Psychoanalytic Theory/Psychoanalytic Geographies

P. T. Kingsbury, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada
© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Glossary

Analysand The patient in psychoanalysis.

Ego The part of the mind that registers the sense of Self and mediates between the unconscious and conscious, as well as the Id, Superego, and social reality.

Id An unconscious part of the mind that is associated with immediate gratification and the primary instinctual impulses of aggression and sexuality.

Identification A process, primarily involving the Ego and the Superego, through which the human subject psychically adopts and incorporates an attribute or attributes (e.g., values, images, words, mannerisms, social roles) from another person or persons.

Jouissance Often translated as enjoyment, this Lacanian term refers to an intensely painful pleasure that is at once fascinating and threatening to psychical well-being and social stability.

Repression The process by which disturbing thoughts, wishes, and memories are expelled from consciousness into the unconscious.

Superego The part of the mind associated with moral agency, self-critical conscience, as well as social standards and imperatives.

Uncanny, the The English translation of the German word unheimliche which literally means ‘un homely’ and originally used by Freud to designate a mild and specific form of anxiety that is derived from encounters with familiar objects that have become suddenly strange.

Unconscious, the A partially inaccessible and dynamic part of the mind that consists of repressed thoughts, injunctions, and feelings that profoundly influence our conscious lives.

Introduction: What Is Psychoanalytic Theory?

Critical evaluations of a theory (from the Greek word theôria meaning ‘contemplation’ and ‘speculation’) seldom proceed by asking whether a theory is true or false. Theories are primarily hypothetical propositions that attempt to explain and analyze phenomena. Theories also help to guide speculative thinking, coordinate research questions, inform methods and methodologies, as well as provide interpretative frameworks through which we can make sense of complex data. Strictly speaking, then, theories provide neither ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ results, nor ‘good’ or ‘bad’ answers. Most critical evaluations of a theory usually pose the following questions: What are the epistemological assumptions, ontological implications, and methodological ramifications of a theory? How is a theory geographically and historically situated? How, why, and where has a theory been contested and revised? In what ways and to what extent is a theory compatible or incompatible with other theories? What is the relation between a theory and practice? Mindful of the above questions, let us turn to some fundamental theoretical maneuvers in psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis mainly consists of clinical ‘practices’, techniques, methods, and theories that seek to reduce psychical suffering. Psychoanalysis was first developed by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) during the late nineteenth century and has been continually revised, disputed, and deformed within and without psychoanalysis. Like the psychoanalytic subject that is traversed by numerous conflicts and splits, for example, between conscious and unconscious life, as well as between biology and cultural significations, psychoanalysis is composed of unruly and sometimes unkind paradigmatic divisions. Let us briefly illustrate this point with three oft-cited examples. First, Freud once vehemently demanded that his former ‘crown prince of psychoanalysis’, Carl Jung (1875–1961), stopped using the term ‘psycho-analysis’ because of Jung’s theoretical differences. Second, in 1953, Jacques Lacan (1901–81) was famously expelled from International Psychoanalytical Association because of his idiosyncratic clinical methodology that rejected the rule that analytic sessions end after 50 minutes. And finally, during the early 1940s, Melanie Klein’s (1882–1960) emphasis on aggression and the early development of the Superego in very young children prompted fierce and prolonged controversies with orthodox Freudians lead by Anna Freud (1895–1982) and the British Psychoanalytical Society.

In addition to its renowned theoretical volatilities, psychoanalysis is arguably a hybrid theory par excellence because its numerous theoretical approaches incorporate ideas from sources as diverse as literature, philosophy, philology, mythology, astrology, political economy, neuroscience, religion, biology, anthropology, mathematics, and topology. Now, what makes psychoanalysis different from other psychological and psychotherapeutic approaches? Much of psychoanalysis is concerned with the interpretation of and clinical intervention of unconscious thoughts, memories, and desires. While psychoanalysis is composed
of many and oftentimes contrary theoretical approaches, all psychoanalytic ‘schools’ of thought are united by their theoretical attempts to explain the suffering that ensues from ostensibly superfluous and inexplicable feelings such as chronic guilt, remorse, jealousy, powerlessness, persecution, self-loving, and self-loathing. Taking it as axiomatic that the unconscious is an ineluctable mode of psychical apprehension, rather than simply a sociohistorical construct, psychoanalytic theory makes the radical claim that people are ultimately cut off from and cannot know what they want. Such a theoretical assumption ushers in two key psychoanalytic premises about subjectivity: people are not biologically or instinctually predisposed to desire or love certain objects. This is why, for example, Freud asserted that people are no less predisposed to forge heterosexual than homosexual or bisexual relationships.

