

## Temporal Drag: Transdisciplinarity and the ‘Case’ of Psychosocial Studies

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### Abstract

Psychosocial studies is a putatively ‘new’ or emerging field concerned with the irreducible relation between psychic and social life. Genealogically, it attempts to re-suture a tentative relation between mind and social world, individual and mass, internality and externality, norm and subject, and the human and non-human, through gathering up and re-animating largely forgotten debates that have played out across a range of other disciplinary spaces. If, as I argue, the central tenets, concepts and questions for psychosocial studies emerge out of a re-appropriation of what have become anachronistic or ‘useless’ concepts in other fields – ‘the unconscious’, for instance, in the discipline of psychology – then we need to think about transdisciplinarity not just in spatial terms (that is, in terms of the movement across disciplinary borders) but also in temporal terms. This may involve engaging with theoretical ‘embarrassments’, one of which – the notion of ‘psychic reality’ – I explore here.

### Keywords

psychic reality, psychoanalysis, psychosocial studies, transdisciplinarity

Trans-

1. A prefix occurring in loanwords from Latin (transcend; transfix); on this model used with the meanings “across,” “beyond,” “through,” “changing thoroughly,” “transverse,” in combination with elements of any origin: transisthmian; trans-Siberian; transempirical; transvalue.
2. Chemistry. A prefix denoting a geometric isomer having a pair of identical atoms or groups on the opposite sides of two atoms linked by a double bond. Compare cis-.
3. Astronomy. A prefix denoting something farther from the sun (than a given planet): trans-Martian; trans-Neptunian. Origin: Latin, combining form of trans (adv. and preposition) across, beyond, through.

(Collins English Dictionary, 2009)

I write from a small department, based in one of the University of London colleges, which goes by the name of psychosocial studies. It is not immediately obvious what this department deals with. The name suggests that it could be a department of social psychology, concerned with the mutually constitutive arenas of individual behaviour and social environment. It could equally be a department of sociology that draws, perhaps, on the insights of psychoanalysis, or on the turn to affect and emotion in the humanities to ‘thicken’ understandings of the relation between individual and society that take us beyond more traditional concerns with material base and ideological superstructure. Given that the list of programmes offered includes a variety of psychoanalytically-orientated clinical trainings alongside its critical academic offerings, it could even be mistaken for a department concerned with bio-psycho-social models of mental health; models that seek, for instance, to explain the relations between social inequalities, health inequalities and mental health diagnosis, or to explain how a nexus of neuro-chemical,

psycho-logical and social forces might articulate patterns in child development, including the development of psychological disorders. In fact, though, the self-description of the department on the university website attempts to distance itself from either a social approach to psychology or a psychological approach to sociology and makes little mention of neuroscience, on the grounds that these approaches tend to bracket the prior ontological question of what the ‘individual’, ‘social’ or ‘biological’ might refer to, leaving these terms assumed rather than questioned, and sealed off from traditions of thought that have put the critique of these categories at the centre of their concerns.

Instead, the claims are for something else – for a dialogue with the various poststructuralist traditions that eschew an a priori distinction between psyche and social. These traditions pursue ontological questions concerning the formation, potentials and limits of such categories, with a commitment to understanding how each might be produced with and through the other, and how there simply is no domain we call ‘the psyche’ that is not already premised on what is appealed to by the term ‘social’, and vice versa. In neither jettisoning a human subject who comes to have a sense of interiority, however mistaken this sense is, nor letting up on the critical practices available for understanding sociality in its most contingent and deterritorialized forms, the department appears to be trying to hold together and understand our tenacious attachments and deep ambivalences to certain social and political formations, whilst also offering an account of their maintenance and production. The list of departmental research interests reveals common concerns with the social and political sphere<sup>1</sup>, but also gathers together many terms recognizable from classic texts in the humanities and social sciences (what is generically termed ‘theory’), such as desire, subjectivity, melancholia, alterity, fantasy, biopolitics, identification, ambivalence, affect, relational ethics, ecology, actor-networks, objects, and, of course, inter, multi and transdisciplinarity. Some of these terms have classical psychoanalytic roots, but have been reworked as modes of social critique in the traditions of critical theory, post-colonial studies, Lacanian psychoanalysis, feminism and queer theories, Foucaultian discursive analysis and schizoanalysis. I know the website well, as I wrote parts of it, and am continually troubled by our collective failures to delineate clearly the concerns, parameters, research focus, and potential limits of this emerging non-disciplinary space.

To describe an emerging discipline as non-disciplinary, and to imagine this non-disciplinarity as a ‘space’ is itself a kind of sleight of hand, a slippage that is perhaps motivated by resistance to enclosures, borders, edges and limits, and the concomitant ossification of thinking, that have come to characterize powerful mainstream debates in the ‘master’ disciplines of psychology and sociology – debates that tend to maintain a distinction between psychological and social life. Whilst there is always a question as to whether the institutionalization of such an emergent ‘non-discipline’ blunts the political edge of the terrain from which it emerges, the appeal to the non-disciplinary is perhaps a rather romantic attempt to side with the marginal, fluid and nomadic practice of thinking across (or even hovering above), rather than between, pre-existing disciplines. It might even be an appeal to the perpetual motion of critique itself, a commitment to unsettle as soon as one settles, to deliberately look for the place where a field meets its

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<sup>1</sup> This list is taken from the departmental website and represents a fragment of what researchers in psychosocial studies might want to attend to – violence, state violence and conflict; intimacy, parenting, care and personal life; human rights, social responsibility and helping behaviour; public cultures, social movements, citizenship and social identities; postcolonial urban cultures and histories of ‘race’ and racism; gender and sexuality; emotional development, psychic change and ageing.

breaking points and therefore faces its contingencies, and to reflexively reposition oneself wherever a new liminal space opens up.

However, I am not sure that this will really do. Whether we like it or not, the 'psychosocial' is weighed down by a 'temporal drag', to borrow Elizabeth Freeman's term (Freeman, 2011); weighed down by debates that have taken place in a host of disciplines in both their normative and emancipatory forms that do anchor this emerging discipline 'somewhere', even if we are not quite sure where that somewhere is. I am not convinced that psychosocial studies can escape so easily the genealogies of the relation between psychic reality and social antagonisms that it seeks to understand in its appeal to the nomadism of the non-disciplinary, and that continue to be debated within traditional disciplinary domains.

