

### Special issue

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# Carnal Critiques: Promiscuity, Politics, Imagination, Spirituality and Hypocrisy

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**ABSTRACT** *The author explains the political, psychological and ethical reasons for writing about promiscuity. His previous work on what is ‘more-than-personal’ embraced politics and spirituality in the context of psychotherapy. He sets this inquiry in the historical context of the fortieth anniversary of the ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s, reviewing critically the debate as to whether there was or was not a revolution. The manifold connections between sexual promiscuity and political critique are explored. This sets the scene for the location of promiscuous phenomena within a spiritual or transpersonal domain. Promiscuities (in the plural) rather than monolithic promiscuity are surveyed in terms of sex and sexual diversity. Promiscuity is reviewed in terms of imaginative process. Finally, the hypocritical attitudes towards promiscuity on the part of many (but not all) psychotherapists are explored with the intention of discovering the reasons for this phenomenon. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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*When the truth is found to be lies  
And all the joy within you dies  
Don't you want somebody to love  
Don't you need somebody to love  
Wouldn't you love somebody to love  
You better find somebody to love  
(Jefferson Airplane, 1967)*

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## PERSONAL DIMENSIONS

An opportunity to speak at a conference to mark the fortieth anniversary of May 1968 enabled some of us who were around then to reflect on the personal and political trajectories of our lives and to discuss it all with younger colleagues. I chose to present on 'Promiscuity – Then and Now' and used the moment to work up reflections on sexuality and social critique in a historical framework. In the event, the paper itself was less confessional and personal than it might have seemed – but the responses it evoked were highly charged as memories, many of them doubtless held in the body, played into the current positions and preoccupations of the audience.

In 1968 I had just dropped out of Oxford. There was, as you'll recall, a revolution supposed to be going on and no one would need degrees in the society that would emerge. As part of involvement in anti-apartheid politics, I had been briefly imprisoned in South Africa and beaten up, so the student movement seemed a really safe place to be. My main interest was in politically engaged experimental theatre and members of the company I founded (the Oxford Progressive Theatre Group) lived communally and engaged in considered and considerable sexual experimentation. There were joys to this but also a good deal of pain as jealousy, arising out of the very training for monogamy we were contesting, was rife. At the time, such experimentation was almost an ideological requirement.

I moved into youth work with 'unclubbable' teenagers, still using drama. Here, I encountered equally non-traditional sexual behaviours but apparently devoid of ideology. I still reflect on the class divide wherein youthful Oxford dropouts behaved sexually in much the same way as disadvantaged kids in an impoverished South Wales new town – but the associations and cultural referents could not have been more different.

Then I slipped into encounter groups, psychiatric social work and Jungian analysis. I started analytical training in 1974 and qualified in 1977. Hence I fit the story told by the psychotherapist organizers of the conference: 'many radicals found their way into psychotherapy trainings'. The story is a bit more complicated than this. Some radicals stayed radical even as therapists. After all, there were in the 1970s several politically progressive therapy projects such as Red Therapy and the Women's Therapy Centre that demonstrated the viability of a hybrid organization. But some radicals took a much more conservative and Establishment direction in terms of psychotherapy.

I am one of those who became devoted to the idea that there could be a hybrid of politics and psychotherapy and this led, amongst other things, to the founding of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility, Antidote (a campaign for emotional literacy in the public sphere), political consultancy with politicians and political groups, and professional work in the areas known variously as inclusivity, diversity, equal opportunities. I was active in the campaign to remove discrimination against lesbians and gay men who were seeking psychoanalytic training.

More recently, I added a third side to the coin, welcoming both the political and psychological relevance to psychotherapy of spiritual and transpersonal ideas. All may be considered 'more-than-personal'. In my writing, I have introduced the idea of a 'resacralization of culture' (Samuels, 1993, 3–23) and developed a contemporary and progressive 'anatomy of spirituality' (Samuels, 2001, 122–34; 2004, 201–11). I return to these ideas later.