Second, psychoanalysis does not take it for granted that people will necessarily pursue their own self-interests. Crucial here, is the psychoanalytic theoretical emphasis on what Freud called the ‘drive’ (Trieb). Very briefly, the drive is a concept that concerns how human subjectivity and sexuality are not entirely determined by biological and cultural forces. Freud argued that human pleasure and procreation do not coincide easily and cannot be understood in terms of ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ behavior. In psychoanalysis, perversion is always the norm. In contrast to the innate attribute of instinct, Freud argued that the psychical and somatic montage of drives coordinated human sexuality. By insisting on the existence of the dynamic unconscious and the importance of the drive, psychoanalysis theorizes a series of deceptively simple, pertinent, and troubling questions. For example, psychoanalysis asks: Where does psychical pain come from? Why do we repeatedly put ourselves in harmful situations? Why and how do certain stultifying thoughts get ‘into’ our minds given the contexts and contingencies of our lives? What happens when we fall in and out of love? What is the relationship between ethics and desire?

In formulating answers to these questions, psychoanalytic theory asserts the importance of real and imagined events that take place during the formative years of our early childhood. Why? During the first 5 or so years of our lives, we spend a great deal of our time acquiring language, learning cultural codes, and forming role models. Moreover, this period of our lives involves the never to be entirely reconciled trauma of psychically separating ourselves from our mother or primary caretaker. Psychoanalysis contends that these events are critical in the formation of sexual difference and gender roles through unconscious formations of desire, defenses, identifications, and fantasies. Critical here are psychoanalysis’s various retheorizations of Freud’s notion of the ‘Oedipus complex’, that is, the shifting psychical battlefields and pathways through which boys and girls organize their desires for and against their mothers and fathers. For most psychoanalysts, the Oedipus complex takes place once the infant has been through the ‘oral’, ‘anal’, and ‘phallic’ stages of psychosexual development.

Although Freud once dubbed psychoanalysis a ‘depth psychology’, psychoanalysis does not contend (as it is usually supposed) that the unconscious is a dark and primal thing that hides and gurgles away in the shadowy depths of people’s minds. Rather, psychoanalysis asserts that the unconscious takes place in the heart of people’s lives and everyday processes such as speaking, thinking, and dreaming. Furthermore, psychoanalysis suggests that the unconscious can speak and be interpreted like a ciphered message. For most psychoanalysts, the unconscious is the accumulation of other people’s spoken words, that is, the aggregated subtle din and babble of people’s desires, demands, compliments, scolds, as well as cultural codes, more generally. This is why Lacan famously called the unconscious “the discourse of the Other.”

The clinical task of getting the unconscious to speak and then make sense of what it says is highly complex. To begin with, psychoanalysis takes a lot of time: on average, analysis takes place several times a week and usually lasts about 6 years. Analysis is never a question of simply bringing the unconscious into consciousness. Rather, the main psychoanalytic task is to relationally understand by obliquely mapping and partially unknotting the tangled web of unconscious thoughts, wishes, fears, and so on. When analysts listen to what their analysands say, they do not simply focus on the content or meaning of their speech. A psychoanalyst focuses on the ‘form’ of what the analysand says, that is, ‘how’ the analysand talks: their stutters, slips, hesitations, repetitions, silences, and deviations. Here, psychoanalytic theory privileges the role of social discourses over the individual because psychoanalysis asserts that language always trumps our intentions: when we say something, we always say something more than we meant to say; when we speak, we always leave elements of doubt. Psychoanalytic theory also proposes that language is material, that is, words and signifiers have material effects. For example, words can wound, deliver emotional stings, incite actions, prompt blushes, define bodies, create feelings, forge memories, and cinder pain. Psychoanalysis, then, makes the following key theoretical wager: talking – putting things into words – can not only illuminate unconscious thoughts, desires, and goals, etc., but can also alleviate the pain of the speaker’s symptoms.

