‘Today the fight for life, the fight for Eros, is the political fight’, claimed Herbert Marcuse dramatically in *Eros and Civilization* (1974, p. xxv). He went on to argue that ‘formerly autonomous and identifiable psychical processes are being absorbed by the function of the individual in the state – by his public existence. Psychological problems therefore turn into political ones’ (Marcuse, 1974, p. xxvii). The flamboyance of Marcuse’s rhetoric obscures something crucial: that he got the diagnosis right and the cure wrong. That is, Marcuse (insisting equally on Nietzsche as on Freud and Marx) perceived that his contemporaries had come to understand structural political problems on profoundly psychological terms.

Yet, for all that this diagnosis still rings true of contemporary western politics, Marcuse’s later insistence on a politics of desublimation, and thus the call to reinfuse political structures with instinctive desire, quickly fizzled. The coincidence of psychological and political seemed too glib and neat. I share those doubts. Although generalizations about political events on psychological terms may be useful to allegorize, parse and frame shifting trends, they are not the only (or always the most useful) ways to draw on psychoanalytic resources for politics. Instead, with these remarks I will suggest that psychoanalysis is most useful for political theory in two moments: first, when its clinical work prompts us to rethink the practices that undo figurations of subjectivity. And second, when we scrutinize those ‘injuries’ or ‘traumas’ that stretch disjunctively across multiple cultures and polities, and search out the conditions of possibility for politics and life to be otherwise. Facing up to both moments requires thinking through the disruptions and possibilities they provoke within the clinical and cultural space of interpretations.

For some time now, political theory had become so used to the drumbeat of ‘is Freud wrong?’ that it forgot that Freud and psychoanalysis were once commonplace in the American academy and even in political science. In part, this more recent skepticism was an outgrowth of an American turn towards behavioral psychology – a turn itself inspired by the initial enthusiasm for psychoanalysis that prompted Freud to say ‘America is a mistake; a gigantic mistake’ (see Jones, 1974, p. 270).
Such positivist explanations took seriously the claim that humans were indeed knowable and that our self-representations could reasonably serve as the preconditions for the human sciences more broadly speaking. And so psychological explanations found their way into foundational claims for political science, economics and psychology. More recently, psychoanalytic frameworks have returned through preoccupations with the melancholias of race and sexuality. These found a language suited for the losses occasioned by a politics alternately indifferent or hostile to those lives lived at the margin and in flight from the ‘usual’ models of subjectivity. Psychoanalysis thus becomes doubly implicated in contemporary efforts to grapple with the knowledge that defines humanity and resists the forms of life that exhaust its shape and substance. But it also offers a deep well of words, experiences and practices with which to gesture towards the inarticulable, and delineates the horizon that lays down the measure of these gestures and those words against others consigned to unintelligibility. Housed in that ‘intermediate region between illness and real life’, psychoanalytic practices trace that point of contact where symbolic forms of life make contact with individual personas and social practices (Freud, 1957, p. 187).

If Marcuse moved too quickly to collapse the structural and psychological into one another, I want to hold onto and slow down their imperfect coincidence. These remarks will move inside the clinical encounter so as to excavate the experience of sitting with an unformed subjectivity, and then will move outside to politics and political theory to consider this praxis in the context of postcolonial order. If these peregrinations begin with two prominent theorists of 1960s politics, then it is only fitting that they close with reflections on Fanon and colonial order. Although these two moments might seem to be unrelated, thinking them together engages Foucault’s claim that psychoanalysis and ethnology share ‘the space of their discourse’, a space illuminated by ‘those great caesuras, furrows, and dividing-lines which traced man’s outline in the Western episteme and made him a possible area of knowledge’ (1970, p. 378). Both ethnology and psychoanalysis originate in the nineteenth century reconfiguration of the space of interpretation, a reconfiguration that goes ‘inside’ to probe motivations and investments, and then projects these ‘outside’ on the events, patterns and structures of human society. Any effort to build on the insights of clinical practice, then, must take this paradox of inside/outside seriously. If the gains of clinical practice now are coming into clearer focus, the implications for rethinking more explicitly political traumas remain only dimly available.

One might pose the question even more sharply: Why must these two moments be thought together? In cultivating a psychology, inevitably persons also ‘learn’ a culture and contour themselves to its horizon. Any learning thus becomes a forgetting of the conditions that made that learning, and not another, possible. Inevitably, this learning becomes the condition of any relation with any other culture. The first section inside the clinical moment puzzles through the practice that makes it possible to revisit the conditions for a life, along with an individual’s symbolic investiture in the cultural forms available to structure their self-understanding.
The second section asks whether the interpretive skills that make it possible to inhabit personal history anew can be mobilized to engage the remembering, repeating and working through of relationships less therapeutic – that is, our distant and largely impersonal relationships with other cultures beyond the west. To the extent that Marcuse and Foucault are right, and westerners perceive politics on insistently subjective terms, any political learning will remain stalled. We might gain ever more precise knowledge of the status quo but without any greater insight into the conditions of possibility that might change those forms of life that make up a shared world. Without such insights, we remain incapacitated before perennial questions of human suffering and how politics might enable us to respond to vulnerability, rather than suffer it. If psychoanalytic theory remains captured by this paradox, its practices offer resources for detaching from and living in between interpretations.

