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Primitivity and Violence: Traces of the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis

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Short statement: This paper offers a critical engagement with psychoanalysis in which some of its 'unconscious' assumptions are examined. It aims to clarify how psychoanalysis participates in some 'colonialist' ideas and to help develop ways of thinking about social violence.

Primitivity and Violence: Traces of the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis

Abstract

Psychoanalysis, the theory and practice of the 'unconscious', has an unconscious of its own, in the sense of containing unacknowledged assumptions that continue to affect it. The unconscious of psychoanalysis can be seen in the implicit models that it holds of the nature of the human subject, and particularly in the manner in which psychoanalytic 'knowledge' is disrupted by persistent assumptions and recurrent blind-spots that are at best partially recognised. These operate especially strongly in relation to 'otherness'.

In this paper, some lingering effects of psychoanalysis' 'unconscious' assumptions are explored. It is argued in particular that the colonial elements of psychoanalysis' heritage are visible in its conceptualisation of violence and primitivity, and specifically in thinking of violence as an 'atavistic' reproduction of a foundational savagery that, in its imagery and in its substance, is caught up with divisions between civilised and barbaric with very particular sociohistorical resonances.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, unconscious, violence, primitivity, colonialism, otherness.

Primitivity and Violence: Traces of the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis

The Unconscious in/of Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis, the theory and practice of the workings of the unconscious, has many complexities, some of which can be thought about as if it too has an 'unconscious' that affects it. This is of course mainly an analogy, an attempt to characterise ways in which psychoanalysis operates 'as if' it is influenced by factors that are not immediately evident, that have important historical sources in the development of the discipline, and that at times are intentionally obscured in the sense of not being spoken about, or of being actively excluded from the account its practitioners might give of it. Such 'unconscious' processes are evident when psychoanalysis is considered as a set of personal and institutional practices, particularly at times of crisis – exactly paralleling what happens with individuals, who are more likely to display their unresolved unconscious conflicts when under stress. There has been much discussion, for example, of how psychoanalytic controversies have revolved around personalities and intense emotional investments between analysts and their colleagues and teachers. The debates between the two major British psychoanalytic groups, the Freudians and Kleinians, within the British Psychoanalytical Society in the early 1940s, systematised as the 'Controversial Discussions' (King and Steiner, 1991) are the paradigmatic case. Amongst other things, they nearly resulted in Anna Freud leaving the Society, and they staged a vicious dispute between Melanie Klein and her own daughter, Melitta Schmideberg (Schmideberg resigned from the Society in 1944). Whilst there were genuine differences between the protagonists in their views of psychoanalytic discoveries, and much of the debate was framed as a discussion of

psychoanalysis' 'scientific' findings, there is little doubt that the British Psychoanalytical Society at the time was riven by passionate yet mainly unspoken anxieties linked to the war and the daily bombing that was going on around, to the recent death of Freud and the ambivalent mourning associated with it, and to the experiences of disruption, exile and loss suffered by the newly arrived European analysts. A supposedly 'civilised' world was being crushed by brutality, and the British Psychoanalytical Society, which might have been expected to be a safe haven, found itself reproducing some of that brutality, only just saving itself at the brink of destruction. There is also evidence that when faced with political pressure psychoanalytic institutions have at times 'acted out' in ways that suggest the existence of 'unconscious' traces of unresolved conflicts. For example, the German Psychoanalytical Society's attempt to preserve itself in the 1930s through anti-Jewish collaboration with the Nazi authorities, and then the manner in which this was covered up in the post-war period before becoming visible in the 1980s, has been the subject of considerable analysis. Some of this suggests the enactment of an unacknowledged repudiation of the Jewish origins (and originator) of psychoanalysis followed by guilt and shame that barely masks continuing antisemitism (Frosh, 2005; 2012). The point here, simply, is that psychoanalytic institutions and psychoanalysts are at least as prone as other groups to demonstrate behaviour that vitiates claims of scientific rationality – or sometimes simply good sense – and offers evidence that something inexplicably 'irrational' is at work, even in the heartland of a discipline that trades in insight and enlightenment.

None of this is particularly unexpected. Indeed, in many respects it follows naturally from the conditions of emergence of psychoanalysis itself – its rootedness in its particular time and place but also in the personality of its founder – and from the characteristics of its central notion or 'discovery', the dynamic unconscious. Freud's hope that psychoanalysis might be a rational scientific enterprise that would contribute to the overcoming of 'infantilism' (Freud, 1927, p.48) was belied by the many rigidities, intensities and ambiguities in his own personality, ranging from superstitions and 'occult' beliefs (Frosh, 2013a) to passionate relationships and equally

