

## **The Politics of the Family: Laing and Esterson in Context**

**LYNNE SEGAL**

It is always a good time to revisit the work of authors who become iconic of their time and place, all the more so when they were critical in the development of one's own intellectual and political life. It is also an excellent time to revisit R. D. Laing's and Aaron Esterson's *Sanity, Madness and the Family* when concern over the state of 'troubled families' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2014) is high on our current Tory government's agenda, while alarm over apparently ever-rising levels of mental stress and ill health are ubiquitous. On the surface, governments around the world have been busy measuring happiness; underneath, they are more worried by unease over the upsurge of melancholia, depression and anxiety. The last measurement of mental health in the UK in 2009 (see Sweet, 2011) reported that a quarter of the population will experience some mental health problem in the course of a year, with anxiety and depression the most common symptoms (10.9%), and 0.8% of the population diagnosed with a mental illness such as schizophrenia.

### **Politics and Pleasure: The Sixties Revisited**

Yet this was not the predominant mood of the moment when the young Scottish psychiatrist Ronnie Laing, after serving in the British army and a psychiatric unit in Glasgow, arrived in London in 1956 to work at the Tavistock Clinic, and later train at the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, working closely with Charles Rycroft, D.W. Winnicott and John Bowlby. By the close of the fifties, a growing spirit of permissiveness was in the air, and it remained throughout the sixties and early seventies. In Britain, the new

decade kicked off with the iconic unbanning of D. H. Lawrence's (1959) *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, widely available for the first time since its appearance in 1928. Soon, rock music was getting raunchier (with much borrowing from American Blues music), women's hemlines were rising, recreational drugs were flowing, as western teenagers made their mark on the decade – their numbers swollen twenty per cent by the post-war baby boom. Money was flowing into more pockets in what historians such as Eric Hobsbawm later declared this 'golden age' of capitalism, with its expanding welfare services, higher wages and, above all, a growing consumer-driven economy flourishing from 1945 up until the mid-1970s. Nevertheless, just like the legislative reform around sexual rights, abortion law reform, and easier access to divorce, the radical impact of the decade was only consolidated in the final years of the sixties. It was evident in ever-more deliberate provocation from the 'underground press', more militant demands for civil rights, and the anti-Vietnam war activity, with students beginning to occupy their universities demanding more control over courses in the late sixties. Most significantly, however, for a couple of decades a new spirit of egalitarianism and class-consciousness was in the air, when for one brief moment a working-class hero was something to be, and not only in the Cavern Club in Liverpool.<sup>1</sup>

So this was the spirit of the sixties, the years in which R. D. Laing produced his major works questioning the nature of 'madness', while highlighting the 'madness' in society at large. He became a legend in his own lifetime, the man of the moment, a leading guru for the inheritors of both Left politics and the counter-culture alike. It is not hard to see that Laing was also as much influenced by as influencing the radical life and politics of the sixties. Indeed, it was reading R.D. Laing, Aaron Esterson, David Cooper, and many

---

<sup>1</sup> See also Rowbotham (2000) and chapter one of Segal (2013).

similar voices complaining about the incarceration and treatment of those deemed mentally ill, that was one of the key triggers drawing young people, including me, into radical politics in those heady days of rebellion and rage, Laing's rethinking of schizophrenia in the *Divided Self* (1960), in particular. It was the world that was repressive and mad, Laing was soon insisting in his numerous books, talks and seminars throughout the sixties and into the next. Perhaps, if we followed the so-called mad on their personal journey, listened more carefully in the attempt to make sense of what they were saying (something he illustrated could easily be done), we might hear the 'sanity' that was present in their rejection of the 'insanity' of so-called normality, with its hypocrisies and alienated labour, propped up by wars, prisons, and mental hospitals. In a new preface to the *The Divided Self*, written in 1965, Laing summed this up saying: 'Thus I would wish to emphasize that our "normal" "adjusted" state is too often the abdication of ecstasy, the betrayal of our true potentialities; that many of us are only too successful in acquiring a false self to adapt to false realities' (Laing, 2010: 12). Popular writers, dramatists, comedians and filmmakers of the day, including Doris Lessing, David Mercer, Karel Reisz, Lindsay Anderson, Tony Garnett, and Ken Loach, in the UK, and Milos Forman, Ken Kesey and Lenny Bruce to name only a few from elsewhere, all agreed. His vision of a mad world in need of liberation was the progressive, still hopeful, if dramatic and woolly zeitgeist: 'Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be break-through. It is potential liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death', Laing wrote in *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (1990 [1967]: 110). The wacky notion of madness as liberation fed into the popularity of the surreal, mildly subversive *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, the British comedy series aired by the BBC between 1960 and 1974, starring John Cleese, Michael Palin and others. Fragments of that mood endure, as some flourishing

comedians report, evident in Eddie Izzard's (2014) recollections of how he spent his days at public school watching Monty Python.

