Introduction: “The Poverty of Philosophy” – A Critique of Psychoanalytic Knowledge and Power

Let me laugh aloud for a while. You see, you understand everything in terms of your schemas, your code, your imaginary, your fantasies... which really are far too partial, in every sense of the word. For the most part, women’s desires, words and jouissance elude them.

(Irigaray, 102)

This is a passionate, often angry, essay by Luce Irigaray titled “The Poverty of Psychoanalysis,” published in Critique in 1977. The addressee of the essay, which begins with “Gentlemen, psychoanalysts,” is the male Lacanian. Adding “Ladies” would not change anything, Irigaray states, as long as we use a language [langue] masculinist in the grain, and where “the masculine noun always governs the agreement”:

The poverty of psychoanalysis? What next? The phallonarcissism you have duly invested in your function as analysts will not tolerate such a statement, though it is in fact a question. So you will protest, more or less consciously, just like those who want to preserve something of their desire in the repressed: in no way does psychoanalysis suffer from poverty [la misère], nor is it wretched [une misère]. (79)

Irigaray speculates of the elected audience of her essay that most of them will be unable to understand its title, meaning, history, or its full afterlife. The title, “The Poverty of Psychoanalysis,” is referring, of course, to Karl Marx’s The Poverty of Philosophy. Published in 1847 in Paris, Misère de la philosophie coincides with the early elaboration of Marx’s historical and economic theory. Written in the reactive mode, it takes on the French Socialists of his time, in particular the Philosophie de la misère of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Marx attacks the economic doctrines of Proudhon on the grounds that he de-historicizes them, refusing to see them as the products of their time and socioeconomic milieu that they are: “these ideas, these categories, are as little eternal as the relations they express. They are historical and transitory products” (119). Capitalism, for instance, is
a historically contingent mode of production, not the universal human condition Proudhon says it is.

He borrows from the economists the necessity of eternal relations; he borrows from the Socialists the illusion of seeing in poverty only poverty. He is in agreement with both in wishing to refer it [and here Marx means economic relation] to the authority of science. Science, for him, is reduced to the insignificant proportion of a scientific formula. It is thus that M. Proudhon flatters himself to have made the criticism of both political economy and of communism: he is below both the one and the other. . . . He wished to be the synthesis, he is a composite error. (137)

Irigaray evokes the ghost of Marx to similarly critique a knowledge system that struts around as if it were self-begotten – “whole, absolute and without any historical foundations”:¹

You refuse to admit that the unconscious – your concept of the unconscious – did not spring fully armed from Freud’s head, that it was not produced _ex nihilo_ at the end of the nineteenth century, emerging suddenly to reimpose its truth on the whole of history – world history, at that – past, present, and future. (80)

She objects in particular to the Lacanian code that the analyst’s authorization comes from himself. This she categorizes as an “imperialism of the Unconscious,” led by “the name of a father of psychoanalysis to whose unconscious any unconscious should be made to conform” (81). If we were to agree that the unconscious is both a result of a certain history and also something that is yet to come into being – Irigaray describes it as “the reservoir of a yet-to-come” (82) – psychoanalysis seems keen to fold the future back into the past, reducing “the yet-to-be-subjected to the already subjected” (82), the unspoken to something language has made explicit already, or already struck dumb. “Freud and the first psychoanalysts did not act quite like this,” Irigaray states. For them, “every analysis was an opportunity to uncover some new facet of a practice and a theory” (83). According to Irigaray, the trouble with the Lacanian school is that it was brought up on philosophy – but not a philosophy predicated on searching questions. Its allegiance to castration, for example – and characteristic confusion about the interchangeability of the phallus and real genitals – makes its law “the law of the imposition of nothingness in the name of Nothingness” (87). In this “nihilistic religion,” social reality is as nothing, Irigaray thunders.

