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We can run, but we can't hide:
The need for psychological explanation in social history

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There have been many occasions in my experience when the explanatory techniques normally used by social historians have seemed inadequate to deal with some particular process or event. No doubt this happens to every historian, but I sometimes suspect that the social world of British colonialism in nineteenth century South Africa - my particular interest - provides these moments more often than some other areas. This feeling is, no doubt, largely the result of not knowing as much about the peculiarities of other places and times, but I do think it is at least arguable that colonial encounters created more extraordinarily odd situations than many other social environments. In past work, I have taken two approaches to these kinds of explanatory challenges. In the case of really bizarre material, I have simply avoided discussing it in writing and have rationalised my omissions on the grounds that this sort of thing is too atypical to be helpful in building up a broad general picture of British settlers' attitudes and experiences. In the case of more frequently occurring oddities, I have attempted to argue that they were the result of the construction of settlers' attitudes by the prevalent discourses concerning class identity and colonialism, which combined to create so great a social distance between settlers and African people that what would otherwise have seemed socially impossible became everyday and natural.[1] Although I do, in general, stand by this analysis, I have increasingly come to feel that it needs to be supplemented. Firstly, really peculiar circumstances deserve some time in the historical spotlight by way of an adjunct to those which an historian has decided were 'normal'. Extreme cases can be very useful in revealing the limits of the normal. Secondly, explaining even the 'normal' seems to me to require the use of psychological terms and techniques, however much historians may wish that this weren't the case.

To begin with an oddity: Consider a passage from the reminiscences of Edward Wilson, a Sub-Inspector in the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police in the 1860s. Wilson describes arresting for pass offences two men whom he happened to encounter as he rode through the

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[1] See S Dagut, 'Paternalism and Social Distance: British Settlers' Racial Attitudes, 1850s-1890s,' *South African Historical Journal*, 37, November 1997; ' "Strangely Hard Natures were bred in the South Africa of that day". Rural Settler Childhood, 1850s-1880s,' *African Studies*, 58, 1, July 1999, 33-53; 'Gender, colonial 'women's history' and the construction of social distance: Middle-class British women in later nineteenth century South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, forthcoming. For a detailed and particularly dogmatic statement of this case, see my 'Racial Attitudes among British Settlers in South Africa, c.1850-c.1895', PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1997.

Katberg on his way from Grahamstown to Queenstown, and who were later convicted of horse-theft. He then devotes a paragraph to a mediation upon the character of Africans as he perceived them:

> ... they not unfrequently [sic] drive the stolen horses and cattle through the towns and villages in broad daylight. Their amount of nerve is by no means deficient.... They are not easily pleased with the quality of their meat. They place but very little value on a lean ox or sheep. I have known them to quit good service, because they could not get fat meat and milk, *ad libitum*. They are a much pampered, well fed race, with no small amount of insolence and overbearing in their nature, and without regard for honesty. Thieving seems to be an innate principle of their nature.[2]

Immediately following this Wilson describes an apparently unrelated incident, connected to the first only in that both occurred in the Katberg:

> I will mention here an incident which occurred on one occasion on my returning over the Katberg to Grahamstown.... I spotted a fine, noble tiger....The cool, independent - nay, defiant strut of the tiger, galled me not a little: he walked leisurely, neither looking to the right or left. It was too much for my nature. I levelled my revolver at him... and fired.... He probably escaped scatheless.[3]

Edward Wilson, as his reminiscences make abundantly clear, was a somewhat unusual person; possessed of a racism brutal and extreme even by the demanding standards of the Eastern Cape in the 1860s, gloatingly mean-spirited, suspicious, greasily obsequious to his superiors and painfully obsessed with the question of what a 'gentleman' was and whether he might qualify to be one. Perhaps most remarkable of all, he was prepared to reveal - or was, perhaps, incapable of concealing - all of this in an extensive published memoir. His reaction to the 'tiger' (leopard) he had seen, then, can hardly be taken as revealing a great deal about the mainstream of settler culture. Before returning, at the end of this paper, to what it might mean nevertheless, I would like to put it to another use: Note how difficult this incident is to explain in historians' standard terms. A hypothetical Marxist, in the unlikely event that he or she should consider the incident worth comment at all, might argue that Wilson shot at the tiger as a result of his class anxieties: Wilson saw the tiger as a symbol of bourgeois status - desirable, unattainable, maddening. However, the Marxist cannot establish a clear link between

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[2] E Wilson, *Reminiscences of a Frontier Armed & Mounted Police Officer in South Africa*, Grahamstown, 1866, 82

[3] Wilson, 83

Wilson's social insecurity and his perception that a particular animal embodied the characteristics that upset him. Why did Wilson notice the tiger at all? Why did he not instead take a pot-shot at, say, a fat dog belonging to some irksome member of the Grahamstown mercantile class? A discursive historian might have a somewhat easier time. He or she could show, for instance, that an important part of the discourse of colonial masculinity was the enjoyment of 'mastery' over nature in the form of hunting,[4] but would be as hard-pressed as the admittedly straw-man Marxist to explain why Wilson had seen this particular animal as an affront to his masculinity and had, what is more, admitted in writing that he was unable to harm it.