However, why does psychoanalytic theory focus so heavily on the unconscious? Because psychoanalysis theoretically adheres to the ‘principle of sufficient reason’, that is, the belief that when something happens, it does so because of a specific reason. On this point, psychoanalysis makes three important and somewhat
unorthodox theoretical maneuvers vis-à-vis causality and psychological phenomena: first, psychoanalysis contends that mental events such as dreams, symptoms, and fantasies are composed and result from numerous rather than single causes. In Freud's words, all psychical phenomena are 'overdetermined'. Second, psychoanalysis theorizes cause not in terms of lawful and linear determinations, but rather, in terms of the indefinite and contingent. According to psychoanalysis, cause takes place when something unexpectedly fails or goes awry. Third, psychoanalysis posits that cause and effect do not and cannot coexist on the same empirical or phenomenal field. Psychoanalysis argues that it is a theoretical error to confuse cause and realization. From a psychoanalytic perspective the primary causes of people's behavior cannot be entirely present in, immanent to, or coincident with the realms of their consciousness. This is why psychoanalysis insists on 'going beyond' the conscious parts of people's psychical lives and attending to what is unthinkable and unknowable, that is, the unconscious parts of people's minds. The theoretical strategy here is not so much an attempt to faithfully capture or mirror psychical 'reality', but rather to explain or take into account the iterations of enigmatic and inexplicable psychical phenomena. In so doing, psychoanalytic theory is extremely pragmatic: it prefers working hypotheses to metaphysical guarantees.

One of the most pragmatic tenets of psychoanalysis is its theoretical investments in thinking about the complex geographies of psychical life. Taking seriously the idea that space is dynamic and expressive, psychoanalysis argues that our feelings and the causes of their feelings do not simply take place as a result of forces that move back and forth between the 'insides' and the 'outsides' of our heads. According to psychoanalysis, feelings and subjectivity itself are inherently spatial because they take place through psychical, corporeal, and discursive processes that involve, for example, fragmentation, displacement, condensation, introjection, and splitting. It is important to note that these key psychoanalytic categories are not spatial metaphors or conceptual allegories. These are categories through which psychoanalytic theory tries to answer questions about how our psyches and social worlds 'really' work.

Given the extent to which psychoanalysis attends to the spatialities of psychical phenomena, it should be hardly surprising that psychoanalytic theory has become a major theoretical approach in human geography. Moreover, Steve Pile asserts that psychoanalysis is a 'spatial discipline'. How so? A quick glance of any psychoanalytic text will reveal how psychical life is theorized in terms of the interactions and interdependencies between different places or locales within, outside, and betwixt people's minds, words, and worlds. Thus, psychoanalysis provides a rich theoretical vocabulary in which to 'map' the inter- and intrasubjective dimensions of space and society. However, psychoanalytic geographies are not simply the inevitable result of psychoanalysis's theoretical commitments or sensitivities toward space. It is important to consider geography's disciplinary contexts through which psychoanalysis has become relevant and legible to many human geographers. It is to a partial and brief examination of how and why psychoanalytic theory was first adopted by geographers that we now turn.