## THE PROBLEM WITH PROMISCUITY

In the 1960s, reference was to ‘non-possessive relating’ or ‘alternative families’ or ‘free love’. No one used the word ‘promiscuity’. I have decided to retain this word for political and intellectual as well as shock reasons. I do not want to end up merely complementing non-monogamy by writing about a kind of serial non-monogamy. For many (not all) more recent polyamorous discourses seem to assume that such relationships will be long-term (or at least not terribly short-term). I’ll return to the crucial value-judgement role played by elapsed time later in the paper but for now will indicate that I am trying to explore the implications of a divorce between sex and relationship. This is an explosive and paradox-ridden topic. At the conference, I was taken for an idiot for apparently assuming that there could be sex outside of relationship. The point was (correctly) made that any interpersonal encounter involves a relationship. Therefore my critic had made it clear that, for her, no matter how lustful and transient a physical encounter, there is a real (in the sense of implicit) relationship present. Yet, at the same time, she evinced a marked hostility to and contempt for promiscuity, which, she said, could not involve a real (in the sense of authentic) relationship. This led to some participants questioning the value-laden relational category difference ‘committed/uncommitted’ in terms of sexual behaviours.

On reflection, I can see that the various territories mapped out under ‘monogamy’, ‘non-monogamy’, ‘polyamory’ and ‘promiscuity’ overlap and that there are frictions between them. Polyamory may seek to differentiate itself from promiscuity but from the standpoint of monogamy will not succeed. Non-monogamy includes both polyamory and promiscuity. Monogamy, as we know, often conceals a polyamory that is known to the partners or their circle but not beyond; this can be contrasted with wholly overt polyamory. And we know that promiscuity is completely reconcilable with monogamy. The two stalk each other. Each is the shadow of the other: the uxorious lust in their heart whilst libertines yearn for peace and quiet. The problem I am worrying away at may be exacerbated by the different habits of thought of psychotherapy/psychoanalysis and the social sciences. I come from a tradition that, despite the stress on listening, attunement and accurate feedback, tends to be less impressed by what people state their position to be in survey or focus group.

I don’t think we can leave it there, in a kind of fourfold parallelism: monogamy, non-monogamy, polyamory and promiscuity each being a path pointing in more or less the same direction to more or less the same ends. I see a lot of competition and bargaining between these relational tropes; in terms of both academic writing and personal experience, people want to justify the choices they have made. All relationships, regardless of composition, involve power issues and carry the potential for the abuse of power. But the inherent antagonism of monogamy and non-monogamy is useful heuristically, performing a function of gluing together the discourse without arching over it. They are linked by their defensiveness against the other: monogamy defending a weak ego and low self-esteem, promiscuity a defence against the dangers of intimacy. Of course, the defensive properties of promiscuity are much more extensively theorized by therapists than those of monogamy and I return to this problem later in the paper.

Another way to manage this question is to see that each of the four (that I selected) yearns to have what the others have – but can do no more than mourn and maybe rage for the lost hypothetical opportunity. I find it hard to say which of monogamy and non-monogamy is

the foundational relational state that has been lost. It means that the mourning cannot be wished away by saying that, in one's life, one may have periods of monogamy and periods of non-monogamy. It isn't a logical mutual exclusiveness, but a *psychological* one.

Returning to the conference, I had thought there would be many presentations on sex or sexuality but there was only one mention in all the abstracts and that was a quote from Lacan that 'there is no sexual ratio'. It seems that, until the recent flowering of writing about polyamory and related matters (for example, Barker, 2004), there has been a collapse of ideology into psychopathology.

It is still hard to find much contemporary discussion of promiscuity in a Western context that does not take a negative line. The OED defines promiscuity as: 'consisting of members or elements of different kinds massed together and without order; of mixed and disorderly composition or character. Without discrimination or method; confusedly mingled; indiscriminate. Making no distinctions. Casual, carelessly irregular.' The word that appears over and over again in the context of sex is 'casual'. Casual sex is the term with which we are now most familiar.

If, thinking deconstructively, we look for antonyms of 'casual', we get to words like formal, deliberate, ceremonial, ritualistic. There is a history of promiscuity that is formal, deliberate, ceremonial and ritualistic – usually in a religious or spiritual context (see Qualls-Corbett, 1987) or as part of pagan and Wiccan practice. This forms the background for my later excursion into spiritual and transpersonal promiscuous phenomena.

Let me say at this point, in anticipation of objections, that I think we should hold back from trying to clean this up by making an overprecise distinction between the erotic and sexual or between fantasies and acts. That kind of precision can be spurious and defensive. Nor do I care to be undermined by being typed or smeared as advocating rather than investigating promiscuity.