Whatever lessons it might ultimately be possible to draw from Wilson's encounter with the tiger, it remains the case that he was an oddity. More important than understanding Wilson's and analogous situations, I would argue, is trying to analyse the 'normal oddities' which characterised nineteenth century British settler culture in South Africa. These might be called settlers' characteristic 'sleights of mind'. These sleights of mind included, for instance, the familiar assertion by British settlers in South Africa that they had created 'an English home' in defiance of all local material and social conditions, their self-perception as 'alone' when surrounded by Africans on whom they relied in every conceivable way and the sense of superiority which settlers appear to have retained even in their interactions with African people who had considerable power over them - kings and chiefs, certainly, but also customers, or neighbours with skills to share or teach or, say, oxen to lend.[5] A similar process appears to have operated in relation to settler-African friendship and sexuality, where equal friendships and sexual relations (both oppressive and consensual) are known to have existed, but which were almost always impossible for settlers to write - and therefore, perhaps, to think about - clearly.

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[4] See, for instance, J MacKenzie 'The imperial pioneer and hunter and the British masculine stereotype in late Victorian and Edwardian times,' in J Mangan & J Walvin (eds) *Manliness and morality. Middle-class masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940*, Manchester, 1987

[5] For multiple examples of all of these, see Dagut, opp. cit.

It could simply have been the case that settlers were, by and large, self-consciously cynical hypocrites. This, however, is most unlikely. People, it seems fair to say, tend to preserve a positive and integrated self-image. Very few of us - apart, perhaps, from certain regional politicians - will consciously admit to ourselves that, 'I habitually lie and strike false poses in pursuit of my narrow personal interests.' It is also possible to argue (as I have done in the past) that settlers were so thoroughly cocooned and blinded by the discourse (or ideology) of colonialism that they were completely unable to perceive major features of their social world. This, again, is unlikely. While one may be largely 'constituted in discourse' one cannot successfully constitute everything else in the terms of one's own discourse. Social perceptions and attitudes do, as it happens, change under pressure from material and other forces. Furthermore, individual minds change with personal experience and not only with changes in the impersonal discourse in terms of which they are, nevertheless, largely constituted. For these reasons, the explanation of settler 'sleights of mind', cannot, I now believe, be carried out entirely in historians' standard material and discursive terms. While the use of material and discourse analysis remain indispensable, they are, in these cases, neither sufficient nor exhaustive.

Here are just two examples of the best known variety of these sleights of mind, the sense of 'being alone.' They are drawn from the writing of people who were as different as it was possible to be and still be considered a British settler in South Africa: Charlotte Bousfield, an embodied definition of British colonial respectability in her capacity as wife of the first Anglican Bishop of Pretoria and Louis Cohen, a working-class Jewish East-ender who prospered as a shady Kimberley diamond dealer. In the diary which Charlotte Bousfield kept during the siege of Pretoria, she remarked on a day during which she had been able to visit her house in the town before returning to the safety of the army camp at night. She enjoyed her visit home, an escape from the noise, crowding and incessant demands of life in the camp: 'I had a delightful day at home yesterday (Thursday) spending the mng. hours alone with one of the kaffirs (Fat Boy) helping me to prepare & cook the dinner.'[6] Cohen had a very similar sense of the social invisibility of Africans in a very different context. Visiting a friend down on

[6] Church of the Province of South Africa Archive, Wits University, CPSA AB 1339, Mrs C E Bousfield, 'Extract from Diary,' 7.2.1881

his luck in the Kimberley of the 1870s, he recalled that 'He looked quite lonely and lost, as fever-eyed he lay in an untidy bed and cheerless, neglected room, with no companion but a strong-smelling nigger, a consumptive candle, and a half-filled bottle of his curse and consolation - a pint of champagne....'[7]

What Bousfield and Cohen shared, and also had in common with most other British settlers, was a sense of the social invisibility of Africans in the context of domestic service - even fairly intimate domestic service. It is worth repeating that the standard forms of explanation are indispensable to understanding why this was the case. One could hardly expect a respectable upper-middle-class English lady, surrounded by servants all her life at 'Home' not to be capable of blocking her social perception of someone so culturally distant from her as 'Fat Boy.' Equally, Louis Cohen, whose predominant experience of Africans was in the form of the mass of systematically dehumanised, apparently interchangeable and effectively rightless workers at the diamond mines, also had good material and discursive reasons to regard an individual African person as a feature, along with candles and champagne, of someone's 'loneliness'. What these forms of explanation do not provide, though, are an analysis of how this invisibility was psychologically possible, where its limits lay, and how they are to be detected. It is not, after all, as if Cohen and Bousfield were unaware of the presence of African people in these situations. Rather, in this context, Africans seem to have existed for settlers in what one might call a perceptual twilight - a twilight that could turn and, indeed, given the reality of social change, must have turned, under certain circumstances, into a dawn of full awareness or a night of complete 'social death'. In other words, Freudian repression, or something very like it, was at work.

