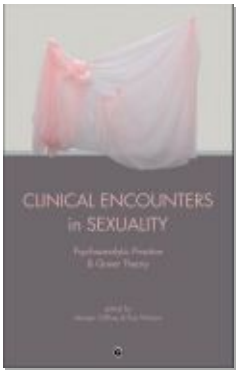
21: A Plague on Both Your Houses.



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SECTION 3

RESPONSES TO PSYCHOANALYTIC PRACTICES ENCOUNTERING QUEER THEORIES

21

A Plague on Both Your Houses

Stephen Frosh

It is tempting to suggest that the staging of an encounter in this book has served mainly to dramatize the incommensurability of psychoanalysis and queer theory. Perhaps there are really two separate theaters, one in which queer celebrations of disruptiveness goes on, and one in which psychoanalysts and psychotherapists try to bring order to confusions of desire, identity and identification. Lisa Downing articulates one of the key oppositions in focusing on perversion:

> For clinical psychoanalysts, perversion is sexuality gone awry; the failure of the subject to attain adult genitality. For queer theorists, on the other hand, perversion may be construed as a defiant performance of excess that shows up the constructedness and arbitrariness of the category of the "normal," and it is centrally implicated in queer's rejection of the meaning of identity in favor of the politics of practice.

She is careful here, despite her affiliation to the queer theater, but the clinicians have their own worries. "Queer theory engages with the judgmentalism about sexual performances, and it can deploy a counter-judgement, a prejudice against prejudice!" exclaims Bob Hinshelwood, who is also troubled by the obsessive Lacanianism of much queer psychoanalytic thought. Where are relationships, where identity built out of identifications?

Carol Owens identifies a misrepresentation of the apparent parallels between queer and psychoanalysis which leads readers to believe they have much in common. Not so, she thinks:

> While it is true that queer theory and psychoanalysis (theory and practice) share an interest in subjectivity, desire, identity, relationality, ethics, power, discourse and norms, it is not true that their interest is dedicated in the same direction, with let's say, a common objective, or common interpretations.

Aligning themselves with each other results, she thinks, in radical misreadings, particularly over *jouissance* (blissful misreadings, we might say): "We are told that if it didn't exist, queers would invent it. Please!" And for some on the psychoanalytic stage, queer simply misses the point about what caring for patients means; that is to say, it fails to recognize reality. Katrine Zeuthen and Judy Gammelgaard, anxious enough about the encounter ("In some ways our apprehension was confirmed when we read the texts"), take the "maybe I'm old-fashioned" route:

> Maybe we are too serious or literal, but we sense in these and other attempts to delimit the essence of sexual queerness an idealization which contradicts our experiences of the pain and suffering which many patients — homosexual as well as heterosexual — associate with coming to grips with the unconscious part of sexuality.

Queer theory opposes the normativeness of psychoanalytic concepts. Psychoanalysis accuses queer of throwing the baby out with the bathwater — or at least, in Owens's words, there are places where "the Lacanian baby is being thrown out with the bathwater of 'classical (*sic*) psychoanalysis'." For the "classical" group, whoever they may be, one problem is queer theory's tendency to reiterate binaries it appears to be opposed to: masculine–feminine transmigrates into heterosexual–homosexual; fluidity–fixity becomes another paean to the superiority of one side (fluidity) over the other. The consequence of this last point

is particularly interesting and is well analyzed by Lisa Downing in her critique of how "Privileging the ideal of fluidity leads to a concomitant stigmatization of the idea of fixity, establishing an unhelpful binary (fluidity or fixity) in a body of thought that usually attempts to deconstruct such dualities." Promoting sexual fluidity — which as she knows is a truism in mental health work — leads to disparagement of those who enjoy fixity, repetition and sameness, the limited practice of sex time after time; yet why should this be excluded from the queer celebration of multifariousness and sexual variation? A nice paradox, indeed, here recognized by one of the players on the queer stage, apparently throwing a line across to the other theater.

Perhaps we are back in the terrain of a debate about continuous revolution. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, let us assume for a moment that the Freudian revolution was a real one and that everything changes as a consequence, leading not only to the saturation of culture by psychoanalytic discourse (as Ian Parker has repeatedly shown to have occurred, and does so again here) but also to a change in the extra-discursive domain, maybe even in the "real world" (it is too scary not to use these quotation marks). Freud turned things upside down and inside out; sexuality became "mal-normed" as Lacan once put it; discourses of and on the unconscious proliferated and the boundary between rationality and irrationality became blurred. Previous accounts of human subjecthood, and perhaps the experience of it too, were disrupted and queered. However, like most things, having made its revolution, psychoanalysis solidified, stagnated, found pragmatic solutions to bureaucratic necessities, created formal institutions, fought for its survival, made compromises to sustain a presence in the world of psychotherapy. It even seems that there is a strong inverse relationship between the radical subversiveness of psychoanalytic theory and the freedom of its institutional practices. That is, the more threatening is their theory of sexuality, the more focused psychoanalysts themselves have been on creating organizational cultures that are mired in conservatism and conformism, as if they had to protect themselves against the fall-out from their