## PROMISCUITY AND POLITICS

Promiscuity is the background phenomenon that since the late nineteenth century has underpinned numerous discussions that couple politics and sexuality. Conventional accounts of intimate relations praise them when they radiate constancy, longevity and fidelity. But more radical accounts suggest that ownership and control of the other are also critically important. The best known of these was Friedrich Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884, 34–5) in which he states that the first class opposition that appears in history coincides with 'the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage' especially in 'the possessing classes.'

The background formulation with which we are more familiar today is that you cannot have social change without deep personal change (for example, in the pattern of relationships and hence in the play of emotions) – and no personal change is possible if society remains the same. This point, first made explicitly by Otto Gross (1913a) nearly a hundred years ago, both anticipates and slightly differs from 'the personal is political' in Gross's utopic and trans-rational forcefulness. (See Eichenbaum and Orbach 1982 for a nuanced discussion.) It was actually Gross who coined the term 'sexual revolution' (see Heuer, 2001, 663), stating that 'smashing monogamy, and its even sicker form, polygamy, means not only the liberation

of women, but still more that of man' (Gross, 1913b, col. 1142, translated by Gottfried Heuer).

Today's monogamy may be seen as chiming and cosymbolizing with market economics and with implicit and explicit claims by powerful Western countries and corporations to 'possess' planetary resources. Monogamy, it can be argued, is therefore implicated in a wide range of injustices – environmental, economic and ethical. Now, this point can be made with greater or lesser passion, for monogamy certainly has its merits and cannot only be reduced to the level of political tyranny.

The corollary – that non-monogamy is correlated with sustainability, equality and social justice – remains, perforce, untested though hugely suggestive. Ownership is a tendentious perspective on relationships and geopolitics alike; but public strategies for sustainability, such as the principle of 'global commons', can be seen to cosymbolize with non-monogamy in the private sphere (see Samuels, 2001, 115–26).

Notwithstanding these arguments, I think it is too easy to see the sexual as merely reflecting the power dynamics of the wider society. Sex is also a matter of power in and of itself and so, at the very least, there is a feedback loop in which sexual behaviours and the fantasies that both drive them and are produced by them have an impossible-to-quantify impact on the political. I have written of the ways in which the practice of 'flipping' or 'switching' in consensual submission-domination sexual behaviours could be seen as a metaphor for the capacity to be powerful in one sphere of life and much less powerful in another, to rule and to be ruled. Switches don't get the idea from politics or the internalization of social organizations and relations; they are not thinking first of a political way to behave sexually and then doing it. Do we have to say where switches get the idea from outside of the sexual? Do we really know where they got it from, if 'from' anywhere? Similarly, we can note switching between registers – as when the powerful businessman dons nappies during his regular Friday afternoon visit to a dominatrix. (The political variant of switching is best expressed in Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*, 1983.)

If we consider, for example, the Midrashic story of Lilith we can understand the possible relations between politics and sexual behaviour a bit more fluidly. Lilith was Adam's first consort who was created from the earth at the same time as Adam. She was unwilling to give up her equality and argued with Adam over the position in which they should have intercourse – Lilith insisting on being on top. 'Why should I lie beneath you' she argued, 'when I am your equal since both of us were created from dust?' Adam was determined and began to rape Lilith who called out the magic name of God, rose into the air, and flew away. Eve was then created. Lilith's later career as an evil she-demon who comes secretly to men in the night, hence being responsible for nocturnal emissions, and as a murderer of newborns, culminated, after the destruction of the Temple, in a relationship with God as a sort of mistress.

My point is that this kind of material can be taken as much as an expression of the influence of the sexual on the political as the other way around. The experience people have of the sexual is also a motor of their politicality, political style and political values. Sexual experience and its associated imagery express an individual's psychological approach to political functioning (see Samuels, 1993, 167–70; Samuels, 2001, 47–53).

Concluding this section on promiscuity and politics, it is interesting to reflect on the micro-politics of non-monogamous relating, using this term to include promiscuity. The politics of relationality in these contexts include whether or not the agreement of members

of officially recognized partners is to be sought and, if agreement is reached, what the meaning of such agreement might be. All relationships are political in this sense.

## HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Was there a 'sexual revolution' in the 1960s that could be seen as a precursor to today's array of non-monogamous relational styles? This is an important background question to our discussions. Did attitudes to sex, sex education, the sexuality of women, to marriage and to same sex relations change in a way that was a major disjunct with what had come before? Or was it simply a technological shift, based on the pill? Perhaps it was something that affected so few people that it could not be called a 'revolution'. Some have suggested that the sexual revolution was simply an extension of market capitalism into the sexual area leading to the creation of a sexual marketplace occupied by sexual producers and consumers.

Nevertheless, many believe there was a sexual revolution and base that on their experience or their observations of the behaviour of others. I think there are more interesting questions than the 'was there or wasn't there?' kind. Belief that there was sexual revolution is a complicated thing to understand. It could be seen as the supreme triumph of nurture and culture over nature and the innate – or the reverse. The dominance of ego consciousness over the drives – or vice versa. Even scepticism about the sexual revolution may mean more than it seems. Perhaps there is a relief in such scepticism because then the status quo is protected. After all, Reich, one of the sources for mid-twentieth century shifts in the sexual, became too much for Freud as much for his sexual ideas as for his political ones. I am sure Reich was right to suggest Freud wrote *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) specifically contra himself – and, let us add, as Heuer has suggested (personal communication, 2008), against Gross as well.

There is a contemporary temptation to indulge in a knee-jerk rejection of what Wilhelm Reich said in 1927 in the introduction to *The Function of the Orgasm*: 'Psychic health depends upon...the degree to which one can surrender to and experience the climax of excitation in the natural sexual act.' What Reich (and others such as Roheim and Marcuse) were doing was to elaborate, with great ingenuity, some implications of Freud's theories of psychosexuality that supported the idea that politics and sexuality were 'intimately bound together', in Fisher's (2007, 238) felicitous phrase. Hence, Fisher goes on, we tend to forget that, alongside his championing of sexual expressiveness, Reich (with varying degrees of support from Freud) advocated the rights of children and mothers, supporting legalized abortions and contraception.

Many sceptics adopt a reactionary approach. Family breakdown, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases – these are held up as the inevitable and disastrous sequelae of the departure from traditional mores. But not all sceptics are so Burkean. Sheila Jeffreys' radical political lesbian point (1990) was that the so-called sexual revolution was just a further subtle oppression of women by men.

## A NOTE ON NON-MONOGAMY IN CONVENTIONAL POLITICS AND IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

As one who has written on political leadership (Samuels, 2001, 75–100), I am interested in historical shifts concerning collective evaluations of promiscuous behaviour on the part of

(usually male) politicians. The old assumption that, whatever goes on in the US, Europeans are far too sophisticated to care about the sexual lives of their political leaders does seem to have shifted in the twenty-first century. Even in Europe, it seems that Western political leaders must *appear* faithful to their spouses. Nothing guarantees the slippage from idealization of a leader to denigration more than the discovery of promiscuous behaviour.

There is an interesting parallel with the history of psychoanalysis. Jung admitted to Freud that he suffered from ‘polygamous tendencies’ and this gave the older man powerful character-assassinating ammunition. It was no surprise that, when evidence emerged that Freud had a physical relationship with his sister-in-law, the psychoanalytic establishment went into over-drive to smear the researchers. In intellectual life, as in politics, it’s the zipper, stupid.

### PROMISCUITY AND SPIRITUALITY

Having reviewed some of the problems with the idea of promiscuity, and placed my ideas in a historical context, I want further to deepen and complexify the discussion by positioning promiscuity as a spiritual phenomenon. It is generally accepted that ‘spirituality’ can be distinguished from religion but, for some, religious and non-religious, it is the ‘S’ word and they hate it; for others this is the *sine qua non* of today’s progressive politics – the so-called ‘rise of the religious left and the emergence of networks of spiritual progressives. (The best known network clusters around the Jewish concept of *Tikkun*, meaning repair and restoration of the world; there are equally inspiring Islamic concepts – the one that interests me is the Qur’anic idea of *Ta’Aruf*, in which the deeper and transformative aspects of conflict are recognized.)

It is hard to define ‘spiritual’, but it involves something ‘more-than-personal’ that lies over or under or beneath or behind the everyday. Often there is a sense of being confronted with something awesome and ‘bigger’ than oneself – more-than-personal. But this is a spirituality that is ubiquitous, hidden in the open, waiting to be discovered, not a result of a ‘sell’ by anyone with ambitions for their religion, sect or cult.