But this is dangerous talk. The importation of psychological terms into explanation is not a respectable move within the discipline of history in general, and certainly not in South African historiography. There are good reasons for this. What I would like to suggest, in the process of surveying these reasons, is that psychological explanation is, nevertheless, unavoidable - and that once its disreputable ancestors have been exorcised and its strengths and weaknesses

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[7] L Cohen, *Reminiscences of Kimberley*, London, 1911, 176

properly understood, it could become a very useful tool for historians concerned to understand certain features of the social world.

The track record of psychological historiography, in sharp contrast to those of materialist or discourse analysis, has not been encouraging. Undoubtedly the most distinguished of psychologically inclined historians, Peter Gay (who has trained as a Freudian psychoanalyst), is quick to concede that many practitioners of 'psychohistory' have given this approach a bad name by their 'unwarranted reductions and extravagant speculations'.[8] They have aimed both too high and too low. Their aim has been too high in the sense that they have tried to reduce historical explanation to what might be called vulgar Freudianism. In this attempt to establish the determining role of psychological causes, 'psychohistorians' have adopted 'a deliberately primitive id psychology... [which] demotes adult historical actors to bundles of persistent, unresolved childhood symptoms'.[9] Psychological historians have aimed too low where they have concentrated on the explanation of what they have defined in advance as instances of 'collective psychosis' or on the 'psychobiography' of eminent or notorious individuals.[10] The first of these techniques is, of course, extremely vulnerable to the charge that it consists of little more than self-fulfilling prophecy. The second is so narrowly focussed on a particular person's character - understood in Freudian terms or some variant thereof - that it is unlikely to be of great interest or use to historians with broader social and political concerns.

If the warmest praise that Peter Gay can summon up for European and American psychohistorical writing since the 1950s is that while there have been a number of 'fiascos', there have also been occasional successes in the genre and, therefore, that the picture in

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[8] P Gay, *Freud for Historians*, New York, 1985, xi

[9] Gay, 186. A particularly discouraging example of this style of historiography is the work of Lloyd de Mause, founder of the Institute for Psychohistory and editor and publisher of *The Journal of Psychohistory*. De Mause has devised a bizarre six-stage 'psychogenic' theory of history, according to which the psychological legacy of parent-child relations - envisioned as typically having been exceptionally abusive - is the key to historical understanding in general. He would appear to be an organic intellectual of the 'recovered memory' movement. (L De Mause (ed), *The History of Childhood*, London, 1976; See also De Mause's website: www.psychohistory.com)

[10] Gay, ix

general is 'by no means wholly depressing'[11], it is not to be expected that more sceptical historians will find compelling models to follow among the attempts which have been made to understand colonial societies in psychological terms.

This is not to deny the broader importance of some of these attempts. Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* are clearly among the most important anti-colonial polemics of the twentieth century. Both offer enlightening journalistic - in the best sense of the term - tours of French colonial culture's house of mirrors.[12] Both works contain a number of observations well worth the attention of historians of colonial South Africa,[13] but they also indulge in passages of precisely the sort of 'extravagant speculation' which Gay, as an empirical historian and as an orthodox Freudian, would deplore: Memmi does so, for example, in his concoction of a 'Nero complex' from which all (or almost all) colonisers suffered.[14] Fanon makes an equivalent error in his insistence that the 'Negro is a [sexually] phobogenic object' in the racist collective unconscious shared by white French people.[15] From historians' point of view, a more serious difficulty, perhaps, is that these texts now read rather more as documentary sources on their periods than as guides to method. Memmi's and Fanon's books were provided with introductions by Jean Paul Sartre and are heavily influenced by existentialist conceptions of individuality and freedom. Existentialism dates this work, and the psychological world which they analyse seems, given 50 years of historical perspective, very precisely dated too. Much of the psychological infrastructure which, they argue, sustains colonialism in general now appears

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[11] Gay, 184

[12] F Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, (Paris, 1952), New York, 1968; A Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, (Paris,1957), London, 1990.

[13]These include for instance, Fanon's reflections on the anxiety and anger generated in university-educated 'Antilles Negroes' in the mid-twentieth century by their ambivalent relationship - at once one of identification, alienation and self-alienation - with French culture, language and power (chapters 1 & 5) and Memmi's biting and brilliant psychological caricatures of the pathetic and ineffectual 'colonizer who refuses' and the stupid and vicious 'colonizer who accepts', each of which contains more than a grain of truth. (chapters 2 & 3).