own daily encounters with unconscious life. Analytic abstinence was not enough; dress codes straightened out, ideologies hardened; bourgeoisification intensified. The resistance of many psychoanalysts to the depathologizing of homosexuality is famous, and relevant; along with a strong tendency, born of the individualism of much psychoanalysis, to back away from progressive political concerns.

On the other hand, when pushed to extremes we might also have to bear in mind that resistance to outrageous irrationality is not necessarily a sign of psychic rigidity. For instance, even the much-criticized ego psychologists of post-Second World War America may have had more integrity than Lacanian and leftist critiques have often allowed. Whilst ego psychology concentrated on that side of psychoanalysis that stresses the necessity for control of unconscious impulses and adaptation to society and hence seems clearly at odds with radical social critiques (e.g., Marcuse 1955; Frosh 1999), it can also be understood as an honest response to the destructive explosion of irrationality embodied in fascism and Nazism. That is, despite its many and obvious limitations, we should not be too single-minded about pillorying ego psychology's attempt to reinstate rationality as a moral force, given the historical context out of which it emerged. However, something more general is at stake here: not just ego psychology as a mode of conformist psychoanalysis, but the tendency for the most demanding, most difficult ideas of psychoanalysis to give way to a kind of conformist moralism, a common sense which one might argue it is precisely the task of psychoanalysis to disrupt.

At this point, queer theory can enter the fray as a new(ish) set of discourses "from the margins" that unsettles the psychoanalytic scheme. Ian Parker tries to maintain the value of such an unsettled psychoanalysis by refusing the tendency of Lacanianism to become too much of a system. Instead, he wants to hold onto its status as practice, as a way of doing things — or preferably, *un*doing them:

> If Lacanian psychoanalysis is treated as a clinical strategy instead of a worldview, then it is possible to make something radical with that strategy, to make of it a place where we are freer in our tactics than other types of psychoanalysis, potentially a good deal queerer in our practice for that.

Abe Geldhof and Paul Verhaeghe, also Lacanians, are on the same lines when they claim, "What is really queer, is *jouissance*. In the last resort the whole discussion about gender and queer is nothing but a defense against the queerness of *jouissance* and the contingencies of life." Contingencies, unsettling practices: these are refusals to be brought into line with any pre-existing orthodoxy, whether that of psychoanalysis or queer theory itself. In this regard, it is noteworthy that what endears Jean Laplanche to some of the queer theorists is the enigmatic signifier and the disruptive presence of otherness that goes along with it. This is an important acknowledgement of the relevance of the theory of otherness to the construction of the subject, but as Carol Owens comments it might also miss the point that Laplanche "was vehemently anti-programmatic declaring that psychoanalytic practice cannot propose an aim of practice, no matter what, otherwise it risks becoming marshalled into a form of social adaptation." This aspect of Laplanche is perhaps central and is an aspect of his critique of the narrativism of much psychotherapy — by which he seemed to mean the attempt to create a meaningful story that would integrate the various strands of a person's suffering and consequently make that suffering more comprehensible and survivable. Of course this is a worthwhile "caring" aim; as a clinical practitioner, Laplanche (2003) knew that. But, he wrote:

> The fact that we are confronted with a possibly "normal" and in any case inevitable defence, that the narration must be correlated with the therapeutic aspect of the treatment, in no way changes the metapsychological understanding that sees in it the guarantee and seal of repression. (29)

In opposition to this "reconstructive, synthesising narrative vector" he identified the truly "analytic vector, that of de-translation and the questioning of narrative structures and the ideas connected to them" (29).

Perhaps maintaining a broad idea of a "de-translating" analytic vector might be a way of thinking about these necessarily failed encounters. We would like the bringing together of psychoanalytic practice and queer theory to produce something new, an enlivened psychoanalysis, a deeper and less simplistically celebratory queer theory. But it cannot happen: they are in radically different places. The limit of what can be achieved has to be that of a bumping up against each other that pushes each one off course; more generally, we might wish a kind of "plague on both your houses" in the positive sense, resonant of the "bringing the plague" that Freud apocryphally promised America. That is to say, despite the danger that each approach will defensively close itself off in the face of the other's critique, psychoanalysis and queer theory need to actively needle each other and be destabilized from some other marginal place, or else they will each solidify still more into the kinds of orthodoxy that their own theoretical tenets would decry.

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