Yet, since then, times have changed in so many different ways, for better and for worse, but with so little of the details of exactly how power shifts and reorganizes itself foreseen by radicals fifty years ago. Just think about what is 'obvious' today, the impact of women in generating change, though this was something to which Laing seemed oblivious when he gave his much-applauded opening speech 'The Obvious', at the triumphal Dialectics of Liberation Conference held over a two-week period at the Roundhouse in London, in July 1967. That marathon of rebellion included so many of the best known radical thinkers and activists of the day on its platforms, including Herbert Marcuse, Paul Goodman, André Gorz, Paul Sweezy, Stokeley Carmichael, and an array of other leading Marxists, anarchists and activists. Laing and Cooper were two of the main organizers of the proceedings, making their views on the need for liberation from psychiatry and its attitudes to 'normality' and 'abnormality' a key feature of the events. Today, the obvious failing of that celebration of 'liberation' is that not one woman was billed as a contributor. In actuality, a solitary woman did take her turn on stage, the New York artist Carolee Schneemann, though she is rarely mentioned as present in any of the memorabilia of the historic occasion.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, back then, her performance barely survived the censorship and criticism it met, itself illustrating the main theme of her art work, both then and since, revealing the ways in which the much-vilified female body is rendered abject, passive and powerless in dominant discourses of femininity, at the very same time as it is portrayed as both mysterious and threatening.

---

<sup>2</sup> Schneemann's most memorable work is probably her iconic *Interior Scroll* from 1975.

This resistance towards women as speakers presumably explains the absence on any platforms of the other radical women of the day, at least those who had somehow managed to get their voices into print or heard elsewhere: Simone de Beauvoir, obviously (although apparently Sartre had been invited), Doris Lessing, well-known for her books and peace activism, along with Peggy Duff and Pat Arrowsmith, both prominent pacifists. Radical theatre luminaries, such as Margaretta D’Arcy, Joan Littlewood, Shelagh Delaney made no appearance, nor was the powerful voice work of Black Notting Hill activist Claudia Jones anywhere to be heard, or even that of Juliet Mitchell (1966), whose iconic essay ‘Women: The Longest Revolution’ had been published the previous year in *New Left Review* (even though she was at the time exceedingly close to Cooper and Laing). Mitchell was apparently in the audience (walking out halfway through), as was a very young Angela Davis. Thus, when it came to predicting the imminent rise of radical women, on the cusp of embarking on our own historic political journey, the *Dialectics of Liberation* was blind to the obvious, one might say.

### **Meanings of Madness**

Nevertheless, there is no doubting Laing’s decisive and lasting impact on the understanding and treatment of mental illness. Like so many others, I know personally that, for a while, all those who saw themselves as progressive were aware of Laing, reading Laing, quoting Laing, and then, before too long, especially as rising feminists in the 1970s, criticizing aspects of his new agenda for liberating the world. Meanwhile, numerous social science texts in the following decades called attention to the shaky definitions and diagnoses of ‘mental illness’, while many of the defenders of the psychiatric profession itself no longer found it possible simply to dismiss Laing (see

Clare, 1976 and Ingleby, 1981). This remained true for several decades, even if the ‘anti-psychiatry’ movement attributed to Laing would later dwindle in significance, though as we shall see, never disappear. Laing himself did not fully identify with the movement that remained loyal to him, since in reality it was David Cooper (1967), his early collaborator, who coined and promoted this idea of anti-psychiatry, before his untimely death from chronic alcoholism.<sup>3</sup> In my experience, the feminists who criticized Laing never completely dismissed him, although when an increasing interest in spiritualism dominated his political concerns, leading him to leave the UK for a while in 1971 to meditate in Sri Lanka (then still known by its colonial name, Ceylon), the Left overall became more critical of him.