[14] Memmi, 118

[15] Fanon, 151, 154. The idea of a non-linguistic 'collective unconscious', originating as it did with the rather mystically-minded Jung, is anathema to Freudians, whose self-definition includes scientific rationalism and axiomatic acceptance of brain-mind identity and non-inheritance of acquired characteristics.

very specific to French colonialism in its next-to-last phase. What Memmi and Fanon offer, in other words, is description of some psychological corollaries of a particular social form rather than examples of the use of a psychological scheme of explanation for social forms and processes in general.

South African attempts to explain aspects of our special type of colonialism in psychological terms have been no more likely to attract the approval of historians. As the social psychologist Don Foster puts it, South African psychologists' attempts to understand South Africa's racial order have tended to see 'racism [as]... generated in individual's minds and not in practices of state or in service of economic advantages'.[16] Two examples drawn from the work of South African psychologists illustrate the point: Historians are extremely familiar with the unacceptably ahistorical nature of the pioneering social psychologist I.D. MacCrone's explanation of white racism as an atavism persisting, largely unchanged, from the 18th century frontier.[17] Chabani Manganyi's discussion of possible links between infant development and racism seems to combine 'vulgar Freudianism' with a use of psychology - in the Fanon-Memmi manner - as a method of describing consequences of existing social circumstances rather than contributing to their explanation: 'What we know today about child development enables us to conclude that, in the present cultural climate in Western societies, the child's world view is decided in its fundamental form during the experience and resolution of the anal crisis'.[18] For Manganyi, white South African infants solve the problem of self-hate generated by their simultaneous identification with and repulsion from their faeces by projecting the element of repulsion onto to the bodies of black people.[19] While it is just barely possible that both of these statements might be true, the real causal work in Manganyi's argument is done by 'the present cultural climate in Western societies' rather than by a specifically psychological force.

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[16] D Foster, 'On Racism: Virulent Mythologies and Fragile Threads' in L Nicholas (ed) *Psychology and Oppression. Critiques and Proposals*, Johannesburg, 1993, 67

[17] I MacCrone, *Race Attitudes in South Africa*, London, 1937

[18] N Manganyi, *Treachery and Innocence. Psychology and Racial Difference in South Africa*, Johannesburg, 1991, 44

[19] Manganyi, 47

There would appear, then, to be every reason for South African historians to avoid the use of psychological models, and even psychological terms, in constructing their interpretations of the past. The precedents are hardly encouraging. What is more, both discourse and materialist analysis, in addition to their other undoubted advantages, offer to make the use of psychology unnecessary by explaining all the contents, - or at least all the socially relevant contents - of individual minds in social terms. The offer to reduce individual psychology out of the picture has been a very attractive one to make to historians. Historical research and explanation are enormously complex. They require us to place what we aim to explain in so many contexts that the opportunity to ignore a particularly awkward one - and to feel theoretically justified in doing so - is hard to resist. I believe, nevertheless, that while approaches which seek to explain the contents of individual minds by locating them in their social context remain vitally necessary to historical understanding, they are not sufficient to the task.

Attempts to reduce psychology away don't work. It is simply implausible to argue that individuals' minds are entirely socially constructed. Marxist claims to this effect are not logically coherent. Quite simply, the existence of false consciousness requires the existence of true consciousness. If the consciousness of the members of a particular class arises, with whatever degree of complexity, from their social position (their relation to the means of production), then it cannot be that the consciousness of members of one particular class (the proletariat when it has become a class-for-itself, by whatever means) also happens to be the true consciousness of all humankind. But this is precisely what Marxism requires. Since the proletariat as class-for-itself and the rest of humanity are biologically identical and since, further, that it is possible for individuals to change their class position and their class consciousness, the capacity of properly conscientised proletarians - and their leaders - to possess true consciousness requires that there be an essential human nature and, therefore, an essential human psychology. This essential psychology must underlie whatever ideological mystifications exist in the minds of people in states of false consciousness. This difficulty is not, it should be noted, one which applies only to earlier and simpler Marxist formulations. Both Robert Miles' and Frederick Jameson's extremely sophisticated versions of late Marxism are just as vulnerable to this line of argument as is Marx himself - who would not, in any case,

have denied that final goal of communist revolution was to free the real underlying human essence from the multiple snares in which capitalism has trapped it.[20]