**The praxis of psychoanalysis**

In the *Order of Things*, Michel Foucault argues that in the nineteenth century the sciences came to form ‘their own positivity by seeking to move ceaselessly backwards and forwards between the conscious and the unconscious’. History – including, I would argue, the clinical histories jointly authored in the analytic encounter – similarly moves between ‘the temporal limits that define the particular forms of labor, life, and language, and the historical positivity of the subject which, by means of knowledge, gains access to them’ (Foucault, 1970, p. 372). Where Marcuse collapses psychological and political, Foucault hints that these two might be pulled apart, if only so that this hiatus between subject and object – a tension at once spatial and temporal – could be accessed. If the other sciences are constantly seeking to affirm humankind in its positivity, by revealing and rationalizing that which is unknown or unconscious, and so constantly and uncritically affirming the cultural conditions that make knowledge possible, psychoanalysis works differently. In Foucault’s words, ‘Psychoanalysis moves towards the moment … at which the contents of consciousness articulate themselves, or rather stand gaping, upon man’s finitude’ (1970, p. 374). The space of the clinical encounter unfolds in this moment between the seemingly fixed horizon of existence, and the unruliness of those psychic remainders of all that does not quite ‘fit’. Freud’s work becomes the pivot point for engaging those broader political, economic and legal structures that contain within them an image of the human – psychoanalysis both contributes to and critiques this model of humanity and knowledge.

If Foucault is right, we are faced with a peculiar paradox, one formed by the projection into our knowledge of the world of a partial image of (western) human consciousness, and our desperate, lived efforts to deny the roiling unknowability against which it takes form. Any change or transformation depends on a knowledge created by humans even as we resist it, as it entails undoing the world, however
flawed and imperfect, that makes ‘us’ possible. If Foucault’s account in *Order of Things* has long been criticized for presenting this paradox on terms too heavily linguistic, then psychoanalysis mediates the structuring effects of language through its emphasis on the messy corporeality of enactments that bind patient and analyst. Theorizing from the relationship between patient and analyst additionally allows psychoanalysis to work at once within and against the philosophic paradox that Foucault identifies; to begin from the premise that the particularities of individual experience mark a person’s psyche, while holding to the radically intersubjective claim that these selves are formed through relationships with others. Like any praxis, psychoanalysis remains in perpetual oscillation between the demand to uncover, reveal and penetrate the workings of these symbolic forms of ‘labor, life and language’, even as its therapeutics tend to the very particular wounds that these forms have wrought on individual persons. Differently from other forms of praxis, psychoanalysis moves ceaselessly between the two halves of this paradox: the ‘outside’ of external events and structures, and the ‘inside’ of psychic interiority.

What does it mean to think in terms of a psychoanalytic *praxis*? What set of interpretive skills might speak to the particularities of individual subjectivity while also interrogating their foundations in historical forms of life, labor and language? The clinical encounter gives us quite literally the space to work through these representations, the tensions between their unblinking positivity and the resistances generated by those psychic remainders that refuse representational capture. These skills would seem to be contingent on the structural dynamics that enable them. Psychoanalytic praxis would need a structuring context in which the risks, the resistances, the *work* of the transference relationship could unfold for reasons other than perceptive clarity or sheer will. These experiences – of epistemological paradox, of the other’s inaccessibility, of the mute solidity of id-like forces – constantly throw both analyst and patient back onto the analytic encounter’s own relationship of structured uncertainty. By returning to this ‘recursive relativity’ over and again, analyst and patient practice abiding within and bearing with discomfort and dissolution – the intransigence of any mute solidity before pleas to take form, to take voice, to become knowable. The unusual siting of the analytic encounter – not fully inside the psychic interiority of the patient nor outside in the social world – enables a half-strangled knowledge of non-verbal experience. Such a knowledge obliges both analyst and patient to confront their defenses against inarticulate desires and unacknowledged repetitions. One crucial element of psychoanalytic praxis, then, lies in resisting interpretation – the patient’s resistance of his usual defensive interpretations of the world, and the analyst’s resistance of being clever.

Elsewhere I have written that the structural asymmetry of the analytic encounter enables a ‘combative collaboration’ between analyst and patient, and one in which resistances open up the ‘we’ of the transference space to other times, persons and affective experiences through the enactments that bind analyst and patient.1 Here I would like to explore more narrowly what it means to sit with the ‘otherness within’
that the analytic encounter evokes and explores all while providing a provisional context to contain those affects and representations that exceed any usual social relationship. Sitting with otherness occurs in that fleeting moment of contact between separateness and relatedness – that moment when the unbearable of one’s own self pushes a person to seek the touch from a bearing-with. Sitting with otherness within rests heavily on the transference that binds analyst and patient, that gathers and contains contingencies – from accidents of circumstance to the restless affects that cannot sediment into stable memories that continue to be enacted. For ‘transference is not only the offering that the analyst makes through her atypical way of listening, but is also the risk, in the beginning silent, that the analysand takes by engaging in this disorientation [se dépayser] of him or herself’ (David-Ménard, 2011, p. 221). On the knife’s edge of indeterminacy, transference balances the hope for transformation against the anxiety of losing the only and all-too-familiar one knows. The mutual experience of resistance likely provokes discontent, boredom, low-grade dissatisfaction, and so often defaults to usual protective defense to shore up blows to self and understanding. Thus the analytic encounter becomes a containing context for the intolerable, the warded off, the not quite acknowledged that does not have shape or form.

