

# **Totem and Taboo: Freud was Right!**

## **Lecture Series**

### **Introduction:**

## **The Four Major Controversies and the Unfolding Debate**

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Tampa, Florida

[www.thecjc.org](http://www.thecjc.org)

PDF updated 06-23-2018

### **Freud's Anthropological Theory**

In a previous series of three lectures entitled "Freud's Anthropological Theory" I covered in detail Freud's Totem and Taboo, which was the most essential anthropological statement in his collected works. I would refer anyone who is interested in a more detailed discussion of Totem and Taboo and the relation of Freud's anthropology to his psychological concepts to those lectures on the **Carter-Jenkins Center's** website. This present lecture continues from that series and begins to address the impact of Freud's anthropology following the publication of Totem and Taboo in 1913. My emphasis here will be on the debates it stimulated between anthropology and psychoanalysis, and within psychoanalysis up to the present.

### **On the relationship between psychoanalysis and anthropology**

By mid-twentieth century it was much easier to find literature on the role of psychoanalysis in anthropology than vice versa. (Munroe 1955) It's probably true to say that *in the exchange of ideas* between the two disciplines, psychoanalysis (for most of the 20th century) had the more profound impact. Anthropology, perhaps more than any other field of science outside of psychology, was especially quick to assimilate Freud's strictly *psychological*

theories - for example, his formulations on *unconscious motivation*, *dream symbolism*, *incest motivations*, and the significance of *childhood* on adult personality; these concepts have become mainstream in anthropological discourse. But the discipline of anthropology had nearly the opposite reaction to the specifically *anthropological and evolutionary* formulations that Freud asserted in *Totem and Taboo*; it largely rejected them, and did so quite passionately. The subsequent debates between the two disciplines over Freud's anthropological theories (following the first English translation of *Totem and Taboo* in 1918) became intense and continue to this day. It is to these controversial anthropological theories of Freud's (as opposed to his psychological theories) that the title of this lecture series refers.

### **Freud's controversial conclusions**

Following the present introductory lecture, I've divided my argument on behalf of Freud's anthropology into four parts, each of which will be covered in a separate lecture. These include:

Lecture 1: On the universality of the Oedipus complex.

Lecture 2: On Freud's theory of the 'primal horde'.

Lecture 3: On Freud's adherence to Lamarckian factors in evolution.

Lecture 4: On Freud's cultural evolutionary approach

For the remainder of this Introduction I want to anticipate briefly in summary fashion the ground I'll cover in each of the next four lectures and provide some context for them on the history of the debates over the last hundred years since Freud published *Totem and Taboo* in 1913.

### **Summary of lecture 1: On the universality of the Oedipus complex**

The Oedipus complex, just as Freud formulated it, is *universal across cultures*. It is largely a function of human biology and infant dependency, and, contrary to popular accusations of *ethnocentrism*, it has nothing special to do with Western patriarchal or patrilineal societies. Unfortunately, even as many within anthropology have come to recognize the validity

of Freud's claim, it has been increasingly minimized, if not attacked, within psychoanalysis. Contemporary psychoanalysis minimizes the concept of a universal Oedipus complex at the expense of its own legitimacy and at the expense of its clinical effectiveness.

What does all this mean? For the purposes of this this brief summary I will refer mainly to the heterosexual, or 'positive', dimension of the *male* Oedipus complex, as this was Freud's earliest formulation and was his primary focus in Totem and Taboo.

### **Freud's discovery**

Freud discovered the Oedipus complex long before he wrote Totem and Taboo. It began to take shape during his self-analysis (between 1895 and 1900) and he referred to the concept already in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). However, it was in Totem and Taboo that Freud first defined the Oedipus complex as a universal feature of childhood *in the fullest anthropological terms*. With this concept Freud defined the specifically *triangular* and *ambivalent* conflicts associated with sexual longing and rivalrous hate that emerge in the feelings of a three-to-five year old child toward its parents - the most intense of which, for the boy, are genitally-felt 'phallic' desire and fantasies for the mothering figure (most often the biological mother in *all* cultures), and corresponding murderous rivalry and jealous self-comparisons in relation to the mother's sexual partner (again, most often the biological father in *all* cultures). The emergence of these feelings in early childhood trigger intense anxieties and distortions in the boy's perceptions of himself and the parents, due mainly to a belief in the *omnipotence of wishes* and a tendency to project the oedipal fantasies onto the parents. Guilt and fear of *castration* follow from the boy's expectation of retaliation from the father in the form of a punishing attack on the part of his body most associated with the unacceptable (but age-typical) impulses that intensify at this stage of psychosexual development. Freud's theory posited that the successful *resolution of the Oedipus complex* ushers in the calmer stage of *latency*, partially determined by inherited factors (usually around the age of six), and follows the boy's (internalizing) identification with the father's (society's) values. The boy's identification with his father is accompanied by a relinquishment of the specifically oedipal

aims and is facilitated by the *greater* narcissistic need to preserve his masculinity (the penis) – greater, that is, than his desire to preserve the specifically oedipal attachments to the mother. The internalization of the father’s (mother’s and society’s) standards in the course of a successful *resolution* of the Oedipus complex gives birth to the *superego* (conscience) which, for this reason, Freud described as *heir to the Oedipus complex*.