Discourse analysis of individual consciousness, which claims to show that the individual psyche is 'constituted through the social domain of discourse' are not very much more convincing than analogous Marxist claims.[21] One of the many merits of the impeccably lucid and fair-minded theoretical sections of Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell's *Mapping the Language of Racism* is that they make clear, and openly confront, the consequences of the belief that every feature of the human world, including the human self, is constituted in discourse. It is their contention that, 'Subjectivity is organized discursively as a public act of self-presentation, but introspection, private accounting for oneself, is no less discursive.... A sense of identity and subjectivity is constructed from the interpretative resources - the stories and narratives of identity - which are available in our culture'.[22] Although it is, of course, true that individual identity is to a very large extent constructed from available cultural resources, it is not thereby established - at least in the absence of very much more thorough and careful philosophical argument - that the human self is entirely constituted by discourse. Wetherell and Potter's claim does not begin to refute Descartes's well-worn but trusty *cogito ergo sum*. The content of the *cogito* may very well be largely culturally determined, but to say the same of the fact of the existence of the *sum* is to confuse the content of one variety of thought - thought about objects, ideas, other people and so forth - with the contrasting variety of thought which is explicitly self-aware: thoughts that imply or explicitly state that 'I exist.' It seems utterly implausible that self-awareness is entirely the result of social conditioning. If this is admitted, then the nature of the pre-existing human self must surely play some role in the way in which people experience the social world.

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[20] As William Dowling makes clear, Jameson's hyper-refined post-Althusserianism depends on a concept of an essential human nature as much as the most straightforward Marxism. This is because his system requires the existence in all humans of a 'political unconscious' into which revolutionary energy is usually repressed. (W Dowling *Jameson, Althusser, Marx. An Introduction to The Political Unconscious*, London, 1984, 114-18.) On Robert Miles' reliance on a concept of human nature, see M Wetherell and J Potter, *Mapping the Language of Racism. Discourse and the Legitimation of Exploitation*, New York, 1992, 31.

[21] Wetherell and Potter, 75

[22] Wetherell and Potter, 78

The time has more than come, however, for this historian's dangerously ill-informed and amateur attempt to venture into the philosophical arena to cease. Even in the likely event of the arguments offered in the preceding paragraphs for the irreducibility of the individual psyche being refuted, it is still the case that historians, in their everyday empirical practice, are continually confronted by the workings - or, minimally, what appear to be the workings - of individual minds. As Peter Gay puts it,

> The professional historian has always been a psychologist.... Whether he knows it or not, he operates with a theory of human nature; he attributes motives, studies passions, analyses irrationality.... He discovers causes, and his discovery normally includes acts of the mind.[23]

Since this is undeniably the case, it would seem at least arguable that historians might benefit from adopting a somewhat more theorised psychological vocabulary. Gloomy precedents, current intellectual fashion and common sense combine, however, to warn against the adoption of some new all-encompassing psychological 'grand narrative'. What is required, rather, is to discover which psychological concepts historians are likely to find most consonant with, and helpful to, the task of constructing empirical historical narrative and explanation. It would also seem wise to search for useful concepts somewhat more widely than historians have done in the past. Marriages between history and psychoanalysis have generally not been happy. It therefore seems sensible to consider whether other psychological approaches have not something to offer historians too.

The major alternative to psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology, has long since replaced the former as the dominant approach among psychologists themselves. At least one of its branches, social identity theory, seems capable of explaining important aspects of the behaviour of humans in groups with considerable plausibility.[24] Social identity theory starts from the undoubtedly correct axiom - common to cognitive psychology in general - that the mind's capacity to process information (in all forms, from sense impressions to complex ideas) is considerably less than the quantity of information with which it is continuously presented. The mind's unavoidable first task is to simplify. When this process is applied to the human

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[23] Gay, 6

[24] Wetherell and Potter's introduction to the strengths and weakness of social identity theory, relied on here, is as clear and balanced as the rest of their theoretical discussion. (Wetherell and Potter, 34-49)

realm, it obviously creates a strong tendency toward group identification and stereotyping, both of oneself and of others. What is more, for social identity theorists,

> ... on the motivational front, individual self-esteem begins to be linked to the fortunes of the group as a whole.... Since self-esteem is a desirable commodity, group members will be motivated to maximise the differences between... groups in favour of the ingroup and will emphasise the positive distinctiveness of their own group on any dimensions which are valued such as prestige, monetary gains, ascription of intelligence and virtue, etc.[25]

For social identity theory, although this process does not operate in isolation from social sources of conflict, 'conflict is sustained by the psychological consequences of group membership which will operate willy nilly'. [26] Social identity theory is therefore very unlikely to appeal to those who believe that the human world is entirely constituted in discourse or that it arises 'in the last analysis' from the clash of material interests - though it is arguable that there is no necessary contradiction between social identity theory and less optimistic or totalising versions of these points of view. Naturally, it is also very important to guard against racist appropriations of these ideas and to insist that though we may be 'hard-wired' for social stereotyping, this is neither a desirable characteristic nor one which operates in isolation from non-psychological sources of conflict. Humans are clannish and fractious creatures. There are occasions when simply admitting that this is the case - and that there may very well be biological reasons for it - will spare historians the difficulties and implausibilities which arise from trying to explain all the features of some particular conflict in terms of external social causation.