**Psychoanalytic Geography**

**Geography's 'Discovery' of the Freudian Unconscious**

Like geography, psychoanalysis has an abiding interest in the worldly. Psychoanalysts frequently use inductive reasoning whereby theories derive from the space–time singularities of people's lives, that is, the uniquely topsy-turvy worlds of people's broken hearts, shattered dreams, and recurrent tears. To be sure, psychoanalysis is spelt 'psychoanalysis' not 'psychoanalysis' or 'psychianalysis'. This quiet, yet indelible 'o' that is inscribed between 'psy' and 'analysis' is the mark of an orb – an Earth writing or 'geo-graphia' of sorts – wherein the 'o' also signals 'of the world'. How so? According to psychoanalysis, the clamorous and delicate dramas of the world are inescapably psychical and people's psychical torments and jitters are inescapably worldly. Psychoanalysis provides an extremely rich theoretical vocabulary in which to explore the volatile reservations and subtle bonds that (de)structure, traverse, and often catch unawares subjects and groups. This is why, during the early 1930s, Albert Einstein, in responding to the League of Nations' invitation to publish a series of open letters that addressed pressing social issues, wrote to Freud and asked him how to prevent the 'urgent and absorbing problem' of the growing 'menace of war'. Thus, on questions about interpretation, passion, and expression, many disciplines in the arts and humanities find theoretical engagements with psychoanalysis indispensable, if not unavoidable. But when and why did geographers start to engage with psychoanalytic theory? What was it about psychoanalysis that first incited geographers' interest? And how have the numerous theoretical approaches that compose psychoanalysis been used by geographers?

Pile has written extensively on the disciplinary conditions and questions through which geographers came to 'discover' the Freudian unconscious. Briefly, during the 1970s, many geographers worked in the subfield of 'behavioral geography'. Behavioral geographers, rejecting the discipline's 'quantitative revolution' that reduced humans and human relations to statistical phenomena such as dots on a grid, examined the spatial dimensions of
reasoning, decision making, place attachment, mental images, behavior, environmental perception, and cognition. Pile notes that behavioral geography was shackled with a fundamental theoretical problem: it did not possess an adequate theorization of how the mind worked vis-à-vis the phenomenal environment. Many behavioral geographers worked with a troublesome 'black box' model of the mind which conceptualized the mind as an ultimately chaotic, obscure, and unknowable entity. Furthermore, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, behavioral geography was increasingly critiqued by the 'humanistic' and 'radical' geographers. These two groups critiqued behavioral geographers for neglecting important dimensions of human subjectivity and agency. On the one hand, humanistic geographers, influenced by phenomenology and qualitative methodologies, brought to the fore the importance of cultural symbolic meanings. On the other hand, radical geographers, drawing on Marxist theories, tackled issues of cultural power structures. Theoretical questions about how the mind worked, however, still lingered. Specifically, humanistic geographers' reliance on the vague analytic category of 'experience' and radical geographers' heavy reliance on the binary of structure versus agency both proved insufficient to address the complex ways through which cultural meanings and spaces were contested and (re)produced.

By the end of the 1980s, geography underwent a significant 'cultural turn'. Partly a result of the increasing importance of the 'cultural' dimensions of the political events in the New World Order (e.g., the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Tiananmen Square protests, growing white nationalism in the United Kingdom and France), partly the result of other 'cultural turns' across the social sciences and the humanities, many geographers (initially those working in the UK) began to focus on the interpretation of the social spaces of power, resistance, and struggles 'alongside' the contingent and contextual spaces of identity, subjectivity, and representation. Among these 'new cultural' geographers, Pile asserted that psychoanalysis offered rich theoretical and methodological frameworks in which to practice and engage with the intersubjective dimensions of 'interpretative geography'. Published in 1991, Pile's intervention was crucial in the inauguration of a subfield that would soon become referred to as 'psychoanalytic geography'.

One recent and valuable assessment of psychoanalytic geography is Felicity Callard’s (2003) article, ‘The taming of psychoanalysis in geography’. According to Callard, much of the taming involves geographers’ dissolution of psychoanalytic concepts into psychological concepts. How so? Geographers often rely on interdisciplinary and assimilatory secondary literatures that promote historicist, culturalist, and social constructionist rather than psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity and spaces. In addition, in contrast to psychoanalysis, many critical human geographers uncritically adhere to progressive theorizations about subjectivity that laud and take for granted people's capacity and willingness for political resistance and transformation. In addition to reevaluations of psychoanalytic theorizations in geography is the emergence of geographers’ engagement with psychotherapies. This work, pursued by Liz Bondi and others, is important because it brings to the fore related and alternative approaches to the sine non qua of psychoanalysis: the reduction of somatic and psychical suffering.