passionate splits. The founding of psychoanalysis *in* this personality is one of its most important characteristics, but also a kind of Achilles heel. The fact that psychoanalysis comes from this personal space, that, most obviously, one of its most important originating texts, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900) consists substantially of interpretations of Freud's dreams, is a remarkable occurrence. What other 'science' has as its *explicit* origin the dream life of its founder? This has had vitally important and productive consequences in challenging the distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' knowledge and in dramatising the centrality of 'irrational' motivational forces in the supposedly rational processes of scientific reasoning. But it also presents obvious difficulties: if psychoanalysis is so 'personal', then the personal conflicts and blind spots of the people involved in it are likely to emerge in its work. That could hardly be otherwise in the clinical and possibly institutional practices of psychoanalysis; but the analogy between the personal unconscious and what happens in psychoanalysis itself stretches further, to include its theoretical and conceptual development. Ideas are emotionally invested in – not just within psychoanalysis – and debate around 'intellectual' issues at times becomes secondary to interpersonal allegiances and conflicts; moreover, there is evidence that some ideas are disturbing enough to produce reactions and resistances that may themselves require psychoanalytic explanation. In relation to this, the psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche makes a powerful point. He first identifies the revolutionary elements in Freud's thought as those that 'decentre' the human subject, what he calls the 'Copernican' perspective that emphasises how human psychic life is forever at the mercy of forces external to the ego and is never sufficient to itself. Freud was well aware of this, as in the famous comment that, 'human megalomania will have suffered its third and most wounding blow from the psychological research of the present time which seeks to prove to the ego that it is not even master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind' (Freud, 1917, p.285). Laplanche argues that one problem in sustaining the radical newness of psychoanalysis, reflected in this particular decentring vision, is how much everything depended

on Freud's capacity to remain stalwart when facing disturbing new discoveries, and to resist drifting back into more conservative ('self-centring') ways of thinking.

In psychoanalysis everything, essentially, is produced by a single man – *simultaneously: the discovery*, affirmed at a very early stage, and which is conjointly (and for me indissociably) that of the unconscious and that of seduction – *and the going-astray*, the wrong path taken each time there was a return to a theory of self-centring, or even self-begetting. (Laplanche, 1999, p.60)

This argument will be described in more detail below; the issue for the moment is simply that with psychoanalysis being so personal, and so Freud-centred, then 'unconscious' aspects of Freud's own thinking – particularly his 'resistances' – become strongly determinant over its progress.

The discovery of the unconscious might have been the crucial marker of Freud's intellectual achievement, but he was aware of how it might not be very welcome news for the world around him. Freud's (1923, p.14) classic statement captures something of the reluctance with which the existence of the unconscious has to be faced. 'We have found,' he writes, 'that is, we have been obliged to assume – that very powerful mental processes or ideas exist ... which can produce all the effects in mental life that ordinary ideas do ... though they themselves do not become conscious.' *Obliged to assume* ('*das heißt annehmen müssen*'): we don't want to do so, it would be much nicer to be able to assert the capacity of each person to manage themselves rationally, in full awareness of what motivates them and consequently better able to control their actions and thoughts. It is indeed, as Freud states elsewhere (though sometimes pessimistically), an aim of psychoanalysis to make people and the world more like this (e.g. Freud, 1933). But, there is an *obligation* to face reality: things don't work like that, there is too much that is incomprehensible in the way people act, and too much also that returns to haunt us when we think we have wished it away. Freud is presenting the discovery here as something that he has been forced to accept despite his own wishes, a characteristic rhetorical move that aims to combat claims that

he has invented it out of his own fantasies; but he is also acknowledging how difficult it becomes, once one allows the notion of a causal unconscious to have purchase, to hold onto the old securities, including those of knowledge itself.

Part of the disturbance created by the unconscious lies in how it produces uncertainty wherever one goes. From the point of view of psychoanalytic knowledge, this is especially poignant, because psychoanalysis is the discipline that seeks to understand and 'use' the unconscious to produce knowledge and – we should remind ourselves – to heal. Yet even those who think they can tame the unconscious by theorising or invoking it, in practice have found that it disrupts what they do – things fall apart, someone backs down unaccountably, a small flaw destroys the leader, revolutionary radicalism somehow turns into conformity. This is, according to Freud, the nature of the human condition. As Judith Butler (2005) terms it, there is an area of necessary 'opacity' in each human subject, and this means that knowledge of ourselves and others can never be complete, but is always blocked by a space of unknowingness. Indeed, according to Butler and in line with the Laplanchean framework that she adopts, preserving this area of opacity is essential as a means of avoiding 'ethical violence' in the sense of forcing an artificial integrity on a subject who has the right *not to be fully known*. Yet if such opacity is so significant, then there will always be something that blocks the achievement of full knowledge of the subject. This means that an unconscious dimension to psychic life makes impossible the confident achievement of knowledge of ourselves, and through that of knowledge of others. It is also arguable that acceptance of the reality of the unconscious makes *all* knowledge uncertain, because our impaired self-knowledge means we can never quite see the *external* object clearly. Ernest Gellner, for instance, tells the story of the unconscious as a cunning adversary: 'The Unconscious,' he writes (1985, p.83), 'is a kind of systematic interference, which hampers full and proper contact between the mind and its object, and thereby prevents effective knowledge.' Although the workings of the unconscious can be seen (though sometimes only by others) in everything we do, we cannot find the thing itself, the unconscious, because it always hides, it

lives nowhere, and it blocks us as we try to know it directly. As a consequence, it can never be rooted out; there is no end to the struggle with the unconscious, because whichever way we turn to look at it, it has a habit of slipping away again, returning to nip at us when we have lost sight of it. Every analysis can be re-analysed, every hard-won truth is bedevilled by doubt; the unconscious calls everything into question in an infinite regress.