To say that the Oedipus complex is universal across cultures does *not* mean that specific cultural and environmental circumstances are not influential determinants in *how* the Oedipus complex is manifested. In fact, Freud’s own theory demands that these play a central role. What it *does* mean is that in all cultures the Oedipus complex operates as a central organizing determinant not only for child development but also for the establishment of social structures (ex., kinship rules, residence patterns) and cultural institutions (ex., religious beliefs, myths, rites of passage). *All organized societies must have evolved institutionalized solutions for resolving the demands posed by the dynamic conflicts inherent in the Oedipus complex*. In the full presentation of Part 1 on the history of debates over the universality of the Oedipus complex, I will describe the evidence from anthropology since Freud published Totem and Taboo to support his thesis. As Melford Spiro (1982) concluded in his landmark anthropological analysis, *Oedipus in the Trobriands*, “...the only appropriate response to the question, ‘Is the Oedipus complex universal?’ is ‘How could it possibly not be?’” (p. 162)

## **Summary of lecture 2: On Freud’s theory of the ‘primal horde’**

When assimilated to updated terminology and scientific evidence, Freud’s controversial theory of the *primal horde* is a surprisingly accurate depiction of early human cultural evolution and some of the critical functions of cultural institutions, in general. In his account Freud reconstructed the traumatic events leading to the creation of the first human society out of its earlier, proto-human social organization, the “primal horde”. Specifically, he described the primal “deed”, the murder of the tyrannical leader or “*father*” of the primal horde by the unified band of junior males (“*brothers*” of the horde) in order to gain sexual access to the females, whom the leader had violently monopolized. *This account turns out to be remarkably*

*consistent with the latest scientific evidence.* It also remains relevant to contemporary attempts to understand the nature of violence in human society.

In this second lecture, I rely heavily on the recent reappraisal of Freud's thesis by anthropologist-psychoanalyst Robert Paul (2010) entitled "Yes, the Primal Crime Did Take Place: A Further Defense of Freud's Totem and Taboo". Paul assimilates Freud's *primal horde* theory to recent evidence on primate social structures and hominid evolution. He demonstrates persuasively "...that Freud's idea of the 'primal father' can without much difficulty be assimilated to the concept of the 'alpha male' at the apex of a status hierarchy such as that found among our closest relatives, the chimpanzees, that probably characterized the last common ancestor of the three African great apes and the hominin line". (p. 232) In the conclusion, Paul describes the more favorable climate in contemporary anthropology for integrating sociocultural, biological and psychological theory and recommends that Freud's thesis in Totem and Taboo, can "...serve as a basis for understanding both the foundational myths of our own culture, as well as the evolution of human society more generally." (p. 247)

### **Summary of lecture 3: On Freud's adherence to Lamarckian factors in evolution.**

Perhaps most controversial, recent advances in genetics and molecular biology may yet prove that Freud was correct in his insistence that human adaptive characteristics and variations *acquired in the course of individual development* can in some manner be inherited by an individual's offspring in subsequent generations. In other words, it is likely that some form of *Lamarckian* factor has operated in human evolution and remains a necessary part of a comprehensive theory of evolutionary adaptation.

Freud was attacked as being wildly out of touch with modern genetics in his unshakable confidence that in some manner Jean Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) had been correct in his theory on the evolutionary role of *acquired characteristics*. Even Freud's closest associates, such as Ernest Jones, attempted to talk him out of this when the opposing 'central dogma' of modern genetic theory began to coalesce during the 1930's and 1940's. Referred to as the *modern synthesis* (because it synthesized the rediscovered *Mendelian* genetics with Darwin's

theories), the accepted model is often confused simply with Darwin's own theory of 'natural selection'. In fact, the modern synthesis is called "Neo-Darwinian", partially because it threw out all remnants of Lamarck's theory that even Darwin had considered to be valid. Currently, there is ample reason to believe that the modern synthesis that has dominated evolutionary theory for much of the last century, "...no longer offers a satisfactory theoretical framework for evolutionary biology." (Jablonka and Lamb, 2008, p.389) Many of the most prominent researchers in genetics and molecular biology are calling for a rethinking of the modern genetic model and a reconsideration of some aspects of Lamarckism for human evolution. To give just one example of this for the moment, here's what the senior investigator of the Evolutionary Genomics Research Group at the *National Center for Biotechnology Information* (Koonin and Wolf, 2009) recently concluded: "Both Darwinian and Lamarckian modalities of evolution appear to be important, and reflect different aspects of the interaction between populations and the environment." It is easy now to find many such examples of mainstream scientists making this argument.

