



ABORIGINAL POPULATIONS IN THE MIND. By *Celia Brickman*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, 293 pp., \$59.50.

This book is about Freud and the heart of darkness. Brickman takes her title from Freud's essay, "The Unconscious" (1915): "The content of the Ucs. may be compared to an aboriginal population in the mind" (p. 195). Six years before he wrote that, a fellow middle European wrote, "The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest [in the estuary of the Thames]. . . . 'and this also,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth'" (pp. 45, 48). Then, in narrating *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad (1902) goes on to tell a very dark story indeed. The idea that in Roman times the Thames was as dark as the Congo seems to imply that the darkness is due to the primitivity of the inhabitants, but in Marlow's account it is the Romans on the Thames and the Belgians on the Congo who are the real savages. A thin veneer of altruism, the supposed mission to enlighten the aborigines, was the excuse for looting, exploitation, and mass murder on a grand scale.

Hochschild (1999) has shown that though the book has been regarded as a fictional metaphor for all kinds of darkness of the heart, Conrad intended it as an exposé of genocide and that "whatever rich levels of meaning the book has as literature . . . [it is] a precise and detailed description of the actual facts of the case" (p. 143). There were real versions of Kurtz with real collections of severed heads decorating their gardens. Why was Kurtz such a savage? Did he go native and become like the primitive Africans around him? Conrad's descriptions of the Africans are not complimentary, and though he certainly was appalled by Belgian colonialism he remained devoted to the British version.

In her study, Brickman shows the origins of the notion of the primitive in the colonial exploits of the various models for Kurtz, in their reports to the people back home in Europe, and in the theorizing of the

early anthropologists, who worked from such accounts and not from their own fieldwork. From a postcolonialist perspective it seems clear that the savagery of the Europeans was based not on the savagery of the colonized but on the idea that aborigines were savage. Christian doctrine beginning with the crusades held that it was the responsibility of the Pope, and through him his princes, to convert barbarians, by force if necessary. Such conversion was one of Columbus's responsibilities. He liked the people he encountered, finding them trusting, friendly, and helpful, but this very guilelessness was taken as a sign of their lack of civilization and a reason to subjugate them. They fought back ferociously, and that proved they were savage.

This sequence took place around the world. The unfamiliarity of the peoples European explorers encountered was taken as a sign that they were not quite human; that they were primitive and in need of improvement, which required subjugation or, failing that, extermination. Their resistance and counterattacks were seen as signs of savagery. Our tendency is to describe Kurtz and other genocidal maniacs of the past and present as being as primitive as the primitives. But what can the word *primitive* mean if the whole notion of primitivity is derived from a vicious circle of dehumanizing others? Brickman points out to us in this thorough, original, and scholarly work that we are more or less stuck with a key term of psychoanalysis that comes from nothing more substantial than the rationalizations of international villains.

This book traces the origins and fate of Freud's idea of the primitive. He read widely in the anthropology of his time, took it very seriously as science, and incorporated it at a basic level of his own theorizing. Early anthropology was shaped by three ideas that Freud accepted as foundational: evolution, the inheritance of acquired characteristics, and the recapitulation of phylogeny by ontogeny. The authorities on whom Freud relied were attempting to demonstrate the unitary evolution of culture as if there were a universal series of stages of cultural development culminating in its most evolved form: European patriarchy. The many cultures of the other continents were seen either as basically identical or as various stages of evolution, survivors into the present of the early history of European culture itself ("this also has been one of the dark places of the earth"). The data for these formulations were haphazardly collected or invented and incorporated into theory by armchair anthropologists who believed what Kurtz told them. The developmental scheme they invented did not just consist of the

gradual modification of custom, but was thought to involve the physical evolution of the brain. Lamarckian theory held that adaptations in one generation were passed on genetically, to future generations, and that idea seemed to Freud to offer the opportunity of being an archaeologist of the mind. By learning what complexes lay in the depths of the unconscious, he could learn the details of our psychological evolution. I think that most of us now read *Totem and Taboo* (Freud 1912–1913) as poetry if we read it at all, but Freud took it very seriously as a discovery of the facts of personal and social evolution. Brickman emphasizes that aside from the project being based on long discredited science, another difficulty is that the Lamarckian idea expressed the racist idea that non-Europeans, especially those with dark skins, hadn't evolved enough to be capable of being civilized.

She points out that Jews in fin-de-siècle Vienna were seen by many of their fellow citizens as being just such uncivilized, uncivilizable specimens. It was widely believed that Jews, like other people with skins darker than the Aryans', had a characteristic bad smell. Brickman contends more or less convincingly that Freud's theorizing worked both to consolidate his position as an evolved white man and also to attack the anti-Semites. In the second chapter of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud (1921) quotes from what he calls "LeBon's deservedly famous work *Psychologie des foules*" (1896). LeBon was a reactionary bigot who wrote about groups from the point of view of a civilized man looking disdainfully at the primitive people who made up the mob—i.e., those who were agitating for change in political and economic relations. Freud turned the notion of the primitivity of groups back against reactionary anti-Semites such as the followers of the Viennese mayor, Otto Lüger. It was not the Jews who were primitive but their enemies. The notion of primitivity not only remains unchallenged but is today even more deeply incorporated in psychoanalytic theory. Brickman's scholarship traces the notion that primitive people are easily enthralled by a commanding leader, locating it in many analytic prejudices, especially sexist ones. Incidentally, in my years of living and working with Native Americans, an allegedly primitive lot, I found them to be generally more resistant than many Americans to demagogic appeals. But Brickman presents another idea of Freud's reaction to anti-Semitism that is less convincing. Anti-Semites believed that circumcision was a sign of the homosexuality or femininity of Jewish men. She suggests that that idea

led to Freud's having to counteract and disguise circumcision fear as castration anxiety.

