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**Psychoanalysis, Colonialism, Racism**

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## **The Ambiguities of Psychoanalysis**

Relationships between psychology and postcolonial theory are mediated in a variety of ways, most of them uncomfortable. This discomfort is produced by a mixture of criticism and what one might call a kind of studied blindness that produces a blank, uncomprehending hostility. The general direction of criticism has been from postcolonial theory to psychology; the converse, a psychological engagement with postcolonialism, is relatively rare, given the stance of apolitical naivety that academic psychology commonly adopts. ‘What has this to do with us?’ is perhaps the most predictable response to questions about what psychology might have to say about, and how it might be implicated in, colonialist discourse. This is despite the existence of some contemporary writing from within psychology that shows exactly what it ‘has to do with us’. This writing refers both to the damage psychology perpetrates and the strands within it that might fill out the postcolonial critique of power by articulating the contribution of mental states to the perpetuation of colonial culture and, conversely, the impact of such culture on the construction of the psychological – and hence *social* – subject (e.g. Hook, 2012). In this regard, it is ironic that one of the founding texts of postcolonial theory, Frantz Fanon’s (1952) *Black Skin, White Masks*, is explicitly psychological in its interests, centring on how colonialism ‘enters the skin’ of its subjects. Paralleling this, some of the most vituperative disputes in the history of psychology can be seen as struggles reflecting the emergence of postcolonial perspectives – notably, the battles over ‘race and IQ’ that split western university campuses in the 1970s, and always threaten to recur (e.g. Rose et al, 1984; Gould, 1996). At a more general level, it can perhaps be claimed that psychology and postcolonial theory need each other. Psychology needs postcolonialism quite patently, because without the challenge of postcolonial thinking it drifts into ahistorical and highly abstracted models of the mind that fail to theorise

their temporal and spatial components. Postcolonialism needs psychology more subtly, because without some kind of effective psychological input it essentialises the sociohistorical and is left grasping for a theory of the subject that attends to its complex affective and fantasmatic life. This means that the failures of connection between the disciplines impoverishes both; more to the point, it results in a theory of the subject that is either asocial, or that neglects the agentic possibilities for resistance and change.

When postcolonial studies and psychological theory have engaged with one another, it has most often been through psychoanalysis (e.g. Khanna, 2004). This is an especially complex situation, because of the controversial position psychoanalysis holds not only within postcolonial thought, but also in psychology. Denounced by most psychologists for the way it takes speculative licence with evidence and for its lack of scientific credentials, it has become attractive to some critical social psychologists and, especially, to those advancing the new ‘sub-discipline’ or transdisciplinary apparatus of *psychosocial studies* (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008). This is partly because of the status of psychoanalysis as an outsider to, and hence critic of, mainstream academic psychology; but it is also more substantively because in focusing on subjectivity and the agency of unconscious life, it creates an opportunity for considering how the human subject is not self-contained, but is permeated by forces that it cannot necessarily understand or control. This means that whilst psychoanalysis has tended to concentrate on ‘internal’ forces, it provides an opportunity to consider the social ‘saturation’ of the subject; or, put another way, it gives leverage to theories that deal with the formation of the human as a social subject. Psychoanalysis has been quite widely deployed in this way in some major social theories and has been advanced by international figures such as Judith Butler (2005) and Slavoj Žižek (2006) – the former

drawing on Laplanchean ideas about the penetration of the subject by the other; the latter perhaps the prime proselytiser for certain forms (Žižekian ones, we might say) of Lacanianism. Whatever the reasons, the situation remains that psychoanalysis, aberrant relative of psychology that it might be, occupies a productive space in the current panoply of transdisciplinary critical materials for intellectual study (Frosh, 2010) and that this is part of its appeal for postcolonial theorists.

This essay explores the prospects for a psychological contribution to postcolonial thought through the mediation of psychoanalysis. It does not attempt to deconstruct or historicise postcolonialism itself, at least to any significant extent, further than to state the need for a postcolonial theory of the subject that incorporates an understanding of affective and ‘subjective’ issues – precisely the area with which psychoanalysis is primarily concerned. The positioning of psychoanalysis as a progressive, critical approach is not, however, a particularly secure one. The central difficulty is the way psychoanalysis has frequently aligned itself with conformist and even ‘repressive’ tendencies that reproduce colonial and at times racist tropes, often in the context of psychological individualism, but sometimes in an explicitly political manner (Jacoby, 1983; Frosh, 1999). This is despite the existence of a contrary urge in psychoanalysis, especially reflected in the ‘critical theory’ tradition that made use of it in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g. Marcuse, 1955) but also in the work of several followers of Lacan (Stavrakakis, 2007) and some British social reformists (Rustin, 1991). The tendency of American ego psychology to give prominence to ‘adaptationist’ perspectives has been widely noted and has been criticised both by political radicals (e.g. Jacoby, 1975, 1983) and by Lacanians (cf. Roudinesco, 1990, p. 175: ‘According to [Lacan] such a psychological science had been affected by the ideals of the society in which it was produced’). The adoption of a strong anti-homosexual bias by orthodox mid-

twentieth century psychoanalysts has had particularly damaging consequences for the practice and reputation of psychoanalysis as a whole, even though recent attempts to reconcile psychoanalysis and queer theory are beginning to bear fruit (Frosh, 2006; Campbell, 2000). Psychoanalytic assumptions about the nature of a 'civilised' mind will be briefly discussed below; but overt forms of racism, notably antisemitism, have also on occasions been evident in its institutional practices (Frosh, 2005, 2012). Most relevantly, colonialism is a deeply problematic issue for psychoanalysis, because it is engrained in much psychoanalytic thinking and terminology, and this has effects on contemporary theory and practice in ways that are not always recognised. For example, as discussed further below, psychoanalysts often draw on the language of the 'primitive' to refer to 'unreasoning' elements of people's psychic lives. Thus, a notion that someone might be evincing a 'primitive fantasy of destruction' is a very familiar one, but what is not acknowledged is that this terminology not only has its roots in a colonial opposition between 'primitive' and 'civilised', but it also *reproduces* this division 'unconsciously' when it is employed. This is to say, the terminology is full of associations that position some ideas as 'civilised' and some as 'primitive', reinforcing a developmental scheme that is heavily inflected by assumptions about the relationship between seemingly irrational and rational thought processes – and in particular who might 'own' them.

