is no woman outside the ideology of woman. I had to think about that. When I thought about ideology, I started to look at psychology. That's how I moved. At the same time, one of the radical groups was anti–psychiatry. It used Freud quite critically, but not as much as the existentialists did.

I remember by then I moved from teaching English literature in Leeds University to be nearer to London where Perry and I were living, I moved to Reading University, where Perry also published some of his books. There I remember the wife of a young colleague, a very political young guy. We were part of the young teachers at universities; we were actually part of the student movement as well.

I remember the wife. She had an absolutely catastrophic delusion of breakdown at its maximum. She was working in Manchester. The head of my department was a very interesting man. He was very fond of her husband. She would just be put into a psychiatric hospital and drugged. Instead, he paid for her to come in a private car, absolutely mad, screaming, delusional, crazy. So a car went to fetch her to bring her down to Reading, where there was a sympathetic young practitioner, who first injected her, because she was trying to jump out of the window. He sedated her. Then her husband and I took her down to London to people working in anti–psychiatry. They found her a room in one of their hostels. There was somebody around for her all the time. She never had any drugs. They just let her sit quietly in a room, doing what she wanted to. She was calm, actually. She came out the other end fine. She did go through something. She was facing paranoid schizophrenia, she would have died, without a doubt. She would have been heavily medicated, probably given some CT. There was something in it. People may want to go back at some point and look at anti–psychiatry literature.

EEÇ: And your reading of Freud, that was "initially triggered by the hostility of American feminism to Freud"?

JM: So my own analysis of woman, which was taken up by Betty Friedan's book on feminism, published in 1964. In the States, the women's movement

was beginning. I went to the States in 1964. I went to the foundation of Betty Friedan's movement, National Organization of Woman, which was the first organized women's movement. I met with groups of people who did very similar things to what we were doing in London. Marxist groups about women, Marxist–feminist groups... There were incredible prohibitions on woman's sexuality. Women weren't supposed to have any sexual enjoyment; vaginal orgasm seemed the only thing you should have. There was a big vote against that. And the beginning of very strong lesbian part of the women's movement in the US.

Freud was always at the nub of the attacks. From the freeing sexuality part, it moved to seeing Freud as this arch–patriarch. There were feminist calendars and diaries with Freud's head on a dartboard with a dart through his eye. That was Freud the arch–patriarch.

I started thinking that there must be something in it. I suppose we have a habit of thinking the opposite. It sounds pretentious to say "dialectically", but what I always found valuable about any aspect of Marxism was dialectic materialism. I would still defend dialectic materialism in some sense. It makes a lot of sense to me still. I'm probably absolutely off the planet saying that, but anyway.

So, as a habit of mind, if people are making a noise about somebody being absolutely the intellectual opposition, the thing that we must all attack, you begin to think there must be something in that for them to be bothering.

Visiting the US, I was still teaching. So, during the summer vacation, I went into the library, which I had used since I was 17 and adored. We had a network of people who used to work in that library. It was a very important intellectual centre, closed down. I went there just to read what Freud had had to say about women. I went there in June and came back in September, having read all his twenty three volumes of work. I just got completely fascinated.

I thought, this is where you could add a social analysis of sexuality to a wider social analysis of economy, social actions, classes, etc. Through psychology, you could get to ideology. Psychology and ideology are extremely close. How we think of what we are, how we think ourselves in the world is an ideological question. This is also what psychology is, how we think ourselves, particularly unconsciously. We don't wake up every morning and think, "Uh, God, I'm a man, uh God, I'm a woman." We know it without thinking about it, at a pre–conscious, but also deeply unconscious level. But how? This question takes us to the unconscious knowledge of gender.

So, I wrote *Woman's Estate*, it was an adaptation of the "Women: the Longest Revolution" article. At the end, it was saying we must think about using psychoanalysis for ideology. After that, I left the university and went freelance, got some money in advance from the publisher, money for me to live a couple of years so I could write a book. In the synopsis I said the book would be a "social history of the feminine"; that is how I got his money. A friend of mine had said, "double your needs, because you will get half," and I did. Then I wrote *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* –– so it had been commissioned as a book on the feminine, it was meant to be a sort of history of sociology of the feminine, the publisher got a different book than he bought. But he was extremely generous and nice, didn't mind at all. Donkey's years later I found the original synopsis, the commissioned book was really completely different.

There have been all sorts of ways in cultural studies where psychoanalysis has been used wonderfully. Something in me wanted to know the material from which it derived. I was always interested in the critical views of psychoanalysis. You know, I have been accused of defending Freud. It was not completely true. My project has always been within the critical views of psychoanalysis, nowhere else. But you have to criticize something in relation with the material you are using. And I wanted to use it in relation to the material from which psychoanalysis arose: men or women; people's psyche: the unconscious itself, in people.