This is especially true of *psychoanalysis* for a number of reasons. First, psychoanalytic knowledge is generated mostly out of the clinical encounter between psychoanalyst and patient, an encounter that turns on its capacity to allow the patient's unconscious ideas to be expressed and to be met by the psychoanalyst's own thought-processes that are informed by her or his own unconscious psychic life. Put more simply but also technically, the 'transference' of the patient to the analyst, which is the network of unconscious fantasies that enshrouds the interactions that take place in the clinical setting, is responded to by the analyst's 'countertransference'. This has been thought about in many different ways. Freud's (1915) early idea is still influential (for instance in the Lacanian school of analysis), that countertransference is a problem caused by the analyst's unresolved unconscious complexes and needs to be reduced in order for the analyst to see the patient clearly. For others, notably the British Kleinian and object relations schools of psychoanalysis and the contemporary 'relational' and intersubjective groupings in the USA, countertransference is an instrument of knowledge and engagement, through which the unconscious of the analyst may have an effect on that of the patient (e.g. Spillius et al, 2011). The result is that the psychoanalytic situation is intensely infiltrated by unconscious material, and whilst the explicitness of this means that this material is unusually open and available for inspection, it also means that the situation – which as noted is the prime setting for the generation of psychoanalysis' *scientific* understanding – is an especially heightened one, full of the uncertainties that the unconscious brings in its wake. Whose problem are we dealing with, the patient's or the analyst's; how can we know for sure that what is being said is an 'honest' account of an experience or one tailored (unconsciously) to

appeasing or pleasing or seducing the other? These are both the ordinary, everyday questions posed in any analysis, and necessary but also incorrigible obstacles to knowledge. More broadly, psychoanalytic theory itself suggests there might be especial problems with the impact of unconscious resistances on psychoanalytic knowledge. That is to say: if, as Freud (1914) suggests, advances in psychoanalytic treatment always have to be made in the face of resistance, which is produced most forcefully at those moments when the most telling truths are about to be revealed, then the discipline which tackles the unconscious is likely to be met by the strongest resistance of all – a point that Freud developed in his defence of psychoanalysis against criticisms from outside it (Freud, 1925) but which also applies to its inner dynamics, as some authors, particularly Laplanche (1999) have argued.

One major consequence of the ‘infection’ of psychoanalysis with the unconscious has to do with the manner in which psychoanalytic ‘knowledge’ is disrupted by persistent assumptions and recurrent blind-spots that are at best partially recognised. In this respect, the argument has some resonance with the famous critique of Freud by Laplanche, prefigured above. The echoes here are twofold. First, Laplanche notes the reflexivity of psychoanalysis in relation to the reciprocal impact of its theory on its subjects:

Any epistemology or theory of psychoanalysis must take account of the very basic fact that the human subject is a theorizing being and a being which theorizes itself, by which I mean that it is a self-theorizing being or... a self-symbolizing being. (Laplanche, 1989, p.10)

At its simplest, what is suggested here is that psychoanalysis, as it gained purchase in many (but especially European and American) societies, became a resource whereby people started to understand themselves in its terms, producing modes of consciousness that then are understood from within psychoanalytic theory in a kind of positive feedback loop.

Psychoanalysis presents an important set of ideas about human psychology; as these ideas become more culturally widespread, people reflect upon themselves in relation to them;

psychoanalysis pursues these reflections, both in the clinical setting and in wider cultural presentations (film, literature, political rhetoric, etc); and these in turn then demand further shifts in theory and practice, and so on. The point here is that psychoanalysis does not merely *describe* the psychology of human subjects; it also has an effect on this psychology – in important respects, it *produces* the ways in which people think about themselves and relate to others (it is productive of consciousness). This implies that the ‘unconscious’ assumptions of psychoanalysis infect people’s modes of being outside the clinical setting as well as within it.

The second issue concerns Laplanche’s idea that psychoanalysis consistently ‘wanders’ from the path of its own radical perceptions. The specifics of this have to do with the centrality of seduction in Laplanche’s ‘new foundations’ for psychoanalysis, an idea that is proving increasingly powerful in providing psychoanalysis with a non-essentialist and non-biological grounding (Fletcher, 2013) and in applications of psychoanalysis ‘outside the clinic’ (Fletcher and Ray, 2014). For the present, however, what matters is Laplanche’s ‘diagnosis’ of why it is that psychoanalysis fails to maintain this radical vision –why it seems so frequently to back away from what it also somehow knows. The thing it knows, according to Laplanche (1999), is the ‘external’ locus of subjecthood, which he understands as having to do with the enigmatic message placed in the human infant by the sexual unconscious of the other. For example, it is not known to the mother how much her erotic life is pressed into action by her contact with the child, but this is nevertheless passed on by her to her infant as an unconscious message, an indigestible piece of psychic activity. Unintentionally, unbidden, the adult implants in the infant a disturbance that cannot be fully interpreted, but that remains encrypted as the kernel of the unconscious. According to Laplanche, this is a *seduction*, exciting the child in an enlivening way but also producing the continuing pressure for interpretation and enlightenment that every human subject feels. It also has important ‘political’ consequences in directing the attention of psychoanalysis to what comes into the subject from ‘outside’ and hence to relations with otherness (an orientation that is familiar from other contemporary philosophers, and is made

explicit by Butler (2005) in relation to Levinas). According to Laplanche, however, this 'decentring' focus is consistently undermined by the tendency of Freud and his followers to 're-centre', to make the unconscious a solely inner event, available to ego control.

[From] the moment that the unconscious is reduced in its alien-ness to what one could call, along with theologians and those of a certain faith, an *intimor intimo meo* ['something more inward than my own inwardness'], we can only observe a return to centring: there is something in me which I've split off from, denied, but which I must re-assimilate. Certainly, the ego is not the master of its own house, but it is, after all, at home there nonetheless. (Laplanche, 1999, p.67)

This 'domestication of the unconscious' (ibid.) that places the unconscious in the control of the subject is always present in Freudian thought, in Laplanche's view, for a very specific reason: it reflects the tendency of the human subject itself to withdraw from insights that are too disturbing, in particular from recognition of the essentially alien nature of human subjectivity.

Laplanche (1999, p.81) expresses this as follows:

in Freud the theoretician, the going-astray is accompanied by a sort of connivance with the object; in other words, a covering-up of the truth inherent in the very object which thought confirms. The closing-in-on-itself of the Freudian psychical system... would be radically linked to the closing-in-on-itself of the human being in the very process of its constitution.

Or as John Fletcher writes in his introduction to Laplanche's *Essays on Otherness*:

To this dialectic between a decentring to which Freud officially aligns himself and a recurrent recentring, Laplanche joins the diagnostic notion of a wandering or going-astray of Freudian thought. . . . The covering over and occlusion of the discovery of the radical otherness of the unconscious and sexuality in Freud's thought, Laplanche suggests, trace out the movements of just such a covering over in the human subject itself. (Fletcher, 1999, p.3)

Awareness of the extent to which what is other dominates our existence is too painful, too terrifying, to be maintained; instead, both the subject and psychoanalysis itself 'wander' back from the momentary vision of this truth, to the fantasy of completeness, of narcissistic selfhood. This is an instance –according to Laplanche the most powerful one – of a general tendency of psychoanalytic theory to follow some of the same defensive processes in the face of 'traumatic' material as the psychoanalytic patient does. More generally still, it can be thought of as a description of the process whereby psychoanalytic research uncovers a radical dimension of the human subject – here, the striking way in which otherness can become central to the subject's experience of itself – but then, faced with the disturbance produced by its own discoveries, it hides its knowledge from itself, with the result that it carries along with it unrecognised but nevertheless powerful 'irrationalities' that continue to impact upon its theories and practices. These irrationalities and resistances have consequences in sustaining assumptions about the subject that require, but do not always receive, investigation; and at the heart of many of these is an attitude to 'otherness' that is retrogressive in the very precise sense articulated by Laplanche, 'a covering-up of the truth inherent in the very object which thought confirms.'

Violence in the Unconscious of Theory

The view that we are in a psychoanalytically 'saturated' world in which psychoanalysis both expresses and produces modes of subjectivity that carry 'repressed' elements of the psychoanalytic unconscious with them, is given some sharpness when we think about psychoanalysis as a mechanism whereby discarded elements of the social are smuggled back in. Amongst the most potent of these social discards are those that relate to colonialism, which can serve here as an example of how psychoanalysis can continue to be plagued by its own unconscious assumptions in the sense that its capacity for providing truly critical concepts is hindered by unrecognised, defensive 'goings- astray', specifically in relation to otherness. In summary, psychoanalysis carries with it colonial ideas that are to some degree hidden from

sight, yet still influence its concepts and its constructions of the human subject. This does not mean that it is straightforwardly colonial or racist; indeed, part of the point is that the ambiguities of postcolonial culture are reflected in the ambiguities in psychoanalysis itself, which both holds onto some core colonialist tropes whilst also proving useful to the emergence of a decolonising consciousness. Anderson, Jenson and Keller, introducing a book on the postcolonial uses and critiques of psychoanalysis and ethnopsychiatry, comment on how psychoanalysis reflects (and implemented) some central colonial and decolonising impulses:

From the 1920s, psychoanalysis was a mobile technology of both the late colonial state and anti-imperialism. Insights from psychoanalysis shaped European and North American ideas about the colonial world, the character and potential of 'native' cultures, and the anxieties and alienation of displaced white colonizers and sojourners. Moreover, intense and intimate engagement with empire came to shape the apparently generic psychoanalytic subjectivities that emerged in the twentieth century – whether European or non-European. (Anderson, Jenson and Keller, 2011, p.1-2)

Whilst there is no space here to trace this dynamic in detail, the argument that psychoanalysis both embodies (some) colonialist assumptions and fuels the possibility of revealing and critiquing these, is an important one that is also borne out by the use of psychoanalysis by some significant postcolonial critics (e.g. Bhabha, 1991; Khanna, 2004). Nevertheless, psychoanalysis' analytic capacity to advance 'decolonising' thought is significantly inhibited by its continuing adherence to some unspoken colonialist allegiances, especially in respect of its understanding of otherness. This applies particularly clearly in relation to an inveterate association between 'primitivity' and violence. In what follows, this association is explored as a primary instance (another one might be the versions of sexuality as 'impulse' or uncontrollable 'drive' that can be found in psychoanalytic theory) of the 'unconscious' repetition of patterns of colonialist thought..

