

# Psychoanalysts unite ... against trans

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**Ian Parker on the debate about gender and sexuality within psychoanalytic institutions.**

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One of the paradoxes of psychoanalysis is that while on the one hand it opens up the domain of gender and sexuality—aspects of our lives that have become so central and self-defining to most people and the source of so much personal misery—to exploration, on the other hand, the institutional histories of psychoanalytic institutions have been riddled with prejudice, directed often at women and gay people. Sustained political campaigns outside and inside psychoanalysis have shifted the terrain of debate about gender and sexuality over the years, and there has developed a strong feminist presence inside the profession. The long-held medical exclusion of gay people from training has been challenged and, in most organisations, ended.

## Splits

It is often difficult for outsiders to make sense of the different cross-cutting debates, in part because the field of psychoanalysis is also riven with internal differences that lead to purges and splits and the formation of different distinct theoretical and professional traditions of work. Psychoanalysis itself is often plagued with what Freud called ‘the narcissism of minor differences’, and practitioners and academic adherents of different approaches cleave to their own favourite charismatic leaders and obey the bureaucratic structures that control training and the transmission of knowledge.

One of the most far-reaching splits, it turned out, was in the early 1960s when the International Psychoanalytical Association, IPA, which was founded by Freud and his followers back in 1910, finally excluded the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, in part because of his refusal to accept a medical psychiatric curriculum in his local affiliate organisation. Lacan set up his own school, which has itself mutated and fragmented over the years.

The IPA, which was mainly oriented to a form of ‘ego psychology’ that was concerned with adapting people to society instead of enabling them to question it, experienced its own internal divisions, with fierce contest in Britain between followers of Anna Freud – Freud’s daughter and advocate of an approach aligned with ‘ego psychology’ – and Melanie Klein. Kleinians became an influential tradition inside the IPA in Britain, and in other parts of the world.

## Kleinians

One thing the Anna Freudians, the Kleinians and the 'independent' psychoanalysts in the IPA could agree on is that they disliked Lacanians, and although there have been followers of Lacan in some affiliate groups of the IPA (in Canada and Venezuela, for instance), the British IPA analysts could pretend, until the growth of the Internet, that there were no such things as Lacanian psychoanalysts.

Trademark notions added to psychoanalysis by Melanie Klein are 'splitting', the idea that the mind is torn in a paranoia-inducing way, and 'projective identification' in which that splitting is dealt with by being thrown out and experienced as coming from others. That increases a sense of paranoia, of course, and most Kleinians also believe that others identify with those projections, feel the effects themselves, which edges toward telepathy.

So, Kleinian psychoanalysts will pick up the 'projected' hate and suchlike sent their way by their patients - unconscious to unconscious communication, they will say - and reflect on it in their 'counter-transference' response in order to come up with an interpretation. All this rests on deep-held beliefs about what is going on inside the mind, and though Klein herself was not a medical doctor and Kleinian psychoanalysis was an opportunity to break from the medical and psychiatric conceptions that governed much of British psychoanalysis, they usually have fixed views about what 'human nature' is, and often about the essential underlying difference between men and women.

## Lacanians

On the other side, Lacanians have spent great energy demarcating themselves from the IPA while, at the same time, seeking dialogue with psychoanalysts there because they want to be taken seriously as psychoanalysts and because the IPA still has the heritage and prestige of the organisation that Freud himself founded.

Signature theoretical developments in Lacanian psychoanalysis include a reformulation of the relationship between the classical Freudian caricature notions of the 'superego' as a set of cultural demands, the 'ego' as rational core of the self and the 'id' as subterranean natural drives. Instead, Lacanians tend to differentiate between the 'symbolic' as the shared cultural realm, the 'imaginary' as the domain of understanding and communication in what we think of as dialogue, and the 'real' as bedrock unrepresentable stuff we cannot imagine or put into words.

There is also an influential misreading of Lacan's late 'Seminar 20' around among Lacanians in which the cultural-historical symbolic difference between 'men' and 'women' is understood by them as referring to what they often call the 'real' of 'sexual difference'. Many Lacanians circle obsessively around this idea of the real of sexual difference, and it has become a kind of fetish stand-in for what psychiatrists assume to be human nature. This ends with a profoundly ideological view of the essential underlying difference between men and women, not as dissimilar to the Kleinians that the Lacanian tradition sought to distance themselves from as we might hope.

## Rapprochement

Relations between the Lacanians and the IPA have long been tense - with a potent mixture of mutual disdain and jealousy in the standoff between them - and joint meetings have been rare, and the attempt at dialogue has failed. Now, however, they have found a cause they can agree on; suspicion and hostility to trans. In the process, we can see laid bare one of the false assumptions that has governed debate and perceptions about the field of psychoanalysis over the years, that the Lacanians are necessarily always radical and that the Kleinians reactionary.

This characterisation has been unhelpful and unfair; there have been a good number of Kleinian psychoanalysts who have been involved in revolutionary struggle, and a number of Lacanians complicit with dictatorial regimes. There were quite a few IPA psychoanalysts who were involved in peace movements, to the extent that some leftists assumed that psychoanalysis as an institution was centre-left and it was worth engaging in; that was the assumption made in the '[Free Associations](#)' project led by Kleinians that started in the 1980s.