In the presentation on Freud's Lamarckism, I rely most heavily on the writings of the geneticist Eva Jablonka and her co-authors who have been among the leaders in this theoretical shift. Jablonka is most well-known for her research in *epigenetics*. As the prefix *epi-* (meaning 'above') suggests, *epigenetics* refers to the biological mechanisms in all living organisms that are 'above' the specific DNA sequences in chromosomes in the sense that they function as a *regulatory system* in relation to genes and inheritance. There is now an abundance of evidence to show that alterations in epigenetic regulatory mechanisms that are *acquired* in the course of an individual's development (both during gestation and following birth) can be biologically inherited by that individual's offspring. It is clear, as Jablonka and Lamb (2008) put it, that,

[Expressed variations in an organism] that are independent of variations in DNA sequence...and...that are guided by epigenetic control systems, are important sources of hereditary variation, and hence can contribute to evolutionary changes. Furthermore, under certain conditions, the mechanisms underlying epigenetic inheritance can also lead

to saltational [atypical and sudden] changes that reorganize the epigenome [the characteristic epigenetic features of a given species]. These discoveries are clearly incompatible with the tenets of the Modern Synthesis, which denied any significant role for Lamarckian and saltational processes. (p. 389)

Particularly interesting and relevant to Totem and Taboo are findings by Jablonka and others that potentially adaptive species variations due to epigenetic factors *increase during conditions of stress*; in other words, a likely causal relation exists between stress (trauma) and an increase in variations available for evolutionary adaptations due to non-DNA Lamarckian-like epigenetic mechanisms. In the third lecture I will emphasize, in connection with these findings, the fact that Freud's *primal theory* in Totem and Taboo is a *trauma theory* (specifically, the *transgenerational transmission of trauma*) spelled out in the context of the primal horde. In this context, Freud's formulations anticipated contemporary findings for the central role of stress on the generation of epigenetic variations. As we will see, Freud was also explicit that his account depicted an evolutionary *epoch* when existing social structures ceased to be adequate for the survival of our proto-human ancestors. One of the recurring oversimplifications of Totem and Taboo has been that Freud conceived of the primal "deed" as a single event; yet an honest reading reveals his account to be a *schematic representation* of an evolutionary *epoch* of thousands of years and many generations.

In light of these considerations, I will address in the third lecture the curiously under-appreciated fact that Freud's primal horde theory provides an account of adaptation to *multiple types of traumatic events*. Beyond, of course, the *father's* own trauma while being murdered, we would have to include all the pre-"deed" trauma associated with violence, castration, and sexual assault entailed in the primal dominance system of male competition for sexual access to the women of the horde. We would include the effects on members of the horde sustained during the actual overcoming, killing and eating of the primal father; the traumatic nature of these events would have been assured (at the very least) by the *loving* aspect of the horde's ambivalent relation to the murdered leader. Also included would be the traumatic passive witnessing of any of the events just mentioned by helpless bystanders, women and children,

especially those most emotionally attached to the victims. Finally, we would have to include trauma sustained in the chaotic aftermath of the murder of the leader who, despite his tyranny, had provided necessary protection from external dangers, had functioned as the most important structural figure for group stability, and whose own dominance in the hierarchical social structure and monopoly of females rendered competitive aggression among the junior males relatively unnecessary.

I will propose that in light of these considerations, and given the fact that Freud's account *is simultaneously a theory of evolutionary adaptation and a theory of trauma*, findings by Jablonka and others on the special causal role of *stress* (trauma) in the generation of epigenetic variations available for selection in evolution become especially relevant to a reconsideration of Freud's primal theory. Jablonka and Lamb (2008) state:

What has been revealed in the last few decades is that the origin of many genetic variations, especially **under conditions of stress**, is not random, is often predictable, and it can result in [atypical and sudden] changes .....The genome-wide changes are **driven by the epigenetic control mechanisms** that under normal environmental conditions operate in a more limited and specific manner. (p. 393; bold type added)

It must be reemphasized here – and probably cannot be stressed enough - that Freud's primal theory stands on its own quite apart from any evidence for Lamarckian mechanisms in evolution. Again, contrary to a hundred years of such claims, the essential thesis of Totem and Taboo neither stands nor falls on the *biological* inheritance of traits acquired in the course of individual development, as I hope to show in Lecture 3. New findings for Lamarckian factors in evolution that are *consistent* with Freud's original thesis only strengthen its credibility, but are not necessary. Still, this is no small matter. The fascinating evidence for a connection between stress and available variations is perfectly consistent with Freud's brilliant but under-emphasized theoretical unification in Totem and Taboo of *evolutionary theory* and *trauma theory*. New evidence that epigenetic factors *especially during periods of stress (trauma)* may

provide a mechanism for the production of “*non-random*”, “*sudden*”, “*atypical*”, and even “*predictable*” variation is, to say the least, a compelling reason to reconsider Freud’s theory.