In thinking about the origins of society, Freud took a position that violence lies at the core of social and personal formations. The killing of the primal father described in the Freudian 'just-so story' of the origins of society in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and in the parallel tale of the killing of Moses in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), shows up as Freud's attempt to explain the inheritance of a destructive element in social relations that derive from the earliest moment of species-experience. This is not a 'symbolic' statement, though it is often taken to be a psychoanalytic myth or metaphor. For Freud, there was a big and urgent question of atavism, of what it is that explains the nature of a return that so often seems excessive to the situation – a phenomenon that he believed could only be explained through the lens of Lamarckianism, in the sense that we are still fighting the battles of the past. We are, in that sense, our ancestors.

When we study the reactions to early traumas, we are quite often surprised to find that they are not strictly limited to what the subject himself has really experienced but diverge from it in a way which fits in much better with the model of a phylogenetic event and, in general, can only be explained by such an influence. The behaviour of neurotic children towards their parents in the Oedipus and castration complex abounds in such reactions, which seem unjustified in the individual case and only become intelligible phylogenetically – by their connection with the experience of earlier generations.

(Freud, 1939: 99)

This can seem like an unexpected argument for Freud to make, in that the practice of psychoanalysis involves careful tracing out of the relationship between neurotic children and adults and their parents and others, and one usually thinks of this as a process of gaining insight into behaviour by reference to the specifics of a person's biography and fantasy life, not through speculations about heritability. Laplanche (1989, p.34), for one, denies that Freud's appeal to the inheritance of acquired characteristics is even Lamarckian, in part because 'the phylogenetic heritage does not consist of characteristics or of improvements to an apparatus, but of scenarios which live on in a sort of *memory*... primal fantasies may flesh out the individual's memory, and they are situated at the level of memory, not the level of function.' Why does Freud need to

appeal to prehistory in order to explain the operations of memory; could he not, as Laplanche would advocate, focus instead on the actual experiences of the infant, looking for the 'justification' of the child's intense responses in the reality of its social and interpersonal situation? Yet what Freud does here is not so much pursue what he regards as the inadequacy of explanation at the level of the individual's experience, but rather try to map the personal unconscious as full of traces of a founding communal violence that is irresolvable because it is *repeated* in the experiences of each individual. In effect, we have a trauma theory: the whole species (or in the case of the Jews in *Moses and Monotheism*, the people) encounters an overwhelming act of violence which marks it forever; we are not aware of this because it is held as a kind of unconscious knowledge; but as each of us catches a glimpse of the violence in our individual (Oedipal) relationships, so the shadowing enormity of the original violence returns. This is a model of traumatic inheritance built on 'après-coup' or 'afterwardsness', a temporality of repetition: something happens, we are never aware of it fully; but as we encounter the relatively small echoes of it in everyday life, we find ourselves responding excessively, unaware that it is the original formation that is in operation. For Freud at least, what happens takes the shape of a murder.

The idea that violence is implicated in the foundation of society is of course not unique to Freud: it is also present in a wide range of theories that base their understanding of the social on an exclusionary process, one in which some are allowed inside the boundary of the group and others are not (Palacios, 2013). In this sense, all social formations are violent in the sense that they all differentiate between those who can participate and those who are left outside; and these others then form an opposition that might be derogated or might become a threat and indeed might inflict actual or symbolic harm on the group. Psychoanalysis adds to this an account of how violence operates within the domain of the individual as well as the social: there is hardly any version of psychoanalytic theory that does not invoke violence and destructive aggression as a major element in the drive towards development. For Kleinians, for example, the

intricacies of violence are very pronounced, as the death drive comes into the foreground and envy – seen as the pure ‘representative’ of the death drive – is made foundational to the functioning and organisation of the mind. ‘I consider that envy is an oral-sadistic and anal-sadistic expression of destructive impulses,’ writes Klein (1957, p.176), ‘operative from the beginning of life, and that it has a constitutional basis.’ But even for Donald Winnicott, often seen as on the ‘softer’ side of object relations thinking and now highly influential in American ‘intersubjectivist’ and relational psychoanalysis as well as in the British tradition, modes of aggression and destructiveness are central to development – for example as a way of ‘testing’ the resilience of the maternal object in fantasy (Winnicott, 1969). What is at issue here is not the detail of one theory over another, but how psychoanalytic thinking about the foundations of the mind and hence of human subjectivity places so much emphasis on how violence operates. That this vision of the human subject might be accurate is not quite the point, though it has to be said that the question of how to survive violence without responding violently is a core one for studies of human subjectivity and of ethics (Butler, 2009). What is more relevant here is how psychoanalysis drew from its social ‘surroundings’ in making violence so central; and how this embedded in it assumptions about otherness and ‘primitivity’ that continue to resonate.

The Freud-Klein comparison around violence is a useful one to briefly pursue here, as these two theoretical formations exemplify how psychoanalysis operates in and from particular times and places, responding to the concerns of those periods and locations and also giving ‘voice’ to them. We can perhaps see in them the revolutionary and the destructive moments of psychoanalysis’ inception, first in Freud’s initial work and then in his reformulation of the discipline and the emergence of the second generation of analysts immediately after the First World War. Freud worked in Europe in a period of revolutions where the dominant locus of excitement and threat was the potentially explosive force of ‘repressed’ undercurrents kept at bay by a repressing, though increasingly fragile, surface of order that represented ‘traditional’ authority. The model of repression and wish that Freud built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

precisely echoed this cultural problematic of surface versus depth, of maintaining the dams against the pressure of the deep, refracted through images of revolution and the bursting through of unconscious, repressed/suppressed desire; and converting passion to social utility ('where id was there ego shall be. It is a work of culture – not unlike the draining of the Zuider Zee' – Freud, 1933, p.80). Everything could be blasted apart by the revolutionary urges from beneath; and ambivalence attached to these urges. They were potentially liberating and demanded a voice; yet they also carried with them the threat of a barbaric rending of the civilisation that had been laboriously constructed. Freud knew this civilisation to be deeply flawed – he was, after all, Jewish and shared the experience of the hypocritical promise of emancipation (which in Austria occurred only in his own childhood) coupled with continuing, escalating antisemitism. Indeed, it is arguable that the movement of psychoanalysis after 1920 became defined according to the 'fort-da' game described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920), the book in which the death drive is introduced. This game was one in which Freud's young grandson made something appear and then disappear, announcing a view of the essential nature of psychoanalysis as a practice of repetition. Metaphorically at least, this was true of the whole of European culture in relation to the Jews: you can come in, but then you must leave; every advance is temporary and can be rescinded; yours is always a borderline experience, always going away again. It also reflects a major claim that psychoanalysis makes, that what seems to have disappeared is likely to reassert itself; and what is here is always haunted by what has gone.

After the First World War, Freud's thinking took at least two somewhat different directions in regard to the vision of violence that pervades social relations. One continued the theme of belligerent revolt versus limitation and constraint, with an emphasis on the prohibitive violence upon which law is founded – the violence of the father who sees his son trying to displace him, and threatens the son with the full force of his power. Late on in his work, for example, Freud notes that the consequence of the 'opposition' between the individual and society is an

internalisation of violence whereby the superego is formed and the child then becomes subjected to its stringency: 'Civilization ... obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city' (Freud, 1930, p.124). So not only does the death drive operate as a source of an impulse towards dissolution on the one hand and projected aggression on the other; there is also a version of the 'inner world' that is constructed on the basis of the (phantasised but not unrealistic) appreciation of the hostility and violence of the external environment. The child is regulated by violence and responds with aggression turned against her or his own impulses. On the other hand, the post-War period staged an obsession with loss and death; in Freud this produced the death drive as a realisation of the uncanny (Freud, 1919). Ghostliness in Freud's own thought was matched by a culture-wide investment in seeing ghosts, all those dead young men who would never return, but who were sensed at every corner, marking and shadowing lives in their restless, unsettled, betrayed way.

In Britain in the 1920s and 1930s, as the losses of the War came to be absorbed, the question of deathliness became particularly prominent in society generally, and in literature in particular, setting the conditions for the emergence of a Kleinian 'culture' in the British psychoanalytical scene. Not only was destructive violence theorised under the gradually emerging terms of the 'paranoid-schizoid position', which reached its apogee after the Second World War (Klein, 1946), but the Kleinian 'depressive position' was articulated, and reparation –with all its ambivalence – became the model of mental health. This was worked out by Klein through the 1920s and especially in her seminal 1935 paper, *A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States*, where reparation has its simplest definition: 'The ego feels impelled (and I can now add, impelled by its identification with the good object) to make restitution for all the sadistic attacks that it has launched on that object' (p. 149). Here one key moral question was central: how do we make good what we have destroyed? In this regard, the very specific resonance of some Kleinian ideas in the wake of the First World War and their increasing

influence after the Second does not attest to their truth value so much as to their cultural congruence. Reparation rebuilds the world after destruction; yet, it is only in its social context that one can get the full feel of the ambiguities involved. Lyndsey Stonebridge notes that in the immediate aftermath of the war, 'reparations' not only meant repairing the damage done, but – because of the disastrous failure of political imagination accompanying the Versailles Treaty – it also had connotations of being unfair and unduly punitive, hence continuing in the destructive mode. 'Like redemption,' she writes (Stonebridge, 1998, p.32), 'reparation carries with it both the spiritual sense of salvation and atonement and economic connotations of compensation and dues collected... For vocal if not ultimately influential sections of the European intelligentsia as well as for those suffering under the terms of the treaty, reparation came to mean something exorbitant, excessive and punitive, in short, an invitation to more aggression.' What is highlighted here is the ambivalence entailed in 'making good' the destruction of the war in an environment in which nothing had been worked through or resolved, and in which the dynamics of anxiety and hatred had not been owned or understood. It is not so much that the Kleinian notion of reparation offers a key to understanding the culture of the time, though it does give some useful leverage for exploring its nuances. It is rather that the trope of reparation runs through a range of cultural products, including Kleinian psychoanalysis, giving them resonance and appeal, and filling them with the meaning-effects that make them warrantable at that time and place. This was different from the Freudian era: the 'problem' was no longer how to live with uncontainable desire, whether sexual or aggressive; it was rather how to manage a situation in which violence and destructiveness were irrevocable, and had already taken place. In this context, the notorious Kleinian focus on destructiveness is actually 'positive' in its orientation (Rustin, 1995), in that it takes as given the human propensity for violence and tries to develop a language and practice through which it can be alleviated. But the broader point is also a simpler one: whether exemplified in the European context of its earliest formulation as a practice of control over unconscious wishes, or in the later twentieth-century interest in reparative and sustainable relationships, psychoanalysis is infected with the problematics of its

period; and what its subjects and its originators went through cast long shadows of violence and loss.

