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Girardian Theory

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Book review

Celia Brickman, *Aboriginal Populations in the Mind: Race and Primitivity in Psychoanalysis*, Columbia University Press, New York (2003) ISBN 0 231 12582 8 vii+285 pp., \$62.50 (hardback) ISBN 0 231 12582 8, \$26 (paperback) ISBN 0 231 12583 6.

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Psychoanalysis, anthropology and comparative religion all took form in the late nineteenth century, at the height of European colonialism and imperialism. That period was also the height of evolutionism. Spencer's 'survival of the fittest' provided a justification for imperialism, and his notion of progress made Victorian England the pinnacle of civilisation. Lévy-Bruhl described the 'savage mind' as qualitatively different from modern consciousness. Frazer promoted the idea of a psychocultural evolution from magic to religion to science. Morgan divided the history of humans into the stages of savagery, barbarism and civilisation. And Tylor gave us the comparative method: the idea that all societies in the world today can be ranked according to these supposedly universal, evolutionary stages.

Anthropology got off to a bad start with evolutionism, which was based on a little bit of knowledge and a lot of speculation and ethnocentrism. But in the early twentieth century it was

abandoned by the functionalism of Malinowski and was rejected by the historical particularism of Boas. Freud had a keen interest in culture but borrowed heavily from evolutionary anthropology. Celia Brickman argues that psychoanalysis was built upon this evolutionary foundation, which is inherently racist, if not racist, and has thereby been handicapped, particularly in understanding cultural differences, racial and ethnic minorities, women, and religion – all of which have been measured by a white male European standard.

Brinkman spells out her argument clearly in the fourteen-page introduction. The first chapter offers a fine overview of nineteenth-century evolutionism. The main point is that non-white, non-Western, non-Christian, colonial ‘others’ were held to be deficient in maturity and rationality and were assumed to be governed by their passions because they were primitive and so had not yet attained civilisation.

The second chapter focuses on the use of evolutionary ideas in Freud's texts, particularly *Totem and Taboo*. Brinkman maintains that evolutionism is the ‘racial subtext’ in psychoanalysis. Freud's ontogenetic theory of the development of personality mirrors the evolutionist's stages in the development of culture: ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. Evolution proceeds from unconscious to consciousness, from Id to Ego and Superego. Regression is a kind of devolution of the individual from civilised back to primitive. Primitive peoples are seen as ‘child-like’ and neurotic. Tylor referred to primitive cultural traits which persisted into more advanced stages of culture as ‘survivals’. Likewise neurotic symptoms, in Freud's view, are the product of regression, back not only to earlier ontogenetic but also to earlier phylogenetic stages.

The third chapter begins with Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Freud argues that the primitive is in ‘thrall’ to an authority figure, creating a primal horde, whereas the mature modern person has the internal control of a Superego. When modern peoples become enthralled in groups, they regress to a primitive, unconscious state and lose the individual autonomy that he associated with maturity.

The third chapter also identifies primitivity with femininity and nature. The author argues that Freud equated women with primitive characteristics such as passivity, submission, narcissism, masochism, irrationality and emotionalism, and identified civilisation with masculinity. The

fourth chapter extends this argument to religion, showing that it too is conceived of as primitive in Freudian thought, partly because it keeps people 'in thrall' and is regressive and neurotic.

The last chapter shows how these evolutionary assumptions from the beginning of psychoanalysis affect the clinical practice of psychoanalysis today. The relationship between the analyst and a client is said to reflect the relationship of coloniser to colonised. The therapist seeks to lead a client from psychological primitivity to autonomous individualism. The problem is that everything non-white, non-Western, feminine or religious is regarded as primitive.

On the whole the author's thesis that psychoanalysis is replete with outmoded evolutionary assumptions that lead to a bias against women, religion, non-Westerners and people of color is convincing. But can psychoanalysis be redeemed through an exorcism of its evolutionary assumptions? In the Epilogue the author calls for a more equal relationship between analyst and client. In addition, she recommends the disengagement of the concept of the unconscious from its evolutionary and developmental frameworks, making it merely the forgotten or unnoticed rather than an earlier and inferior state of mind.

Brickman demonstrates an excellent understanding of the history of both anthropology and psychoanalysis. And she uses it deftly in a post-colonial deconstruction of Freud's ideas. The reader should have some knowledge of psychoanalysis to follow her argument. The main audience for this book seems to be psychoanalysts, but it will also be of interest to intellectual historians and psychological anthropologists.

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