**Theories and Research Themes in Psychoanalytic Geography**

Like psychoanalytic theory, psychoanalytic geography is difficult to categorize. Put differently, it is difficult to discern or impose a neat paradigmatic boundary around what is and what is not psychoanalytic geography. In what follows, the contours of three important theoretical approaches that compose psychoanalytic geographies are elaborated – Freudian, Lacanian, and object relations theory approaches – and their attendant theoretical questions and research agendas. What follows is an overview of keywords and research themes, rather than an exhaustive account of what constitutes psychoanalytic geography. Readers are thus encouraged to read and read beyond the references cited below, as well as the cross-references.

**Dreams, the Unconscious, and the Uncanny**

Pile contends that a major reason behind the enduring critical attention devoted to Freud's groundbreaking book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, is because the work demonstrates the incisiveness of Freud's 'spatial thinking'. Freud attempts to understand the shifting and elusive meanings of dreams and how they 'work' by drawing on spatial analytic categories such as 'condensation', 'displacement', and 'associative paths'. Notably, Pile illustrates how Freud's 'dream spaces' are not only caught up in the revisions and reversals of personal desires, but also the illuminations and reflections of social things. For these reasons, Pile theorizes urban spaces as dream spaces. Theoretically, Pile uses the Freudian–Marxian analytic categories of 'city-work', 'magic-work', 'dream-work', 'emotional work', 'time-work', 'blood-work', 'grief-work', and 'space-work' to show how emotions and fantasies do ideological work in city life. Psychoanalysis enables Pile to show how an effective 'grounding' of theories (whether psychoanalytic or not) not only requires an adequate understanding of materiality and space, but also an understanding of the immaterial.

To illustrate this theoretical point, Pile draws on the psychoanalytically inflected social theories of Walter
Benjamin in order to interpret cities as urban ‘phantasmagorias’, that is, alluring space–time processions of optical illusions, secret desires, irrational anxieties, imaginary figures, moody misdeeds, and fantastic stories. Pile’s psychoanalytic geography also explicates how dreams are a key part of everyday political geographies. How so? Dreams involve politics because they incite struggles: not everyone shares the same dreams and/or nightmares. For Pile, dreams are also political because our ability to shape and intervene in the world is partially determined by how we are gripped by the world of dreams.

One of the most extensive and influential investigations in human geography of how the Freudian unconscious works in sociospatial formations is Heidi Nast’s research on ‘mapping the unconscious’. Like Pile’s assessment of dreams, Nast asserts that the unconscious plays a significant role in everyday life and politics. Nast provides insight into how the unconscious plays a constitutive role in the spatial organization of violence, injustice, and exploitation in US racist landscapes in the context of southern plantation, post-Reconstruction settings, and the educational policies and urban renewal programs in 1950s Chicago. Underpinning Nast’s investigations are two psychoanalytic maneuvers. The first idea concerns how a geographical explanation of a social phenomenon can proceed not so much by empirically mapping the links between the particular (e.g., the local) and the universal (e.g., the global), but rather by dialectically connecting the universal to the singular, that is, the exceptional. How does this distinctly Freudian (and indeed Hegelian) theoretical mode of analysis play out in Nast’s interpretations? For Nast, there are three interrelated singular events. First, thousands of black men were not only lynched, they were also castrated. Second, many lynchings were not clandestine or secret, but rather public celebrations consisting of hundreds even thousands of white family members. Third, numerous lynchings of black men were frequently libidinized insofar as they were typically the direct response to the alleged rape of a white woman. For Nast, the singularities of the excessive or seemingly useless act of castrating a dead body, the proximity of the family unit to the scene of lynching, and the frequency of the alleged rape of a white woman can provide clues to explain the senseless or irrational violence of racism.

