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THE MANU WITHOUT PORTFOLIO COLUMN, 3

A Conspiracy of Orphans

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For Riva

The manuscript of the first draft of *Le Premier Homme* (The First Man), 150 semi-autobiographical pages, was found in a bag in Albert Camus' car after the road accident that killed him, aged 46, in January 1960. It was to be a historical novel about Algeria, from the arrival of French settlers in the 1840s to the Second World War and beyond, woven with memories where his alter ego, Jacques Cormery, searches for the seeds of his life as a writer. We read of his birth in 1913 during a rainstorm on the kitchen floor of a derelict farm; of his visit many years later to his father's grave (who died when Camus was only one year old) in the cemetery of St Brieuc; of his fear of the dark and of death. As he tracks his younger self, he finds himself marvelling at the boy's ingenuity and unruliness when roaming the streets or playing football with a ball made of tatters.

There was no secure attachment between the young boy and his mother. The boy loved his mother with despair. She never hugged him because she did not know how; they would be physically close to one another only when he slept the sleep of the poor, in the same room with her and his brother. In the evening, his grandmother would tell him it was time to go to bed; he kissed her first, then his uncle, and last his mother, who gave him a tender, absent-minded kiss, then assumed once more her motionless position, in the shadowy half-light, her gaze lost in the street and the current of life that flowed endlessly below the riverbank where she sat, endlessly, while her son, endlessly, watched her in the shadows with a lump in his throat, staring at her thin bent back, filled with an obscure anxiety in the presence of adversity he could not understand.[1]

In many ways, the young boy lived like an orphan, negotiating alone his relationship with history and the world. When Camus returned to visit many years later, his mother showed the same ethereal affection and elusiveness.

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Some will be familiar with Mary Ainsworth's Strange Situation procedure, the experimental set-up used to appraise differences in children's attachment. Ainsworth was keen to understand the child's anxiety potential in relation to the caregiver, and utilised signals of separation and novelty, activating the child's intuitive expectations. This experiment highlighted the ever-present likelihood of the child accessing a state of abandonment. What went unnoticed is that this state of abandonment – factual, symbolic or psychological – can have a positive side. If we can entertain for a moment the notion that the traditional nuclear family thwarts our creative desires and tries to make young people submissive and ready to merge with the capitalist machine, then the condition of 'becoming-

orphan' – factually or symbolically – may yield a positive, emancipatory potential. Being faced with the fear of separation and abandonment in the 'strange situation' also opens the possibility for deterritorialisation: of happy, expansive, and combinatory play – a dimension strangely neglected in a psychology culture bent on preserving the status quo and reiterating the alleged relevance of the Oedipal nuclear family.

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The family has been back in fashion for some time, to the point where one may wonder whether its natural, cultural and political legitimacy was ever questioned. But questioned it was, fiercely and fluently over 150 years of influential socialist and feminist writings which cast rightful suspicion on this hierarchical bastion of patriarchal power and enforcer of capitalist ideology. From Fourier to Engels to the great Clara Zetkin, the family has been thoroughly deconstructed, all the way to the Combahee River Collective's compelling argument in the late 1970s that the liberation of all oppressed peoples requires the demolition of the political-economic systems of capitalism, imperialism and the patriarchy.

Most women's liberationists would agree, I think, with this last statement. So why does it now sound quaint, even archaic? Could it be that a different approach has prevailed, namely the liberal, well-mannered 'anti-discrimination' view which no longer calls for the disbanding of hierarchical structures but is content with genteel reassessment plus a handful of discrete entreaties (if … *ahem* … at all possible) to be 'included', to be allowed to push an Oedipal pram in the suburbs, to renew our subscription to a secularist resurrection and our overrated species' jolly ride to nowhere, and above all to 'join the conversation', as the hollow *mantra du jour* has it.

Psychology rushed in to lend scientific legitimacy not only to the family, but to the corrosive takeover of humans and humanities which crept up since the zombification of the world put in place by Reagan and Thatcher. How did psychology come to legitimise global neoliberal vampirism? It did so in countless ways, and one example among many is having bought wholesale, and then broadcasted to the colonies, the Anglophone Gospel of Attachment Theory. In so doing, it reintroduced biologism, essentialism and the century-old tradition of keeping women down and thwarting any shred of liberation for all humans for decades to come. My claim may sound preposterous. Someone asked me indignantly: 'How can anyone question attachment theory?' Another wanted to know, 'How can there be anything critical to say about a theory on which there is widespread consensus?'. Ah, the warm duvet of consensus! Cosy, comforting and cuddly. And a sure indication of ideology at work just under it – bourgeois, liberal, neoliberal, positivist, conservative, reductionist, essentialist, foundationalist, ethnocentric ideology, that is. I am not refuting the crucial importance of parents or the love attachment of children to their mothers and fathers, but simply wanting to ask a few questions. For instance:

(1) Is it possible to look closely at attachment phenomena as an interplay of dynamic forces, rather than choosing to mindlessly recite the immovable taxonomy of attachment styles?
(2) Has anyone noticed that with the recent neuroscientific boost-up given to Attachment Theory, the latter has been used for implementing conservative policies? Take the disastrously influential study by Conservative MP Ian Duncan Smith in 2009 (titled 'Early Intervention: Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens'). It draws on neuroscience/attachment theory to insist that children's attachment relationship with their mother must be established in a way that will create compliant citizens.
(3) Why is it that great emphasis is invariably given to attachment and secure base, while exploration, adventure and lines of flight have been thoroughly neglected?
(4) Is it possible to look closely at the locus and purpose of mums and dads in desiring-production, without the said mums and dads having to re-run ad infinitum the same static roles within the Oedipal static theatre?

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What Camus learned in the Algerian streets of his youth is the precious freedom which emerges at times through the physical or emotional

absence of parents. It was the seed of his unique voice as a writer. This condition of 'becoming-orphan' (an expression I borrow from Deleuze and Guattari) represents the creation of a fresh territory out of a loss of territory. By finding oneself in concrete or symbolic exile, becoming a free-lancer and learning self-sufficiency, a person re-creates a new terrain. 'Individuation' (a notion bullied to the margins by the false need for social, political and intrapsychic 'integration') may be linked to this. To become oneself, one mustn't have the faintest idea of what one is. To become oneself, one must wave goodbye to the dubious haven of identity, and find a joyous and risky dimension of play and experimentation. Here is John Berger:

> I propose a conspiracy of orphans. We exchange winks. We reject hierarchies. All hierarchies. We take the shit of the world for granted and we exchange stories about how we nevertheless get by. We are impertinent. More than half the stars in the universe are orphan stars belonging to no constellation. And they give off more light than all the constellation stars.[2]

To be 'the first man' – or woman or person – in Camus' sense is to bring oneself up outside the parental sphere; to transubstantiate the parents' ambivalent message by turning social conditioning into a line of flight towards emancipation. Today, it means to stand up to the banality, compliance and conservatism of contemporary culture – including psychotherapy culture, that new fortress of surveillance of the populace set up in the name of protecting 'the public'. For all the talk of measuring authenticity on authenticity scales, an authentic person is hard to find. If found, she'll be told to seek counselling, for chances are she won't fit the peer-reviewed requirements. For all the scientific appropriateness of peer-reviewed articles in academic journals, an original article is hard to find. If found, it will probably be considered 'unscientific'.

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Earlier on I dredged up the mighty word 'individuation' as a cursor to what I am trying to describe. A more exact term would be 'existential individuation', closer to Kierkegaard's testing theology than to Jung's pious socio-religious adaptation. Try it sometime: stick your neck outside the precincts of your tribe, snub the dusty hymn-sheet others are half-heartedly crooning from. Now tell me, how does it feel, to get on your face the icy blast of abuse, scorn and defamation? How does it feel 'to be on your own, with no direction home'? At this point you join the conspiracy of orphans. Like the Kierkegaard of *Fear and Trembling*, accused of madness by sanctimonious psychotherapists. Like Riva Joffe, tireless campaigner against apartheid and racism and committed activist in Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party, a Jewish woman – wait for this – investigated for anti-semitism by current Labour leader Keir Starmer's faction, for criticising Israel's brutal treatment of Palestinians and for rightly denouncing Zionism as an 'inherently racist ideology'.[3] Riva was in her eighties when she passed away in September 2021. If for instance you are getting on and nevertheless refusing to go meekly into that good night, you are an orphan too, an exile from the confederacy of docile dunces who supinely accept whatever a thoroughly inept government tells you – or, for that matter, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) (does the acronym stand for Banal Assemblages of Constipated Platitudes?).

Life might be a lot less cosy then, but you'd be in good company. Think of Beethoven. Sure, very few can 'self-actualise' into a genius, least of all an overrated psychologist like Abe Maslow, who coined that dodgy term. All the same, Beethoven's example may be an inspiration. Contrary to the expectation that in old age you should recline in religiose reconciliation or 'acceptance' of the ridiculous 'power of now', in his late years Beethoven produced delightfully gnarled and unconventional pieces which transgress conventions, express defiance, and set the ball rolling for the avant-garde. In his unfinished book on the composer, Theodore Adorno marvels at the fact that it is not disquiet for his impending death that drives these late works, but the desire to create a new aesthetic that values fragmentation and challenges the norms of his era.

Without daring visions of the new, what chances are there for genuinely progressive politics and truly transformative psychology?

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Notes and References

1 Albert Camus, *The First Man*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2001, p. 178.
2 John Berger, *Confabulations*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2016, pp. 29–30.
3 Jewish Voice for Labour, Riva Joffe – in memoriam. Available at https://tinyurl.com/5n7c8dxm (accessed 17 January 2022).

About the contributor

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