My anatomy of spirituality suggests that there are different kinds of spiritual deficits or lacks that contemporary Western citizens suffer from. A defect in social spirituality means that the individual has little or no experience of the incredible togetherness that ensures when a group of committed individuals pursue a social or political goal. A defect in craft spirituality means that work is not only without meaning but is also soulless and spiritually damaging. Democratic spirituality is a reworking of the notion of ‘equality in the eyes of the Lord’ and who can doubt that today’s politics have resolutely turned their back on paying anything more than lip service to egalitarian goals and ideals.

The focus here is on the fourth element in the anatomy – profane spirituality: sex, drugs and rock and roll (or popular culture). The thinking here comes from Jung’s insight, conveyed to the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, that alcohol abuse is not only about seeking spirituous drafts but is also a spiritual quest. Herein, I am talking, not only about addictions (and sexual activity can certainly become addictive and compulsive, even statistical) but specifically of the spiritual quest carried by lust and by promiscuity, about sex as force and not sex as relation (to use Muriel Dimen’s phrase, personal communication, 2007).

This kind of sexual behaviour may be understood in terms of mystical experience. There's something numinous about promiscuous experience as many readers will know. Overwhelming physical attraction produces feelings of awe and wonderment and trembling. There is a sort of God aroused, a primitive, chthonic, early, elemental God. There is an unfettered experience of the divine.

The idea of a mysticism between people is one by which contemporary theology is captivated. 'There is no point at all in blinking at the fact that the raptures of the theistic mystic are closely akin to the transports of sexual union' wrote Richard Zaehner in *Mysticism – Sacred and Profane* (1957). In literature, D.H. Lawrence (1913) fashions a creation myth out of sexual intercourse in *Sons and Lovers*: 'His hands were like creatures, living; his limbs, his body, were all life and consciousness, subject to no will of his, but living in themselves.'

In Chassidic mysticism, reference is made to a quality known as *Hitlahabut*, or ecstasy. Buber held that this quality transforms ordinary knowledge into a knowledge of the meaning of life. For the Chassids, *Hitlahabut* expresses itself bodily in dance, where, according to Buber, the whole body becomes subservient to the ecstatic soul. Similarly, William Blake sang that 'man has no body distinct from his soul'.

In a series of works, Robert Goss (for example, Goss 2004, 59) has been suggesting that, behind non-monogamous relating we find the presence of a 'promiscuous God', one who loves indiscriminately (if hardly casually). Although Goss is primarily concerned with the reclamation of the bible for LGBT and queer people, his remarkable phrase is a suitable note on which to end this discussion of spirituality and promiscuity.

## PROMISCUITIES

Promiscuity is not a monolith – there are often perplexing differences to do with gender, sexual diversity, class and ethnicity. For reasons of space, I will consider only gender and sexual diversity.

It is sometimes argued that promiscuity as a discourse is written by and for males (this is what Sheila Jeffreys means). But it is interesting to see how much of the non-monogamy literature is written by lesbians. Are we to take this as indicating that it is only where heterosexual relating is concerned that promiscuity is a male game? Surely not. And I had thought that feminism made it clear that most advantages in marriage lay with the husbands who are 'obeyed'. Yet, at the May '68 conference, enraged women turned on male members of the audience as much as on the speaker in a moralizing frenzy. One said in response to my positing promiscuity as a political as much as a sexual phenomenon: 'I cannot believe I've heard you say what I think you've said'.

Sexual desire generates an anxiety that calls forth a certitude that is really not at all grounded. I am sure that my thinking about promiscuity suffers from this – and that what might be said against it will suffer from an element of dogmatism as well. I have discussed in an as – yet unpublished paper entitled 'The fascinations of fundamentalism: political and personal perspectives' that the promise of an end to sexual anxiety is what gives religious fundamentalism its appeal to adherents and its fascination for those who do not see themselves as fundamentalist. We are too quick to theorize why people become fundamentalists without pausing to ask why we are so keen to offer such theorising. My point, succinctly,



is that even the critics of fundamentalism are caught up by the seductiveness of its promise of an end to sexual anxiety.