However, few of us rejected Laing’s key argument, which was to insist upon the possible intelligibility of mental illness, especially of all that had hitherto been designated as the ‘meaningless’ thought processes and behaviour of the psychotic patient, above all the ‘schizophrenic’. Those who read it would never forget the stunning vignette in his first book, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1960: 29-30), in which Laing exposes the contempt and ignorance in the behaviour of the man regarded as the father of psychiatry, Emil Kraepelin, when he was recording for posterity the ‘incomprehensible’, ‘excited speech’ and behaviour of a young patient diagnosed with schizophrenia, whom he is displaying before his students. In startling contrast, Laing’s reading of this same patient’s speech, as certainly angry and resentful, but completely comprehensible, is thoroughly compelling. The patient can be seen as mocking Kraepelin’s totally dismissive way of using him as ‘material’

---

<sup>3</sup> See Chris Oakley’s article in this issue for a more detailed exploration of the relationship between Laing and Cooper.

for his audience, refusing to hear anything intelligible, let alone offering any understanding of the mocking commentary of the doctor in which this young man is engaged: 'Are you getting impudent again? I'm coming! I'll show! You don't whore for me. You mustn't be smart either, you're an impudent lousy fellow ... You understand nothing at all; nothing at all does he understand...' Laing, however, believed he did understand, and convinced most of his readers.

In championing the sublated, negated experiences of those deemed schizophrenic, Laing soon beamed a torch on what he saw as the iniquities of family life. Like him, those feminists who bonded together as women's liberation at the very close of the 1960s were also highly critical of what we saw then as the patriarchal nuclear family, which meant we did not reject what Laing had to say about the miseries within its walls. After all, it was Betty Friedan who, the year before the appearance of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, in 1964, had published her own iconic precursor of second-wave feminism, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). She highlighted the hidden trauma of those often depressed, valium-consuming full-time housewives, targeted by advertising to find delight in the latest washing powder, supposedly eager to produce the whiter than white socks for their clean, neat and tidy, shiny, growing children. The problem was that Laing just never got to grips with the real power dynamics of those nuclear families he studied, or their cultural and political context.

### **The Politics of the Family Revisited**

Nevertheless, as when reading Laing's exposure of Kraepelin's insistence that psychotic speech was nothing but babble and nonsense, there is much that is fascinating – literally all too familiar – in Laing and Esterson's accounts of family life. Written versions of

observations Esterson recorded of eleven families of schizophrenics between 1958 and 1963, the eleven separate case studies comprising the eleven chapters in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* resemble the *mise-en-scène* for a very recognizable soap opera. We all know something about the hidden dynamics of family life, where one person, often in collusion with others, simply cannot see the effect their actions are having in undermining another member of the household. Each chapter of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, which immediately became a best-seller on publication, is designed to prove the underlying thesis that the experiences and actions of the least powerful person in the family, the one deemed 'schizophrenic', become completely 'intelligible' as soon as 'they are seen in the light of the family situation', as in their exemplary opening observations of Maya, the daughter in the Abbott family (p. 32).

The Abbott parents, for instance, present themselves as 'quiet, ordinary people', yet Laing and Esterson note that they 'have consistently regarded with alarm all expressions of developing autonomy on Maya's part' (p. 34), and continue to do so in the interactions the clinicians had with the family: 'We were not able to find one area of Maya's personality that was not subject to negations of different kinds' (p. 41). Much the same transmission of blame, evasion and collusion, which Laing and Esterson observe in the shared language and gestures of family communication patterns, usually accompanying the absence of genuine maternal warmth or affection, we are told, are brought to light in chapter after chapter, even as they remain occluded within underlying patterns of silence, conspiracy and the issuing of contradictory demands, or 'double binds' (the term borrowed from Gregory Bateson) that result in placing just the one family member in an impossible situation. We could turn, for instance, to the case of the Danzigs, where it is the daughter Sarah who is seen as trapped within conversations in

which she, and she alone, never her brother, is expected by the parents to display ‘total compliance’. These orthodox Jewish parents said they would not pry into their daughters ‘private affairs’, and yet ‘they watched her every move so closely that she felt she had no privacy at all’ (p. 123).