My aim in this article, then, is to approach the psychosocial as a 'case' – a kind of test case perhaps – for thinking about how transdisciplinary practices might operate in their temporal dimensions, pursuing this notion of temporal drag, and what drags a discipline back to 'out of date' debates or concepts, despite its desire to be free of them. If the central tenets, concepts and questions for psychosocial studies emerge out of a re-appropriation of what have become anachronistic or 'useless' concepts in other fields – I'm thinking here of 'society' for sociology, or 'the unconscious' for psychology, or even 'hysteria' for psychoanalysis, all of which are routinely referred to as outmoded, superseded, or simply medically discredited – then we need to think about transdisciplinarity not just in spatial terms (that is, in terms of the movement across disciplinary borders) but also in temporal terms. My claim is that tracing the connections between different ways of thinking about psychic and social relations that are the objects of this discipline's study might involve engaging with the ways in which we cannot rid ourselves of concepts and terms that themselves emerge out of specifically located disciplinary debates and yet perhaps do not come to full effect until after the event of their emergence. This would include tracking the ways that these superseded or discredited concepts come to have efficacy through a kind of delayed action reminiscent of *apres-coup*<sup>2</sup>. Rather than viewing psychosocial studies as interdisciplinary in the sense of creating a new dialogue, say, between queer studies and affect studies (i.e. transdisciplinary in the sense of the production of categories that move across both disciplines and yet remain distinct from them), I want to argue for psychosocial studies as an opportunity for anachronistic concepts (ones that have come to be sensed as 'embarrassments' in contemporary theory) to be reanimated, and where 'old' and 'new' ideas speak to one another contemporaneously in generative ways.

In the first part of the article I look in more detail at how 'trans-' can operate as a temporal phenomenon. In the second part I trace out what might have happened to a key 'embarrassment' in psychoanalytic theory: the notion of 'psychic reality'. I want to suggest, with Michel Serres, that this idea, which was 'of its time', and is now 'out of its time', and thereby 'wrong' in that double sense that the contemporary suggests, resurfaces in the work of Judith Butler through a particular contiguity, or 'folding' that

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<sup>2</sup> *Apres-coups*, deferred action, retroaction, and afterwards-ness are all related translations of Freud's term, *Nachträglichkeit*, meaning delayed or belated understanding, or the later pathogenic effect of earlier traumatic experience (Freud and Breuer, 1895). I have turned to both Elizabeth Freeman's notion of temporal drag, and to the concept of melancholia, rather than *Nachträglichkeit*, to indicate a more psychosocial reading of delayed action, explored later in the essay.

she performs between the work of Freud and Foucault, which allows the former gains of the concept of psychic reality to become active again. Although my reading of Butler is well rehearsed and may offer nothing new to the substantial literature on her work, I use it simply as an example of a kind of 'psychosocial study' that I hope can act as a general condition, a 'case' of the transdisciplinarity of 'psychosocial studies'. Where Freud's original concept opened the question of how a disturbing or traumatic external event at the centre of psychic life gets reconsidered as a form of fantasy-taken-as-real, Butler's elaboration of the psychic life of power draws Freud into an uneasy but productive tension with Foucault to understand the very production of a distinction between psychic and social life. Rather than psychic reality being seen to have been surpassed, in what I am calling Butler's psychosocial reading it becomes available again for contemporary thought, not to describe a mode of fantasy but for an account of the very potential of the malleability of norms, and hence for social change. As we shift from a discussion of reality to one of power, or, in other terms, from a distinction between the law to more socially mutable norms, so paradoxically a key area of psychoanalytic thought that has fallen into disrepair becomes available retroactively, gathered into this new psychosocial disciplinary domain. It is the process of gathering, as a transdisciplinary practice, that I primarily wish to elucidate.

### **'Trans-'**

One particular question that hovers over psychosocial studies is whether it is in fact a branch of psychoanalytic studies, which operates as its 'master' discourse. I certainly think a cartography of psychosocial studies would include a loosely-termed 'psychoanalytic-Marxist' tradition that might include some of the work of early critical theorists such as Wilhelm Reich, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Eric Fromm, as well as the developments of Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, Cornelius Castoriadis and Alain Badiou<sup>3</sup>. Certainly psychosocial studies might retrospectively read these authors as engaged with the wholesale deconstruction of a priori categories such as 'individual', 'society' or 'collective', where the radical decentring of the subject in psychoanalysis could be aligned with various accounts of the tensions between power and resistance in a bid to understand better the failure of social change. If we were to trace other psychoanalytic social theories that might 'govern' psychosocial studies, we might turn to the long feminist psychoanalytic trajectory of which the work of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Juliet Mitchell, Nancy Chodorow, Jessica Benjamin and Jacqueline Rose are examples; the engagements between psychoanalysis and philosophy exemplified in the work of Jacques Derrida<sup>4</sup>; and the history of engagements between psychoanalysis and post-colonial theory that takes the work of Frantz Fanon as its starting point and then develops in the texts of Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Ranjana Khanna, Derek Hook and Gail Lewis, to name a few<sup>5</sup>. Or again, we could approach the question of the place of psychoanalysis in psychosocial studies through tracing the ways that key psychoanalytic concepts such as melancholia, fantasy, desire, guilt, and identification have been taken up and productively reworked as ways of understanding identity, subjectivity, and ethics.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see Adorno, 1953, 1973; Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002; Althusser, 1971; Badiou, 2000; Castoriadis, 1998; Fromm, 1942; Horkheimer, 1982; Lacan, 1992; Marcuse, 1969; Reich, 1946; Žižek, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Irigaray, 1985a, 1985b, 1991, 1993a, 1993b; Kristeva, 2001; Mitchell, 1974; Chodorow, 1978, 1989; Benjamin, 1990, 1995, 1998; Rose, 1998; Derrida, 1976.