Primitive Remains

To return to the main argument, there is something else to consider in relation to psychoanalysis, understood as a theory that is infected by violence, yet positions itself as an approach of enlightenment. This concerns how the theorising of violence is underpinned by certain assumptions that ‘unconsciously’ reproduce the terms of a colonial imagination. For Freud, psychoanalysis was an emancipatory practice that would bring illumination and reveal the infantilism at the source of so much individual and social behaviour; this revelation would be a way of taming the unconscious and using its energy in the pursuit of a more creative, more ‘civilised’ world. This has barely happened, of course, and in Freud’s lifetime it became clear that the European world was slipping into barbarism – with Freud himself associated with the victims. The traces of this in psychoanalytic theory are very pronounced, and none of it should really have been a surprise. Indeed, they are theorised explicitly in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (Freud, 1930): society is hypocritical, the unconscious is at loggerheads with it; there is little likelihood of dramatic change; violence is the source and origin of the social; death comes to dominate us all. If barbarism breaks down the ‘garrison’ of civilisation, it can hardly come as a shock to those who devote their intellectual and professional energy to tracing the impossibility of coming to terms with the unconscious. But let us go a little further too, in thinking through Freud’s and psychoanalysis’ positioning of the space of violence and savagery. For this word – ‘savage’ – is quite a key one in the formation of psychoanalysis.

Freud’s (1913) adoption of a binary differentiation between ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’ on the one side, and ‘civilised’ on the other, has been discussed extensively in many places, as has the way in which this ‘colonial’ discourse is disrupted by the Freudian assertion of the presence of

'primitivity' within every subject, however ostensibly 'civilised' they may be, in the form of an unconscious that does not obey the dictates of rationality (e.g. Frosh, 2013b). The issue here is the way in which this imagery of savagery and primitivism is reproduced in accounts of violence, with the effect of running together the ideas of the primitive 'other' of colonialism and the violent elements in all human subjects. That is to say, where destructiveness is observed, it is commonly interpreted as a reflection of 'primitive' elements of the subject, and accretes around it associations and fantasies of the 'uncivilised' other, to which the colonial mentality is well attuned. Thus, the opposition between 'civilisation' and 'the individual's dangerous desire for aggression' holds in the example given earlier (Freud, 1930, p.124), as does the notion of the death drive as something that *returns* as a primordial situation, associated with primitive fantasies about dissolution. Hence Freud's (1919, pp.241-2) gloss on death: 'Since almost all of us still think as savages do on this topic, it is no matter for surprise that the primitive fear of the dead is still so strong within us and always ready to come to the surface on any provocation.'

This 'regressive' framework, assuming a kind of 'descent' into savagery, is present too in the Kleinian fascination with destructiveness, which is made consequent upon an inbuilt death drive that produces envy as a 'primitive' affect linked with attacks on the maternal object. (Notably, Klein uses the notion of 'primitive' freely to describe early, passionate affects and desires; but she also uses it in the same way as does Freud, as in opposition to 'civilised'. For example: 'Another question applies to the effect of late weaning, as is customary with primitive peoples and also in certain sections of civilized communities' – Klein, 1952, p. 119.) The 'positive' move in Kleinian theory through the depressive position and into reparation retains a sense of needing to overcome impulsivity through managing more complex (one might call them 'civilised') thought patterns that tolerate uncertainty and ambivalence in a way assumed to be difficult for children to manage. Under the conditions that prevailed in these great moments of formation of seminal psychoanalytic theories – and that still exert significant influence today – the idea of 'primitive' thinking and emotion slips easily into the figure of *the* 'primitive', who by virtue of precisely this 'primitivity' (irrationality, impulsivity, etc) becomes

other to the civilised. Only certain colonised individuals – ‘elite natives’ with complex and conflicted psyches that could be subjected to psychoanalysis (Andersen et al, 2011) – are potential citizens; the others are infantilised in their childlike consciousness, justifying European dominance in everyone’s interests.

There are many ways to defend psychoanalysis against the charge of simple colonialism, and as mentioned above these are supported by the adoption of psychoanalysis by many postcolonial thinkers (Khanna, 2004; 2011; Frosh, 2013b). Nevertheless, something disturbing recurs here. Andersen, Jenson and Keller (2011), whose edited book is an eloquent testimony to ways in which psychoanalysis has been used as part of the decolonising movement, also point out how it sustains an understanding of ‘primitivity’ that faces both ways – it carries forward what is effectively a racist account of the colonised but also shows that the genuine ‘heart of darkness’ lies on the side of the coloniser. Tracing the complex manner in which this happens, Andersen et al note how psychoanalysis expresses some of the patterns of post-World War One destructiveness in terms familiar from colonialism.