It might be tempting for political theorists, at this juncture, to seize on narrative as a tool to voice the unknown or intolerable, so as to broach the subjective experience and epistemological certainty that hold Man in place. For all that the language of conflict, risk and uncertainty resonate with political theory’s own turn to narrative, psychoanalysis teaches us to forestall that urge. These interpretive skills find their greatest potency in evoking the alien, irrational and un-integrated, while finding a means for both parties to sit with these fragmentations, and that sense of wanting to crawl out of one’s own skin. The later capacity to be ‘more of an author aware of being an author’ depends very much on the earlier proximal presence of this first site of incitement and the work that comes from acting with, against and through the social roles pressed into service by the analysis.²

Moving back inside the clinical encounter, Mitchell Wilson (1998) comments that:

As analysts, we rarely ask ourselves or our analysands the question: What is the analysand’s experience of grasping a warded-off aspect of him or herself? … Within this clinical theory, there is a common and quite explicit theoretical bias … [towards] integrating that something into a larger psychic whole. And yet, only dis-integrated, ego-alien, mental contents can be integrated. Prior to integration these warded-off contents must be struggled with, experienced, and tolerated …. The analyst’s desire to make sense of the patient may obscure crucial experiences intrinsic to insight which are not narratable. (pp. 58–59)

Much of the work of analysis entails learning to bear ugly feelings – the depressive anxieties, petty resentments, rages and humiliations – that are often the flip side to efforts at hope and transformation. To move beyond the intellectualized experience of ‘gaping before finitude’, analyst and patient must endure these assaults on
everyday narcissism. The praxis unique to psychoanalysis gains its potency from the ability of the transferential relationship to endure in the face of the disintegration and to withstand the desire to stabilize unsettlement with interpretation. If this *dépaysage* – literally, the displacement within a mental landscape – is to have lasting effect, then it should unsettle the conditions that hold a sense of place and belonging in place. That is, it would touch on the feelings and experiences one could bear to identify as one’s self, as well as the broader knowledge or perspective that holds that self in place. Challenging the narcissistic power of self-assertion entails beholding those warded-off contents and eventually taking their measure for oneself.

Measuring tapes in hand, political theorists might return to the world outside to query: how capacious is the clinical encounter in the face of this ‘otherness within’? Even as Wilson and other psychoanalysts work hard to recover an otherness that is unruly and refuses easy intelligibility, to what extent does the analytic encounter presume that trauma is contained within a relatively shared cultural horizon? What enables the un-integrated elements to linger as un-integrated and all-but-intolerable, so that the full force of their challenge to coherent identity can be confronted? For representational power to be challenged, both analyst and patient must resist the urge to impose, insist or *force* meaning onto an association or enactment. These iterations confront the patient with their implacable sameness, and confront the analyst with their resistance to interpretation, and so threaten the narcissism of both. Trauma persists not through the allure of sublime horror but from a dull repetition that evades efforts to step outside of its iterations. For analyst and patient both, it might be tempting to reduce the scope of these warded-off contents, and to seek more domesticated analytic inroads, than to risk allowing that which exceeds representation to overflow the analytic context itself. These resistances, though, form something of a bridge between patient and analyst that is other than a bond of empathy, knowledge or common experience. Instead, resistances are the push-pull that draws analyst and patient close, and the circuit across which affects flicker and social forms become distended.

If psychoanalysis is an ‘intermediate region between illness and real life’ – intermediate to psychic interior and external events, intermediate to personal and social practices, intermediate to inexorability and contingency – then political theorists might seek out those spaces, relationships and interactions that likewise capture the constant movement or circulation between inside/outside. Circulating through such spaces might offer a different return to the ‘outside’ political and cultural world. Evoking something of the cacophonous ‘we’ of the transference, these spaces could begin to disaggregate and explore a too-quick assertion of identity, while resisting the temptation to substitute another subjectivity, another representation in its place. Resistances offer a site of conjoinment from which to rethink political wounds within a space contained as much by agency and attachment as by injury.
The calm violence of culturally particular relationships

When Freud announced psychoanalysis to his late nineteenth century culture, he fondly and arrogantly declared it to be one of the three great ‘wounds’ to western culture and man’s self-image therein. In using the language of wound and trauma, Freud inadvertently belied something about the political challenges of the next century. Namely, that the wounds occasioned by the paradoxes of the human sciences are both the condition of incapacitation – insofar as they trace the process of injury and political violence – and of any possibility for change or recovery. Such wounds span the epistemological and the personal, and say just as much about a culture as about individuals who suffer from its pathologies. And yet what counts as ‘wound’ or ‘illness’ – these blows to human self-image, and signs of imperfect integration – also serves as the site for thinking the otherness within western culture, and for the west’s contact with other cultures. These wounds bind cultures less from any hope for a ‘fused horizon’ than from forced contact or calm violence, and often are characterized by the desire to resist recognition rather than to accede to another’s terms. So once again, what might it mean to think psychoanalysis and ethnology together? If the previous section dwelled on the experience of ‘bearing-with’ the intolerable, and delayed the turn to narrative, it was to emphasize it as a work that cuts against the urge to cure, or to solve, or to moralize, and so, to figure a subject of life, labor and language. But what insights into the disjunctures of colonial legacies might be opened up by the clinical practices of psychoanalysis?

If psychoanalysis thinks trauma in terms of personal history – the move from mental organization to defensive organization – then questions of cultural contact address the ordering and disordering of societies. Foucault (1970) provocatively intimates that: ‘[J]ust as [the patient’s] alienation within the fantasmatic character of the doctor] can be deployed only in the calm violence of a particular relationship and the transference it produces, so ethnology can assume its proper dimensions only within the historical sovereignty – always restrained but always present – of European thought and the relation that can bring it face to face with all other cultures as well as with itself’ (p. 377). Foucault suggests that inquiry into the fragmented multiplicity of representation and identity needs to be more proximate if it is actually to grasp the workings of representation itself. Contact – at once corporeal and fantastic – must be the nub of any refiguration.