In connection with gender and promiscuity, a particularly interesting document to consider is Catherine Millet's *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* (2001). One of the most explicit books on sex written by a woman, it recounts Millet's sexual experiences over thirty years. It is an incisive and destabilizing work that makes generalizing about gender differences in connection with sexuality seem impoverished. Millet tells us that she 'exercises complete free will in my chosen sexual life... a freedom expressed once and for all'. She explains how special is the excitement of an encounter with a new lover: 'my pleasure was never more intense... not the first time that I made love with someone, but the first time we kissed; even the first embrace was enough.' She is no stranger to jealousy: 'I personally have experienced my confrontations with these passionate expressions of jealousy' saying that jealousy is an 'injustice'.

One passage I found interesting is a reflective memory from Millet's childhood. As a girl, she ran numbers over and over in her mind, and now she is numbering her future husbands: 'Could a woman have several husbands at the same time, or only one after the other? In which case, how long did she have to stay married to each one before she could change? What would be an "acceptable" number of husbands: a few, say five or six, or many more than that, countless husbands?' Questions of time and duration pepper the promiscuity field, no matter the gender of the subject, and I return to time when I come to discuss hypocrisy.

Continuing to look at the plurality of promiscuities, this time with sexual diversity rather than gender in mind, it is interesting to note how often discussions about promiscuity even in quite liberal professional circles of psychotherapists collapse into discussions about promiscuous cottaging on the part of gay men. I have been arguing for many years that therapists have been unconsciously influenced by the media and collective cultural discourses as much as by their own theories concerning the general psychopathology of homosexuality. They have got caught up in a moral panic concerning cottaging and haven't noticed that they've allowed heterosexual promiscuity to fall out of the conversation. Hence, it is well-nigh impossible to manage a reasoned conversation about either promiscuity or cottaging.

Can we make something positive out of this homophobic moral panic? Flip it around? Yes, I think we can if we revisit Leo Bersani's contention in 'Is the rectum a grave' (1987) that the great lesson and gift of gay men to the rest is the massive individualism of promiscuous sex. It is a very specific and powerful form of resistance precisely because there is no political agenda. Bob Dylan made much the same point: 'I've never written a political song. Songs can't save the world. I've gone through all that.'

Finally, a note on bisexuality and promiscuity. Bisexuals as a group experience specific pressures in relation to promiscuity. I agree with those who insist – for political and psychological reasons – that bisexuality is not a cover for something else and wish to retain the term. They are up against strong opposition. Some will say that bisexuality is but a cover for disavowed homosexuality (if the critic is psychoanalytic), or for politically unacceptable heterosexuality (if the critic is a lesbian or gay activist). As a phenomenon, bisexuality adds a further layer of complexity and paradox to our thinking about monogamy and non-monogamy and the connections between them. As far as psychoanalysis is concerned, Freud's insight of a fundamental bisexuality all too easily gets overlooked (similarly, Jung wrote of a 'polyvalent germinal disposition' in the sexual realm).

## PROMISCUITY AND IMAGINATION

Up to now, we have been discussing historical, political and spiritual aspects of the promiscuities. But, as a therapist, I know that promiscuity is not only a literal matter. It is also implicated in a whole array of imaginative and metaphorical discourses. For, in addition to the political symbolism, we have to think of promiscuity as symbolizing boundary-breaking creativity in both an artistic and a general sense (one could be politically promiscuous, for example).

From a psychological point of view, promiscuity calls up symbolic or metaphorical dimensions of issues of freedom, differentiation from parental and family background, and a new relation to the primal scene (meaning the image we have in our mind of the intimate life or lack of it of our parent(s)). Kleinian psychoanalysis refers to ‘the couple state of mind’, the parents in the mind engaged in fertile and creative intercourse. The intent is to propose a universal symbol of fecundity and mental health generally: ‘the basis or the fount of personal creativity: sexual, intellectual and aesthetic’ (Hinshelwood, 1989, 241). But the result is very often a distressingly literal application of the idea. Hence, we must ask: is the couple state of mind, the couple in the mind, always a stable ‘married’ or committed couple? We could also ask: always a heterosexual couple? Always a couple of the same ethnicity? Not only is this particular Kleinian theory – widely used in British object relations psychoanalysis even beyond the Kleinian group – unquestioningly heteronormative (see Samuels, 2001, 49–51), it is also ferociously conventional.

Re-visioned imaginatively, promiscuity holds up the promise – and the threat – of an internal pluralism (Samuels, 1989) always on the brink of collapsing into undifferentiatedness but, somehow, never quite doing so. On a personal level, we are faced with what could be called the promiscuous task of reconciling our many internal voices and images of ourselves with our wish and need to be able to feel, when we desire it so, integrated and to speak with one voice.