Bülent Somay: And from the late 1970s onwards, you wore two hats at the same time; one being psychoanalyst and the other feminist. But how can these two positions, one a member of the social movement for emancipation and/or social change, and the other of a healer working in an extremely intimate environment, be reconciled?

JM: I went into psychoanalysis from feminism, from the sexual side and the political side. My questions for psychoanalysis were from politics, such as whether psychoanalysis could help understand the position of women. I've written articles and published other things on psychoanalysis for feminist newspapers in England.

It was only after that I wanted to take my research further; I needed to have a material base that the theory has derived from. Then I trained as a psychoanalyst, coming from the political spectrum.

I never really saw these two divided in the way you are presenting in your question. The project has always been defined in the other way. After all, Freud was quite explicit that there is no distinction between the individual as individual and the individual as social being. We are always and nothing but social. The unconscious, the field of psychoanalysis, is absolutely and necessarily social. So you may look at the social through some individual context. But because what you see is the social, we can use that material gathered from the individual to take further questions or further interpretations of the social. And the other way around, if you are going to look at the individual who has got a clinical problem, there is always a social context. There is never a psychopathology without the social context.

Practically speaking, they are of course different enterprises. It's private, working with an individual in a clinical context, because it has to be absolutely confidential. So the practice is obviously different, while the material theory combines very well, using the individual to understand the social and the social to understand the individual. That's what the whole notion of the unconscious is. It's not Jung's elective unconscious, it's Freud's social unconscious, that the mind is the body, the mind is somatic in everybody. Though you will have different individual histories, what we are looking at is in fact what holds us together, the dynamic, what we have in common.

I think what leads us to senses of two different worlds in the sense of individual is actually the nature of the society we live in. We take it for granted that the social is versus individual and vice versa. The individualism of capitalist society is such that we always tend to think of the individual as "not social". Therefore, we always tend to see the person with problems as an individual with individual psychopathology, and disregard the social problem. But in fact it's impossible. It has to be one and the same thing.

BS: As a feminist, your call to your fellow women is "Do not submit, subvert, change, change the world". But as a psychoanalyst, working with an individual, suffering comes because of the inability to cope with the existing order. You try to facilitate the social harmony, and eventually, submission. Is there a way to avoid this seemingly contradictory situation?

JM: I think it's seemingly rather than deeply contradictory. There is no way that I would be interested in helping somebody to cope with an impossible or difficult situation. What they might want to do is to find a way to change the situation by having some changes within themselves. But I wouldn't want them to change themselves to fit the situation in any sense. Supposing someone is not dysfunctional, ie they can work, they can have sexual relationships, friendships, love relations, and so on.

What I would be hoping for is an openness to find out what the person knows about himself, and what he or she doesn't know. When they know it, when they find out what it is, then, in a sense, he or she can choose how to use what he or she found: to choose, not to adapt. This is not a word that features in Freudian psychology. But to see how one can change oneself as well as how he or she can change the world is the problem. I think in both fields, what one is looking towards is "change", not "adaptation". Change of the individual is interpreted as adaptation to status quo –– but no, we should be changing both.

BS: Do you think psychosis as a complete or significantly partial refusal to submit to the symbolic order is psychoanalyzeable? Can there be a middle way, between the psychotic's way of refusing to submit and our trying to subvert the symbolic order?

JM: My present work is very much on the area of normalization of psychotic processes. In that normalization, what you have often got is actually the very rigid social order as well as rigid personality. So, it's not a question whether psychoanalysis can work with it or not. I think it can, but I think we haven't got a full understanding of psychosis yet. I think we understood its pathological dimension, not the normative dimension. We can ask whether psychopathology of the psychotic is really a subversion of the symbolic order or embattled rigid position from which the person cannot move either to subvert the symbolic order or to conform to it.

I don't think anti–psychiatrists such as Laing and Cooper saw the schizophrenic as the madman telling the truth. What we had were two sets of rigidity, we had the pathological dimension of psychosis in paranoia, schizophrenia: delusions –– which are delusions, let's face it. But then we had the normative delusions of an acceptable psychotic status quo, which is what our political world very often is. For me, the question is whether the person who is suffering from the extreme pathological dimension of psychosis can find sufficient freedom to not need that refuge, whether he or she is able to come with a critique of the normative psychosis of the political social world.

Published 2006–04–12
Original in English
Contribution by Cogito (Turkey)
First published in *Cogito* 44–45 (2006)
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