Drawing on the clinical insights from the section above, what are the limits of psychoanalysis as it seeks to evoke and confront a not-me that escapes the limits of one’s cultural horizon? Any response to the traumas of colonial order would seem to be fraught, given the tangled histories, attachments and cultural communities of North Africa. In American history, Du Bois (1996 [1903]) has referred to this aftermath – this ‘thought and afterthought’ – as ‘social surgery,’ a phrase that emphasizes the stitching together of the edges of a wound or rent in the
social fabric (pp. 75, 87). Once again, this phrase puts pressure on how such clinical practices could be made social and raises unanswered questions about who performs such triage and on the basis of what knowledge and experience. When above I referred to the ‘partial image of (western) human consciousness’, suspended between parentheses was the question of whether the practices of psychoanalysis are indelibly western, and so bound to teach practitioners only about the culture of which they are already a part. Or, are these practices and the ‘fantasmatic relationship of violence’ that houses them sufficiently pliable such that it is possible to contrive some kind of ‘expan[sion] to accommodate or contact’, one that makes it possible to engage a more radically foreign not-me?

These questions come to a head in the remarkably ambivalent case histories that come at the end of Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth, itself a remarkably unstable text. In the fourth case study, Fanon describes the treatment of a European patient sent for treatment for depression by his boss; examination revealed that this patient was a police officer actively involved in the torture of Algerian patriots. One day, when the patient arrives at the hospital for treatment, in the course of walking the grounds in search of Fanon he encounters a former torture victim (also a patient) and suffers a panic attack. After calming him down, Fanon goes in search of his other patient, and finds him crouched in the bathroom and attempting suicide. Fanon ends the case report by noting dryly that the policeman, ‘after his condition improved rapidly, he was eventually repatriated on medical grounds. As for the Algerian patriot, it took a long time for the staff to convince him he had been deluding himself, that policemen were not allowed inside the hospital, that he was tired, and he was here to be cared for, etc …’ (Fanon, 2004, p. 196).

The complex interaction between Fanon, the policeman and the Algerian patriot illustrates the entwinegment between psychoanalytic and ethnographic projects alluded by Foucault. Through the simple analytic of ‘illness’, the bleed of trauma from psychic to political to epistemological levels becomes quickly evident. If political theory is accustomed to answering the question ‘why do we suffer?’ by defining illness against an ideal model of personhood, and then suggesting that both meaning and politics arise from working the interval between the two, then what model or context should Fanon reach for? At the most basic level, both the policeman and the patriot suffer from some psychic injury. Their personal experience of the present faces constant invasions from a past whose affective force bridges the two moments. To deny clinically the reality of either the depression or the panic attacks is to undermine the reality of both patients’ personal worlds organized through different defensive reactions. It is to abandon the possibility of seeking a disordering of defense and neurosis that is different from the disordering of society Fanon associates with decolonization. Both policeman and patriot would be in danger of being read as political allegories rather than persons. For all that Fanon notes the entanglement of psychic and political injury
and the difficulties of interpreting symptoms, the challenge is to track their inarticulate presence back to an ordering of the world itself half-denied.

Taken literally, ‘depression’ and ‘panic attacks’ are diagnoses that poorly attend to the ‘atmosphere of violence’ that suffuses colonial order. If the violence of World Wars I and II saturates Freud’s own models of mind, then how to grapple psychologically with a colonial order whose own inarticulacy takes the form of half-truths and falsifications? Fanon emphasizes this order as compartmentalized, dislocated – as divided in ways utterly uneven, unparalleled, uncomplementary. ‘You do not [simply] disorganize a society’, Fanon writes (2004, p. 3). The lines between visible and invisible, sayable and unspeakable, inclusion and exclusion, are not so neat. Instead, the somatic half-visibility of symptoms invites the tracing of muttered lineages back to the imposition of an order at once grossly material and utterly fantastic. In his essay ‘The North African Syndrome’, Fanon moves to site the hospital as a way-station between the political space of French empire, and the space of a community that might-have-been.

Illness would seem a marker of entwined personal and political bereftness, one somewhere between theft and loss. Asked to ventriloquize the unspeakable, symptoms become place-holders for what they cannot reference, and utterly detached from western medical order. For, ‘without a family, without love, without human relations, without communion with the group, the first encounter with himself will occur in a neurotic mode, in a pathological mode; he will feel himself emptied, without life, in a bodily struggle with death, a death on this side of death, a death in life’ (Fanon, 1967, p. 13). Fanon’s language here resonates more with the Nietzschean struggle to shape those interactions that are the scratched-out conditions of life, than with psychoanalysis’s emphasis on early childhood relations. They are the relations of a community arrested, if you will, between the death of its own time and a living defined by atrophy and colonial incapacitation. And yet to overemphasize these lacks would be to render those living in a colonial order as members of Rousseau’s state of nature – to ascribe to them a context and culture so indeterminate that their ability to tell for themselves the history of colonialism would be erased. To make Algerian culture only into a culture ‘without’ would be to undo all of the creative substitutions, second families, unseen communities also in place. Symptoms and diagnosis would seem uneasily perched between two orderings of the world.