However, there are elements of the field that do not work with a psychoanalytic frame at all, or actively reject a version of Freudianism, and yet might still be rendered 'psychosocial' in the particular ways that they draw on phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and especially discursive theory, for accounts of subjectivity that have been taken up in a dialogue with critical psychology. These elements would include the particularly influential theories of affect and emotion aligned with the work of Deleuze and Guattari and developed by Brian Massumi, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti and Sara Ahmed, or the cultural theory of Lauren Berlant with her keen eye for the ways intimate life operates in public spheres, where affect is released from the kind of subject that possesses interiority, and suggests a 'psychic' life turned inside out, exteriorized, a surface exemplified as a body without organs<sup>6</sup>. We could also include in this trajectory a renewed interest in the category of 'experience' through the work of A.N. Whitehead, and we could add to this cartography the possibilities for psychosocial readings of recent work on materiality, objects, ecology, vibrancy, and virtuality. These are broadly perspectives that trouble distinctions between subjects and objects, either drawing our attention to the social lives of human and non-human actors, or insisting that 'things' do not precede their interaction with one another, but emerge through particular inter- (or in Karen Barad's words intra-) actions (Barad, 2007). By shifting attention to assemblage and dispersal, psychosocial studies becomes not just the study of the relation between the psychoanalytic decentred self and the possibilities for social and political change, but how the material-discursive phenomena that we cluster under 'psyche' and those under 'social' come to mutually constitute and produce one another.

This already places us in some kind of intensive interdisciplinary domain which begs the question as to whether psychosocial studies might be better described as a set of transdisciplinary practices that allow movement across different traditions of thought without having to fully belong anywhere. The discussions in this issue have been prompted by a distinction drawn between inter-, multi- and trans- disciplinarity whereby inter- and multi-disciplinary practices would include those where specific knowledges, concepts and methods are maintained, and a certain cross-fertilization is sought so as to elucidate better a given phenomenon or problem (see the articles by Osborne and Sandford, 2015 in this issue). The 'trans' describes something distinct from this, suggesting there are practices, objects, methods, concepts and knowledges that do not firmly belong within one disciplinary field or another, but move amongst them, somehow beyond the reach of disciplinarity. Unlike the prefix 'inter-', which retains a certain claustrophobia, signalling the situation of betweenness or amongness, trans- seems to gesture towards the great outdoors. We could say that a certain freedom accompanies whatever the prefix trans- attaches itself to, suggesting that a transdisciplinary concept, text, practice or method might be free to roam, inserting itself like a foreign entity within an otherwise homogeneous field, much like the genetic meaning of the term 'transformation'. Despite trans- being used in chemistry to describe a radical separation (in the definition above the two atoms linked by a double bond hold the pair of identical atoms in opposition, so that their relationship is one constituted by a distance across an atomic terrain), trans- may better evoke that other chemical example, the free radical. Here an atom has an open electronic shell, making free radicals chemically promiscuous with others, and also with themselves, highly reactive, transformational. The bonds are

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see Fanon, 1986; Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1992, 1997; Khanna, 2006; Hook, 2011; Lewis, 2009

<sup>6</sup> For example see Deleuze and Guattari, 1972; Massumi, 2002; Sedgwick, 2003; Grosz, 1994, 1995, 2008; Braidotti, 2006, 2011; Ahmed, 2008; Berlant, 2011.

suggestively described as ‘dangling’, somehow available for polymerization as they move. So, as a concept departs from one disciplinary domain and inserts itself in another, it may both underscore the distinction between those domains, whilst at the same time, through its anomalous presence, bring about some kind of change or re-formation<sup>7</sup>.

As I have tried to suggest, the idea that the psychosocial may operate as a transdisciplinary practice is certainly appealing, especially if trans- has something to do with a kind of freedom of movement that allows untethered concepts, texts, ideas, objects, practices or methods to cross-disciplinary domains, with possibilities for transformation that accompany the anomalous when it pops up in the realm of the same. However, I have also suggested that such movement may not be as untethered as we wish, and that we are never free of the history of both normative and emancipatory elements of field formation. This shifts our attention to how transdisciplinary practices may operate in relation to time – how they sediment over time, how they themselves operate as temporal entities, and how we may trace the ways they come, over time, to appear as knowledge without recourse to disciplinary traditions that by definition do not apply. Thinking about transdisciplinarity not just in spatial terms but in spatio-temporal terms we can begin to think about how concepts or methods may only become apparent, or useful, or indeed reach the limit of their usefulness, when they are taken up at particular historical junctures, or when other concepts also become available, allowing them to perform their transformational work.

### **The ‘Case’ of Psychosocial Studies: Judgement, Melancholia and Temporal Folding**

To think about the ‘case’ of the psychosocial in a wider discussion about transdisciplinarity is to echo Lauren Berlant’s understanding of case as genre (Berlant, 2007). For Berlant, the case is something that takes shape in many different professional and life scenes – psychoanalysis and law, of course, but also in the academy, in aesthetic forms like documentary, detective stories, and fictional autobiography, and life scenes like chat shows or blogs. For Berlant, the case represents a particular way in which the singular is folded into the general, in which singularity and its relation to generality is managed, and most importantly judged. Indeed, in all these genres, what matters is the idiom of judgement: cases are ‘problem- events’ that have ‘animated some kind of judgment’ (Berlant, 2011). The case of psychosocial studies, for instance, may animate a judgement on how transdisciplinary practices work across and through temporal folding, as well as a more internal judgement that is constantly taking place, that has to do with assessing the usefulness of concepts, texts, critical operations and research practices that have been otherwise rendered useless, or simply wrong in contemporary disciplinary spaces. If psychosocial studies is a critical transdisciplinary practice, then its critique is not so much about what the disciplines of psychology and sociology ‘lack’, and that psychosocial studies ‘fills’, but in part to do with the deliberate reappraisal of what is no longer seen as efficacious. This is not to suggest that this is the only way that psychosocial studies proceeds. Psychosocial researchers do, of course, produce new and hybrid concepts all the time, suggest new ways of approaching a range of social

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<sup>7</sup> Gender is never far from our thoughts when we are talking about the trans- formational consequences of the anomalous in the realm of the same – the ‘wandering womb’, for instance, is the paradigmatic example of the move- able substance that is ‘altogether erratic’ and yet responsible for creating symptoms of illness, a transformation from health to ill-health.

problems, and develop new and innovative approaches to research methodologies that are making a major contribution to qualitative research in the social sciences (e.g. Roseneil, 2012; Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). But I would contend that even these new developments require a constant process of 'judgement' about former, now obsolete texts, concepts, and objects within the field, a process that we cannot escape by easy reference to 'trans'.