When we think of psychoanalysis in the social contexts of race and class, we are likely to be staggered by the lack of intersection and “committed
involvement” (51), a term I borrow from the Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire. Freud himself is notorious for writing, in Civilization and its Discontents (1930), that

In an individual neurosis we take as our starting point the contrast that distinguishes the patient from his environment, which is assumed to be “normal.” For a group all of whose members are affected by one and the same disorder no such background could exist; it would have to be found elsewhere. (144)

This, in turn, gave rise to the nomological claim that the primitive or the socially abjected did not have an unconscious: they were the unconscious. In his essay “The Unconscious,” Freud ventures the wild opinion that “the content of the unconscious may be compared with an aboriginal population of the mind” (195). The primal or primitive, in Freud’s work, refers both to an “early stage of development” and, as Celia Brickman points out, to “savages,” who, “by virtue of their differences from European cultural norms and their darker skins, [were considered] to be less culturally advanced than their European cousins” (4–5). The primitive tends to be defined in terms of lack and deficit – that nihilistic religion Irigaray raged about, although Freud’s ideas about the primitive are not as crude as the quick summary above suggests. In the “Uncanny” essay, for instance, he associates the violent inception of civilization with a forced “surmounting” (249) of animistic beliefs, and, in Totem and Taboo, the primitive is another name for the archaic (lending credence to Freud’s invention of psychoanalysis as an archaeological science). In Totem and Taboo, one of Freud’s key works on mourning, he talks about the “emotional ambivalence” around death demonstrated alike by “dreamers, children and savages” (62).2 This ambivalence has two-fold implications: it stands for a love commingled with hostility toward the dead; it reflects also the remorse of murdering an adversary, in the context of war, for instance. As he elaborates in “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” “savages” – and by this term he means “Australians, Bushmen, Tierra del Fuegans” – are “far from being remorseless murderers”:

when they return victorious from the war-path they may not set foot in their villages or touch their wives till they have atoned for the murders they committed in war by penances which are often long and tedious. . . . behind this superstition there lies concealed a vein of ethical sensitiveness which has been lost by us civilized men. (23)

While “emotional ambivalence” is usually associated by Freud with obsessional neurosis, here he is not simply positing in the primitive a prototype
of the neurotic but bemoaning the unambivalent aggressiveness that the processes of civilization – ideas of sovereignty and liberal democracy in the West – have fostered. In chapter 6 of Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud uses “primaeval” and “primitive” interchangeably (53). In the same work, speaking of retrograde repetition, or the self-destructiveness of the repetition compulsion – the need to ruin what is whole in a bid (and in repeated bids) to become whole again – Freud gives examples from Plato’s Symposium and the Brihadarânyaka Upanishad. The former is a possible repetition and derivation of the latter, dated 800 BC: in both Greek myth and ancient Hindu scripture, the unified, plenteous self feels lonely and wishes for a second. It is halved, with each part now desiring the other, “and eager to grow into one,” writes Freud, repeating Plato (70). Again, “primitive” has the valence of primeval or ancient, and lessons lost to humankind.

As Daniel Boyarin astutely comments on the dual modality of reading Freud’s racial (double) consciousness, if the ethnological comments posit him as a white subject enciphering black subjects, another critical vantage point would interpret “white” and “black” as stand-ins for Aryan and Jew: “In the first reading, Freud is the colonizer; in the second, the colonized” (219).³ Freud’s deconstructive take on the categories of “primitive” and “civilized” notwithstanding, sketchy intimations of the “psychic unity of mankind” at the inception of the field of psychoanalysis gave way to an engagement with non-Western cultures that was of “an appropriating kind,” according to Sudhir Kakar:

The paramount concern of psychoanalysis seems to have been in protecting and gathering evidence in support of its key concepts rather than in entertaining the possibility that these other cultures, with their different world-views, family structures and relationships, could contribute to its models and concepts. (Culture and Psyche 45)

These were territories to be annexed, Kakar states, “particularly for the Oedipus complex” (45). Freud’s Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1921) is an interesting example for testing out Kakar’s claim about the predominance of the Oedipus complex (and the concomitant denigration of mass psychology). This work reverses the trajectory of individuation (group to self) to read social neuroses transversally through individual neuroses. As individual psychology encapsulates the tumult of the individual’s relations with others “as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent” (Group Psychology 68), it is also, therefore, a social psychology. Narcissistic phenomena and social acts both fall “within the domain of
individual psychology,” Freud claims (96). *Group Psychology*, however, is not a clarion call to what Gustave Le Bon – whose 1895 work *The Crowd* informs Freud’s argument – terms a “primitive communism” (cited in Brickman 104). As the thesis unfolds, Freud characterizes the herd instinct observable in any group as “a regression of mental activity to an earlier stage such as we are not surprised to find among savages or children” (116). The Darwinian cadences of *Totem and Taboo* return in his pronouncement in *Group Psychology* that the group is, indeed, the primitive mental swarm of the “primal horde” (121): primitive peoples are particularly susceptible to this mentality. Reviewed in this light, individual psychology exists not in tandem with group psychology, but despite it. Each individual may have a share of “numerous group minds” (128) but they will have to transcend this collectivity to claim “a scrap of independence and originality,” Freud states (128). If, in *Totem and Taboo*, individuality was made possible by the violent overthrow of the primal father, in *Group Psychology*, the process is presented more organically: life’s intrepid and associative movement from self to group episodically returns, exhausted, to the somnambulant self.