The history of this stretches back to the beginnings of psychoanalysis, reflecting the colonial and racist (including antisemitic) assumptions prevalent in the Europe out of which psychoanalysis arose. Freud deployed the idea that the thinking of what he called 'savages' was not only contrasted to 'civilised' mentality, but also revealed the origins of mental life both for the culture as a whole (the contemporary savage being a throwback to the precursors of modern 'man') and for the individual (the savage mind being like that of a child). For example, at the beginning of

*Totem and Taboo*, subtitled *Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, he writes, 'There are men still living who, as we believe, stand very near to primitive man, far nearer than we do, and whom we therefore regard as his direct heirs and representatives. Such is our view of those whom we describe as savages or half-savages; and their mental life must have a peculiar interest for us if we are right in seeing in it a well-preserved picture of an early stage of our own development' (Freud, 1913, p. 1). The repetitive first person plural pronoun is notable here: 'we believe', 'we do', 'we regard', 'our view', 'we describe', 'us', 'our own development.' The savage is the other, the not 'us'; though as will be outlined briefly below, there is quite a degree of subtlety in what this might mean. Freud also was explicit about how 'savages' share attributes with children, both in terms of how they think, and how they are thought about by 'we adults'. 'It seems to me quite possible,' he writes (p.99), 'that the same may be true of our attitude towards the psychology of those races that have remained at the animistic level as is true of our attitude towards the mental life of children, which we adults no longer understand and whose fullness and delicacy of feeling we have in consequence so greatly underestimated.'

The adoption of a binary between 'savage' and 'civilised' is not perhaps intrinsically racist and colonialist, but the assumption that the latter always displaces the former and, more importantly, that the terms can be applied to different people, is. In Freud's thought, 'savage' societies hold to various types of irrational thinking (concreteness, mystical attitudes to death, etc), processes reviewed throughout *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1913) and explicitly linked with children in more 'civilised' societies. For instance, in writing of wish fulfilment (p.84), Freud comments, 'If children and primitive men find play and imitative representation enough for them, that is not a sign of their being unassuming in our sense or of their resignedly accepting their

actual impotence. It is the easily understandable result of the paramount virtue they ascribe to their wishes, of the will that is associated with those wishes and of the methods by which those wishes operate.’ These ways of thinking make them ‘primitive’ in the developmental sense that they should normatively be overcome by more advanced modes of being – a theme also taken up in the analysis of religion in *The Future of an Illusion* (Freud, 1927). Whilst Freud himself does not press for political action that does this – he was interested rather in how science might overcome superstition – the general approach is consistent with the justification of colonialism and even slavery on the grounds of the inherent inferiority of the primitive. There is another subtle turn here, however, that is specific to Freud and the early history of psychoanalysis, relating to the intense antisemitism of Freud’s time. Gilman (1993) shows how deeply rooted antisemitism was in the beliefs of many Europeans, markedly so in the Viennese amongst whom psychoanalysis grew up, and how widespread were ideas such as that Jews were castrated (hence, feminine), that they were ‘oriental’ and maybe even ‘black’, and that they were primitive in the religious sense (Christianity having displaced Judaism) but also psychologically, socially and racially. Gilman suggests that Freud, consciously or unconsciously, constructed some of the most conspicuously radical elements of his theory in response to this. For instance, Gilman argues that the trope that Jewish men are castrated through circumcision is replaced in psychoanalysis by the idea that the castration complex is universal, so that all people – including the most gentile – follow a model set by the Jews. This Freudian impulse to disarm antisemitism by positioning the Jews as the truly civilised people (which was mirrored in the idea that as nationalism took hold in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, the Jews might be the *only* ‘true Europeans’, oriented towards a transnational comity) results in a shifting of the ‘other’ of European society away from the Jew and towards the ‘savage’, that is, the colonised, black

‘primitive’ of slavery and the European imagination. This theoretical move attempts to relieve Jews from the opprobrium of primitivity (unsuccessfully, as was demonstrated unequivocally just a few years later) by passing it onto the colonised other.

There is always a danger with summary accounts such as this one, that the history it sketches simplistically reduces a tension-filled and ambiguous process to a linear narrative. It is certainly the case, for example, that psychoanalysis was from the start full of impulses that challenged and subverted the assumptions of the societies in which it found itself. Indeed, this is one reason for the mixture of explosive embrace and resistance that characterised the response to psychoanalysis: on the one hand, it fuelled enormous shifts in self-perception, artistic creativity and even political and economic thought (not confined to outspoken radicals – see for example John Maynard Keynes’ (1919, 1936) post-World War One utilisation of Freudian ideas to argue for the importance of emotional factors in economics). In many respects, it is precisely in the tension between what Toril Moi (1989, p. 197) calls, in relation to the attitude of psychoanalysis to femininity, Freud’s ‘colonising impulse’ and its contrary acceptance of ‘the logic of another scene’ – the specific expressiveness of unconscious life – that the creativity of psychoanalysis inheres. Nevertheless, consideration of the rootedness of much psychoanalytic thought in colonial assumptions is important not merely in order to sweep away the ideological detritus, but also to identify where the investments of psychoanalysis can provide leverage for understanding the place of psychosocial theory in the postcolonial project.