This argument concerning temporal drag is similar to those discussions in which the idea of melancholia has been used to think through the process of field formation that refuses to let go of its antecedents, and cannot rid itself of 'originary' texts despite its desires for non-disciplinarity. Ranjana Khanna (2006) suggests melancholia as a way of understanding the formation of post-colonial studies, for instance, and Judith Butler's work on melancholic gender identifications could be seen as suggestive for the whole field of gender and sexuality studies (Butler, 1993). Khanna distinguishes between affect and affectation in thinking melancholia in relation to the postcolonial field. Melancholia as affectation is a result of the realization that there is always a complicity between colonialism and canon formation which may lead a field to collapse in ineffective immobility and guilt on the part of the academics located in privileged first world institutions, as well as a melancholic relation to the crisis of representational politics. Melancholia as affect, or what she calls the 'work of melancholia', in contrast to affectation, is something Khanna uses to understand the productive and future-orientated aspects of the critical agency that is a by-product of the relation between ego and lost objects in Freud's conceptualization of melancholia. Melancholia refers to the time of persistence – the work of not letting the lost object go, of retaining an attachment over time even when that attachment pulls one back into the past, as well as projecting into the future in the form of critical agency. There certainly is a way that psychosocial studies, like the field of the postcolonial, is melancholic in affect. It also does not know what it holds on to (what, after all, are its founding texts, and what precisely are its objects and its ideals?), and employs a similar critical agency to deconstruct such linear formations and its own tendencies to an uncritical retrenchment to the world.

However, I think this misses an aspect of psychosocial studies that has to deal with the affect not just of guilt, but also of embarrassment. Can we really, seriously, talk about the 'psyche' for instance, or even the 'subject' now that the humanities, through a widespread uptake of a Deleuzian sensibility and the recent interest in objects and materiality, has suggested that we dispense with objects and subjects and embrace the notion that what we have is 'various materialities constantly engaged in a network of relations' (Bennett, 2004: 354), a 'sticky web of connections', as Jane Bennett puts it, an ecology rather than a psychosocial field? In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman explores this notion of the embarrassment of former political positions or attachments to certain ideas. Punning on the drag of time past, drag as gendered performance, and the drag as a big bore, she reminds us of the 'bind' that lesbians committed to feminism, for instance, find themselves in, in the wake of the transformations that queer studies brought to feminist theory in the early 1990s. As she comments, 'the lesbian feminist seems cast as the big drag. Even to entertain lesbian feminist ideas seems to somehow inexorably hearken back to essentialised bodies, normative visions of women's sexuality, and single-issue identity politics that exclude people of colour, the working class, and the transgendered' (Freeman, 2011: 62). And yet many of the political interventions made by lesbian feminists speak to the now in interesting and important ways. In a similar vein, Kathi Weekes (2011), Stella Sandford (2011) and Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford (2010), have all done fascinating recent work on reappraising the contributions made by Marxist

feminist thought (another embarrassment, let's face it) to contemporary debates about post-work, changing gendered patterns of labour, and what is emerging as a 'feminist' commons.

### **The Baker's Dough**

Before proceeding any further, I therefore want to think about how we might understand the ways that earlier, and in some senses obsolete, ideas and concepts might become contemporary, how they might make trouble in the form of an embarrassment, and how they might address the particular kinds of social concerns about which psychosocial studies might want to speak. Rather than turning to melancholia, I want to think about this through the work of Michel Serres, someone who has worked across culture, science and philosophy, and who perhaps more than anyone proposes a transdisciplinary approach to understanding knowledge, critique, time, and space. One of Serres's favoured figurations, for instance, is Hermes – literally translated as 'transport', the figure who traverses, 'exports and imports' (Serres and Latour, 1995: 66) in the name of invention. Neither inter-disciplinarity nor multi-disciplinarity quite captures what Serres proposes through the figure of Hermes. In his well-known series of conversations with Bruno Latour he states:

Have you noticed the popularity among scientists of the word inter-face – which supposes that the junction between two sciences or two concepts is perfectly under control, or seamless, and poses no problems? On the contrary, I believe that these spaces between are more complicated than one thinks. This is why I have compared them to the Northwest Passage [in Herme`s V. Le Passage du Nord- Ouest], with shores, islands, and fractal ice floes. (Serres and Latour, 1995: 70)

Serres talks of the 'field of comparativism', not so much a moving between established disciplinary areas of thought (say, the sciences and the humanities) but creating that very passage in the first place – closer to what we are exploring here as transdisciplinary in its transformational potential. Though the metaphor is spatial, resting on his interest in topology (the mathematical study of continuity and connectivity which describes the special properties of objects that do not tear or break, but whose morphology persists under homeomorphic deformation), Serres develops a related notion of time that is centrally concerned with the relationship between contemporaneity and superseded or out-moded modes of thought which he elaborates through various figurations. These include the baker kneading dough (Serres, 1991), and the crumpling and folding of a handkerchief, noting the ways that temporal folding produces new contiguities, proximities and confluences of thought, much like the ways apparently widely separated points on a handkerchief may be drawn together into adjacency (Serres and Latour, 1995: 60–1). Serres invites us to understand that time is chaotic in a precise sense:

Time does not always flow according to a line [. . .] nor according to a plan but, rather, according to an extraordinarily complex mixture, as though it reflected stopping points, ruptures, deep wells, chimneys of thunderous acceleration, rendings, gaps – all sown at random at least in a visible disorder. Thus, the development of history truly resembles what chaos theory describes [...] things that are very close can exist in culture, but the line makes them appear very distant from one another. Or, on the other hand, that there are things that seem very close that, in fact, are very distant from one another. (Serres and Latour, 1995: 57)



Time does not flow as much as ‘percolates’ (Serres and Latour, 1995: 58), flowing, that is, in a turbulent manner. Steven Connor has written that because topology is concerned with what remains invariant as a result of transformation, ‘it may be thought of as geometry plus time’ (Connor, 2004). And one of the most important of Serres’s applications of topological thought is to thinking about history. In place of the line of history (something Serres identifies as inherently violent), he proposes time understood in terms of dynamic volumes, or topologies. Time is seen as a river or flame, forking, branching, slewing, slowing, rolling back on itself. Connor writes: ‘these structures involve apprehending time as what David Bohm (1980) called an “implicate order”, as a complex volume that folds over on itself, and in the process does not merely transform in time, but itself gathers up and releases time, as though time were like the intricately folded structure of a protein’ (Connor, 2004). The discussion of baker’s dough in Rome (Serres, 1991) exemplifies this:

The system grows old without letting time escape; it garners age – the new emblems are caught up and subsumed by old ones; the baker molds memory. [...] Time enters into the dough, a prisoner of its folds, a shadow of its folding over. (Serres, 1991: 81)

For Serres, the notion of the contemporary captures the doubleness of someone thinking in radically new ways in their own times, and through that newness, through the ways that those ideas are out of time with their own era, they are available for ‘contemporary’ thought.

Serres therefore puts together two issues of concern here. The first is his deliberate resurrection of dead texts, and the problems with repudiating the past as bygone and the present as authentic when time is understood as linear. From a linear perspective ‘our time’ is always conceived of as the cutting edge, and in this way ‘we’ are always right. In doing so, we condemn what we think of as false to being ‘out-of-date’ or ‘obsolete’, belonging to an earlier time, and thereby expel ideas, modes of thought, practices, concepts from the now. Serres argues for a suspension of judgement about what is ‘right’, and an attention to what remains conserved, sometimes quite close to our own era, including counting the cultural losses that correspond to the gains of contemporary scientific discovery. The second has to do with interdisciplinarity. Serres argues that as science becomes our only mode of contemporary discovery, so the insights of literature, and the humanities more generally, become by definition outmoded, ‘wrong’, along with all their sedimented gains. The humanities can only then operate according to historicism, dealing with the remains of the past, whereas the sciences completely cancel out their past, overturning it with each new advance. In this way the problem of the relation between different viable disciplines and the problem of time are one and the same.

### **Psychic Reality and the Psychic Life of Power**

Can we talk, then, about ‘psychic’ life? I’ve suggested above that references to the ‘psyche’ may show up as a kind of embarrassment in contemporary theory. It goes against the grain of mainstream psychological discourse where ‘psyche’ gave way some time ago to ‘mental’ and now simply to ‘neuro’, as the brain, albeit conceived of as plastic, responsive, porous and in some ways relational, has become the psychological subject. The notion of a psychic life is tinged with something unsavoury, perhaps a leftover connection with the 19th-century interest in telepathy and the occult, linked historically in Britain to the Society for Psychical Research, with which Freud had some

connection (Luckhurst, 2002; Frosh, 2013).

Not only is it anachronistic to refer to psychic life, but in particular the notion of 'psychic reality' has pretty much collapsed as a useful category in some traditions of psychoanalytic thinking. In a recent book, Marion Oliner (2012) suggests that a two-sided response to 'reality' in psycho-analytic thinking has developed over the decades. On the one hand, psychoanalysis recognizes a group of patients who have experienced severe trauma, for whom reality has pressed in so forcefully that they remain passive to the enormity of this experience. Traumatic experiences, however, require assimilation over time as they prompt a range of psychic 'solutions', often including unconscious omnipotence in relation to survival. Internal conflicts, in other words, are understood in relation to the processes of assimilating trauma. On the other hand, there is another group of patients who have failed solutions to childhood internal conflict, and who could be said to be active agents in their suffering. Here concerns with alterity, intersubjectivity, and figurability come to the fore, as a way to understand how we come to accept that the world has its own independent existence beyond the machinations of primary narcissism or omnipotence. Oliner argues that Freud's original notion of self-preservation was initially enough to understand why one comes to deal with 'reality', but Freud's own turn towards psychic reality has led to a kind of ossification of the dual positions she lays out, and a stagnation of theoretical developments on how psychoanalysis conceptualizes the relation between 'inside and out'. In fact the American psychoanalyst Jacob Arlow, back in 1985, also noted this stagnation, and declared psychic reality dead: 'Let me begin by saying that I consider the term psychic reality anachronic. It belongs to an earlier period of psychoanalysis. Its continued use in present-day psychoanalytic conceptualization is unwarranted' (Arlow, 1985: 521).

For Arlow, psychic reality is always a recollection of some kind involving an 'event', but this event is a mixture of fact and fantasy, memory and perception. How the recollection of such psychic events emerges in analysis, and what is done with them, is entirely based, he claims, on the orientation of the analyst. Given the multitude of orientations, we end up with a multitude of psychic realities, rendering the concept, in his view, useless:

Whether one is a classical Freudian analyst, oriented in terms of childhood traumas of abandonment, loss of love, castration anxiety, oedipal defeat or penis envy, or a Kleinian tracing out the vicissitudes of the depressive and paranoid positions, or an object-relations theorist, concentrating on the deleterious effects of an environment that is not a safe, protective barrier, or a self-psychologist, searching out the failures of empathic communication and mirroring, or an attachment theorist eyeing the evidence of an unstable, unreassuring mother who cannot supply the protective holding environment – each one will orient himself differently towards the patient's productions, selectively attending and responding to those elements that are consonant with his theory of pathogenesis. Each will find a different psychic reality in keeping with the favoured view of what process or events they believe caused neurotic illness and character deformation. Each one will find in his or her patient a different vision of psychic reality, i.e. a different version of the nature of the unconscious elements in the patient's mind. Each will envision psychic reality in keeping with the favoured theory of pathogenesis. Under the circumstances, therefore, the concept of psychic reality furnishes no common ground for discourse. It has become an anachronism. (Arlow, 1996: 664)

But what might it mean, we should perhaps ask, for psychic reality, an absolutely central

concept in psychoanalysis, to have become anachronistic in this way, even within the discipline where it originated, and what might have happened to it, as it has migrated beyond the clinical field? This is just the kind of transdisciplinary concept that psychosocial studies might want to make use of, gesturing as it does towards internal mental processes, and a simultaneous engagement with something excessive to psychic life, rendered here as 'reality'. The problem, it appears, is not just one of emphasis – either on the trace of a core reality within our fantasy life, or on the limitations of psychical operations that give rise to forms of psychological reality – but of 'going astray' theoretically, a proliferation of directions that theory has taken and a dissipation of understanding. The notion that reality itself might be multiple, as Bruno Latour would hold, is not considered by Arlow. Multiplicity leads to fragmentation leads to anachronism.