As this superficial discussion of one branch of cognitive psychology shows, some concepts and findings derived from the mainstream of psychological thinking are certainly worth historians' attention. Considered as a disciplinary whole, though, it does not recommend itself. It has long been a gibe against psychoanalytic history that one cannot psychoanalyse the dead. This is only partially true, but it is undoubtedly the case that one cannot pass among them handing out sharp pencils and survey forms designed to elicit quantitative data. It has also to be said that attempts by cognitive social psychologists to provide explanations for specific past

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[25] Wetherell and Potter, 45

[26] *ibid.*

events and social structures are no less disappointing than those of their psychoanalytic counterparts.[27]

If the wholesale adoption of psychoanalysis as scheme of understanding the social world has led historians into absurdity, a total reliance on cognitive psychology threatens to lead into banality, into an explanation of too much in the way of violence and oppressive power relations by way of a rueful acceptance of 'the way things just happen to be'. As Don Foster points out, the contribution of psychology to social explanation ought ideally to take place at several levels. These would include an acknowledgment of the role of cognitive psychology in helping social scientists to understand the nature and limits of what is psychologically possible in inter-personal and inter-group relations as well as the development of some formal method of understanding the 'intra-psychic level' - the limits of possibility within an individual mind.[28]

Two models appear to compete to provide an model and a vocabulary within which to explain the 'intra-psychic' features of minds. The dominant cognitive approach, as remarked above, sees the human mind as a limited-capacity information processing system and people, therefore, as 'naive scientists', seeking to explain their world in terms of a small sample of faultily-perceived data.[29] This model has received abundant experimental support and seems, in its clarity and simplicity, far more attractive than the murky depths and multiple departments of the Freudian schemas as they were developed in Freud's own work and those of his disciples and apostates. Nevertheless, I believe that a Freud-influenced understanding of the structure of the individual psyche is likely to be of much greater use to historians.[30] The

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[27] An example of this sort of attempt (which appears to be typical based on my cursory and inexpert examination of the literature) is Daniel Bar-Tal's 'Delegitimization: The Extreme Case of Stereotyping' in D Bar-Tal, C Graumann, A Kruglanski, W Stroebe (eds) *Stereotyping and Prejudice. Changing Conceptions*, New York, 1989, pp. For an historian, this reads as collection of purely descriptive statements about the situations in which extreme prejudice arise, having no specific explanatory power beyond the idea that that groups of people keenly defend their perceived interests (whatever they may be).

[28] Foster, 74

[29] G Finchilescu 'Social cognition and attributions', in D Foster & J Louw-Potgieter (eds), *Social Psychology in South Africa*, Johannesburg, 1991

[30] It is worth noting that Freudian and cognitive models of the psyche are not, perhaps, incapable of synthesis. Richard Wollheim points out that Freud's thought remained compatible with the thoroughly

(continued...)

cognitive model suggests that the mind holds up an imperfect mirror to the social world, but that the mirror's specific 'contents' are no more than a distortion of what it reflects. This model, therefore, in turn reflects back almost the entire task of explaining the socially relevant contents of the human psyche back into the realm of the social. This may be a prudent procedure - but it offers historians only a little help in trying to understand the interaction between the individual psyche and the social world.

The model of the psyche which Freud held during the middle phase of his life,[31] by contrast, claims to show us that the distorting mirror is, in fact, a piece of mirrored glass, a one-way (or almost one-way) window, behind which is concealed a dark room, as in a TV cop-show. Much of the contents of the mind are simply reflections of the social world - but the dark room hidden behind the mirrored glass also contains important actors, whose views on the drama played out on the mirrored side of the glass can be decisive. This dark room full of sinisterly lurking cops, to drop this increasingly preposterous metaphor, is the unconscious. In the unconscious lurks a non-rational, unflatteringly basic and emotionally very powerful collection of instincts, wishes and fears, which co-exist in ways the conscious mind would consider utterly contradictory: 'Freud, it must be emphasised, held not merely that contradictory elements... can exist in the unconscious, but that they exist there without contradiction'.[32] The contents of the unconscious strongly influence the conscious part of the mind in its emotions, thoughts and actions, however well-controlled or respectable the mind may consciously think itself to be.

The Freudian model of mind provides historians with an elegant and plausible explanation for the ways in which historical actors often seem to have been dominated by conflicting

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[30](...continued)
mechanistic model of mental functioning he developed in his 1895 'Project for a Scientific Psychology'. (R Wollheim, *Sigmund Freud*, (2nd ed.), New York, 1990, chapter 2) The same point has recently been made in an excellent debate on psychoanalysis conducted in *Prospect*, and which is available at: www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/highlights/pills_talk/index.html

[31] Between, roughly, the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900 and the major alterations to and complications of his image of the mind, announced in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *The Ego and the Id* (1923).