Brickman contends that even if Freud's erroneous ideas of cultural history have been abandoned, another part of a questionable theoretical legacy remains. Since Freud thought that individual development recapitulates racial development, the early stages of life are seen as primitive, not just in the sense of occurring early in the individual's history but in the pejorative sense of resembling dangerous and despised peoples and their ways. It is this point that makes Brickman's work more important than if it were merely a history of Freud's thought and the early development of psychoanalysis (its primitive stages, so to speak). The prejudice cuts both ways. Childlike traits are inferior to characteristics of adulthood, and individual characteristics that resemble or are said to resemble those of primitive cultures are childlike. A white man, especially an atheist scientist, becomes the standard to be aspired to. Brickman, a woman with a Ph.D. in religion and the human sciences, devotes careful and effective attention to the development and persistence of psychoanalytic biases against religion and women. Primitivity, Freud believed, implies the failure of a desirable repudiation of the maternal, and so women are almost by definition primitive; if they have repudiated the maternal, however, they are considered perverted.

Freud saw religion as derived from the magic of early racial times, and considered it the task of psychoanalysis to rescue the individual from the authority of the past. These are prejudices that I ran up against in myself in 1966, when I began my work in the Navajo Nation. It came to me as second nature to assume that mental health required independence and even separation from one's family of childhood and especially from the mother. Suddenly, I was among a matrilineal culture in which for a woman moving away from home was abnormal, and both genders lived in interdependence with a large group of close relatives. I was forced to notice how well the system worked; and more painfully, I felt I had lost rather than gained by being as independent as I was. Besides losing something vital, I had been suffering from shame for not having lost it thoroughly enough. The general Western idealization of independence has been wholeheartedly adopted by most psychoanalysts. My Navajo acculturation and my reading of Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984) helped to free me from my moralistic criticism of those who need the good opinion and support of others.

Navajo religion is both simple in making the everyday world of nature sacred, and elaborate in its cosmology and liturgy. I had never lost the basic religious convictions of my childhood, but I was enough of a convert to psychoanalysis to scorn religious practice. In my early Indian years I recognized the benefits to the Navajos of their religious beliefs and practices (Bergman 1971, 1973). To better understand the subject I was often a participant observer in ceremonies. Then I realized I had become simply a participant (Bergman 1974). I was not only deeply involved religiously, but in the process I had been adopted into an extended family of which three decades later I am still a part. I have benefited personally from my acculturation, and I believe my work has benefited by my escaping the very biases that Brickman's book undermines.

She is more evenhanded in her account of Freud and the rest of us analysts than I can summarize briefly. She recognizes that Freud both valued and denigrated so-called primitive experience. He not only tried to free us from what he thought primitive but also appreciated it. As Auden (1976) wrote in his memorial to Freud:

But he would have us remember most of all
 To be enthusiastic over the night
 Not only for the sense of wonder
 It alone has to offer, but also

Because it needs our love. For with sad eyes
 Its delectable creatures look up and beg
 Us dumbly to ask them to follow;
 They are exiles who long for the future

That lies in our power . . .

Brickman devotes considerable space to more recent psychoanalytic developments, particularly along feminist and intersubjectivist lines, that have corrected some of the bias invoked by the word *primitive*. Nonetheless, the bias remains strong in many of us. I think it is easy for us to be lulled into complacency about the correctness of our point of view as scientists and lulled into believing that opposition, especially heated opposition from the other, is primitive. When we do that, we resemble the colonialists who took the way the colonized fought back as evidence of their being primitive.

Anderson (1999), a colleague I respect for her conscientious thoughtfulness, but from whom I differ on some fundamental theoretical considerations, wrote an account of the pressure on the analyst “toward enactment in terms of the threats that primitive, pre-thinking states of mind exert on attempts to know and understand” (p. 504). The case she reports is of a man who made “reasonable requests for changes in schedule and other seemingly minor deviations of the analytic frame”; after initially complying with “a few of these requests,” Anderson concluded from dreams and associations that the patient was seeing her “as debilitated and incapacitated and as being analytically inattentive to deeper concerns” (p. 504). She therefore stopped complying, and the analysand became angry. The conflict between the two seems to have been prolonged and bitter, and, though it had its ups and downs, it was never resolved, at least by the time the paper was written. Anderson provides an elegant, though to me unconvincing, discussion of the case as showing how primitive forces are revealed by adherence to correct analytic technique. She may, of course, be right. I wasn’t there, and she is a good observer, but I find it more plausible to imagine that the analysand was right in thinking that there was no good reason for a blanket refusal to change appointments. If earlier he saw her as weak for granting requests, it seems to me that that perception could have been analyzed rather than simply accepted. Anderson makes the point that primitive forces oppose technique that she considers good, but I think it may have been overly rigid. If we are convinced that our technique is correct, especially if it provokes what we view as primitive, we blind ourselves to the possibility that the other has a good point; that requests were reasonable and their denial not. Even if the analysand’s anger could somehow be shown to be disproportionate, that would be a separate problem and would not prove that the request was an attempt to undermine the analysis. Certainly all of us in our work make our patients angry fairly often, and there is a great deal to be learned from such interactions, especially if we are prepared to consider that it is possible that we are the ones being unreasonable.

Columbus knew that aborigines were savages without rights to ownership of their native land. We analysts are in danger of knowing that our understanding of our relationship has a similar precedence over the claims of our primitive patients. It seems to me that hope for the future of psychoanalysis in particular, and perhaps of humanity in general, lies with an awareness that most savagery results not from

primitivity on one side or the other, but from the opposing parties each thinking that the other is not as fully human as they are.

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