Nevertheless, the idea that Lacanian psychoanalysis was more 'radical' was fed by, among other things, the close involvement by Lacan's son-in-law Jacques-Alain Miller in French Maoist politics – Miller was a member of [La Gauche Prolétarienne](#) – and Miller, who became leader of Lacan's school on the dad's death, steered what became the '[World Association of Psychoanalysis](#)' (as a rival outfit to the IPA) toward engagement with political issues. In recent years that political ambition has been expressed in a sustained campaign against Marine Le Pen, which we can think of as a progressive position, and a call for support for Emmanuel Macron, which is rather more supportive of contemporary liberal capitalism. This, in a classic Stalinist flip-flop from ultraleftism to popular-front style alliances, has included attacks on those who challenge Le Pen and Macron from the left, a threat which Miller dubbed [hitléro-trotskisme](#).

Part of a shift to the right has seen the rapid adoption by Jacques-Alain Miller of anti-trans rhetoric. In one [astonishingly awful lecture to a Russian audience](#) online, for example, Miller gives quite a good introduction to psychoanalytic ideas, and then follows this up with a rant. He says that we psychoanalysts listen to people, and he gives the example of 'homosexuals' who are given space to participate, but this should not be the case for trans, he says, because that will validate them, and he goes on to refer to the problem of LGBT 'propaganda' in schools in France, something that Macron put a stop to, and as he says this he smiles.

Then, right on cue, online appear 'testimonies' by Lacanian members of the World Association of Psychoanalysis, the WAP, endorsing Miller's ideas, spewing out complaints about the rise of 'political correctness' that mirror some of the recent Kleinian anti-trans discourse about the dangers of 'woke' politics in Britain.

## **Transit Conference**

The scene was thus set for an 'international conference' on 'Sexual Identities in Transit' organised by the '[London Society of the New Lacanian School](#)', LSNLS, one of Miller's vanity-project organisations linked to the WAP. At last, and on the most toxic basis, there was a meeting of minds at a 'location in central London', at a place that was kept secret for paranoid fear that it would be disrupted by trans activists (it took place at University College London, which is where one of the IPA-linked research units is based).

This was an opportunity for dialogue with leading Kleinians and other assorted transphobes that the LSNLS Lacanians seized with open arms, bringing in some of their big guns. Éric Laurent, Miller's second-in-command at the WAP, was beamed in online to elaborate on [recent polemics against Judith Butler](#) who, after a brief attempt to cuddle up to her, he regards as an enemy because of her celebration of queer and relativist ideas of gender and sexuality. Alexandre Stevens, another Millerian big dog, was there, as was a child and adolescent psychiatrist François Ansermet, also a member of the WAP, who spoke about clinical practice. You would think that Ansermet would know better after having co-authored a useful book about '[neural plasticity](#)' that showed how social experience was registered in and transformed structures in the brain, an argument in opposition to biological reductionist psychiatric models.

On the Kleinian side, David Bell, a former consultant psychiatrist at the Tavistock Clinic and past-

President of the British Psychoanalytical Society, was a predictable invited speaker. Bell, who is politically radical in many respects, was drawn into a whistle-blower scandal at the Tavistock and Portman Gender Identity Development Service and has been publicly railing against the kind of support the service gave to trans people.

The current psychiatric backlash against trans is being led by those who now write about 'gender dysphoria' as if it is a medical condition. Key advocates of this kind of medicalisation and pathologisation of trans – Marcus Evans, a British Psychoanalytical Society analyst and Susan Evans – who also worked at the Tavistock, were invited speakers at the 'transit' conference.

The knives were out for the Tavistock in an invited talk by Michael Biggs, an Associate Professor of Sociology at Oxford University and Fellow of St Cross College, someone whose comments about trans have been roundly [condemned by students at Oxford](#). Completing the line-up was another professional dedicated transphobe Helen Joyce, author of a book on trans as ideology and activist with the [Sex Matters group](#) that is obsessed with making sure that gender is grounded in biology, at least in what they think biology is.

## Effects

There will be effects of this conference, small though it was, including on theoretical debates and real clinical practice in psychoanalysis for trans people, who will now need to take care not to encounter one of these conference participants, or their acolytes, on the couch. One overall effect will be to shift psychoanalytic discourse to the right.

We need to remember, against this drawing of psychoanalysis closer to dominant ideology, that there have always been, and still are, radical alternatives. On the side of the Kleinians, for example, we have the work of [Marie Langer](#), who left Vienna to fight in the Spanish Civil War and then, in Latin America, allied with feminists there, late in life taking women's liberation seriously alongside revolutionary politics. On the Lacanian side we have powerful interventions by [Patricia Gherovici](#) who has championed the perspective of Latinos in the poor barrios and spoken out for our trans comrades.

Inside both traditions, and even inside the psychoanalytic organisations that have been drawn into transphobe positions, there are those who are deeply unhappy about where they are being taken, and that we need to keep links with. Those links are historical-political links with what is really radical, or could be radical about psychoanalysis. These are the kinds of alliances that are worth fighting for.

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**P.S.**

- Anti\*Capitalist Resistance. 22 Feb 2023:  
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/psychoanalysts-unite-against-trans/>

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I am for my comrades to republish this, but should note that it first appeared on the Sublation site,  
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