The second psychoanalytic idea that underpins Nast’s complex, yet extremely rewarding paper concerns the theoretical premise that it is a mistake to conflate cause and realization. For Nast, the motives and causes of racist violence such as lynching are not and cannot be entirely caught up in the social. Rather, such violence emerges precisely because there are limits to the social: not everything can be socially articulated or collectively put into words and acknowledged. Furthermore, as Nast argues (following Freud), the constitution and ostensibly normal functioning of sociospatial relations actually requires certain things to be rendered unspeakable or unthinkable, that is, sociability requires the repression of specific dangers and threats. In Nast’s paper, in the context of societies dominated by racist white Oedipal (father, mother, and son) families, the ‘repressed bestial being’ that is made ‘legitimately secret’ is an incestuous wish fulfillment between the mother and the son. In Nast’s ‘mappings’ or case studies, incest is racially encoded as blackness and symbolically aligned with young black males or ‘boys’. Young black males, then, are unconsciously produced as threats toward white women qua mothers and thus become ‘repositories’ of colonial and racist violence.

From a Freudian-psychoanalytic perspective, social relations are ultimately compromise formations that are borne out of, require, ‘and’ continually fail to gentrify the repression of an underlying and antagonistic trauma. From a psychoanalytic perspective, social and cultural realities are not simply contingent and constructed; they are also extremely volatile and vulnerable to the dictates of aggression. In theorizing this relationship between social space and traumatic fissuring, several geographers have drawn on Freud’s notion of the uncanny. For example, Rob Wilton has examined the uncanny effects of an HIV/AIDS hospice in Los Angeles’s suburban landscapes and Derek Hook has examined the ideological roles and uncanniness of monuments in Pretoria, South Africa. Notably, Laura Cameron has examined the overlaps between Freud’s theories and Arthur G. Tansley’s work on plant ecology. In addition, Mary Thomas has considered Freud’s notion of the unconscious to rethink qualitative methodology in human geography using the example of narrative data analysis.

Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real Spaces

Jacques Lacan is widely cited as the most significant psychoanalytic theorist since Freud. It is difficult to underestimate the influence of Lacanian theory in the humanities, cultural studies, gender and sexuality studies, and increasingly, via the extensive work of Slavoj Žižek (1949–), the social sciences. Lacan’s thinking stretches over five decades and is extremely complex. Lacanian theory is united by the theory of the ‘registers’. During the 1970s, Lacan examined knots from the point of view of their topological properties. Lacan devoted much theoretical attention toward the Borromean knot which is composed of three interlocking and constitutive rings. For Lacan, the Borromean knot aptly illustrates the structural interdependence of three registers that compose psychical life: the Imaginary, Real, and Symbolic. Lacan theorized these three registers not as discrete
entities but rather, as the musical connotation suggests, in terms of proximate relations of discordance and harmony. What do these registers mean? Very briefly, the Imaginary (the focus of Lacan’s work in the late 1930s and 1940s) refers to dual or binary relations that do not involve the imagination per se, but rather concern the Ego and its illusions of totality, liability to fragmentation and lures, narcissism, rivalry, and aggressiveness. The Symbolic (the focus of Lacan’s work in the 1950s and early 1960s) is a noun that primarily refers to language, cultural rules and conventions, exchange, measurement, lack, death, and the unconscious. The Symbolic also shields people from the disturbances and chimerical effects of the Real. The Real (the focus of Lacan’s work in the late 1960s and 1970s) is probably the most misunderstood and complex of Lacan’s registers. In a nutshell, the Real takes place through sublime, contingent, and terrifying phenomena. Crucially, we cannot directly confront, obtain, or grasp the Real. Rather, the Real involves near misses or barely elided encounters that subsist outside, disturb within, and are unassailable to Symbolic signification and Imaginary wholeness. Spatially, the Real concerns phenomena that are, on the one hand, anamorphic quai forever elusive limits and, on the other hand, obdurate quai disturbances that are always cropping up and tripping up things. For example, if the discursive constructions of race concern the Symbolic and racial identification concerns the Imaginary, then racism concerns the Real. Interestingly, for Steve Pile, Lacan’s three registers can be roughly mapped onto and through Henri Lefebvre’s spatial triad of ‘lived space’ (or, representational spaces), ‘conceived space’ (representations of space), and ‘perceived space’ (spatial practices).