[C]ly being born we have made the step from an absolutely self-sufficient narcissism to the perception of a changing external world and the beginnings of the discovery of objects. And with this is associated the fact that we cannot endure the new state of things for long, that we periodically revert from it, in our sleep, to our former condition of absence of stimulation and avoidance of objects. (129)

Celia Brickman is correct in assessing that Freud, despite not subscribing to Le Bon’s antidemocratic intent in *The Crowd*, “retained [his] use of the category of the primitive as the critical term of opprobrium against which the desirable state of a modern, emancipated subjectivity could be measured” (105). Brickman’s otherwise formidable analysis does not explicitly take into consideration that Freud was an Austrian Jew, whose ideas in works such as *Group Psychology* were influenced more by crowd theory rising out of World War I than by the psychodynamics of empire. As the historian Sander Gilman states, Freud “objected to the very concept of biological ‘race’ as early as the marginal notes he made in his university textbooks” (Gilman and Thomas 87) and his works on group behavior are haunted by the “insuperable repugnance” – a term he uses in *Group Psychology* (101) – bred by close physical proximity, not only in relation to cultural difference: “Every time two families become connected by a marriage, each of them thinks itself superior to or of better birth than the other” (100). The examples he gives here of squabbling groups include...
English and Scot, the Spaniards and the Portuguese, the South German and the North German, the closely related “white races” and the “coloureds,” the Aryans and the Semites (100).

Individuality, individualism, civility, and autonomy at one end, and a primitive communitarianism on the other: socialized entities on the winning side of the colonial divide, and narcissistic, puerile, fearful, and slavish hordes on the other. I will, in the chapters to follow, discuss in detail Frantz Fanon’s critique of Octave Mannoni’s theory of (primitive) enthralment, and the global city’s phobia of migrant swarms, but suffice to say here that the primitive in Freudian psychoanalysis is given a phylogenetic register, not an ontogenetic one. The primitive (and this includes indigenous communities) is the phylogenetic register for they have not graduated to “individual acquirements” from “noisy ephemeral groups” (Group Psychology 129). Brickman extrapolates two configurations of primitivity from Freud’s writings:

The familiar colonial tale of the primitive as a member of the evolutionarily prior, darker races, who lives in a hordelike community, desires his own oppression and lives in subjection to the leader of the community, is supplemented by a view of primitivity as determined by the unrestrained exercise of or compliance with authority. (114)

While the legatees of Oedipus shifted from “external to internal control” (Brickman 108) by transmuting beloved persons into “object-cathexes” to be abandoned, thereby laying claim to egoic subjectivity, the primitive failed to author a similar history of maturing identifications. In fact, the primitive is outside history as we know it, hypercathected to external leaders, not idealized (internal) structures like the superego. Brickman reminds us that Freud had, in Group Psychology, compared the relationship of follower to group leader to that of the subject of hypnosis and the hypnotist. Freud had upheld these aim-inhibited, nonsexual relationships for creating enduring group ties. “On the other hand,” Brickman says of Freud’s interpretation, these relationships seem to “impoverish rather than strengthen psychic structure” (110). The primitive, therefore, is also poor.

Scrutinizing scientific papers published in the PEP-web in the seven decades between 1933 and 2003, Manasi Kumar suggests that psychoanalysis has had too much and too little to say about poverty. At first glance, there is an abundance of metaphoric appropriations: “ego’s poverty” (Freud, 1918, 1919); “poverty of phantasy” (Ferenczi, 1923, cited in Berman, 2000); “poverty of interests” (Greenacre, 1941); “poverty of symptomatology” (Spitz and Wolf, 1946); “sensory poverty of dreams”
(Knapp, 1956); “affective poverty” (Esman, 1979); “the psychological poverty of present-day philosophy” (Eissler, 1963); “terror of poverty” (Khan, 1965); “voluntary poverty” (Anna Freud, 1967); “deprived child” (Winnicott, 1971); “poverty of instinctual experience” (Winnicott, 1975).