A further example of the ‘detritus’ might be found in some work by Celia Brickman (2003), which offers an extensive account of how the language of primitivity infects psychoanalysis. Like Gilman, she notes how Freud’s ‘universalizing reconfigurations’ (p.165) turn the despised Jewish body into the model for humanity as a whole. From the perspective of postcolonialism,

however, this move, which is subversive in relation to antisemitism, is ‘made at considerable expense,’ because ‘the modalities of inferiority previously ascribed to the Jews did not simply disappear but were ambivalently displaced onto a series of abjected others: primitives, women and homosexuals.’ Brickman elaborates on how the assimilation of the Jewish other to Europeanism positions psychoanalysis as a colonialist discipline and incorporates racism into its fabric of argumentation.

Categorized as a member of a primitive race, Freud repudiated primitivity, locating himself and his work within European civilization, with both its scientific and colonizing enterprises, and replacing the opposition of Aryan/Jew with the opposition of civilized/primitive. (p.167)

In relation to psychoanalytic practice, ‘primitive’ usually means either or both of ‘fundamental’ and ‘irrational’. A ‘primitive’ impulse is never a rational one; it always arises unmediated from the unconscious and hence has not been worked over by the secondary processes of thought. The sleight of hand then is to link this kind of primitivity with the irrationality of the colonised other and then to make rationality itself the marker of civilised human society – or even of what it means to be human at all. After all, when one loses one’s power of reason, one ceases to be able to function as human at least to the degree that equal citizenship is at risk. In the colonial context, this justifies colonisation: irrational primitives cannot be trusted to run their own affairs; the civilised European is justifiably superior, for everyone’s good. Commenting on Freud’s anthropological speculation, Brickman notes how the psyche comes to be envisaged as a representation of colonialism and hence how Freud explicitly parallels the structure of the mind with that of (colonial) society.

[By] correlating the progression of narcissism, the oedipal stage, and maturity with animism (savagery), religion (barbarianism), and science (civilisation), *Totem and Taboo* transposed the racial assumptions of the cultural evolutionary scale onto the modern psyche... The psychoanalytically conceived norm of mature subjectivity was, by virtue of the correlation of libidinal development with the cultural evolutionary scale, a rationalism whose unstated colour was white, just as its unstated gender was male. (Brickman, 2003, p.72)

Even though these Freudian assumptions are mainly ‘unstated’, the terminology and the conceptual baggage of the ‘savage’ and the ‘barbarian’ remained with psychoanalysis for some time and is still lying only-just-dormant in those references to ‘primitive feelings’ that often can be found in clinical psychoanalytic discussions. A certain mode of rationality is given priority here, which is attached to masculine ‘reason’ as it has developed over the period of industrial modernity (Frosh, 1994). That which falls short of it – the ‘unreason’ attributed to women, children and ‘primitive’ cultures – is derogated and made subject to reason’s imperialism. This is not, of course, to imply that one should fully affirm *unreason* as a simple alternative to ‘colonial reason’; it is rather to claim that the reason-unreason opposition is itself rooted in a colonial mentality that supports it and narrows the range of what is culturally validated. In a similar vein, Neil Altman (2000, p.591) comments, ‘When Freud the ego psychologist said, “Where id was, there ego shall be,” he defined the goals of psychoanalysis in terms reminiscent of the colonial mentality. In this sense, the structure of racism is built into structural psychoanalytic theory, particularly in its ego-psychological form.’ This claim is itself resonant of the critique of ego psychology mentioned earlier. The argument runs that because this form of psychoanalysis assumes reason to be superior to unreason, its concurrent assumption that unreason is

characteristic of ‘primitives’ means that it is promoting a colonising process (reason trumping unreason; civilised displacing primitive) that is embedded in a racist paradigm. As an instructive aside, it is perhaps worth noting that ego psychology itself has a complex set of origins, one of which regularly gets lost when its notions of adaptation are pronounced solely conformist and colonialist. The occlusion here is of the personal history of most of the post-Second World War American ego psychologists as migrants or refugees from Nazi Europe. Their concerns were indeed to find creative ways to adapt to a new society; in addition, they were exercised by the explosion of irrationality that had overwhelmed their lost homelands, and their impulse to find ways to fend this off and protect future societies from its recurrence was perhaps understandable.

The argument so far is that psychoanalysis has some of its roots in colonialist assumptions that continue to resonate in contemporary theory and clinical practice. Even though this is counterposed with a more complicated investment in a ‘seditious’ mode of critique, the extent to which psychoanalysis is implicated in a colonialist frame makes it a problematic candidate for postcolonial and antiracist adoption. Nevertheless, it is the case that psychoanalysis also influences contemporary postcolonial theory. This is mainly for two related reasons, one shared with many other disciplines (including psychology) and the other perhaps specific to psychoanalysis. First, the tortured history of psychoanalysis reveals how colonialism infects even disciplines that also have subversive possibilities. Psychoanalysis is a key instance of an attempt to speak ‘from the margins’ about western culture, and indeed to reveal explicitly how the claim of the west to progress and rationality is underpinned by violence and irrationality. In his theory of culture, Freud proposed that the murder of the primal father was the basis for all civilisation, including (in his 1939 text, *Moses and Monotheism*) monotheistic religion. In relation to individual psychology, the notion of the dynamic unconscious is such that it places the

supposedly ‘primitive’ at the core of even the most ‘civilised’ subject. The unconscious is universal, no one is exempt from it; even the most refined person has lust and aggression within. Psychoanalysis reveals this and is consequently a radical opponent of the ‘primitive/civilised’ distinction. Yet, psychoanalysis carries within it a history of racism and antisemitism that is still visible, not only in the fascination with the ‘primitive’ mentioned above, but even in quite recent outbursts of antisemitism (Frosh, 2012). Psychoanalysis is thus an exemplary incidence of a disciplinary practice that both draws on colonialism and disrupts its categories at the same time, and exploring how this happens can teach us a great deal about the tentacles of colonialism and racism in intellectual life.

