***Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics***

**Number 72 June 2018 ISSN: 2047-0622**

**URL:** [**http://www.freeassociations.org.uk/**](http://www.freeassociations.org.uk/)



**Joanna Ryan, Class and Psychoanalysis:  Landscapes of Inequality. Routledge, 2017**

Reviewed by Robert M. Young

I regard myself as psychoanalytically well-read, yet I found this book daunting. Worth it, mind you, but demanding. I am glad to be able to begin with a very helpful guide. The author gave a half-hour talk on the book at the Freud Museum followed by a discussion with Barry Watt: [http://podcast.freud.org.uk/e/class-and-psychoanalysis/](http://podcast.freud.org.uk/e/class-and-psychoanalysis/" \t "_blank)

One thing this event shows is how hard it is to think clearly about this topic. I back up my admiration with an evaluation by Professor Stephen Frosh. ‘Class and Psychoanalysis is a text of great importance. Joanna Ryan writes in a clear and objective way about the neglect of social class in psychoanalysis, yet behind this objectivity is a passionate involvement that will strike a chord with all concerned psychoanalysts and psychotherapists. The book presents the best available overview of the history, theory and practice of psychoanalysis in relation to social class, combining this with interview material from the author’s own studies of psycho-therapists to give a detailed and compelling picture of how class enters the consulting room. Engaging with this profound yet accessible book is essential for all who care about class injuries and how we might find ways to respond to them.’

      I have known Jo Ryan since we were both students at the Department of Experimental Psychology at Cambridge in the 1960s. There is an intriguing set of reflections on her academic trajectory in a conversation with a long-term colleague and friend, Martin Richards, at [https://www.cfr.cam.ac.uk/pdfs/joanna-ryan.pdf](https://www.cfr.cam.ac.uk/pdfs/joanna-ryan.pdf" \t "_blank)

Having, I hope, already provided ample evidence of the quality of the volume under review, I shall go off on a related tack, one that I am in a good position to pursue. That is, I shall focus here on information bearing on her class location, which I will compare with my own.  I am interested in illuminating why people with our class backgrounds should have pursued the paths we have. We have devoted ourselves to overlapping and adjacent political projects

We both come from interesting class backgrounds. Her parents were both eminent Oxford dons: her father came from a Jewish commercial background and became  Professor of Jurisprudence and Master of Brasenose College. He was in his time the most highly regarded philosopher in the UK. Her mother, Jennifer, was first a distinguished civil servant in the Home Office and then at Nuffield College was author of a highly regarded history of The British Police. She went on to become a renowned tutor at St. Anne’s. (personal information from Wikipedia.)

Joanna got married very young to Alan Ryan, who became an Oxford Professor of Politics then Warden of New College, Oxford, He held numerous overseas visiting posts (see Wikipedia). They separated at a very young age. He remarried; she did not but had an intriguing sequence of partners. She was the first woman fellow of an Oxbridge college – King’s. For the most part, however, she has found and plowed furrows of her own choosing, regardless of careerism and the seeking of prestige.

I came from a genteel, philistine, fundamentalist, impecunious aristocratic Southern American family with a pedigree traceable to the Founding Fathers in New England. I grew up in a cottage in what was for the most part a wealthy suburb where I was mentored by a rich neighbour who had been to Yale. With his help I won a full scholarships to Yale, and then to medical school from which I gained a graduate fellowship to Cambridge where I became a Fellow of King’s College and a prolific don in the history of science. I, too, married very young and also separated soon thereafter. It has been my experience that being an Oxbridge don makes one a member of the upper middle class. Joanna and I both trained as psychoanalytic psychotherapists midway through academic careers, and both had reason to benefit from versions of class confidence, though our families were fraught in both our parental and our own generations.

Throughout the book Joanna draws attention to the remarkable silences in psychotherapeutic writings with respect to class in clinical material, for example, brushing out Viennese servants and carers in the early days of psychoanalysis or in analysts’ counter-transference material. That has also been my experience both as a patient and as a therapist. For example, my mother was an invalid, and my carer was a devoted black servant throughout my childhood, but this aspect of my upbringing, I regret to say, was not sufficiently apparent in my clinical material. It is as if I thought, contrary to my professed beliefs, it would be polluting to bring class or race into the pure space of the analytic flow – something like sacreligious. In fact, it was racist. I also found this reaction in myself while reading the book.

At the end of her book Joanna Ryan recommends a thoroughly accessible volume. I have read it and heartily concur: Stephen Grosz, The Examined Life: How We Lose and Find Ourselves. Vintage, 2013 (also available in Audio CD). Once again, I found Class and Psychoanalysis to be a rich and wide-ranging book, but I also find myself unable to summarize her reviews of the various writers, i.e., a summary of summaries of writers on psychoanalysis and class. This is not the author’s fault. I just cannot make the myriad conceptual connections between her themes and my own clinical and personal experience, though I can usually make connections between my work with my patients and class. I do urge you to immerse yourself in her careful expositions of authors who have set out to integrate clinical material with class issues and draw upon her own summaries.

Here are her chapter headings. I offer them as promissory notes on what the book provides:

1. Introduction: Why class and

       psychoanalysis?

2. Asking Questions of History

3. Elision and disavowal: the extrusion of class

      from psychoanalytic theory

4. Psychotherapy for the people?

      Psychoanalysis in some public sectors

5. Lived experiences of class: psychological

      and sociological perspectives

6. Class and social mobility within

     the psychoanalytic field

7. Class within therapy relationships

8. Contemporary psychoanalytic

     writings on class within the clinic

9. Money and some political economies

      of psychoanalytic work

10. Speaking class to psychoanalysis.

She is also co-author of other books that draw upon her life experiences: (with Noreen O’Connor) Wild Desires and Mistaken Identities: Lesbianism and Psychoanalysis (2003). co-editor (with S. Cartledge) of *Sex and Love: New Thoughts on Old Contradictions* (1983). author *The Politics of Mental Handicap*, revised ed., Free  Association Books (1987). She has a brother who is brain damaged.