Returning to bodies for a moment, there is also a metaphorical aspect to promiscuous sex. Promiscuous traces and shadows may be present in constant sexual relationships via the operation of fantasy; and there is a constant element in apparently promiscuous behaviour, if the image of the sexual Other remains psychically constant. This takes us back to the Freud-Jung schism over sexuality. Freud spoke for the literal, the instinctual, the causative; Jung for the metaphorical and the teleological, asking ‘what is sex really for?’ Sexual imagery is not only a desire for physical enactment. It is also a symbolic expression of an emotional longing for some kind of personal regeneration through contact with the body of an Other.

Support for the idea that there is a promiscuous element in sexual constancy can be found in an unlikely place – Rabbinic Judaism of the early part of the Christian era. In his book *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, Daniel Boyarin (1993) explains how the tension between procreative and non-procreative sex operates as a kind of in-house promiscuity. Non-procreative sex is exclusively for pleasure, and pleasure, whether to do with sex or with eating, is regarded by the Rabbis as a Good Thing. Amongst other revelatory ideas, he shows quite clearly how Judaism strives to heal, as well as force, the split from the body with which it is too easily associated.

In Philip Roth’s novel *The Dying Animal* (2001), made into the film *Elegy* in 2008, David Kepesh, academic superstar (and Jew) lives a sexual life of studied promiscuity. But: ‘No matter how much you know, no matter how much you think, no matter how much you plot and you connive and you plan, you’re not superior to sex.’ Kepesh falls in love with a much

younger woman, who will eventually be diagnosed with breast cancer and undergo a mastectomy (he had ‘worshipped’ her breasts). Roth is not making a moral or (pseudo)mature point about the collapse of the promiscuous ideal (nor was the book ever in praise of the promiscuous life). He is underscoring how sexual relating is all about struggle, indeterminacy and – above all – anxiety. As I said earlier, when considering monogamy, non-monogamy, polyamory and promiscuity, you can’t have it all – not even in fantasy! Nevertheless, Roth’s *aperçu* in connection with promiscuous sex is worth repeating: ‘The great biological joke on people is that you are intimate before you know anything about the other person.’

## PROMISCUITY AND HYPOCRISY

Hypocrisy is the act of opposing a belief or behaviour while holding the same beliefs or performing the same behaviours at the same time. Hypocrisy is frequently invoked as an accusation in politics and in life in general. Noam Chomsky argued that the key feature of hypocrisy is the refusal to apply to ourselves the same standards we apply to others. So hypocrisy is one of the central evils of our society, promoting injustices such as war and social inequalities in a framework of self-deception.

With these thoughts in mind, I want to turn to my own profession of psychotherapy, both in and of itself and as representative of the wider culture. My accusation is that, when it comes to promiscuity, psychotherapy as an institution and many (but not all) psychotherapists as individuals are hypocritical. In terms of the etymology of the word ‘hypocrisy’, they are play acting or feigning something. As well as scoring points, I am interested in probing this phenomenon.

It is significant that sex outside of relationship is largely untheorized by analysts and therapists – or, if there is a theoretical position taken, it is invariably in terms of psychopathology, of an alleged fear of intimacy, problems in attachment (‘ambivalent attachment’) and relationship, perversion and so on. There is an absence of consideration of what I referred to earlier as sex-as-force (but see Kahr, 2007). Actually, with some notable exceptions, there is very little contemporary psychoanalytic writing on bodily experience at all (but see Orbach, 2009). When Lyndsey Moon (personal communication 2008) was undertaking research focusing on the needs of bisexual clients, during which she interviewed 40 therapists (lesbian, gay male, heterosexual, queer and bisexual) only three (including the present writer) ‘actually went any where near “sex” as having a meaning that needs to be talked about or talked through with clients’. Moon speculates that the bulk of the therapists were experiencing ‘much fear of the sexual body and sexual behaviour’.

I think it is interesting to ask whether there might be something in the fundamental thinking or set-up of psychotherapy that leads to a carnality-averse conservatism. Certainly, the proliferation of schools in psychotherapy is a gorgous metaphor for this whole topic: on the one hand, historically, most therapists have been monogamously wedded to one school, yet the field itself is – or so it could be argued – becoming ever more, and ever more threateningly, promiscuous.

We have learned that, for every majority discourse, there is likely to be a subjugated minority discourse. In psychotherapy – as in society – the majority discourse is relational. Hence, the subjugated minority discourse will be the opposite of relational; in the language

of this paper, promiscuous. I have wondered if the silence of psychotherapists on the topic of promiscuity reflects a kind of sexual horror – so they translate everything into a discourse of relationality in which ‘persons’ get split off from ‘sex’.

Putting these ideas – of hypocrisy and a subjugated non-relational discourse – together, exposes the secret moral conservatism of numerous psychotherapeutic clinicians compared to their often very different sexual behaviour as persons. We could begin to understand this more deeply by seeing it as envy on the part of the therapist of the sexual experimentation and out-of-order behaviour related to them by their clients. Many psychotherapists are not overtly judgemental about promiscuous behaviour but tell us that it is a stage or phase of psychosexual development – usually adolescent. As such, the client should grow out of it because it cannot be sustained into middle or old age. It is not hard to see that, aside from whether it is true or part of a general cultural denial about the sexuality of older people, this is far from non-judgemental accepting. It rules out any possibility that promiscuity might function as one template (in classical Jungian terminology, ‘archetypal structure’) for lifelong relational individuation. We don’t talk much about the need to hold the tensions between the one and the many when it comes to relationships.

The matter comes to a head when psychotherapists engage with infidelity (‘cheating’) on the part of their clients. Whilst not denying that some therapists, particularly couple therapists, understand cheating as a systemic phenomenon, the overall psychotherapeutic take on the matter is that it is a symptom of something else, some problem in the cheat, usually of a narcissistic kind. The cheated upon usually feels immense pain and the cheat often feels great guilt. These are strong affects for the therapist to engage with. Hence, unsurprisingly perhaps, what we see in the majority of instances is a counter-resistant valorization of relational longevity and an utterly literal understanding of ‘object constancy’ at the expense of relational quality. Provided you are in a longstanding relationship, you are, to all intents and purposes, OK. (I take up this point in relation to persons of sexual diversity seeking to train as psychotherapists in Samuels, 2006.)

However, when it comes to sexual desire, time doesn’t have all that much to do with it. When I was a schoolboy, there was a joke about the theory of relativity: if you kiss a sexy girl for five minutes it feels like five seconds; if you stick your hand in a flame for five seconds it feels like five minutes. In the unconscious, time doesn’t work the way it does at the conscious level.

The same is true in relation to sexual desire. One of the most compelling accounts of this is in Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1941). Mortally wounded, the Spanish Civil War volunteer, Robert Jordan, is going to cover the escape of his comrades. Lying on the ground, weapon at the ready, he reflects on how he has lived a lifetime of sexual intimacy and a kind of ‘marriage’ with Maria, a girl living with the partisan band who has been raped by Franco’s soldiers. He tries to recall: ‘Well, we had all our luck in four days. Not four days. It was afternoon when I first got there and it will not be noon today. That makes not quite three days and three nights. Keep it accurate, he said. Quite accurate.’ And earlier, in passion, ‘... there is no other now but thou now and now is thy prophet. Now and forever now... there is no now but now.’ And later, reflectively, ‘I wish I was going to live a long time instead of going to die today because I have learned much about life in these four days; more I think than in all the other time.’

Erotic time is no truer than any other form of time.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

My hope in this paper was to be able to think outside the box in relation to the role of psychotherapy in cultural critique, fashioning that critique this time out of the carnality that we find in promiscuity. Lessons from May '68 and observations from today suggest that, in the West, understandings of the manifold connections, including symbolic connections, between relationality, sexuality and politics are hindered by negativity and hypocrisy on the part of many psychotherapists, mental health professionals, academics and critics. Psychotherapists who seek to impact the political need to pay attention to the limits placed upon their laudable ambition by retrogressive attitudes to promiscuity and sex outside of conventional relational structures of a monogamous nature.

But there was also an additional goal stemming directly from the shift in consciousness I mentioned earlier in this paper whereby personal and social change are understood as inseparable. The exploration of the sexual is indeed just that. But as we move onto the social level, and then onto the spiritual level, we are challenged to find out more about suffering, pain, dislocation, alienation and to see how promiscuity might function as a secret spiritual and social passage to the fullest possible healing engagement with a suffering world.

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