Secondly, perhaps because it does speak from the heart of colonialism, psychoanalysis offers a route towards explicating the workings of the colonial mind and its legacy in the postcolonial world. Ranging from Fanon’s (1952) seminal application of existentially-inflected psychoanalytic ideas to the identity construction of the colonised mind (as well as to the explanation of racism), to more recent uses of Freudian theory in explorations of the ‘melancholic’ aspects of the postcolonial state (Khanna, 2004), psychoanalysis has offered a vocabulary and set of conceptual tools for articulating the subtle manner in which sociocultural processes construct, and are in turn supported by, psychic configurations. Edward Said (2003) provides one summary of this in his presentation of Freud’s late work, specifically *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), as a critique of personal and national identity. This is constituted in ‘Freud’s profound exemplification of the insight that even for the most definable, the most identifiable, the most stubborn communal identity – for him, this was the Jewish identity – there are inherent limits that prevent it from being fully incorporated into one, and only one, Identity’ (Said, 2003, p.53). Freud’s proposition that Moses was an Egyptian emphasises how a nation is never

homogeneous, either ‘genetically’ (i.e. ‘racially’) or culturally. The most important founding figure of Jewish culture is, according to Freud, an outsider, which is a specific instance of a general rule that can be applied everywhere – that identities are always heterogeneous and fractured. This emphasis on the ‘outsider’ at the heart of the nation also undermines claims for the fixedness and superiority of European colonial culture, pointing to the reality that at its source is a hidden otherness. There is no single identity, it is always open to the other, and claims for its univocality depend on drowning out the voices of the others that have given it shape. The European is thus infected from the start with the disruptive presence of the colonised, and psychoanalysis shows how this occurs.

### **Effects of the Colonial Gaze**

The second part of this essay illustrates how psychoanalysis might act on this potential to fill out postcolonial theory. The adoption of psychoanalysis by postcolonial theory has a very specific origin in Fanon’s (1952) *Black Skin, White Masks*. The central chapter’s violent opening haunts Fanon’s whole book and everything that has come since, and focuses attention on the impact of a certain kind of alienating *gaze*. Fanon sees himself observed:

‘Dirty nigger!’ Or simply, ‘Look, a Negro!’

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. (p.109)

And a few pages later, where the observer is explicitly a child:

‘Look, a Negro!’ It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.

‘Look, a Negro!’ It was true, it amused me.

‘Look, a Negro!’ The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.

‘Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened.’ Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible. (pp.111-2)

This episode is commonly read in the light both of a Sartrean kind of alienation, in which the black man is denied the reflection in the eyes of the other that would constitute him as a subject, and in terms of the Lacanian mirror phase (Lacan, 1949), which Fanon explicitly references later on (p.161). In the latter, psychoanalytic, case, an important point is the difference between Fanon and Lacan, which is not marked by Fanon himself but is significant for comprehending psychoanalysis’ limitations as well as its promise. Fundamentally, the difference is in terms of cultural relativity or specificity, as against the universalising tendency of psychoanalytic reductionism. The culturally undifferentiated Lacanian mirror phase attributes alienation to the adoption of the visual image as the ‘truth’ of the subject, and sees all subjects as similarly constructed by this process. The Lacanian subject looks in the mirror and sees its image reflected back to it, and then appropriates that image as a source of comfort and a way of making meaning out of what was previously fragmented experience. In so doing, the subject adopts as ‘real’ the image given back to it from the mirror; for Lacan, this is a description of how the ego functions to cover over the Real. Fanon, however, offers a specifically racialised version. The black subject, *subjected to* the racist gaze, sees itself in the *white* mirror that removes the possibility of self-assertion and mastery and instead creates further fragmentation. The black subject is positioned as an *object* (‘I was an object in the midst of other objects’) and does not appropriate the fantasy of integrated subjectivity. What has happened is that the black subject has been fixed

by an external gaze – the ‘mirror-as-camera’ as Khanna (2004, p.187) puts it. She goes on, ‘The psychoanalytic ambiguities of the mirror stage are, in a sense, then, the flip side of the colonial machinery that renders the colonized subject split, and visible only when refracting a certain form of light. The modern colonized subject has, then, a different ontological makeup than that of the colonizer rendered through the relationship of looking, and not seeing oneself as a mask, but rather, one’s gestalt as a mask, and one’s mask as a self.’ Kelly Oliver summarises the way in which this marks out the black subject as one who cannot share in the kind of alienation that western theorists posit as essential to human subjecthood. ‘For Fanon,’ she writes (2004, p.24), ‘if man is alienated because he is thrown into a world not of his own making, the black man is doubly alienated because he is thrown there as one incapable of making meaning... The privilege of autonomy and creative meaning making has been bought at a cost to those othered as inferior, dependent, and incapable of making meaning.’ Earlier, she makes an important point about the romance of alienation in the west, and the reality of a different kind of alienation forced on the ‘other’ by colonialism.

What Fanon identifies as the difference between the *black man* and *man* turns around this difference between ordinary alienation and its double, or underside, the alienation of colonization and oppression. Fanon suggests that the black man is denied the form of alienation so precious to subjectivity according to various European philosophers. Rather, the black man is the dark, invisible underside of the privilege of subjectivity constituting alienation. (p.3)

Alienation of a certain kind – the ‘European notion of an alienation inherent in subjectivity’ (Ibid., p.1) – is a luxury that allows certain people to deal with guilt and anxiety. Psychoanalysis recognises it, notably in Lacan’s idea that separation of the subject from some little piece of

reality – the ‘object a’ – is essential for the constitution of subjectivity. When this separation collapses, for example when one comes face to face with a ‘double’ in the form of an uncanny reminder of what one has become, the subject is deeply disturbed. Mladen Dolar (1996, p.139) explains that it is here that the Lacanian account of anxiety is distinctive: rather than focusing on anxiety about loss (castration, birth anxiety, death) ‘it is the anxiety of gaining something too much, of too close a presence of the object. What one loses with anxiety is precisely the loss – the loss that made it possible to deal with a coherent reality.’