Lacan’s theory of the three registers, as well as the works of Freud and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), inform much of the theories, or better still the écriture feminine (feminine writing) of three influential French feminists: Luce Irigaray (1930–), Hélène Cixous (1937–), and Julia Kristeva (1941–). Numerous feminist geographers have drawn on the writings of Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva to examine the patriarchal biases that infuse cultural practices, knowledge, representations, as well as corporeal and visual spaces. For example, Gillian Rose has mainly drawn on Irigaray’s understanding of the Imaginary to question masculinist demarcations between ‘real’ and ‘nonreal’ spaces. Jenny Robinson has used Kristeva’s concepts of the Symbolic, abjection, and the semiotic to emphasize the ineluctable vulnerabilities and failures of sociocultural borders and distinctions. Given that Lacan was highly and openly skeptical of feminism, many geographers have questioned the value and viability of Lacanian psychoanalysis. And yet, feminist geographers such as Virginia Blum, Heidi Nast, and Liz Bondi have acknowledged the relevance and potential of Lacan’s theories to challenge heteropatriarchy and spatial oppression. One way this potential is being realized is through Lacan’s oft-misunderstood category of the Real. Paul Kingsbury, for example, has drawn on Žižek’s political readings of Lacan’s category of jouissance that basically means an antagonistic and excessive libidinal charge in order to theorize the links between the social bonds of exploitation and domination in the context of tourism and consumption. In so doing, Kingsbury’s work builds on Felicity Callard’s argument that psychoanalysis is often theoretically ‘tamed’ in geography.

Other notable Lacanian approaches in human geography include Robert Wilton’s work on physical disability, Ben Page and Jon Goss’s research on the politics of production and commodification, and Stephen Healy’s examination of the ethics and social fantasies that reside in informal caregiving and healthcare delivery in the US.

Boundaries of Selves and Others

The third main theoretical approach in psychoanalytic geography is informed by object relations theory. Briefly, proponents of object relations such as Melanie Klein (1882–1960), Michael Balint (1896–1970), and British psychoanalysts, including Donald W. Winnicott (1896–1971), Ronald Fairbairn (1889–1964), and Harry Guntrip (1901–75) emphasize how (following Freud’s notions of ‘object’ and ‘object relation’) the psyche’s interactive and intersubjective world is made by and through relationships ‘and’ objects. From this perspective, ‘relations’ are first and foremost ‘inter’relationships wherein the psyche not only constitutes its objects, but is also constituted by, composed of, and relates to itself through objects. ‘Object’ refers to how something, typically a person, body parts, and somatic sensations, or a character role can become the medium, procurer, and/or locus of the drive.

According to object relations theory, infants begin to develop a sense of self through a growing awareness about how their bodies are separate from their mother’s or primary caretaker’s body. As boundaries between the infant’s self and the external world become increasingly demarcated, the infant realizes the extent of its vulnerability. The child’s subsequent experiences of loss, separation, abandonment, desire, fear of dissolution, and anger produce an ambivalent response to the mother. When the mother provides food, warmth, love, and comfort, she is a ‘good’ object. However, if the mother leaves the child on her or his own and does not provide gratification when demanded, she becomes a ‘bad’ object. In this way, the mother is loved for providing love and hated for the withdrawal of love. The child is faced with a dilemma because it cannot comfortably hate or express anger because it fears punishment and thus the child must control these emotions. This ambivalence pervades the child’s development and structures its responses to
the qualities its mother once provided (loss, love, comfort, etc.) later in life.

David Sibley’s work, informed by object relations theory, has influenced a great deal of social and cultural geography. Asserting that the delimitation of communities and social groups involves the same difficulties as constituting oneself and others, Sibley examines how dominant social groups shore up their power by enforcing boundaries that secure dominant groups’ sense of purity and sameness through the exclusion and marginalization of other groups that are typically codified in terms of impurity, defilement, and shame. Sibley shows us the extent to which these psychosocial processes rely heavily on modern media representations of threats and vulnerability that are configured along axes such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and age. Sibley elaborates how these representations such as newspaper photographs labeling gypsies as ‘criminal types’ are a crucial element in the social construction of ‘good selves’ and ‘bad others’.

