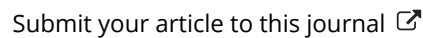
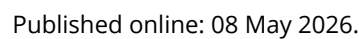
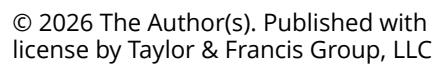


To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332828.2026.2663777>



CHODOROW COMMENT

BY JEFFREY PRAGER

There is a poignant symmetry between Nancy Chodorow's first book *The Reproduction of Mothering, Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* and this, her last article, now published shortly after her death. Her trailblazing 1978 book boldly and confidently introduced psychoanalytic thinkers, especially Fairbairn, into mainstream sociology to better answer the critical social question of "why women mother." Psychoanalytic object relations theory, she argued, is essential to understanding the intertwined psychic and social mechanisms required for girls to identify with their mothers—for them to embrace motherhood for themselves and for boys to eschew the role and place their psychic energies elsewhere. This book expresses the importance for social sciences to move beyond a cognitively based socialization theory in order to more deeply understand childhood mentation. Unconscious experience, too, must be reckoned with as individuals relate to others and motivate and orient themselves within the social structures in which they are situated.

The Reproduction of Motherhood was a *tour de force*. It brought feminist critique of patriarchy straight to the center of sociological theory and critical analysis. It introduced to sociology not psychoanalytic theory per

Jeffrey Prager is a Training and Supervising Analyst, New Center for Psychoanalysis; a Research Professor, Department of Sociology, UCLA; and is a member of the Board of Directors of the Freud Archives, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

se but a clinically and empirically based psychoanalysis directed to explain patterns of social experience. More than a decade after its publication, *Contemporary Sociology* described it as one of the ten most influential books published in the field of sociology over the last twenty-five years. In 2021, the volume *Nancy Chodorow and the Reproduction of Mothering 40 Years On* was published and amplified the importance of her work through the contributions of eminent sociologists, feminists, and psychoanalysts.

“Freud in his Psychosocial Generation: Durkheim, Simmel, Weber and Du Bois,” as Nancy herself noted, does not represent finished work. Instead, it is a provocation to readers to consider why Freud, along with a list of distinguished sociologists writing roughly at the same time—a generation of scholars—all grappled with the common aspiration to create a social theory that brought under a single rubric both an individual psychology and a description of social formations. Remarkably, forty-five years following her first volley seeking for a psychoanalytic sociology this, Nancy’s last publication, strikes a similar theme. This time, however, by introducing to analysts many sociologists largely unknown to the analytic canon she directs her remarks to the psychoanalytic field rather than the sociological establishment. A first version of this article was delivered to members of the New York Psychoanalytic Society, the *eminence grise*, if you will, of American classical psychoanalysis. The same career-long battle for interdisciplinarity was now fought on a different front. All of Chodorow’s work from 1978 onwards moved between the social sciences and psychoanalysis, always demonstrating to these different audiences the incompleteness of their knowledge.

Just before her untimely death and with the encouragement of family and friends, Nancy was urged to send this article to *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* for publication. In her communications with the *Quarterly*, she requested that two longtime friends comment on this article—myself, a sociologist fully trained in psychoanalysis like her, and Stephen Seligman who shared Nancy’s interest in psychoanalytic social theory. I believe we were chosen in part because Nancy saw us as people who might continue her career-long commitment to promoting a deeper intellectual integration between the social sciences, feminist thought, and psychoanalysis. It is my honor to write these brief remarks in the spirit, I hope, of what Nancy wished for.

“Freud in his Psychosocial Generation” was inspired in the first instance by Nancy’s appointment to the Holmes Commission of the American Psychoanalytic Association, meetings charged to assess the problem of racism in the organization and the underrepresentation of racialized minorities among psychoanalysis’s ranks. There, she confronted on the ground the tensions between the social—both in theory and in practice—and the craft and enterprise of psychoanalysis. It was an important learning experience for her and, as she describes in this paper, it led her to a serious encounter with W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the great and under-appreciated sociologists of the 19th and 20th centuries. Du Bois was unique among the pantheon of these great social theorists for his primary attention to the United States, including the special character of American racism.

But as this article emphasizes, though Du Bois’s empirical attention lay in the U.S., he shared with European social thinkers of his generation—including Freud—the presumption that understanding the social world was simultaneously a *psycho* and social intellectual enterprise. Du Bois, indeed, had spent some formative years in Germany. Like the late nineteenth-century European thinkers—Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel—Du Bois accepted as a *sine qua non* that social theory could only be psychological theory *and* vice versa. Individual drives, impulses, and motives are intrinsic to any effort to capture the unique features of modern society. Freud, too, understood that his discovery of psychoanalysis would only be complete when it could better understand the fundamental social questions besetting humanity: war, aggression, trauma, domination, and so forth. As Freud came to understand that his own days were numbered, he increasingly turned to reflect on how the individual psyche relates to, helps shape, and is influenced by *the collectivity*. His more sociological works—*Totem and Taboo*, *Civilization and its Discontents*, *Moses and Monotheism*, *The Future of an Illusion*, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*—were both applications of psychoanalysis and expressions of Freud’s own belief of what the discipline of psychoanalysis required to be more complete.

No one better describes this tension between the individual and the collective than Nancy herself when, in the Preface of her culminating work, *The Psychoanalytic Ear and the Sociological Eye* (2020), she writes of

herself that there is a paradox at the heart of her professional (and personal) identity.

Because I come from social science, where everything comes from without, it has always been important for me as a psychoanalyst to emphasize one-person theories, to insist that everything in the mind is not co-constructed, co-created, or part of a field or bulwark. I came to psychoanalysis out of fascination with and passion about individuality as a necessary corrective to the sociocultural determinisms and lack of theorizing about, recognition of, or basic interest in individuality found in social science. At the same time, I was from the beginning eager to find some place, in my own clinical work, in listening to the work of others, and in my writing, for recognition of the fundamentally social and relational contributions to individual and individual subjectivity. [p. xiii]

With her characteristic clarity, Nancy captures the built-in strain between determinism and individual agency that Freud himself attempted to straddle. For Freud, psychoanalysis's foundational logic is one of psychic determinism—the lasting impact of early childhood experiences—and one unique to each individual. But Freud also insisted that through the psychoanalytic method—the talking cure based upon insight—individuals can recover the capacity to possess greater personal freedom in spite of that determinism. The Afterword to *The Psychoanalytic Ear and the Sociological Eye* is entitled “‘Could you direct me to the Individuology Department?’ Psychoanalysis, the Academy and the Self.” In it, Nancy provides a compelling piece of science fiction bearing the strong imprint of her intellectual preoccupation: imagining psychoanalysis as an integral part of every college and university, a department in the social sciences focused on the individual in all of its complexity. This would be a department, we might imagine, whose intellectual mission would be to explore how best to reconcile these dual imperatives—an acknowledgement of a social science that defines from without the life chances of an individual and a depth psychology that considers the manifold ways in which each individual expresses the self.

In 2010, Nancy published a paper in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* entitled “Beyond the Dyad: Individual

Psychology, Social World,” which was first delivered as a plenary address at a session honoring her contributions to psychoanalysis at the American Psychoanalytic Association meetings. Just as boldly as she had in her challenge to the social sciences in *The Reproduction of Motherhood in 1978*, Nancy leveled a critique at the *relational turn* by psychoanalysts for what she describes as a too precipitous move away from the individual psyche of the analysand. The dyadic relationship, she argued, had overtaken analytic attention to the unique subjectivity of the analysand. Hers was not a retrograde position reaffirming a wish to return to an exclusively one-person psychology. Her critique derived from her special capacity to exert sociological knowledge on the psychoanalytic enterprise, including the social setting where analytic work is conducted. In “Beyond the Dyad,” Nancy also shares the history of her own graduate training at Brandeis University where she received her Ph.D., studying with two important sociologists: Phillip Slater, who wrote “On Social Regression” (1963); and Egon Bittner, who built on many of the insights of Georg Simmel and was a pioneer in ethnomethodology. In his writings, Simmel offered a superb *social* analysis of the dyad itself. In a word, the dyad is not a natural in-the-world phenomenon—two individual subjectivities in interaction—but itself is a sociocultural construction subject to its own implicit assumptions, blindneses, and distortions. The dyad defines the social in its most intense form. It exists without mediation from the outside and is irreplaceable because it unequivocally depends on one another’s participation and can readily participate in various forms of rule-breaking. The psychoanalytic dyad inevitably reflects an asymmetry of dependence: the analysand’s reliance on the analyst is a singularly intense one while the analyst commonly moves contemporaneously from one dyadic relationship to another. Further, there are disparities of epistemic authority, knowledge, and power typically unacknowledged and unanalyzed between the two but, rather, implicitly shared. Nancy brilliantly applies this sociological knowledge to warn psychoanalysis against a too-ready acceptance of the dyadic relationship, one that had not been subject to critical analysis itself, nor has it still. For her, the taken-for-granted naturalness of the dyad, without critical assessment of its own unconscious properties, has promoted in contemporary psychoanalysis an unthinking preference for the analytic relationship over exploration of the individual psyche.