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, we come upon Freud’s powerful formulation of the “psychological poverty of groups” (74), which supposedly explains their capacity for enmity and what, in “The Taboo of Virginity,” he had termed “the narcissism of minor differences” (199). These unreflective figurations not only distance the real thing but imply that to be poor is to have an impoverished inner life. As Kumar points out, “the description of the poor then is either too sterilised or so preachy that it sounds as though the poor do not have an unconscious or do not even have the capability to have one” (14).

Kumar does not mention Freud’s technique papers in this extensive review, especially his “Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-analysis,” in which Freud frets on the structure, length, and cost of therapy and the impossibility of delivering a “short, convenient, outpatient treatment for obsessional neurosis” (128). Although he argues against gratuitous treatments – a therapy session is an investment of time equivalent to a seventh or eighth part of the psychoanalyst’s monthly stint – Freud lets slip that he has offered free psychoanalysis. This was as an experiment, and removing the transactional and regulatory element vastly increased, instead of alleviating, the neurotic’s resistances. Kumar also doesn’t mention an extraordinary moment in the history of what Elizabeth Ann Danto called the “public involvement and accountability” (5) of psychoanalysis: the free clinic phenomenon. Two months before the Armistice, at the 5th International Congress of Psychoanalysis in Budapest, Sigmund Freud famously declared that: “The poor man should have just as much right to assistance for his mind as he now has to the life-saving help offered by surgery” (cited in Danto 1–2). This stance is elaborated in papers published soon after. In “Lines of Advance in Psycho-analytic Therapy” (1919), he states:

> the conscience of society will awake and remind it that the poor man should have just as much right to assistance for his mind as he now has to the life-saving help offered by surgery; and that the neuroses threaten public health no less than tuberculosis, and can be left as little as the latter to the impotent care of individual members of the community . . . institutions or out-patient clinics will be started, to which analytically-trained physicians will be appointed, so that men who would otherwise give way to drink, women who have nearly succumbed under their burden of privations, children for
whom there is no choice but between running wild or neurosis, may be made capable, by analysis, of resistance and of efficient work. Such treatments will be free. (167)

In “Postscript to an Autobiographical Study” (1935) Freud adds: “[O]ut of their own funds, local societies support . . . outpatient clinics in which experienced analysts as well as students give free treatment to patients of limited means” (73). Whereas his theory aimed to be a de facto science, Freud’s clinical practice embraced the social-democratic ideology of post-World War I Vienna. Between 1918 and 1938, the “indigent urban residents” of Freud’s Vienna, to quote Danto, were “students, artists, craftsmen, laborers, office clerks, unemployed people, farmers, domestic servants and public school teachers” (2). Freud’s pronouncements on free clinics helped to create a dozen cooperative mental health clinics, from Zagreb to London. These were free clinics “literally and metaphorically,” Danto states: “they freed people of their destructive neuroses and, like the municipal schools and universities of Europe, they were free of charge” (3). The movement, however, was short-lived. In 1933, Freud’s books were burned in Berlin; the psychoanalytic institute closed and Max Eitingon fled to Palestine. Freud is known to have quipped to Jones that he was fortunate: after all, in the Middle Ages, they would have burned the author. It ended when, on March 12, 1938, thousands of German troops armed with bayonets marched the Nazi flag into Vienna. Looking back at Freud and the other psychoanalysts involved in this début-de-siècle struggle, Helen Schur, wife of Freud’s personal physician Max Schur, states: “I think they saw that this would be the liberation of the people. To really make them free of neuroses, to be much more able to work, you know, like Freud said, to love well and to work” (Danto 10).

A Social Psychoanalysis?

Despite the ongoing social work on the depredations of urban poverty in areas such as neonatal health and infant nutrition, domestic violence, housing, and human rights, the psychological toll of extreme disenfranchisement tends to be neglected by governments and NGOs alike. Unseen City: The Psychic Lives of the Urban Poor is the culmination of a decade’s thinking and research on the causal link between damning sociocultural perceptions of the mental capacity of poor populations and the lack of state-funded mental healthcare provision for the same. Reading contemporary literature and theory, psychoanalytic theory and history, and
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alongside empirical work with the free clinics on three continents, the book reveals the unseen city of its title. Exposing the entrenched contexts of mental illness through narrative, observational, and quantitative data, it urges the inclusion of the interpretive humanities in current debates on mental health.