The kind of ‘alienation inherent in subjectivity’ that is seen as necessary for the construction of the emancipated subject is blocked by the colonial relationship, which in the Fanonian example forces the black subject to be constructed in the eyes of the white. The consequence is that the kinds of alienation that construct white and black subjectivities are radically distinct from each other. The Lacanian frame again helps here. For the white subject, the mirror phase is characterised by a presentation of visual wholeness (the image in the mirror) that reassures the subject and leads to a sense of agency in the world. For the black, colonised subject, the reflection is not of the image as seen by the subject her or himself (and directed by the gaze of the mother); it is a reflection of the coloniser’s gaze, and as such is *doubly* alienating. Fanon, writes Oliver (2004, p.21), ‘describes the effects of the white mirror as undermining any sense of unification and control, and returning the black body and psyche to a state of fragmentation and lack of control.’ Put more broadly, the colonised subject is alienated from the possible space of meaning-making; what she or he sees is not a look of recognition coming from the other, but a look of disdain, fear or blank incomprehension.

Colonial power is built on this capacity of the coloniser to remove the source of subjecthood from the colonised; and this power is reflected and institutionalised continuously by the gaze,

resting on and marking the skin through the process that Fanon calls 'epidermalization'. This particular kind of gaze projects the abjected elements of the white onto the skin of the black. In particular, the black is positioned as sexual, aggressive, physical; and this legacy of slavery and colonialism continues to inhabit the dynamic of mastery that poisons the racialised subject. 'For Fanon,' claims Oliver (p.51), 'values are secreted, injected, born of the blood, amputated, and haemorrhaging; they are analogous to bodily fluids. As such, they are dynamic and mobile; and more important, they move from body to body and can infect whole populations.' Racism is made viral by this. Fanon himself comments (1952, p.161),

When one has grasped the mechanism described by Lacan, one can have no further doubt that the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely. Only for the white man the Other is perceived on the level of the body image, absolutely as the not-self – that is, the unidentifiable, the unassimilable.

The black functions as a necessary repository for the white's disowned affects and fantasies – notably those of sexuality:

The white man is convinced that the Negro is a beast; if it is not the length of the penis, then it is the sexual potency that impresses him. Face to face with the man who is 'different from himself', he needs to defend himself. In other words, to personify the Other. The Other will become the mainstay of his preoccupation and his desires. (Fanon, 1952, p. 170).

Sexuality in the field of racism will be returned to below; but this kind of libidinally inflected racialised passion is a necessary component of an account one might try to give of why colonialism and racism are such inflamed, so personally *felt*, structures.

Derek Hook (2012) also draws attention to the way Fanon's notion of epidermalization 'prioritizes the visual register, providing an understanding not just of the stark visibility of race but of the effects of the "racial gaze"' (p.114). These authors and others emphasise how the white gaze constructs the black subject from the outside, through the operations of bodily oppression and the kind of look that pins the denigrated other to the ground. The gaze is both destructive and admiring; or rather it is full both of hate and of desire, and as such is marked by envy and by a search for a mirror that will reflect *difference*. The white subject *needs* the black in order to define itself; and it desires the black as the repository of those necessary things – above all, sexuality – which it has repudiated out of anxiety and self-loathing.

### **The Racist Imaginary**

A central contribution of psychoanalysis to postcolonial work is to provide a vocabulary that facilitates discussion of what might be called the 'excessive' dimension of racist discourse. This does not mean that racism is ever not excessive – that it is ever purely 'rational' in, for example, an economic sense (it is never rational in terms of its truth claims). But the intensity of the racist *imaginary* is always over and above anything that can be claimed to be in the interests of the oppressing group – whether colonialism itself, which works to subjugate the colonised society, often through terror, or whether it is the explicit violence of populist anti-black, Islamophobic and antisemitic racism. Characteristically, much of this theorising has been undertaken not by clinical psychoanalysts, but by sociologists and cultural critics deploying psychoanalytic ideas. For Adorno et al (1950), in their classic post-War investigation of 'prejudice' informed by social psychology, critical theory and psychoanalysis, the source of this racist imaginary lay in a specific family scenario, in which an authoritarian father and the absence of affection produces a sado-masochistic personality structure unable to deal with the complexity of the world and

insistent on the simplifying products of projection. This creates a persecutory environment full of hated beings, thus confirming the subject's vision of being ensnared in a dangerous situation in which the other has to be wiped out for the self to survive. In particular, *difference* cannot be tolerated because it always constitutes a threat.

