Primal Scenes

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AMONG its many achievements, Kathy Psomiades's *Primitive Marriage* complicates and enriches our understanding of the theoretical inheritance of the nineteenth century. The book's central claim is that the Victorian anthropology of marriage had an outsized effect on the development not only of later cultural and structuralist anthropology but of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Foucauldian historiography of sexuality, feminist theory (including Marxist feminist theory), and queer theory as well. Against all odds, we find the fairly obscure and definitely benighted figure of John McClennan positioned right at the epicenter of modern theories of sexuality. The book asks, What on earth is he doing there, why haven't we noticed him, exactly, and, above all, how does the recognition of the particulars of his contributions change the way we, today, conceptualize the relationship of nineteenth-century knowledge production to modern and contemporary critical theory?

What I appreciate most about this line of questioning is the way it reconnects our habits of thought in the present to the historical situations in which they first arose. In this crucial regard, *Primitive Marriage* makes a unique methodological intervention in that it insists on treating outdated thinkers like McLennan and John Lubbock as theorists whose conceptual innovations remained central to the development of critical and feminist theory in the twentieth century. As Psomiades observes, for instance, Foucault could overturn the received narrative of sexual repression in the nineteenth century in his account of sexual modernity, but he nonetheless depended on a set of anthropological ideas concerning the history of kinship structures that descended through Lévi-Strauss from the Victorian anthropologists. The Victorian anthropology of marriage appears in this reading at once as an example of the historical transformations Foucault described—the extension of the discourse of sexuality into the new disciplines and domains of the late nineteenth century—and also as a vital source of the foundational structuralist terms

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that allowed Foucault to narrate that historical shift in the first place. The book is continually alerting us to the ways that different disciplines and intellectual formations have borrowed, stolen, and reimagined concepts and interpretive practices that formerly belonged to Victorian anthropologists.

Among the many major intellectual contributions and discoveries *Primitive Marriage* makes, I am especially interested in the way that it asks us to rethink psychoanalysis. In the book's conclusion, Psomiades details the connections between Freud's discussion of the family structure in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and his anthropological sources. But I think her analysis actually challenges even more fundamental aspects of Freudian thought than the Oedipus complex, which itself depends on Freud's earlier claims about the unstructured character of infantile sexuality. Before we can be oedipalized, we must be, rather infamously, polymorphously perverse. Freud's view of infantile perversion boiled down to his observation, first articulated in his 1905 *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, that that sexual object and sexual aim are "merely soldered together."[1] Articulated at the very outset of the first of the *Three Essays*, this observation tends to be seen as undermining the normative fin-de-siècle account of the perversions that Freud nevertheless reaffirms in the third essay. Sexuality is in the first place an arbitrary coupling of particular desires with particular objects; later it is structured and contained by internalized social conventions. In a sense, one can see this as a confrontation, staged within Freud's work, between psychological and anthropological models of sexuality: social structures organize otherwise anarchic psychosexual tendencies. This is usually understood to be one of the single most important contributions to the modern theory of sexuality that Freud introduced. But in Psomiades's account, this denaturalizing and decoupling of object choice from sexual aim occurs half a century earlier, within the Victorian anthropological literature on wife capture, which, Psomiades argues, "put [sexuality] into time," for the first time, as it were.[2] Crucially, Psomiades writes that McLennan "imagined the origins of human social life in the regulations governing sexual object choice."[3] To what extent is Freud's theory of infantile sexuality itself modeled on the sexual anarchy of McLennan's theory of primitive sex life?

Such methodological interventions have the effect of volatilizing the other dimensions of Psomiades's argument, since her primary texts and objects now seem to exert an uncanny, ambivalent claim on the present. Indeed, the takeaway from this intervention seems to me less a genetic

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assertion about a theoretical lineage than a destabilization of what it means to take a concept out of its historical context and to put it to new uses in the first place. *Primitive Marriage* identifies a widespread critical assumption that, as Psomiades puts it, "the Victorians have history and we have theory."[4] Working against this assumption, *Primitive Marriage* makes it possible to see just how much of modern critical theory was erected atop the unwieldy but nonetheless episteme-altering foundation of the nineteenth-century debates about the historicity of sexuality. To the extent that we are still working through the problems and contradictions of sexual modernity, then, we are still working with and through the nineteenth century. In a similar vein, Hayden White once asserted that "Marx, Freud and Durkheim now appear as much to be parts of the problems we have inherited from the nineteenth century as contributors to the solution thereof."[5] *Primitive Marriage* asks us to push back further into the archives of nineteenth-century theory, moving beyond White's three luminaries toward the intellectual innovations that, in the case of Freud and Durkheim especially, shaped their work.

Notes

1. Freud, *Three Essays,* 14.
2. Psomiades, *Primitive Marriage,* 3.
3. Psomiades, *Primitive Marriage,* 6.
4. Psomiades, *Primitive Marriage,* 17.
5. White, "The 'Nineteenth Century' as Chronotope," 244.

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