[32] Wollheim, 186

perceptions and strong but ambivalent emotions. This fact causes considerable trouble for both material and discourse analysis, both of which are required by it to postulate that ambivalent people are something like badly tuned radios, picking up broadcasts from more than one station at a time. Ambivalence and self-contradiction are much more easily and plausibly explained if the existence of a muddled and demanding unconscious is postulated.

This Freudian perspective also makes it possible to incorporate into historical analysis what might be called the 'remainder' which is left after more socially-oriented forms of explanation have done their work. The individual and collective subjects of historical enquiry frequently display what appear to have been obsessive needs or extreme emotional responses to the social circumstances. If they do not ignore this material, historians tend to argue that some individual's intense hatreds or obsessive needs for deference, even when they have had a clear causal influence on the course of historical events, are somehow not the province of historians and should be referred to the unfathomable and ultimately unimportant discipline called 'individual psychology'. This is obviously unsatisfactory - and a limited application of psychoanalytic technique by historians makes it unnecessary

The third advantage offered by the Freudian model of mind is both the least known to the historical profession and, I believe, the most important, providing the most useful forms of assistance that psychology can offer to historians. Historians - and perhaps particularly historians concerned with the social world of European colonialism - are, as I have tried to suggest, continually confronted by examples of 'sleight of mind'. A Freud-influenced image of mental structure and functioning offers an attractively logical way of helping us to explain how settlers' mental subterfuges were possible. As Gay expresses it, Freudians view the mind, 'much like a modern military dictatorship.... It employs battalions of censors to prevent domestic news from leaking out, and border patrols to prevent hostile ideas from reaching, and possibly subverting, its people.'[33]

This, surely, is a model of the mind with which historians will be familiar. We come across evidence of the human capacity for stubborn and apparently effortless self-deception - for

[33] Gay, 123

simply 'not noticing' - every time we return to the archives. Its existence is repeatedly corroborated in the reports submitted to legislatures by long-dead bureaucrats, in century-old newspaper editorials and in obscure memoirs privately printed 'at the request of my children'. If the mind does have this capacity for repression, then the 'normal oddities' - of which Cohen and Bousfield's sense of being 'alone' are examples - seem much easier to understand. The Freudian model is capable not just of explaining this capacity, but also of detecting its effects and its limits - tasks much more difficult for forms of explanation that reduce the psyche to insignificance. Freudian psychoanalysis claims that opportunities and techniques exist which enable some of the contents of one's unconscious to become consciously known both to oneself and to others. To continue Gay's 'military dictatorship' metaphor:

> Yet often neither the censors nor the patrols have the wit, or the agility, to carry their assignments through. At night especially, but also at unguarded moments during the day, messages, disguised as dreams, slips of the tongue, or neurotic symptoms get out; and perceptions, dressed in innocuous garb, get in. Both, however, pay a price for their intrepid penetration of the energetically defended frontiers: they are gravely distorted, treacherously translated, sometimes crippled beyond cure. At the very least, they are heavily masked... recognizable only... to the schooled and sensitive interpreter.[34]

Awareness of what is repressed returns when one's psychic guard is down, or when the pressure from external forces - perceptions, ideas, experiences - is so great that it overwhelms these defences and repression ceases to be possible. In this way, the Freudian model of mind helps to explain both the frequent occurrence and the character of 'sleights of mind.' This model accounts for their tenacity and for their incomplete, ambivalent, 'twilit' character. It also predicts and explains the situations in which they are apt to break down. The Freudian way of visualising the structure of the mind, in other words, gives historians the opportunity to show why and how sleights of mind can be widespread and powerful and, yet, how attitude change can and does occur. No other set of concepts seems to offer these advantages simultaneously.

But, as the advertising voice-overs have it, there is more: Freudian psychoanalysis claims to allow knowledge of one's unconscious processes and their contents, without one having previously been aware of them, to other people - in particular, to trained psychoanalysts. At this point, it might appear that only two choices are possible for historians; either to abandon

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[34] *ibid.*

this sub-field to professional psychoanalysts with historical interests or to become immersed - like Peter Gay - in the doctrines of psychoanalysis oneself, Oedipus complex, will-to-death and all. It must be admitted that either option appears more logical and more rigorous than any proposed middle way. The discipline of history, however, is a notorious haven for theoretical half-measures and middle ways. Few historians who have taken the 'linguistic turn' follow their colleagues in other disciplines into complete idealism and relativism. Materialist historians often adhere to the importance of class struggle and material determination in the last instance, without feeling any compulsion, say, to detect progress towards the triumph of the proletariat in their field of interest or even to uphold the labour theory of value. Therefore, bearing in mind the dangerous allure and disputed value of many of the implements within the Freudian toolbox and the unfortunate results of their wholesale adoption, it seems wise to adopt only an extremely minimal set of Freudian concepts and techniques. I would argue that these should be the notions of an unruly, incoherent and influential unconscious; of the conscious or unconscious repression of perceptions, memories and ideas into the unconscious when they conflict with conscious thoughts; and of the likelihood of the 'return of the repressed' into the conscious mind in a modified, disguised form, as a 'compromise formation' when, for whatever reason, the defences against the repressed material have been relaxed or circumvented.[35]