Stuart Aitken and Thomas Herman have drawn on two object relations concepts. The first, ‘potential space’ or ‘transitional space’, is a space through which meditative, fluid, transitional, and exploratory demarcations of Self and Other (e.g., person, people, landscape, object, etc.) take place during infancy. Such a space is replete with the interconnective capabilities of ‘objects’. The second concept is the ‘transitional object’ which typically includes the breast, food, a toy, and blanket. Such transitional objects are mediators and travelers between permeable inner and outer psychical worlds which, through acts of ‘playing’ (inverted commas in original), help to establish a potential space. According to Aitken and Herman, these two concepts (especially potential spaces) provide useful and ‘refreshing’ ways, to understand how in Western contexts children develop and form identities through acts of play that disrupt and resist adults’ masculinist and patriarchal imperatives of control, order, and reason. Another important example of object relations theory in human geography is Amanda Bingley’s development of a Winnicottian methodology that enhances our access to unconscious relations between the Self and landscape.

Also engaging with landscape via object relations theory is Robert Wilton. Drawing on Kristeva’s concept of abjection, Wilton examines the social anxieties that surround the planned construction of a small AIDS hospice in a Los Angeles neighborhood. Wilton theoretically and empirically shows us how people’s anxieties and intolerance of someone and/or something that is different are bound up with fragile yet intransigent psychosocial spatial relations of embodiment, defilement, and purification. A significant psychosocial process here is projection wherein people expel and find in other persons and objects disturbing psychic material. Wilton’s work is important because it demonstrates the explanatory power of psychoanalytic theory to show why people experience anxiety vis-à-vis social differences and how they contribute to the reproduction of social and spatial divisions.

**Concluding Remarks**

Psychoanalysis typifies the convulsive beauty and liveliness of doing theory because it illustrates how theories can incite building, bashing, mongering, tailoring, spinning, bigotry, and blindness. Psychoanalytic theory is one of the most valuable and controversial theories in human geography. Psychoanalytic theory shares numerous axioms and goals with other important theoretical approaches in geography. For example, with historical materialism and Marxism, psychoanalysis not only emphasizes how modes of living are inescapably historical and social, psychoanalysis also strives – through ‘praxis’ – to ameliorate the condition of people’s lives. Alongside feminist theories, psychoanalysis brings to the fore questions about people’s gendered/sexed relations, enactments, embodiments, conflicts, confusions, and expectations. With post-structuralist theories, psychoanalysis posits that much of the happenings in the world and people’s lives take place through and because of the dynamisms, fixations, and uncertainties of language. And with non-representational theories, psychoanalysis focuses on how affect and imperceptible-yet-material forces are situated within complex sets of unfolding intersubjective relations and representations.

And yet, on numerous points that have yet to be fully explicated by geographers, as well as this small encyclopedia article, in many ways psychoanalytic geography is quite different from the above theoretical approaches in geography. How so? In a nutshell, the *zine qua non* of psychoanalytic theory is its contention that the human subject is fundamentally and forever radically split and conflicted: on the one hand, our minds are divided in terms of consciousness and the unconscious. On the other hand, our bodies are forcibly carved by the dictates of biology and language or cultural significations. Taking into account these two divisions, much of psychoanalytic theory is concerned with understanding how the world must be organized and work in ways that people can hold onto something that resembles ‘subjectivity’ and ‘reality’. Who can doubt the importance of how the geographies of these ‘things’ – subjectivity and reality – will always inform the world that we live in, as well as all our impassioned theorizations?

**See also:** Affect; Behavioral Geography; Cognitive Geography; Critical Geography; Critical Theory (After Habermas); Feminism/Feminist Geography; Human Geography; Humanism/Humanistic Geography; Interdisciplinarity; Landscape; Language and Research;
Non-Representational Theory/Non-Representational Geographies; Other/Otherness; Place; Poststructuralism/Poststructuralist Geographies; Psychoanalysis; Psychotherapy/Psychotherapeutic Geographies; Self-Other; Situationism/Situationist Geography; Subjectivity; Surrealism/Surrealist Geographies.

Further Reading


Relevant Websites

http://www.p-e-p.org/
Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing.