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Primitivity and Denial: Traces of the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis, the theory and practice of the 'unconscious', has an unconscious of its own, which in many ways acts as its adversary. The unconscious of psychoanalysis can be seen in the implicit models that it holds of the nature of the human subject, and particularly in the manner in which psychoanalytic 'knowledge' is disrupted by persistent assumptions and recurrent blind spots that are at best partially recognised. This can be thought of as an *unconscious of theory*, or more simply as a mode of ideological practice: social discourse presented as neutral observation, scientific fact or clinical discovery. It can also be seen in a variety of institutional enactments, as psychoanalytic organisations respond to the specific demands of the surrounding culture, almost always, as professional societies, choosing the more conservative of the alternative paths that are open to them.

In this paper, psychoanalysis is turned back on itself in relation to these different types of *unconscious* functioning. In this, it is treated as a reflexive cultural object – it is produced by its social context, it performs some of the hidden as well as obvious elements of this context, and it reflects back on the context too, to create the world it describes. This now rather anodyne idea, that we are in a psychoanalytically *saturated world*, is given some sharpness when we think about it as a mechanism whereby discarded (foreclosed, disavowed) elements of the social – perhaps particularly of colonialism– are smuggled back in.