In each case study, the parents’ invalidation of their daughters’ feelings and perceptions is depicted, resulting in the denial to these young women of any sense of authenticity, causing them to lose all grip on their own thoughts and emotions. It is in particular the mothers who are portrayed as the most insistent that the daughter whom they later come to see as ‘sick’ and ‘mad’ began life as a ‘good’ and happy child, always obedient and cheerful, but later ended up becoming ‘bad’, and then ‘mad’, when they started to challenge their mother’s ideas about what was best for them. Returning to Maya, we learn that: ‘A curious and revealing moment occurred when ... Mrs Abbott had said that for Maya to get “well” she would once more be “one with her”’ (p. 47). In the case of the Fields, it is again when the daughter, June, returned from camp at fourteen, having been separated from her mother for the first time since she was a baby, that this mother found her completely changed from being ‘my June’, happy and affectionate, to becoming ‘ill’ – more withdrawn, no longer obedient, and hiding her thoughts. Yet June’s growing expressions of independence were at first welcomed by her schoolteachers, while Laing and Esterson comment: ‘Only her mother saw it as an expression of *illness* ... and felt confirmed in this opinion when June began to become more withdrawn at home over the Christmas vocation and thereafter’ (p. 151). The same narrative pervades most of the case studies, evident again in Mrs Irwin’s account of her relations with her daughter, Mary. She reports that she and her daughter ‘were alike in so many ways – when Mary was well’. All was fine until suddenly Mary became ‘ill’,

the mother reports, and her tastes became different as she ‘started to shut herself off from me, becoming selfish, defiant, too full of herself, and cheeky’ (p. 202). Yet, Laing and Esterson inform us: ‘Investigation has failed to reveal in what way Mary is selfish, except that she no longer tells her mother everything, does not seek her advice or permission to do things, and so on’ (p. 219). Recurrently, it is the criticism of the daughter’s struggle for independence from the parents, and in particular the mother, which creates troubling dilemmas for these vulnerable adolescents trying to leave home. These are families, often lower middle-class, and usually very religious, in which the need for complete compliance with stifling bourgeois ideals are paramount, though the actual practice of traditional values is presented as often superficial and hypocritical, if not dishonest.

What is missing from these all too recognizable case studies is any contextualization of the situation of the post-war families under observation, especially any reflection on the distinct position of mothers and daughters within them (though occasionally we learn that one of the mothers involved may have once rebelled against her own mother). The roles of gender, class and religion appear all too evident today, but remain submerged in the Laing-Estersonian family analysis. This is all the more striking when Laing was making his observations while working at the Tavistock Clinic, with his accounts of the flaws and sufferings of family life endorsed by none other than his colleague there, John Bowlby. Now John Bowlby had certainly said and written much about attachment and family life, as surely everyone knows after he became the focus of much subsequent feminist protest. However, what he highlighted was not the over-possessive, hyper-conformist mother, who discouraged all signs of separation in her child, but rather the

opposite. His focus on mothers was in order to single out ‘maternal deprivation’ as *a*, perhaps *the*, key evil of the 1950s.

The basic assumption of Bowlby’s Maternal Deprivation Hypothesis was that there should be no prolonged, or possibly even brief, disruption of the attachment between the young child and mother, as primary caregiver, at least in the first five years of life. Any maternal absence, he said, could result in long term cognitive, social, and emotional damage, perhaps leading to adult delinquency or affectionless psychopathy. Even short-term separation from an attachment figure could lead to significant distress in the child:

Numerous studies have made it clear that young children, who for whatever reason are deprived of the continuous care and attention of a mother or a substitute-mother, are not only temporarily disturbed by such deprivation, but may in some cases suffer long-term effects which persist (Bowlby et al, 1956: 211).<sup>4</sup>

It was thus not clear to the housewife and mother in those post-war families whether it was *ever* safe even to leave her young child in the care of another, even to dash to the shops for more soap powder to remain good housewives. Mother’s constant presence was always necessary, monitoring her child.