If a central project of psychoanalysis was to demonstrate the universality of its central tenets, then finding vestigial traces of such ‘primitive’ characteristics as the incest taboo, filial ambivalence, fetishism, and the tension between the indulgence and repression of the drives in modern Westerners provided an explanatory logic for the evolution of the ‘family of man’. The irruption of savagery among the civilized was less pathology than it was atavism... Psychoanalysis, as practiced and elaborated in colonial settings and, particularly, as adopted and adapted in the emergent postcolony, became reconfigured as a powerful critique of colonialism. (Andersen et al, 2011, p.11)

However, it only seems to do this by carrying forward the previous vision of otherness in terms of the primitive and savage – which has to do with the norms of a colonial society in which black and brown others were seen as undeveloped and infantile. In an associated way the unconscious was understood as passionate, wishful, uncontained and immature; and violence as

a form of 'atavism' was linked with primitive remains. Whilst other psychoanalytic schools not discussed here (for example, intersubjectivists and possibly Lacanians) show less dependence on the primitive-civilised binary, the point is that psychoanalysis carries over the traces of this binary as it moves forward into the postcolonial era. 'Unconsciously', it reproduces them even when used in the decolonising movement – this being part of the ambiguity of Fanon's (1952) account and perhaps also why every postcolonial psychoanalyst seems to be drawn back to him as a point of origin and fascination. In relation to the spread of psychoanalysis beyond its original European and North American heartlands, the continuing pull of colonial assumptions can also be found. For example, in one of the most densely psychoanalytic cultures in the world, Brazil, there is a clear history of psychoanalysis as a 'civilising' force that reinforces colonialism as well as providing tools for resistance – in much the way that Andersen et al (2011) describe in the quotation immediately above. Early Brazilian psychoanalysis was embedded in a vision of nation-building that tackled questions of racial mix and sexuality as primary concerns of a society emerging from slavery and supposed 'primitivism' (Russo, 2012a). This early history of Brazilian psychoanalysis was reshaped through encounters with authoritarianism and social control during the twentieth century, resulting in a set of theoretical and practical concerns that were characteristically split between a conservative, 'conforming' psychoanalysis tied to normalising visions of 'race' and sexuality (that is, psychoanalysis as a tool for social control) and a more critical psychoanalysis offering support for resistance to authoritarian dictatorship. One consequence was a tension that arose during the Brazilian dictatorship of 1964-1985 between the official institutions of psychoanalysis and much of its clientele. Russo (2012b, p. 174), for example, noting the contrast between the psychoanalytic promise of individual 'liberation' and the conformism of the psychoanalytic societies, comments 'The silence or even the connivance of the "official" societies with regard to the military dictatorship was a hallmark of psychoanalysis in Brazil... "official" psychoanalysis ... became a symbol of political conservatism at a time when psychoanalysis — at its height — was regarded as an instrument of liberation by a good number of its clients.' Similar tensions occurred in Argentina (Plotkin,

2012), although the specific history there showed different colonialist dynamics, as psychoanalysis was deployed to reinforce the idea of a 'European' dominant class.

Conclusion

The idea that psychoanalysis has its own 'unconscious' is no more and no less metaphorical than the idea that any individual person has an unconscious. We cannot see this thing, the unconscious, in any way; we know, in fact, that it does not actually exist as a physical entity. Instead, it is evident from what people say and do, in their guarded as well as their unguarded moments, that stuff happens, it seeps through and the process of understanding it is always retrospective. The claim here is that we can see such 'seeping through' in the theory of psychoanalysis, and no doubt elsewhere too (for example, in institutional practices and clinical work) if we take the time to look for it. This seeping through takes a number of forms, but the one emphasised here is the link psychoanalysis makes between violence and primitivity, a link that has its origins in Freud's thought and in the social forces of his day, but is reproduced in later psychoanalysis and continues to freight contemporary discussions.

I suggested at the start of this piece that whilst unconscious forces operate in all disciplinary formations, psychoanalysis' attempt to articulate and control them might particularly provoke them into action. Freud's apparent reluctance to acknowledge the unconscious ('we have been obliged...'), whether rhetorical or real, might entail a recognition of how the 'theory of the unconscious' is a provocation. Psychoanalysis presents itself as a discipline of tentative mastery, but what is evident is that it has its own blind spots. Other work (feminist and queer) has shown how these include gender and sexuality, two dimensions that are absolutely central to psychoanalytic thought and yet have also proved to be hothouses for contestation. In this paper I have concentrated on another such blind spot, that of colonialism. Directly and indirectly it keeps looming into sight. I have argued that the colonial elements of psychoanalysis' heritage

are visible in its conceptualisation of violence, and specifically in thinking of violence as an 'atavistic' reproduction of a foundational savagery that, in its imagery and in its substance, is caught up with divisions between civilised and barbaric with very particular sociohistorical resonances. I have also tried to hold close to the idea that psychoanalysis can offer ways of thinking about violence that can aid the postcolonial project, which I take to be an emancipatory one. Specifically, the resistance shown in psychoanalysis to what Laplanche (1999) refers to as the 'Copernican' vision of the subject as necessarily permeated by the other is a resistance that can be analysed and understood – as he tries to do – in relation to the disruption the other causes to the ego's search for control. Building a psychoanalysis that is alert to the functions of otherness is not only a clinical task, reflected in contemporary work across a variety of psychoanalytic 'schools' that emphasise relationality and intersubjectivity (e.g. Benjamin, 2004); it is also a social and political task. It asks questions of psychoanalysis about how its original assumptions about the 'primitive' other are maintained in its ongoing conceptualisation of the human subject; it particularly focuses attention on what these assumptions produce in relation to how violence is understood; and it suggests ways in which these 'unconscious' assumptions might be unpicked to enable psychoanalysis to offer more cogent accounts of violence in society.

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