Although psychic reality may have been expelled from the American scene, this is not quite the case elsewhere. The contention of the final section of this article is that by the time Judith Butler comes to the notion of the psyche in *The Psychic Life of Power* (Butler, 1997), psychic reality has indeed become useless, but is reanimated through a particular dialogue she sets up in relation to the work of Foucault. However, the ground of Butler's reading of the relation between power and psychic life is a certain rendition of psychic reality in the work of both Lacan and Laplanche that conceptualizes a form reality takes, beyond the dualism of interiority and externality, which remains active in psychoanalytic theorizing beyond this dissipation. This involves the conceptualization of psychic reality as a third term, an idea that we could say remains rather latent in more mainstream psychoanalytic thought until its later reanimation in psychoanalysis 'beyond the clinic'.

### **Freud and the Third**

In brief, psychic reality first appears in Freud's early paper on 'Hysterical Paralysis' (1893), where he begins to discuss how the 'lesion' that he believes is associated with hysteria is an alteration of a thought or an idea. Freud develops this idea in *A Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), where he makes an initial distinction between 'thought reality' and 'external reality' and in the work on hysteria with Joseph Breuer in 1895, before he famously (and infamously) abandoned his 'seduction theory' in 1897 in favour of a theory of unconscious infantile fantasy. Hysteria, in this early work, was understood to arise in relation to painful or traumatic 'real' events, the memory of which was repressed, turned away from the conscious mind, and yet dynamically active in creating disturbances elsewhere. Hysterical symptoms formed when this repression broke down, the symptom acting as an alternative solution to keeping these memories from consciousness. By 1906, by way of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, Freud had revised his position on the nature of the events that cause the production of hysterical symptoms, shifting the emphasis from what we could call the materiality of sexual trauma to the psychic realm of fantasy and unconscious wish, whereby memories are not the result of an event simply inflicted from the outside but, as Lawrence Friedman has evocatively put it, are 'structured by preference' (Friedman, 1995). Freud, however, resisted a simple distinction in which the internal world now triumphed over the external, offering a shifting dynamic interaction between memory, perception, fantasy and the pressure of the drive or wish in a field that could involve material trauma (he never repudiated the existence of sexual trauma in some of his patients), but now decentralized in relation to unconscious fantasy. As Laplanche and Pontalis put it:

It is right to emphasise at this point, however, that the expression 'psychical

reality' itself is not simply synonymous with 'internal world', 'psychological domain', etc. If taken in the most basic sense that it has for Freud, this expression denotes a nucleus within that domain which is heterogeneous and resistant and which is alone in being truly 'real' as compared with the majority of psychical phenomena. (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988 [1973]: 316)

That nucleus that is truly 'real' is what Lacan would go on to name the Real, the aspect of the wish that remains impossible, resistant, heterogeneous to the unconscious, extending Freud's claim that 'there are no indications of reality in the unconscious' (Freud, 1897). At the same time, however, Freud saw the unconscious as subsuming all areas of mental life, so that consciousness was simply a small part of this wider 'psychical reality', claiming paradoxically:

The unconscious is the true psychical reality; in its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as incompletely presented by the data of consciousness as is the external world by the communications of our sense organs. (Freud, 1900: vol. 4, p. 613)

If both internal and external worlds remain partial in our apprehension of them, then there is some aspect of mental and social life that remains distinct from both material reality and what Laplanche and Pontalis call 'pure psychology' – 'extimate', as Lacan would say. The particular move that Freud makes in relation to hysteria as he shifts from the aetiology of sexual trauma to that of fantasy is that hysterical individuals treat the fantasy which is born of a repressed wish as if it were real. A fantasy, once consciously understood as fantasy, has none of the dynamic repressive force of a fantasy thought to be reality, which, though not identical with delusion, induces a range of unconscious psychical effects related to the original wish, such as guilt, envy, anxiety, and identification. In other words, Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory was not simply about replacing real events with fantasies, but about embedding the difficulty with making a distinction between reality and fantasy as a core struggle in neurotic psychic life. In deluded states, if we follow Lacan, there is no such struggle, as the law that allows a distinction between reality and fantasy to be maintained is foreclosed, so that there is little awareness that fantasy and reality have not coincided. What has been internally abolished 'returns from without' and can only appear in the Real, as the entire area of symbolic functioning has been foreclosed. In hysteria, the analysand knows the difference between fantasy and reality, but nevertheless treats fantasy as if it were real. Its reality describes the effects of being taken as real – the fantasy's capacity to produce the 'real' psychic processes of guilt, envy, identification and so on.

Where Lacan follows Freud in talking about an impossible Real – traumatic, unrepresentable, irreducible – Jean Laplanche goes in a different direction. For Laplanche psychic reality is a particular instance in Freud's thought in which the vector that usually moves from internality outwards is radically reversed. Although psychoanalysis makes what he describes as 'ridiculous efforts to reconstruct the outside, objectivity, on the basis of the inside' in such a way as to be worthy of the great idealist philosophies, there is a germ of a break with this Ptolemaic, self-centred position in Freud's own writing (Laplanche, 1995). This shows up at various moments in Freud's work – in seduction and transference, the superego, persecution and delusion – that bring out an irreducible otherness that gives rise to psychic life. The most important discovery of psychoanalysis for Laplanche is the presence of the 'other thing in me, and of the link between the other thing and the other person' (1995: 663). In focusing on the link, Laplanche provides an account of psychic reality as a third term that resists being

co-opted as either a version of internality or externality, and puts their relation as the condition for their emergence – something on which Butler later builds.

The link takes the form of a message between adult and child that comes too early for the child to decode. Sexual in its intent, the message is a form of seduction, and not simply a seduction fantasy on the part of the child: “‘Psychic reality’ is not created by me; it is invasive. In this domain of the sexual, there is too much reality at the beginning’ (Laplanche, 1995: 680). However, it is not the content of the message that matters but the irreducibility of the fact of communication (Laplanche, 1995: 665). This third domain of reality then, that is neither the materiality of the gesture made by an adult that we could ascertain as ‘abuse’, nor the pure psychology of either the protagonist or victim, is simply the reality of a message that passes from adult to child. Because the message is enigmatic and cannot deliver its content in a straightforward manner, it both fails and succeeds at one and the same time (Laplanche, 1995: 665). For example, Freud, Laplanche tells us, makes an enormous effort to manufacture the primal scene from just two ingredients – perceptual reality, on the one hand, and the child’s fantasy, on the other. But the reality that is not material but also not purely subjective has to do with the adult proffering of the scene, a kind of unconscious intent on the part of the adults, an offering, indeed a seduction, through an invitation to look, to witness, to receive a message, regardless of what actually takes place. In this sense trauma is embedded in the proffering, as it is here that the adult imposes their enigmas, which are addressed to the child. It is not just that adult sexuality is focused towards other adults that the child witnesses and/or fantasizes about, but it is aimed also at the child. Laplanche triangulates the primal scene not simply in the child’s mind but in the reality of the adult’s enigmatic message to the child at the same time as being caught up in the dyadic sexual relation with a third. The message says something like: ‘I am showing you – or letting you see something which, by definition, you cannot understand, and in which you cannot take part’ (Laplanche, 1995: 666).

### **The ‘Soul’ and the Psyche**

The notion of psychic reality as a third reality, irreducible not only in the sense of the Lacanian Real, but in the sense that Laplanche offers us, of something sexual and yet completely impossible to decode that invades us from the other, provides a bridge in Butler’s work between Freud and Foucault. A message, after all, is always social, not a form of telepathy in which an adult psychic state is passed to a child. Crucially, Laplanche’s rendition of psychic reality opens the way for it to be understood to change the social norm, not just the other way round, and it is this possibility that Butler pursues in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997). In what we could claim as a foundational text for psychosocial studies, Butler creates a ‘new passage’ out of her reading of Freud and Foucault, to offer us an account of a tenuous, always strained, but productive relation between psychic and social spheres. This productivity is not just about what may be produced as excessive to these categories, but the process by which the border between internality and externality is itself produced. Butler deliberately holds on to a notion of the psyche, a category neither identical with the subject nor with Foucault’s ‘soul’ (Foucault, 1975), but some kind of gesture towards interiority that is at the same time utterly predicated on the sociality of its production. Through her reading of Freud and Foucault together, I suggest she offers us a way of circumventing the ‘embarrassment’ of the conjunction ‘psychic reality’, and enacts a temporal fold, in the sense that Serres intends, allowing Freud’s term to become available in a contemporary scene as a theoretical resource through her careful reading of melancholia alongside an

analytics of power. In this sense Butler's work is exemplary of a temporal transdisciplinary practice in a psychosocial register. What I offer here is a brief reminder of the work Butler does in *The Psychic Life of Power* to highlight a particular usage of the terms 'psyche' and 'social' that allows us to access Freud's earlier work on psychic reality in contemporary ways.

From a position that is concordant with both Foucault and Lacan, Butler begins with a notion of the subject as a placeholder, created through linguistic operations that predate us and that we did not choose, and yet on which we depend for our intelligibility and agency. However, discourse understood in a Foucaultian sense of the *dispositif*<sup>8</sup> does not free us from the problem of attachment, or desire for subjection. Once power is no longer thought of as pressing down on the subject from the outside but, as productive of the subject, then at best we will have an ambiguous relation to power, both desiring and resisting it at once. For Butler this means we must account for our desire for subjection, i.e. for its psychic form. Moving away from the subject caught in a nexus of external power, whose response to that power emanates from somewhere 'within', Butler addresses the problem of how that 'within' comes into operation in relation to power. If she learns from Foucault that power enunciates the subject and that she cannot therefore posit a subject on whom power operates, she is reliant on a figure or trope of 'turning' rather than resisting, for understanding how power inaugurates the subject. 'Trope', the use of figurative language, itself both means, and operates as, a kind of turning, so this becomes a perfect vehicle for Butler, picking up on how the trope of turning is itself a kind of 'turn on turning', or a turn that turns in on itself. Where an Althusserian account of interpellation demonstrates how the subject is produced through the address of state authority and suggests that a psychic operation, conscience, is already in operation with the regulatory norm, Butler highlights how it is the formation of the psychic operation (the turn of turning) itself for which we need to account. Butler therefore attempts to work the groove between Freud and Foucault – Freud because he deals with a precarious subjectivity that is carved out of internalized attachments to that which we have lost and yet remain dependent on, and Foucault because he provides a productive account of power.

Butler's key question concerns process, and indeed temporality in the form of repetition or iteration is central to her theorizing. How, she wants to know, do social norms become internalized, not just once, but again and again over time, if we have done away with a simple distinction between social norm and interior life? Her answer is that it is the process of internalization that allows that distinction. As internalization (the taking in of the norm) works its ambivalent process, the norm itself takes on different forms as psychic rather than social phenomenon. Through Foucault we know that norms, as internalized social regulatory forces, take over internal life almost totally, so much so that the 'soul' for Foucault becomes a social category. However, Butler argues that 'being psychic, the norm does not merely reinstate social power, it becomes formative and vulnerable in highly specific ways' (Butler, 1997: 21). By vulnerable, she is suggesting

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<sup>8</sup> Foucault states in the 1977 'The Confession of the Flesh' interview: 'What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements' (1988: 194).