Any kind of ‘sitting with the otherness within’, either on clinical or more metaphorical terms, becomes enormously complicated – but using the lens of resistances might offer some surprises. If resistances are a space of conjoinment, we might pause and note that for all that this case history constantly wanders – from Fanon’s house to the road to the hospital, back to Fanon’s living room, again to the hospital and a bathroom inside – all three people circulate through the same space. The real variation comes from their affective responses that carve out different symbolic landscapes. Fanon’s position as narrator and doctor seems to
stabilize the case history, until the reader considers the roles, responses and risks his patients thrust upon him. Fanon’s extraordinary skill lies in moving between disjunctive psychic, political and epistemological registers; playing out both patients’ different fearful fantasies of being ‘found out’ as moral frauds and political traitors; and yet motivating the role of ‘doctor’ towards therapeutic ends at profound political odds with one another. Already to respond to another, to speculate about their care for us, to feel a continuity of interaction, would be an accomplishment in Fanon’s world. The risk is that any witnessing or care is no more than intellectual tourism, divorced from proximal experience, and so lacking the high stakes that fuel productive resistances. And yet even Fanon’s skills are not impervious to the surrounding context – after all, Fanon backs into a series of half-truths when he disingenuously reassures the Algerian patriot, even as that patient tries to recover from other traumatizing assaults on his personal moral order. One wonders what it would have meant for Fanon to survive in such a role. If the expansion that enabled contact in the previous section rested on both parties acknowledging assaults to their narcissism, then the force of acknowledgement here is more shattering. It would entail a more direct assault on the colonizer’s image of Man at the core of his political and epistemological identity. For that moment to be powerful, it would demand that the will to interpret – that Foucauldian paradox at once cruel and creative – be suspended. A rush to usual models of narration would be a way to retell another’s experience for our western selves.

I would like to close with some thoughts on how political theory might think these moments of psychological and cultural contact together, so as to re-open questions of psychology, subjectivity and epistemology. In the same way that it is a mistake to see psychoanalysis as rescuing the hysterical by giving her a voice – a lesson taught to Freud first by Anna O. and then by Dora – then political theory should actively seek different ways to think theory beyond the West. Fanon issues a challenge to go beyond the inclusion of new voices, or the extension of existing theories. Speaking to the fantasmatic colonizer, Fanon (1967) writes, ‘If YOU do not reclaim the man who is before you, how can I assume that you reclaim the man that is in you? … If YOU do not demand the man, if YOU do not sacrifice the man that is in you so that the man who is on this earth shall be more than a body, more than a Mohammed, by what conjurer’s trick will I have to acquire the certainty that you, too, are worthy of my love?’ (p. 16). Fanon instead challenges his readers parse those psychic internalizations that hold political structures in place, their recoil at his words, the longing to hold onto (at least) interpretive sovereignty. Like any of the human sciences, psychoanalysis is bound up in historical processes of sovereignty and colonialism. Unlike the others, however, its practical commitments lie in actively working with the calm violence of resistances always on their way to becoming something else. For interpretation to cultivate this creativity – to be loving, not cruel – it needs to move in and out of texts and contexts so as to elucidate the play of resistances and to hold onto these dislocations without collapsing into neat categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’. It demands
far more work, both politically and interpretively, in seeking out a contact that acknowledges and works against distance, and in allowing that trauma speaks on the lower frequencies that are felt rather than heard. Such work entails disrupting the core, organizing narrative of theory itself – hence the emphasis in these remarks on ‘sitting with otherness’ and exploring its psychic and political valences before rushing to impose an interpretation.

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Notes

1 See Luxon (2013).
3 Ranjana Khanna offers a brilliant such reading in Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism (2003).

References


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Freudo-Foucauldian politics and the problem of history

Freudo-Foucauldianism: a rebarbative term, if ever there was one. In Mad for Foucault (Huffer, 2010), I questioned queer theory’s tendency to indulge in this ‘ism’. What I meant by this was that despite Foucault’s well-known critiques of psychoanalysis, queer theorists have consistently tended to combine Foucault with Freud (or Lacan) in ways that are philosophically incoherent. In the context of our critical exchange here, that rebarbative term provides a helpful way for me to begin to speak about the place of psychoanalysis in political theory. And yet, right from the start, let me also signal that over the course of writing these reflections something surprising happened. I found, in the end, that it was precisely my own resistance to Freudo-Foucauldianism that allowed me to reimagine its political possibilities.

To be sure, from its inception in the late 1980s and early 1990s, queer Freudo-Foucauldianism made a certain kind of sense as a powerful desubjectivating challenge to the identitarian knowledge formations out of which queer theory was born. In philosophical terms, both Foucauldian and Freudo-Lacanian perspectives provided resources for contesting the epistemic, ethical and ontological coherence of the rational Western subject and the humanist projects launched in his name. As Leo Bersani put it in his aegis-creating 1987 Freudo-Foucauldian essay, ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’: ‘the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal of proud subjectivity is buried’ (Bersani, 1987, p. 222). So too, from a methodological perspective, the queer tendency to pair Foucault with Freud or Lacan was consistent with its aim to critique what we might call heteronormative ways of knowing. On the whole, queer theory has been less interested in remaining faithful to its own foundational ‘great books’ than in performing the kind of bricolage that has become a hallmark of an anti-authoritarian queer method. Modeled by Judith Butler in Gender Trouble (1990), Freudo-Foucauldian bricolage has opened a field of anti-normative sex/gender play whose effects have been life-changing for many.1 In the face of that impact, it is worth asking now: why get so hung up on philosophical orthodoxies? If people are moved by queer bricolage to shake up the sexual order of things, why not celebrate the success story that is queer theory? Why continue in my insistent critique of queer Freudo-Foucauldian mixtures?