In the normal course of events, repressed material returns to consciousness only in neurotic symptoms, dreams, jokes and 'parapraxes' - that is, slips of the tongue, 'absent-minded mistakes', instances of forgetting names which have hitherto been very well known, and the like. Historians very rarely have access to the dreams of our subjects, and would normally be exceptionally ill-advised to attempt to diagnose aspects of their behaviour as neurotic symptoms. Jokes and parapraxes are more frequently encountered in the sources. While these

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[35] J Laplanche and J Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, London, 1988, 398, 76. It may be reassuring to reflect that this particular sub-set of Freud's ideas has become almost commonsensical in the century since Freud introduced them. Moreover, an acceptance of these ideas does not require assent to Freud's much-disputed and almost certainly incorrect views on the human developmental schedule or on sexuality, nor are they derived from evidence obtained exclusively, or even largely, in his quite possibly fraudulent clinical practice. Far from being supported by induction from the abnormal to the normal, they are substantiated by a very large number of instances drawn from the experience of people in good mental health, as recounted in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901). Both books provide relatively simple theoretical frameworks and an enormous accumulation of primary-source evidence, giving them a startling resemblance to historical monographs.

are likely always to form the most useful point of entry to the unconscious for historians, it is not necessary only to lie in wait for them. The endlessly parodied technique of free-association required of the patient as he or she squirms on the psychoanalyst's 'couch' is available, in a modified form, to historians. Freud explained what was involved in the case of (allegedly) therapeutic free-association:

> If... derivatives [of what was primarily repressed] have become sufficiently far removed from the repressed representative, whether owing to the adoption of distortions or by reason of the number of intermediate links inserted, they have free access to the conscious. It is as though the resistance of the conscious against them was a function of their distance from what was originally repressed. In carrying out the technique of psychoanalysis, we continually require the patient to produce such derivatives for the repressed as, in consequence either of their remoteness or distortion, can pass the censorship of the conscious.... During this process we observe that the patient can go on spinning a thread of such associations, till he is brought up against some thought, the relation of which to what is repressed becomes so obvious that he is compelled to repeat his attempt at repression.[36]

It should, therefore, be possible to read passages of argument or description with an eye to the point at which the 'thread of associations' leading from some observation or remark abruptly breaks off. This would involve, for instance, an attempt to be alert to sudden changes of subject or to firm denials of the conclusion to which an argument had appeared to be leading.

Such a moment certainly seems to occur when Sub-Inspector Wilson's memoir shifts from a resentful discussion of the alleged nature of Africans to a recollection of a pot-shot at a leopard. What he says about Africans, among other things, is that they have 'nerve', but that they are insolent, overbearing and dishonest. Despite this, he has been able to arrest and to have convicted numerous Africans, including the two men mentioned on this occasion. Africans are despicable and cunning - but he is winning the battle against them. The 'tiger', on the other hand, while it has as much 'nerve' as African people, is also 'fine', 'noble' and 'defiant' - and escapes 'scatheless' from the Sub-Inspector. In these post-Freudian times, it seems almost cliched to point out that what has occurred is a '*displacement of affect*' from Africans to the leopard.[37] What Wilson cannot consciously think about Africans - that they appear to be resisting colonialism with considerable bravery and success and even, possibly,

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[36] 'Repression' (1915), in S Freud, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, London, 1991, 149

[37] It even seems unlikely that anyone writing after the diffusion of versions of Freud's ideas into general knowledge would permit themselves something so transparent. Wilson published his reminiscences when Freud was ten.

that this is something to be admired, can be shifted onto the 'compromise formation' - the annoying, magnificent and invulnerable leopard. Even in the case of the apparently adamantine Edward Wilson, then, the construction of an individual mind by colonial discourse had distinct - and discernable - limits.

In most cases, of course, the opportunity to use Freudian techniques does not fall so easily into one's lap. When examining the writing of more normally constituted people - and more normal, less spectacular 'sleights of mind' - much more careful and subtle readings will be required. Even in these cases, though, I believe that a tentative and judicious application of psychoanalytic concepts and vocabulary will help historians to explain these kinds of attitudes more lucidly and convincingly. Far from being unnecessary quackery to be avoided at all costs, a little of Dr Freud's medicine can be very useful. To end on the sort of personal testimonial appropriate to those selling patent cures: It has certainly helped me. These psychoanalytic ideas seem to me to cast a great deal of light on the confident and thorough-going but simultaneously insecure and desperately limited nature of British colonialism in South Africa.

Suggestions, refutations and reading-lists gratefully received at: **105sgd@muse.wits.ac.za**