Turning Bowlby on his head, what *Sanity, Madness and the Family* addresses is the malign effects of just that full-time housewife and mother who believes that her job is always to be present and monitoring her child, especially, in these cases, her daughter. Moreover, in this book we no longer see the increasingly ‘false self’ developed by

---

<sup>4</sup> See also Bowlby, 1946 and 1951.

hapless ‘schizophrenics’ to protect them from the attacks and denigration of the external world, as in Laing’s first best seller, *The Divided Self*. Rather, in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, the disordered thought processes of ‘schizophrenia’ disappear into the abnormal, contradictory, mystifying, invalidating communication patterns of ‘the Family’ – indeed, of relatively normal-seeming nuclear families. But we can now recognize the image of these normal-seeming nuclear families, with their stay-at-home Mums, slightly hen-pecked Dads: the sort of family breeding those trouble-making teens, just like ‘Jim Stark’/James Dean, the *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), where Dads are not really allowed to be ‘real’ men, but have to placate their depressed, over-bearing, obsessively conformist wives. Thus, in a pincer movement, from opposite ends of male expertise, Bowlby and Laing can be interpreted as sharing an outlook, which is indeed the orthodox clinical outlook, of blaming mothers: in the one case (Bowlby) for any significant absence from the home; in the other (Laing and Esterson) for her all-too-dutiful, inescapable, presence. In a cultural looping effect, by the close of the sixties, Laing’s writing became ever more damnatory and inflated as his rhetoric embodied some of the hollower aspects of the youth rebellion of the time, demanding a complete ‘revolution of everyday life’. Thus, in *The Politics of the Family* (1969: 35), Laing denounced the ‘operations’ through which the family destroys its children, arguing that the love parents provide for their children is a form of violence, since it is not freely given but an attempt to create in the child what the parent wishes to see: ‘families, schools, churches are the slaughter-houses of our children’. What he was not discussing, however, any more than other men at the time, radical or otherwise, was how childcare, love, commitment and responsibility might be organized differently.

### **Feminist Interventions**

As second-wave feminists saw it, there was indeed something wrong with the state of the post-war family, in those post-war years of pretend ‘Happy Families’, being celebrated ubiquitously. It was evident even in our playing cards from my childhood, with those Four-Square Happy Families: the four Buns, belonging to Mr Baker, the four Bricks, belonging to Mr Brick, the Builder. In reality, those Four-Squares were often headed up by Mr Misery, in gloomy households, where weary, sometimes physically and certainly often psychically, damaged soldiers had returned to hearth and home: a stranger to Mrs Misery and all the little Miseries, above all the miserable and constrained daughter: Miss Misery. This is why marriage guidance centres were created in that decade to try patch up and hold the family together. But neither Bowlby nor Laing nor Esterson could get a fuller understanding of the state of the family. Laing and Esterson’s descriptions resonate with the world created by those Angry Young Men, the newcomers in the literary establishment of the time, all eager to blame women, blame mothers, for trapping husbands and children alike in the treadmill of domestic conformity.

The distinct misogyny of that era was entangled with a heightened, almost hysterical, homophobia – which made it harder for young men to delay too long their entry into marriage, or to stray too far outside it. Thus it was the alleged radical voices of the era – Kingsley Amis, John Wain, John Braine, and John Osborne – who seemed to revel in their apparent detestation of women, those creatures they portrayed always scheming to trap men in the treadmill of domestic conformity. As the gay literary scholar Alan Sinfield (1983) later noted of this time, the huge success of Osborne’s triumphant play *Look Back in Anger*, for instance, was ‘hailed as most representative “in every nuance” of the context of the mid-fifties’ (p. 2). Osborne, who, as we now know (see

MacDonald, 2008), was hiding so many secrets around his own sexuality and 'manhood' (not least his relationship with his one-time collaborator, Anthony Creighton), captured perfectly the hatred so many 'rebels' harboured towards that new 'tyrant', the wife and mother. Thus the perpetually irate protagonist of *Look Back in Anger* (Osborne, 1976), Jimmy Porter, systematically torments his more refined wife, comparing her to a gorging python – devouring men, and draining them of all vitality: 'Why do we let these women bleed us to death?', Jimmy laments, 'No, there's nothing left for it ... but to let yourself be butchered by the women' (p. 89). The man: here portrayed as butchered by the woman; laugh if you can: many men did. Meanwhile, a deadly silence ruled in Laing and Esterson, as well as everywhere else, over who exactly was being beaten, raped and butchered, and by whom. It would take the rebirth of feminism before that particular aspect of family life – rape and domestic violence – could be properly seen, named and, finally criminalized; much later still till marital rape would be declared illegal. Only very few cases of extreme domestic violence ever went to court in those post-war years (usually ones involving men's murder of partners or servants), since routine beating of wives and children was thought to be acceptable 'discipline'.