‘mutable’, hence what she offers us is a way to think about not just resistance but the process of producing changes in conditions of intelligibility. As she reminds us, ‘to thwart the injunction to produce a docile body is not the same as dismantling the injunction or changing the terms of subject constitution’ (Butler, 1997: 88). Undermining is one thing, and rearticulating the symbolic terms by which subjects are constituted is another.

In order to understand our passionate attachment to the disciplinary regimes that both produce and totalize the subject, Butler mines psychoanalysis for a response to the ontological question of ‘who’ is there to make attachments prior to subjectivation as subject formation. Here she looks to Freud’s account of how the ego paradoxically comes into being through melancholic processes, through identification with lost objects and lost attachments. It is unnecessary to rehearse Freud’s concept of melancholia fully here. What I want to highlight is how, in Butler’s hands, melancholia becomes a way for understanding the institution of a distinction between social and psychic life, and that the boundary that, in her terms, ‘distributes’ the terrain between the two is dependent on mutable social norms. This is a crucial point for psychosocial studies, as Butler offers a way of articulating a social psyche that builds on Laplanche’s insistence on the constitution of psychic life through an encounter with alterity, but a socially constituted alterity, and therefore one that changes as it becomes psychic.

Briefly, from Freud’s 1917 account of melancholia a bond is formed between subject and object followed by a withdrawal of the object. The subject, instead of decajecting and loving a new object, withdraws the libidinal energy that had been caught up in the original attachment into the ego and cannot find anywhere for it to go. This state produces an identification of the ego with the abandoned object: ‘I’ am, like you, a lost and abandoned object. The loss of the object creates a split in the ego, caught in a dynamic interaction between ego-criticism (a condemning agency) and an ego modified by identification. By the time we get to ‘The Ego and the Id’ (1923) Freud states: ‘The character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes’ and that ‘it contains the history of those object choices’. Melancholia becomes the generalized condition, as the lost object is taken ‘in’ to an ego that through that process is built up and formed. The ego is precipitated by loss, ‘sheltering’, as Butler puts it, the memory trace of that lost love. So, as Lacan also draws out, prior to ego formation there is some kind of traumatic encounter, an encounter that entails both identification and aggression with the other which cannot be given up, and institutes the ego through taking in the remains of that loss. The ‘turn’ that constitutes psychic life contains both a change in direction and a change in affect – from object to ego, and from love to hate – as the object-taken-in is berated and sadistically attacked by a condemning agency, as well as loved. The failure of the ego to fully take itself as its own love object, as in primary narcissism, creates a sliver of a gap between subject and object, and in doing so internal and external worlds are instituted.

Crucially for Butler, and I would argue for psychosocial studies: ‘if the melancholic turn is the mechanism by which the distinction between internal and external worlds is instituted, then melancholia initiates a variable boundary between the psychic and the social, a boundary [...] that distributes and regulates the psychic sphere in relation to prevailing norms of social regulation’ (Butler, 1997: 171, my emphasis). As the ego is modified through identification with lost objects, social ideals, silences and prohibitions are also taken in. What is denoted as ‘object’ is actually an already configured social world. The berating agency is not simply internal. When the melancholic states ‘I have

lost nothing', this is not just as a psychic bolstering against loss, but a statement that reveals the social forms of power that regulate what losses can and cannot not be grieved, as much of Butler's later work elaborates. 'Conscience' is an internal violence turned in on the self, but it originates in the violence of social norms that regulate the lost object.

Finally, the counter-point to the psychic form that the violence of social norms takes is the political promise that can be understood as part of the melancholic's 'plaint'. Many theorists have commented on the 'spirit of revolt' that Freud writes about in the melancholic, as they attempt to break the bond that they also want to sustain (e.g. Kristeva, 2001; Khanna, 2006). Butler understands melancholia not as an individual pathology but as a condition produced and reproduced through systematic cultural and social exclusions from dominant norms that provide recognition. The condition of melancholia, that is also the generalized condition of ego formation, institutes a boundary that produces and regulates a separation of psychic and social spheres, and in becoming 'psychic' social norms can in their turn be regulated and (re)produced. Whilst the ego cannot escape the incorporation of the violence of non-recognition, at the same time it is in revolt, seeking to break the bond on which its formation depends. Hence, for Butler, we 'work through' social regulation all the while we are constrained by it.

## **Conclusion**

Michel Serres talks of how a system can grow old without letting time escape, and through a process of temporal folding or kneading, unexpected contiguities can be made. He is particularly concerned with the fate of 'dead' texts or ideas, and how quickly they are relegated as 'obsolete'. He urges us to pay attention to what has remained conserved, close to our own era, and deliberately reserves judgement on the insights from previous eras, proposing a kind of waiting, until their usefulness can resurface again through their contiguity to other, most ostensibly 'contemporary' texts and ideas.

The idea that a Foucaultian perspective on power and the norm can surface within a psychoanalytic account of the psyche positions these concepts as transdisciplinary. However, what I have tried to do here is not just identify and trace key transdisciplinary concepts that are active in the field of psychosocial studies, but show how psychosocial studies is, itself, a transdisciplinary practice. It proceeds by gathering up 'dead' or outmoded concepts and reading them with and through other more contemporary concepts. In doing so, both are transformed. It is this process of mutual transformation that is at the heart of Judith Butler's account of the psychic life of power. Her account therefore could be read as indicative of a form of psychosocial transdisciplinary work, although she may not, herself, name it as such. Psychic reality, that Freud first articulates in 1893, is pronounced dead in 1985, but remains active in the French tradition, and reappears 'beyond' clinical psychoanalysis through the folding or kneading Butler performs of Freud and Foucault that produces a psychosocial account of a variable boundary that both instigates and regulates psychic and social spheres. Through this process we see how the norm comes to have 'gotten in', and how the psyche in its turn can affect some leverage on socially produced norms and regulatory practices of governance. Psychic reality, as neither simply reality nor simply internality, is reworked in Butler's hands, through the redoubling of effects of the two spheres as they are constituted through power, subjection, and our attachments to our subjection. This more political reading of psychic reality is then available to be 'gifted back' to the clinical sphere, so that the violence of social norms, and their mutability, can form part of our understanding of the emergence of the subject in the clinic.



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