I am sympathetic to these questions but want to insist: something has been lost in queer bricolage. That something, I argue, is history. By history I do not mean the project in which most historians see themselves engaged:
to offer the truth of the past as an anchor to shore up the stability of today. Rather, by history I mean a destabilizing movement of temporal dispersion that Foucault variously called the historical a priori, the genealogical method or historical ontology. Both in its Freudian and, importantly, Lacanian poststructuralist modes, queer psychoanalysis has missed history in this specifically Foucauldian sense.

I will focus here on Freudo-Foucauldianism’s poststructuralist iterations in Foucauld-Lacanian mixtures to argue that this question of history produces an unbridgeable gap between the genealogical and psycholinguistic perspectives the Foucault–Lacan opposition names. Space does not permit me to elaborate on the implications of this rift at the heart of queer theory. Let it suffice to say here that the transhistorical drive that is Lacanian queer negativity shatters subjectivity at the expense of history.3 For Foucault, conversely, it is history that undoes us. That difference – history – between Foucauldian and Lacanian modes of self-undoing provides a frame for broader questions I want to pursue in this critical exchange: Is psychoanalytic thinking necessarily ahistorical? Why should it matter if we historicize anyway? Why, specifically, should it matter for politics and political theory?

I approach these questions by arguing, in three parts, why history should matter not only for queer theory but for antifoundationalist politics and political theory more generally. Given space constraints, I will assume for my argument that antifoundationalism and politics are not incommensurable; indeed, one of my aims is to reopen a conversation about how to think politically without a subject and its attributes – free will, agency, autonomy, choice – in a world that in fact undoes us and our attributes on every scale, from the everyday disruptions of extreme weather events to the ubiquitous evidence of mass species extinction and predictions of human finitude. To act politically as we see our own face literally dissolving at the edge of a rising sea requires a willingness to think hard about the ethical question – how are we to live? – even as we bear witness to the disappearance of that we and that living.4 Foucault’s other-than-psychoanalytic historical approach to desubjectivation provides resources for confronting these challenges.

With that in mind, I begin by describing, contra psycholinguistic desubjectivation, how Foucault’s historical a priori dissolves the subject and the stability of its claims. Second, I return to Gender Trouble as a paradigmatic queer Freudo-Foucauldian origin story whose psycholinguistic, primarily Lacanian juridical frame exposes its conception of power as both ahistorical and out of sync with power in Foucault. Finally, I return to my opening questions – is psychoanalysis necessarily ahistorical, why historicize? and why political theory? – with some concrete examples of how psychoanalytic practice might be fruitfully combined with Foucauldian history as a way to rethink our political present.
Foucault’s Historical a priori

Despite scholarly habits of dividing Foucault into vastly different early, middle and late periods, it is undeniable that one of the through-lines in his work is history. What Foucault called in 1984 the critical task of doing a ‘historical ontology of ourselves’ (Foucault, 2002, p. 318) links the historical a priori of Foucault’s archeological period to the methods he later called genealogy and problematization.⁶ The most well-known of these terms, genealogy, is often misunderstood as trajectories of influence or lines of filiation; along similar lines, the historical a priori is often misperceived as a framing historical context. But as Foucault insists in ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’ (1971), his approach to the past refuses ‘the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies’ (Foucault, 1998, p. 370) that characterize common conceptions of history as causal connections or grounding frames. History in Foucault is radically disconnecting and ungrounding.

Unlike ideology or Kantian transcendental conditions for the possibility of thinking, the historical a priori names the materiality of what Foucault calls the archive: a ‘complex volume’ of ‘different types of positivity’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 128), which is not simply the sum of documents preserved by a culture, but the ‘operating system’ (Nealon, 2014, p. 203) that allows some statements and events to appear while others fade. Most important, the material and epistemic limits of the archive both bind and unbind us in relation to our own time. ‘Not a condition of possibility but a law of coexistence’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 107), the historical a priori frames the genealogical method, a method whose purpose is to describe our own time from the perspective of ‘the border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 130). The temporal border that touches our time both establishes the limit between us and what we are not and, at the same time, makes us coextensive with the otherness that delimits us. Contact with the archive is thus the touch of a temporal otherness that ‘deprives us of our continuities’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 131): it ‘bursts open the other, and the outside’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 131).⁷ This is what it means to historicize: to ‘dissipate[] that temporal identity in which we are pleased to look at ourselves when we wish to exorcise the discontinuities of history’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 131).

The Trouble with Queer Bricolage

What is at stake, then, in Foucault’s well-known doubts about psychoanalysis? Some, like Didier Eribon (2005), have argued that psychoanalysis is inherently homophobic and therefore to be dismissed out of hand. Given the complexity and diversity of various psychoanalytic schools, to say nothing of their capacity to acknowledge and even embrace sexual perversions, this critique seems reductive and unconvincing. At stake in Foucault’s doubts about psychoanalysis is not homophobia but history.
Among the countless interpretations of *History of Sexuality Volume One*, very few bring out its challenges to Lacan. Most have read its explicit doubts about the repressive hypothesis as a critique of Freudian biologism and of the Marcusian uptake of that biologism as a timeless, emancipatory sexual drive in need of expression. But Foucault’s doubts go deeper than suspicions about biological essentialism. Foucault’s critique of repression also targets Lacan’s radically denaturalizing discursification of Freud. Specifically, in *History of Sexuality Volume One*, Foucault contrasts a ‘thematics of repression’ with what he calls a ‘theory of the law as constitutive of desire’ (Foucault, 1978, p. 82) clearly referring, albeit elliptically, to the contrast between Freud and Lacan. Foucault argues that while their theories differ in how ‘they conceive of the nature and dynamics of the drives’ (Foucault, 1978, p. 83), they do not differ in how ‘they conceive of power’ (Foucault, 1978, p. 83).