As I wrote when exploring those post-war families myself for my book on masculinity, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (Segal, 1990), it was their jokey pleasures in insulting women that cheered men up as family life struggled to re-establish itself in this era, in what could truly be called a war between the sexes. I remember it well from my own medical father, informing his surprised female patients on giving birth to a daughter: 'Better luck next time!' Or one might find the battle continuing by perusing any joke books of the day, as in the concluding section to *The Man's Book of*

1958, full of murderous male humour: 'No man regards his wife with pleasure, save twice: in her bridal bed, and in her grave'; 'Here lies my wife: here let her lie: Now she's at rest/and so am I' (quoted in Segal, 1990, p. 21). Much more of the same; a laugh a minute, *ad nauseum*, could be found in the routine light entertainment culture of the day. The point was that at the very time that women were being urged to be full-time housewives, they were also being condemned, either for their obsessive domesticity, or for their negligent lack of it. On the one hand, Philip Wylie's (2009) best-selling book from 1943, *Generation of Vipers*, had heralded the rise of the insidious talk of 'Momism' in the USA and well beyond, denouncing the dangerous epidemic of over-protective mothers who stifled their sons' autonomy and weakened that of their husbands (daughters were not yet part of the equation, since their conformity was taken for granted). On the other hand, even as women were ridiculed for their excessive homemaking, they were at the very same time being medicated for prevalent anxiety and depression in their domestic roles. As others have pointed out, the 1950s set the precedent for linking housebound mothers with neurotic anxiety or depression, as doctors and pharmaceutical companies co-operated on the need for medical intervention for miserable and frustrated housewives. There was a huge market for the new forms of tranquilizers (benzodiazepines), especially valium, widely described, as 'mother's little helpers', to keep housewives sufficiently willing and able to carry on with their consistently devalued chores (see Metz, 2003). Women's liberation was waiting in the wings, but meanwhile few people were expressing much sympathy with the loneliness and frustration of these full-time mothers.

However, when feminism eventually did arrive on the scene, quite clearly visible by 1969, there was no holding back a very different sort of scrutiny of the nuclear family.

Hannah Gavron's book, *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* (1966), was an early messenger of what was to come. In the following decade there was an explosion of systematic research on the sense of powerless and despair so prevalent in the maternal domain, with or without her chemical helper. Feminist sociologists, such as Ann Oakley in her *The Sociology of Housework* (1974), were determined to remedy the hitherto largely male-centred analyses of family life. Oakley's extensive interviews, for instance, found not a minority but a seventy per cent majority of women she interviewed dissatisfied with their household role, all stressing its monotony, isolation, and low prestige, evident in the apologetic expression 'just a housewife'. Other classic studies from the 1970s looking at the social origins of women's high rates of anxiety and depression included the detailed research of Brown and Harris (1978), which stressed the role of social class in further exacerbating the low self-esteem and anxieties of working-class mothers. The role of 'race' and racism had yet to make any useful entry into these surveys, although increasingly those hospitalized as 'schizophrenic' were men racialized as Black (see Suman Fernando's article in this volume).

The world had moved on, with some prominent voices now eager to examine both the situation of the housewife and the pressure on daughters in the home through a feminist lens focused precisely on the pressures created by sexism and misogyny, including the hitherto largely disregarded issues of domestic violence and child sexual abuse. What feminists argued in the 1970s was that love and marriage placed women in an impossible position, primarily because the myth of the 'happy family' was at odds with the dependence and lack of choice, or worse, experienced by women and daughters in the home. Early feminist yearnings were that new forms of mutuality and shared caring could be created between women and men, supported by much improved welfare

provision and shorter working hours in the job market. The main thrust of 1970s feminist thought was thus to place the family and its needs firmly within the social domain, including but moving well beyond the personal relations within it, with their pressures to conform to and uphold gender stereotypes. Of course it was never easy to see exactly how the language of parents and lovers, little boys and little girls, with their differing needs for care and autonomy, translated into policies in the social domain. Nevertheless, to this day feminists have shown persistent creativity and energy in developing their vision of a society that could prioritize rather than marginalize the needs of care for all dependent people, young and old.<sup>5</sup>