The extremely prejudiced person tends towards 'psychological totalitarianism', something which seems to be almost a microcosmic image of the totalitarian state at which he aims. Nothing can be left untouched, as it were; everything must be made 'equal' to the ego-ideal of a rigidly conceived and hypostatized ingroup. The outgroup, the chosen foe, represents an eternal challenge. As long as anything different survives, the fascist character feels threatened, no matter how weak the other being may be. (pp.324-5)

It is important to grasp the way the psychoanalytic component of Adorno et al's work enables them to conceptualise the intensity of affect that racism of this kind involves. Racism is not a 'simple belief' and its irrationality is not solely in the area of its truth claims (though of course it is irrational in that sphere). It is precisely the excessive affect added to the *systematically* prejudiced ideology that makes for a racist imaginary in the sense of an all-encompassing fantasy. Adorno et al enunciate this in relation to the threat felt by the 'fascist character' when faced with difference, and there is a lot of other psychoanalytic evidence for this, as in Theweleit's (1977) famous investigation of the proto-fascists of Weimar Germany. Indeed, the general theme that racism becomes constituted through a projective process whereby the subject disowns aspects of the self which she or he then finds in the outside world and feels persecuted by – and consequently directs violent hatred towards – is rife in the literature. It has its limitations, as all simplifying explanations will have; but it conveys well the way in which a racist subject will both be drawn to and repelled by the object of hatred, and in spite of all

evidence to the contrary, will hold a genuine conviction that its very existence is threatening. In Fanon (1952), this racist passion is spearheaded by sexual repression: whiteness, supported by an ideology of 'purity' and a disavowal of sexuality, needs the black 'other' as a repository of its own discontent if it is to survive. The white man projects his repressed sexuality onto the black, constructing him in fantasy as a sexual paragon and an object for his homosexual desire. The white's relationship to the black is then mediated by this sexuality: the black man, who contains the projected elements of the white's sexuality, is a constant threat to the potency of the white man, a stimulus to the desire of the white woman. Racist persecution of the black is therefore fuelled by sexual hatred, something evidenced by lynchings throughout history.

The postulation that the racist imaginary is constituted not by 'mistaken beliefs' of the kind hypothesised in psychological theories of prejudice, but rather by splitting and projection, draws together psychoanalysts from a wide variety of different positions. In previous work (Frosh, 2006), I have attended especially to the Kleinian analysis provided by the British sociologist Michael Rustin (1991), and the more classical ego psychological version outlined by the radical American psychoanalyst, Joel Kovel (1995). Summarising briefly here, it is the irrationality of mental structures organised around a fundamental 'lie' that Rustin focuses upon, whilst Kovel is interested in the way in which American anti-black racism uses the historical ground of slavery as a repository for white sexual fantasy – an account that has much in common with Fanon's earlier view. Rustin sees racism as deploying extreme defences against psychic fragmentation, defences which construct a paranoid world view that then reinforces the attack the racist psyche feels itself to be under. Beliefs about race, writes Rustin,

when they are suffused with intense feeling, are akin to psychotic states of mind... The mechanisms of psychotic thought find in racial categorizations an ideal container. These

mechanisms include the paranoid splitting of objects into the loved and hated, the suffusion of thinking processes by intense, unrecognized emotion, confusion between self and object due to the splitting of the self and massive projective identification, and hatred of reality and truth. (p.62)

Rustin emphasises the paranoid nature of racist thinking, something readily apparent in conspiracy theories and fantasies of being flooded by waves of immigration, or of being infected by immigrant-borne diseases, or poisoned by alien foods and culture. This is paranoid not simply because of its content ('everyone is against us; we are in a battle for survival') but because of the affective charge attached to the expulsion of intolerable fantasies into the other. The 'election' of the racialised other as an object of hate is a way of closing down the thinking that would be necessary in order to deal properly with these unwanted fantasies, to integrate them properly into the subject's mind and hence make them survivable. Instead, these 'unthought' impulses are evacuated into the other. Racial categories are particularly useful repositories for such anti- or pseudo-thinking not just because they are socially valorised for political purposes (such as colonialism and economic exploitation), but because they are fundamentally 'empty' categories, with very little externally grounded, 'objective' meaning. Rustin comments,

virtually no differences are caught by 'black' or 'white' ... This is paradoxically the source of racism's power. It is the fact that this category means nothing in itself that makes it able to bear so much meaning – mostly psychologically primitive in character – with so little innate resistance from the conscious mind. (p.63)

The racist imaginary is thus constructed out of repudiated elements of the personality that are experienced as deeply threatening. Projecting them into the other means they no longer damage

the subject from within, but it also creates a persecutory and threatening outside world which has to be defended against. Racialised others are especially selected as these hated external objects because they are made available to fulfil this role by the history and structure of racist and colonial societies, and also because, as a fantasy category, racial 'otherness' can be employed to mean virtually anything. The choice of these objects thus derives from the nature of racist societies, but are then perpetuated and accentuated by the way the personality gets distorted through its organisation around pseudo-thinking – that is, around what Rustin calls a 'lie'. This lie, which nominates the other as the cause of trouble as a way of covering over 'internal' disturbance, becomes central to the preservation of the individual's personality and identity. The more strongly it is held, the more it is needed; the subject comes to be in love with the lie and fearful of anything that challenges it. 'The "lie" in this system of personality organisation becomes positively valued, as carrying for the self an important aspect of its defence against weakness, loss or negative judgement' (Rustin, 1991, p. 69). Racism, socially structured though it may be, is consequently deeply invested in by the individual, distorting and disturbing her or his relations with reality and with truth.

It is useful to think of this not as an account of how social and psychological factors 'interact', but rather as a psychosocial theory in which what are usually taken as 'inside' and 'out' are embedded in one another and are inseparable. Racism depends on the structures of racist and colonial societies in order to survive. The choice of the racialised other as the object to receive unwanted psychic projections is made possible by the fact that such others are already 'nominated' as derogated and disempowered, yet also dangerous threats. The racist subject experiences her or his antagonism as belonging to the other and so holds to a rigid separation between internal and external. However, the point about projection is that it reveals precisely the

*permeability* of subject boundaries: what is supposedly ‘inside’ does not stay there, but leaks out and finds its place amongst networks of identification and relationality that are organised socially. These are also part of the ‘self’: racist ideation is intense precisely because it is *felt*. The meaning of a ‘social subject’ is located here: each subject is constructed in and by the demands of (colonial) society, of course acting upon it in its own way, but nevertheless riven by it and inconceivable without it.