This, then, is Foucault’s claim: that in denaturalizing Freud – and, in so doing, making the symbolic constitutive of a nonself-identical, decentered subjectivity – Lacan nevertheless clings to an ahistorical, specifically juridical conception of power in his ‘theory of the law as constitutive of desire’ (Foucault, 1978, p. 83). Wendy Grace argues that in replacing repression with the law, Lacan does not escape the trap of the repressive hypothesis; rather he implicitly collapses psychoanalytic refoulement, or primary repression, with political repression as suppression (Grace, 2013, p. 239). Put simply, Lacan’s drive-based theory of power is juridical. Thus, when Foucault warns that ‘in political thought we still have not cut off the head of the king’ (Foucault, 1978, pp. 88–89), he is addressing not only Hobbesian thinkers but also, implicitly, Lacanian and post-Lacanian theorists whose insistence on the law misperceives modern biopower as sovereign.

Why does this matter for queer bricolage and, specifically, for its modeling in *Gender Trouble*? Butler opens the book that many claim as a founding Foucauldian queer text by reinscribing ‘women’ as ‘juridical subjects’ who are ‘invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices’ and ‘political operations’ that are both ‘concealed and naturalized’ (Butler, 1990, p. 3). To be sure, Butler’s picture of juridical power is not simply repressive in a negative sense. Rather, in her theory of ‘subjects … produced’ (Butler, 1990, p. 3, emphasis added) by a law that also excludes them Butler borrows from Foucault his description of power as both repressive and productive. But in that borrowing she misses Foucault’s challenge to juridical representations of modern power and his shift away from productive power as the flip side of sovereign repression toward productive power as the biopolitical intensification of life. Most important, in its poststructuralist conception of gender within a psycholinguistic model of law as constitutive of desire, *Gender Trouble* implicitly adopts a non-Foucauldian conception of power as drive. Correspondingly, in its post-structuralist exposure of the political subject’s ‘discursive foundation’ (Butler, 1990, p. 3), *Gender Trouble* occludes Foucault’s insistence on history. And again, by history, I mean a historical ontology that includes the othering contingency
of a temporal dispersion to which we are bound by the epistemic and material – discursive and non-discursive – limits of the archive.

Thus *Gender Trouble*’s performative disruption of coherent subjectivity is based in a Lacanian theory of law directly at odds with Foucauldian history. When Butler writes that ‘the juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power’ (Butler, 1990, p. 7), she directly contradicts Foucault’s claim that contemporary power is not juridical but biopolitical. Butler’s performative claim to resignify political agency is bound by the law by its ahistorical, psycholinguistic frame; it works directly in opposition to Foucault’s historical ontology, requiring us to ignore Foucault’s call to free our analytics of power from representations he calls ‘juridico-discursive’ (Foucault, 1978, p. 82). In other words, in the paradigmatic political thought of queer bricolage, we have still not cut off the head of the king.

**Freudo-Foucauldianism Restaged**

Let me return to my opening questions: Is psychoanalytic thinking necessarily ahistorical? Why does it matter if we historicize? And why, specifically, do these questions matter for political theory? I have engaged here with one strand of psychoanalytic thinking that has been especially salient in queer theory. One of my reasons for doing so has been to clearly expose how the queer undoing of subjectivity happens in many modes that may be philosophically at odds with each other. Although often lumped together with poststructuralist thinkers, Foucault’s lifelong practice of historical ontology separates him from both anthropological and psycholinguistic structuralisms.

With regard to psychoanalysis generally, the matter of history that separates Foucault’s desubjectivations from Lacanian ones does not mean, necessarily, that all psychoanalytic thinking is ahistorical. To make such a sweeping claim would be to refute the material specificities of the very histories the claim purports to defend. Histories of the present require contact with archives; if our present has shifted from queer gender trouble to Kleinian affect, let us do a genealogy of that affect. That said, to the extent that we moderns remain Freudian, even as we embrace the Kleinian breast, we remain the inheritors of a violence *History of Madness* (Foucault, 2006) describes: the erection of psyche-logos through a Great Confinement that excluded and objectified madness as the other of ourselves, then interiorized that otherness as a timeless unconscious. If we take history seriously, in the Foucauldian sense, the unconscious cannot be timeless, and we cannot be simply or only Freudian. Put somewhat differently, the historical *a priori* calls us to attend to that which delimits us: to that other-than-Freudian ‘border of time’ that surrounds our Freudian ‘presence’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 130).

I have argued elsewhere that this contact with an otherness that delimits us describes an ethics of alterity in Foucault. Unlike the response ethics of Butler’s later
work, Foucault’s ethics of alterity stems from his attention to the temporal dispersion of the historical a priori. Foucault’s other is not ethical in a Levinasian, humanist sense; rather, the dispersion of ourselves in our coextension with that which historically delimits us constitutes the ethical call of a non-human otherness, of our temporal border. In this sense, to ask the Foucauldian diagnostic question – what is this today in which we live? – is to ask, again, the Socratic ethical question – how are we to live? But to ask it again – as a question for today – is to ask it in a recoiling movement of dispersion that renders today strange. With Foucault, David Webb writes, ‘we are thrown into a present that is fractured, complex, and about which we can know something, but not everything’ (Webb, 2013, p. 119). It is precisely the fractured, complex strangeness of our present that impels us to revisit the archive in a contact that transforms us, again, in our presence. In that transformative recoil, Webb argues, ‘one can see the outline of a practice of freedom’ (Webb, 2013, p. 119).