### **Unfinished Business**

It is easy to see, however, that the unravelling of so many of the supports feminists sought over the last three decades has placed ever increasing burden on those who are primarily involved with doing the work of caring. This is the reason the politics of the family remains as challenging as ever in these harsh, neo-liberal times, as meeting the needs of care can often become a nightmare in the strained and desperate lives of overworked parents, especially mothers, in a world where there is more pressure than ever for parents, and parents alone, to prepare their child to survive in what is for so many the most precarious of futures. As I (and others) argued in *'What is to be Done About the Family?'* (1983), even as family life has been transformed by feminism and we have witnessed many women's growing financial independence, so many of the problems of care remain, above all its devaluation in society at large. Indeed, for

---

<sup>5</sup> This is evident, for instance, in campaigning groups such as the Women's Budget Group, in which feminist economists, researchers, and activists have for years attempted to liaise with government agencies and worked to create a gender equal society in which women's financial independence gives them greater autonomy at work, home, and in civil society. See <http://wbg.org.uk/about-us/>

many in recent years, especially mothers, they deepen, as the pressures of the workplace and the effects of deliberately engineered austerity and welfare cutbacks impact upon family life. One thing that remains unchanged is the tendency to blame parents, primarily mothers, for family troubles.

This is evident in all the recent government reports on troubled families, stating upfront that it is concerned first and foremost with the burden these families place on the tax-payer, while attempting to deal with the issue of multiple problems of parental stress, child neglect, abuse, violence in the home, children truanting from school, and more, by 'intensive parenting classes', combined with financial penalties on the parents of child truants. As one of Britain's social policy experts, the journalist Patrick Butler (2012), concludes, on surveying one recent report: 'You can exhort as much as you like but...economic poverty eats life coaching for breakfast every time'. Thus trouble looms inside the family, as ever, but rather differently from its presence in those post-war families. We may indeed still learn something from the mystifications and miscommunications described in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, but only if this is the start of a journey that quickly moves well beyond the closed door of the home.

Meanwhile, as I have already stated, the sad realities of mental illness remain ubiquitous. When not altogether ignored, this is handled today using the resources of the ever-expanding pharmaceuticals industry, marketing its serotonin-related, mood-altering drugs for neurotic symptoms, or varieties of its heavier, dopamine blocking anti-psychotropic drugs. Nevertheless, over the years one important shift that we can see as a type of legacy of anti-psychiatry is some mental patients taking things into

their own hands. It began with the formation of the Mental Patients Union by a tiny group of inmates and ex-inmates and friends, at the close of 1972, with ex-inmate Andy Roberts (then, as now) prominent among them. In line with the zeitgeist, the tone of pamphlets back then was Marxist, and the labelling of mental illness was seen as one of the most cunning conspiracies of the capitalist class. Their activism included helping to liberate inmates from mental hospitals, should they want this. Over the years, mental patients' groups in the UK have mutated into PROMPT (People for the Rights of Mental Patients in Treatment), and CAPO (Campaign Against Psychiatric Oppression) in the early 1980s. Since then, there has been the formation of *Mad Pride*, and the *Hearing Voices* groups. It is moving and impressive to hear the voices of those people now called 'experts by experience', who are part of the 'survivor movement' which has been important in shifting attitudes towards mental health. So too have groups, such as Mind, who have also played a critical role in supporting those in need of psychiatric support, as well as more structured and unstructured, supported and alternative, therapeutic communities. All these progressive resources are discussed regularly in the magazine *Asylum*, established in 1986, and relaunched in 2010, by psychiatric service or ex-service users, along with carers and other mental health workers and academics wanting to promote democratic and egalitarian ways of furthering mental health and dealing with distress.