Kovel (1995) provides some more leverage on the way in which racism bleeds into the historical structures of the social in a way that leads back to colonialism, here in the context of slavery. The contrast he uses is between a monolithic and rigid mode of thinking and what he terms a ‘polycentric’ mind (which he links with a now valorised ‘primitivity’) that is open to otherness and difference, ‘associated with an openness of the psyche to the world and, in primitive society at least, an openness of society to otherness’ (p.221). In Kovel’s account of history, capitalism suppressed such openness in favour of the rationalist concept of the singular self, the unified personality. Western modernity is built on the renunciation of alternative possibilities of being; the drive for profit swamps the impulses for pleasure and enjoyment. Noting the need for a specific, socially located explanation of how this renunciation turns into racism as what he calls the ‘peculiarly modern form of repressive exclusionism,’ Kovel (p.212) asks the following question.

Could it be that as the western mentality began to regard itself as homogeneous and purified – a *cogito* – it was also led to assign the negativity inherent in human existence to other peoples, thereby enmeshing them in the web of racism?

The vitality and polymorphism of the world becomes flattened and narrowed into a rigid mode of reasoning and a single narrative of experience; this means that much that is real is excluded, and returns to haunt the subject as a frightening, because potentially uncontrollable, irrationality. Racism enters into the equation because this irrationality is located in the other – the one who, through exclusion and election as the ‘alien’, comes to embody the supposedly non-human. The following passage, redolent of Fanon’s description of the sensuality-denying, sexually repressed foundations of ‘whiteness’, powerfully conveys this point of view.

A persistent shadow had dogged puritanism, the dominant cultural type of the early capitalist order – a spectre of renunciation and rationalisation, of the loss of sensuousness and the deadening of existence. In this context the animality projected onto the black by virtue of his or her role in slavery became suitable to represent the vitality split away from the world in Puritan capitalist asceticism. Sensuousness that had been filtered out of the universe in capitalist exchange was to reappear in those who had been denied human status by the emergent capitalist order. Blacks, who had been treated as animals when enslaved, became animals in their essence, while the darkness of their skin became suitable to represent the dark side of the body, embodying the excremental vision that has played so central a role in the development of western consciousness. In this way blacks were seen as beneath whites in reasoning power and above whites in sexuality and the capacity for violence. (Kovel, 1995, p. 217)

Kovel is arguing here that the development of western modernity, built on slavery and capitalist accumulation, produced a psychological imperative to disown multiplicity and sensuality and to project it into the black other. The power of this psychosocial organisation is so great that it can ‘enter into the evolution of the psyche’ (Ibid.) denying the possibility of openness to any new

experience which is not in the interests of accumulation. Instead, the repressed sensuousness, preserved unconsciously because otherwise the psyche dries up completely and is 'deadened', is experienced as threatening and subversive, as well as exciting. It is bestial, animal, fit for projection onto those slaves who are designated by the complex social drive of capitalist imperialism as not fully human. Their physical blackness, marking them as distinct, is merged together with already-existing psychic defences against what Norman Brown (1959) has called the 'excremental vision' to create the ideal object of repudiation. We are back to the idea of the 'primitive' here, as the object into which everything messy and 'unsophisticated' is projected; Kovel's addition is to show how this is linked with the specific history of slavery to make the black other its representative.

There are numerous potential difficulties with the kind of psychoanalytic explanation of racism outlined here. Although I have been emphasising the status of psychoanalysis as a psychosocial theory that breaks down the usual individual-social (and psychology-sociology) binary, there remains a strong temptation when using psychoanalytic concepts to work from the inside out. The social world then becomes populated by projections that emanate from within, without always maintaining consideration of how the opposite effect occurs too – how the apparently 'inner world' of the subject is built around the incorporation of messages from the social other – a perspective adopted by some psychoanalysts very strongly (e.g. Laplanche, 1999), but nevertheless one that is not routine in psychoanalytic thinking. Even progressive approaches such as those described here also tend to assume the presence of some fundamental psychic urges that will unavoidably create problems should they fail to be expressed. In Kovel's account, sexuality has this status: because colonialist culture suppresses and narrows it, it leaks out and has to be projected into the body of the black other. But sexuality itself takes many forms, even

within modernity, and whilst it is a useful shorthand to think of it as something that always seeks to make itself known, this is too mechanistic to do justice to the complexity of constructive processes that produce sexuality in the first place.

The detailed exposition proposed by Kovel places the racist imaginary in a clear and specific social context – the rise of bourgeois modernity built on the slave trade and the colonialist election (and derogation) of the black body as recipient of the excluded and feared elements of the white psyche. This alerts us to the energy of the racist ‘unconscious’, its ‘excremental vision’ and also its elaborate enjoyment, again in the sense of something that goes over-and-above what might be expected, and explicable, on the basis of sociopolitical and economic interests. Perhaps the clearest exponent of this in recent times has been Slavoj Žižek, whose elaborations of the racist dynamic occur within a powerful system constituted in part by Lacanian concepts. Žižek (2006, p.62) comments generally that, ‘The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never “just life”: humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things.’ In the context of racism, this kind of ‘enjoyment’ does not mean ‘having fun’; it means that there is something surplus and unnecessary to which humans are nevertheless ‘passionately attached’. Jodi Dean summarises Žižek’s approach here, referring specifically to his 1993 text, *Tarrying with the Negative*.