Speaking of the relevance of psychoanalysis for the urban and raced poor, however, stands the risk of being top-down philanthropy if we do not take into account three key issues. First is the cost of psychoanalysis. The payment of a fee for treatment is traditionally seen to be crucial to the transference relation in psychoanalysis: both a transference relation – the displacement of feeling from one object, say the mother, to the analyst – and transference neurosis, an artificial neurosis built around the relationship with the analyst. Transference is, at once, an obstacle to the “talking cure” and the means of working through – that is, a way of cordonning off a tendency to repetition, to acting out, and running it through the transferential circuit. The analyst’s task is to overcome the repetition controlling the transference and open the psychic avenues of remembering. Through the payment of a fee, the libidinal economy of the psychoanalytic dyad is set in play, the analyzand becoming bonded to the analyst, cathexed but also invested in a kind of imaginative and financial speculation. The concept of “free clinics” is therefore not free of contradiction, for transference, as Michel Foucault notes in *The Order of Things*, is what differentiates psychoanalysis from the ethnological science it drew from. While ethnology saw “primitive peoples” as being without history, psychoanalysis reads the history of the subject as being both held and withheld in the repetitions of the transference, which it interprets. This in turn poses questions to the practice of free psychoanalysis or psychoanalytically inflected psychotherapy in the West or East.

Second is the association between poverty and mental illness. Low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) carry the severest burden of poverty, and the highest number of depressed individuals are also to be found there. Do circumstances of poverty lead to “a higher prevalence of depression,” or does depression “lead individuals to drift into, or remain in, poverty?” ask Crick Lund and Annibale Cois in a longitudinal analysis that tests the theories of social causation and social drift in an LMIC context for the first time (396). According to the social causation hypothesis, adverse socioeconomic conditions related to financial stress (such as lack of education, food insecurity, increased exposure to violence) increase the risk of mental illness. The social drift theory proposes conversely that people with mental illness lapse into poverty because of
disability, impaired productivity, increased health expenditure, and other adverse life events related to mental health. Examining data from the South African National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS), in a context where poverty is more extreme than in high-income countries and there is more income inequality, Lund and Cois conclude that depression is a predictor of poverty; depression is also a consequence of poverty. A breakthrough in global mental health research, this study shows that social causation and social drift may occur simultaneously. More policy priority, therefore, should be given to the diagnosis and treatment of depression, the authors recommend, just as there needs to be increased policy attention to the “social determinants of depression at a population level” (401).

A related question is whether a study of mental illness in poor populations contributes to a fuller understanding of urban poverty? It is my argument that such a study can fruitfully revise the rationalist humanism of economic concepts such as “poor but efficient” and “poor but neoclassical,” which, Esther Duflo points out, assume that the decision-maker, however poverty-stricken, remains “unboundedly rational, forward-looking, and internally consistent” (367). Duflo, co-Director of the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab at MIT, won the Nobel (more precisely, the Sveriges Riksbank) Prize in Economic Sciences in 2019. She argues that the *Homo economicus* at the core of neoclassical economics—the “calculating, unemotional maximiser,” as Mullainathan and Thaler put it—would behave differently if they were poor than if they were rich (367). What is needed, she concludes, is a theory of how poverty impacts decision-making: such theory would give rise to innovative empirical research which was both “observational and experimental” (377). Bringing race to bear on poverty, the economist Glenn Loury postulates a discrimination theory that sees social inequality as inseparable from racial inequality in societies shaped by colonialism and chattel slavery. “The tacit association of ‘blackness’ in the public’s imagination with ‘unworthiness’ distorts cognitive processes and promotes essentialist causal misattributions” (406). It is crucial to understand the maladies of raced bodies as the outgrowth of cumulative causation and examine the role of racial disparity in engineering speeds and forms of human development in Western societies, Loury argues. Poverty will not be eliminated by handouts and compensation, but through ongoing critical cognisance of “lives imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago,” as Saidiya Hartman has described it (*Lose Your Mother* 6).