Yet there is still so much more to say, which I have no space to elaborate, including the dangers of tokenism. There is an unwanted association between survivor groups and today's government rationalizations justifying cuts in the spurious name of self-help and self-reliance. This neo-liberal climate, which makes such a fetish of self-reliance, turns almost any notion of 'dependence' into something pathological and repellent, to be avoided at all costs. Such dogma ignores the reality that we are all dependent, and interdependent, in our own ways, but it is easy to sideline or ignore the very real

needs of those whose behaviour can be stroppy, difficult and demanding – as is that of many who are labelled mentally ill. Concrete help, understanding and support is needed, especially for those whom we usually prefer to overlook. People labelled mad and in need of shelter, care and asylum are today often ending their days homeless on the streets. This is the situation described so well at the conclusion of the historian, Barbara Taylor's recent book, *The Last Asylum* (2014). Its fascination and power comes first of all from the vivid account of Taylor's own journey into the gruesome miseries of mental breakdown from the early 1980s, and then her gradual recovery, over a decade later. However, what is most impressive about the book is its reminder of how personal memoir can be put to social, cultural and political ends, and the case she makes for more and better funding for a great diversity of mental health provision. The book does not stem directly from any Laingian tradition, but remains open to remnants of it, in joining the struggle to rebuild mental health services and, as part of this provision, to provide more caring support for those families dealing with psychiatric problems.

## References

- Bowlby, J. (1946) *Forty-four Juvenile Thieves: Their Characters and Home Life*. Oxford: Baillière, Tindall and Cox.
- Bowlby, J. (1951) 'Maternal care and mental health'. *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation*, 3, 355-534
- Bowlby, J. et.al. (1956) 'The effects of mother-child separation: A follow-up study'. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 29, 211-249.
- Brown, G.W. and Harris, T.O. (Eds) (1978) *Social Origins of Depression: A Study of Psychiatric Disorder in Women*. London: Tavistock.
- Butler, P. (2012) 'Louise Casey's troubled families programme ignores the real problem'. *The Guardian*, 18 July, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/jul/18/louise-casey-troubled-families-problem> (accessed 10 April, 2017).

Lynne Segal *The Politics of the Family*

- Clare, A. W. (1976) *Psychiatry in Dissent: Controversial Issues in Thought and Practice*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Cooper, D. (1967) *Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry*. London: Tavistock.
- Department for Communities and Local Government (2014) 'Study shows scale of troubled families' problems'. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/study-shows-scale-of-troubled-families-problems>, accessed 5 April, 2017.
- Friedan, B. (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Gavron, H. (1966) *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Ingleby, D. (1981) (ed.) *Critical Psychiatry: The Politics of Mental Health*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Izzard, E. (2014) 'Eddie Izzard hails the surrealist, pioneering genius of Monty Python'. *The Guardian*, 27 June.
- Laing, R. D. (2010 [1960]) *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Laing, R. D. (1990 [1967]) *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* [1967]. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Laing, R. D. (1969) *Politics of the Family*. Toronto: CBC Massey Lectures.
- Laing, R.D. and Esterson, A. (1964) *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Lawrence, D. H. (1959) *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. New York: Grove Press.
- MacDonald, J. (2008) 'Anthony Creighton and John Osborne'. *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 28(3), 265-266.
- Metz, J. (2003) "'Mother's Little Helper": The Crisis of Psychoanalysis and the Milton Resolution'. *Gender and History*, 14(2), 240-267.
- Mitchell, J. (1966) 'Women: The Longest Revolution'. *New Left Review*, 40, 11-37.
- Oakley, A. (1974) *The Sociology of Housework*. New York: Pantheon.
- Osborne, J. (1976 [1956]) *Look Back in Anger*. London: Faber and Faber, 1976.

- Rowbotham, S. (2000) *Promise of a Dream*. London: Allen Lane.
- Segal, L. (ed) (1983). '*What is to be Done About the Family?*'. London: Penguin.
- Segal, L. (1990) *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*. London: Virago.
- Segal, L. (2013) *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure*. London: Verso.
- Sinfield, A. (1983) *Society and Literature, 1945-70*. London: Methuen & Co.
- Sweet, D. (2011) 'Health', *Social Trends* (41), Office for National Statistics, [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/social-trends-rd/social-trends/social-trends-41/health.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/social-trends-rd/social-trends/social-trends-41/health.pdf), accessed 5 April, 2017.
- Taylor, B. (2014) *The Last Asylum: A Memoir of Madness in our Times*. London: Penguin.
- Wylie, P. (2009) *Generation of Vipers*. Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press.