Since a community’s enjoyment consists in no positive attribute, it comes to the fore in myths and fantasies, myths that generally explain the ways our enjoyment is threatened by others who want to steal it, who want to ruin our way of life by corrupting it with their own peculiar enjoyment. In turn, we find enjoyment in fantasizing about *their* enjoyment, in positing an enjoyment beyond what we imagine for ourselves. So, we don’t like the

excess of others' ways of life (their music, the way they smell, their relation to their bodies). Their way of life seems immediately intrusive, an assault, like they are flaunting it, daring us, blatantly refusing to sacrifice their enjoyment and come under a common symbolic order. Why do their lives seem so authentic, so real? Why are they so much more in tune with their sexuality, able to eat and drink and live while I am hard at work? The very excessiveness of their enjoyment makes them 'them', other, foreign. (Dean, 2007, p. 22)

Yet, as Žižek (1993) notes, it is precisely this excessive element in the other that attracts 'us', that makes us feel the other has something we do not have – a fuller life, more energy, more intelligence, more passionate sexuality. The field of fantasy is obviously what is in operation here. Moreover, once one possesses the idea of the other's enjoyment as being more than that which is available to the subject, one opens oneself to the logic that proposes that if this is the case, then one's enjoyment must have been *stolen*. The Jew has stolen the money, the black has stolen sexuality: this is what drives much racist fantasy, and it is hard to theorise the excesses of racism without recourse to such an idea about how it is fantasised. For Žižek, in full Lacanian mode, such an imaginary is premised on the repression of a different awareness, that what has been 'lost' or stolen in this way was never part of the subject at all: 'What we conceal by imputing to the Other the theft of enjoyment is the traumatic fact that *we never possessed what was allegedly stolen from us*: the lack ("castration") is originary, enjoyment constitutes itself as "stolen"' (Žižek, 1993, p. 203). This is part of a larger debate on how fantasies of loss can obscure realities of lack – how the incompleteness of the subject can always be laid at someone else's door. The key point here, however, is how the theorisation of excess in this way can say something about the perpetuation of racist ideology and imaginary states: the other is not only

denigrated and hated; the other also has what we want, and this causes a rage that has nothing to do with the real situation.

Hook (2008) draws together some of these disparate threads by aligning Fanon and Žižek in their accounts of how racism gets ‘under the skin’. Fanon’s (1952) line of analysis emphasises the projection of the white’s sexuality onto the black man, only for the white man to find it returning as envied aspects of his own disavowed sexual embodiment. Hook reads this in relation to the Lacanian idea of the surplus of enjoyment that is both needed and yet is feared, because it locates the psychic life of the subject in the body and hence in what is ‘bestial’ and mortal. The consequence of this, as noted above, is that the racist subject is obsessed by a lack which she or he translates into a ‘loss’ – implying that it has been stolen by someone else, who now possesses it. Hook elaborates,

One might thus speak of the racist envy of a given ‘regime of enjoyments’, that is an experience of lack in which the racist subject wishes to take back those surplus enjoyments that they perceive in various ‘racial others’. The enjoyments in question are properties that the racist subject feels themselves singularly entitled to, but is lacking; these are properties that have as such been stolen away by others, whose possession thereof therefore qualifies these ‘racial others’ as radically blameworthy. In such moments the ‘enjoying other’ becomes curiously important to the racist, certainly so inasmuch as they might be said to represent a repository of enjoyments that need be taken back. We return thus to a familiar lesson in the psychoanalysis of racism: the ‘racial other’ is needed, envied, desired far more than the racist subject can ever admit. (Hook, 2008, p.146)

For Hook, the rendering of Fanon into Lacanian territory draws attention to the ways in which racialising embodiment acts within a regime of colonial and racist thought that means that the body, as well as being ‘a vessel of physical experience and affectivity’, is also subjected to ‘the ideological imposition of particular frames of value and meaning’ (p. 149). The consequence is a kind of eternal tension between the affective and embodied experience of the subject, and its writing over by a symbolic and ideological structure that is intrinsically linked to the colonial. In this tension or ‘antagonism of the real’ lie both the persistent power of colonialist ideology and perhaps the route to its unpicking.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has been concerned with the utility of psychoanalysis for postcolonial thought. Postcolonial theory has been ambivalent towards psychoanalysis, for good reasons. Part of this is the general suspicion of psychological approaches, with their individualistic focus and general history of neglect of sociohistorical concerns. Additionally, there are specific elements of psychoanalysis’ conceptual framework that draw upon, and advance, colonialist ideology. Freud’s postulation of the ‘primitive’ or ‘savage’ mind, which still infects psychoanalytic thinking, is a prime example here. On the other hand, psychoanalysis’ assertion that all human subjects are inhabited by such ‘primitivity’ goes some way to trouble such normative assumptions. In addition, psychoanalysis offers a number of tools that grant leverage on postcolonial issues – most notably, the damage done by colonialist and racist thought. Two specific contributions to postcolonial psychology made by psychoanalysis are described: the ‘colonising gaze’ and the ‘racist imaginary’.

Postcolonial studies offer a strong challenge to assumptions that are rife in psychology and not absent in psychoanalysis either. Primary amongst these is the view, still prevalent despite years

of critique, that it is possible to theorise individual human subjects as if they stand outside the specific cultures in which they are embedded, and to use concepts that are free from social and historical freight. Postcolonialism asserts that psychology is itself constructed as part of the regime of power of colonialism, a point that has been discussed here in relation to the origins and investments of psychoanalysis. It also invigorates the search for ways of investigating the ‘social subject’ that are genuinely psychosocial, in the sense that they work at the point of articulation of what has historically been separated out into the ideological realms of sociology and psychology. I have tried in this paper to identify some ways in which psychoanalysis responds to this challenge. This is not to claim that psychoanalysis is unequivocally and unproblematically aligned with postcolonialism. It has too many embedded convictions that stem from colonial practices, in particular a pronounced individualism that often makes social structure secondary. Nevertheless, psychoanalysis can be used both to trouble colonial and racist assumptions, and as a stepping stone to some subversive theory.

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