This is why history matters: the strange ethics of alterity of Foucault’s historical a priori grounds Foucault’s better-known conception of ethics as a practice of freedom in relation to others as historical ontology. Further, because Foucault views politics as an ethics (Foucault, 1984, p. 375), how we historicize matters for politics. Defending a Foucauldian view, Wendy Brown has argued that ahistorical assumptions and transcendent ideals ‘constitute repudiations of politics, even as they masquerade as its source of redemption’ (Brown, 2001, p. 94). Contrasting what she calls the ‘relatively ahistorical figure of a system’ with ‘political rationalities’ that are ‘orders of practice and orders of discourse, not systems of rule’ (Brown, 2001, p. 115), Brown makes a case for Foucauldian genealogy as a way to rebuild ‘the stage for potential political invention and intervention’ (Brown, 2001, p. 117).

Does this mean that, as ‘systems of rule’, psychoanalytic perspectives on politics are without value? Not necessarily. For one thing, to reduce psychoanalysis to a rule-based system is to impoverish the breadth of its possible meanings. Nancy Luxon frames her own uses of psychoanalysis for rethinking the political by reminding her readers of political theory’s general hostility to psychoanalysis: ‘any turn toward psychoanalysis’, she writes, ‘may be seen to be a turn away from politics’ (Luxon, 2013, p. 381). Like Butler, Luxon thinks Freud and Foucault together; and yet, in her attention to political action through ethical cultivation she avoids many of the problems of Butler’s psycholinguistic structuralism. Drawing on psychoanalysis less as a theory than as a concrete clinical practice of ‘combative collaboration’ (Luxon, 2013, p. 382), Luxon finds in the psychoanalytic exchange the practical cultivation of ‘our capacity to tolerate experiences of rupture and discontinuity’ (Luxon, 2013, p. 387). This use of psychoanalytic practice in conjunction with her work on Foucault’s histories (Luxon, 2008) – specifically, his later lectures on ancient ethical parrhesia – allows Luxon to rethink our present and the autonomous political actors it upholds through the lens of ‘a different kind of governance’ (Luxon, 2013, p. 384).

To be sure, Luxon’s implicit alignment of the parrhesiastic Greek self with the modern confessional self risks the danger of deploying the metahistorical continuities
Foucault warns against in ‘Nietsche, Genealogy, History’. With regard to Foucault’s Greco-Roman return to ‘the self’, it is worth remembering precisely Foucault’s point about the temporal borders that delimit us: although the West finds its origins – and therefore its identity – in its Greek beginnings, the Greeks are profoundly other to us. As Foucault puts it in *Discipline and Punish*, ‘we are much less Greek than we believe’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 217). The Greeks are not a model for us; indeed, Foucault’s Greek ‘self’ is not a ‘self’ at all: it is neither a metaphysical substantival self nor a phenomenological self as a subject of consciousness nor a psychoanalytic self as ego (*le moi*). Rather, ‘self’ (*soi*) in Foucault is the reflexive effect of subjective problematization: a temporally contingent term that emerges within a history of subjectivity as a problem to be rethought (Huffer, 2014). In that light, Luxon’s interest in political agency sometimes skews Foucault’s tendency toward desubjectivation in ways that seem at odds with his antifoundationalism.

That said, Luxon’s use of psychoanalytic practice within a Foucauldian frame opens exciting possibilities for rethinking the political in ways that resonate with Brown’s genealogical approach to politics and history. Can psychoanalytic practices be rethought, through the lens of the historical *a priori*, as modes of the self-undoing practices of freedom Foucault calls ethics? Can the Freudian practices Luxon describes touch the other-than-Freudian, Greek ‘border of time’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 130) as our parrhesiastic other? Can our Freudian ‘presence’ be undone, along with the rational Western subject that spawned it, by those other practices that delimit us? Finally, can the self-undoing that psychoanalysis names be transformed into new modes of political praxis? The ethico-political practices of freedom that are grounded in Foucault’s historical ontology can help us to imagine these possibilities along with a host of others. At the same time, Foucault’s histories of the present, and his insistence on the question – what is happening today? – remind us to disinvest from the starry-eyed futurism of political promises whose possibilities are always just over the horizon. Let us ground ourselves today – here, now – in a freedom that exists only as a practice. The historical *a priori* – the ungrounding ground of that practice – calls us to the stage of politics again and again, even as we find that stage – the world as we know it – collapsing beneath us.

**Notes**

1 For a beautiful meditation on the place of *Gender Trouble* in one person’s queer life see Rosenberg (2014).
2 In referencing Lacanian queer negativity, I invoke especially Edelman (2004) and Dean (2009).
3 Wendy Grace concurs: ‘the insistence by Lacan and others on the trans-historical nature of desire … could not be more contrary to Foucault’ (Grace, 2013, p. 236). Grace continues: ‘For Foucault, power is not a drive’ (Grace, 2013, p. 239).
4 See Foucault’s famous image in *The Order of Things*: ‘If [the fundamental arrangements of knowledge] were to disappear as they appeared, if some event … were to cause them to crumble, … then one can
certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea’ (Foucault, 1970, p. 387).

5 I want to emphasize here that Foucault was never anti-psychoanalytic. As Wendy Grace explains: ‘To describe Foucault’s relationship to psychoanalysis as radical opposition overlooks his willingness to acknowledge its progressive aspects’ (Grace, 2013, p. 230).

6 See especially Hacking (2002).

7 For a queer politics of touch as tact and contact see especially Caron (2014).


9 On ethics as recoil see the indispensable Scott (1990).

References


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