Nancy's voice is now silent when psychoanalysis perhaps needs it the most. Being aware of the social has never been more loudly articulated as now, influencing how we recruit new members to our field, assess the sources and historical inequities of our own exclusionary practices, and interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds. And Nancy's receptivity to the work of Du Bois is an articulation of her own openness to these contemporary ways of thinking about the issues at hand. Du Bois, in depicting the African American experience as one of *double consciousness* and as living underneath *a veil*, impressed Nancy for his insight about how external realities like racism manifest themselves idiosyncratically within each individual psyche. They are, as Nancy puts, it, "an attempt at an ego-syntonic and adaptive form of splitting" (p. XX). For Nancy, sociologists like Du Bois, Simmel, and Durkheim—and for me, psychoanalysts like Frantz Fanon—can be revelatory about ways to integrate the internal with the external. The social, Nancy understood, is not something simply to be mechanically soldered on top of the individual psyche, as a value-added set of important concerns or as another source of experiences that limit or constrict the person. External determinants—the coercive forcefulness of the social world on individuals' inner worlds—have been insufficiently attended to by psychoanalysts, as Nancy made clear in her critique of psychoanalysts' use of the dyad. And this, her last article, is yet another reminder by her of the necessity for us to do so.

Dozens of Nancy's essays and books written over the course of her very prolific career, including her recent book, have been in service to defining and helping to resolve this conundrum. For Nancy, this was the future of psychoanalysis: one that preserves individuality as psychoanalysis's core insight while redoubling its efforts to consider how the outer world of experience—structural inequality, injustice, non-recognition, and social oppression—penetrates and often distorts the inner world of the individual. Naming Erik Erickson, Hans Loewald, and Warren Poland, among others, as forerunners and inspirations to her own inquiries, she employed and expanded on *intersubjective ego psychology*, building on their work and charting fresh territory—an enterprise she named the *American Independent Tradition*.

Nancy's endless creativity and her contagious curiosity has now ended. She has been the voice of a subtle, nuanced interdisciplinary

psychoanalysis, one infused with social science, that speaks to our current moment and our current crisis. It is now up to us to continue her quest.

REFERENCES

- BUESKENS, P., ed. (2021). *Nancy Chodorow and The Reproduction of Mothering: Forty Years On*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- CHODOROW, N. (1978). *The Reproduction of Mothering, Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. California Press.
- (2010). Beyond the dyad: individual psychology and the social world." *J. Amer. Psychoanal. Assn.*, 58:207–230.
- (2019). *The Psychoanalytic Ear and the Sociological Eye: Toward and American Independent Tradition*. New York: Routledge.
- PRAGER, J. & HICKS, M. (2026). "Fanon's Sociogenesis in its American Form: Engaging Racism in the Psychoanalytic Consulting Room." Paper presented at the American Psychoanalytic Association Annual Meetings, San Francisco, CA.
- SLATER, P. E. (1963). On social regression" *Amer. Sociological Rev.* 28:339–364.

333 S Beverly Dr
Suite 100
Beverly Hills, CA 90212

Jeffreyprager1@gmail.com