#### **Summary of lecture 4: On Freud’s cultural evolutionary approach**

Finally, in the last Part 4 presentation, I’ll make the case for the validity of Freud’s use of 19th Century *cultural evolutionary* concepts. His synthesis of clinical observations and ethnographic findings, using a general *comparative method*, in order to reconstruct *stages* in human cultural evolution, was not only justified but remains so in spite of the widely accepted critiques. Many of the once-disparaged concepts that Freud employed in common with the earlier evolutionary anthropologists remain valid today when properly integrated with contemporary approaches. This would include Freud’s use of E. B. Tylor’s ‘doctrine’ of psychological and cultural *survivals* (i.e., outdated remnants of archaic *stages* in social/cultural evolution), the general concept of *human nature*, and the corollary concepts of *cross-cultural universals* and ‘*psychic unity*’ (the similarity of the human mind across cultures).

The earliest 20<sup>th</sup> century critics of cultural evolutionism, such as modern American anthropology founder, Franz Boas, still retained, along with Freud, something of a conventional scientific philosophy: generally speaking they upheld the necessity of formulating general principles or ‘laws’ that could be tested against further observation and applied cross-culturally. This all began to change quite rapidly. In American anthropology, where evolutionary theory and the idea of ‘psychic unity’ declined quickly, ever more radical versions of *cultural determinism* and *cultural relativism* were put forward to argue that cultures not only differed, but differed *radically*. The more radical expressions of this stance allowed for no scientific or generalizable *standards* of measurement, comparison, or understanding. In other words, ‘*culture*’ can’t be understood scientifically; only *particular cultures* can, and each must be studied and understood *only* in terms of its own culturally-relative frame of reference. Here’s Ruth Benedict’s (1934/1959) statement of this, made as early as 1934 in *Patterns of Culture*, one of the most popular books in the history of anthropology:

[Cultures] differ from one another not only because one trait is present here and absent there, and because another trait is found in two regions in two different forms. They differ still more because they are oriented as wholes in different directions. They are travelling along different roads in pursuit of different ends, and these ends and these means in one society cannot be judged in terms of those of another society, because essentially they are incommensurable. (p.223)

By the 1950's this *relativist* position had been "...adopted by the psychoanalysts Fromm and Horney, as well as by the school 'culture and personality' led by Kardiner." (Smadja 2011, p.994) Unfortunately, psychoanalysis is still quite entrenched in the more radical versions of this, in spite of the fact that already by mid-century anthropology had begun to see its flaws; and the problems with the more radical version of cultural relativism involved some of the most relevant concerns not only for psychoanalysis, but for psychology and theories of mental health, in general. As an example, by the early 1960's Milton Singer (1961) from the University of Chicago would already report: "The collection of psychiatric data from other cultures is still far from adequate, but what there is has not yet revealed startling differences in abnormal human tendencies." (p. 25)

Now, having briefly anticipated the main themes in the following lectures, I'd like to provide some brief context regarding the history and quality of the debates over these four most controversial aspects of Freud's anthropology.

### **On the irony in the major critiques**

Having briefly anticipated the main themes in the following lectures, I'd like to provide some brief context regarding the history and quality of the debates over these four most controversial aspects of Freud's anthropology. In my defense of Freud's anthropology, I hope to illustrate a recurring *irony* that has run throughout the entire history of the debates between psychoanalysis and anthropology over Freud's conclusions. As we saw simply from Milton Singer's observation in the last summary of Part 4, some of the most compelling evidence for

Freud's theories *has come precisely from those who have been his most ardent critics*. In my reading of the literature this has occurred in three ways. First, as in the fog of war, it has come in the form of cross-fire, aimed initially at Freud, but then hitting other critics on the opposite side of an *all-or-nothing* argument being directed at Freud. Second, it has occurred when the ethnographic data marshalled against Freud unwittingly undermined the critic's own positions and reinforced Freud's theory. And, third, it has come in the form of advances in research and theory in anthropology and other disciplines that have had some stake in the questions Freud addressed in *Totem and Taboo*. This last reason is particularly true for anthropology, which, if it attacked Freud's theories the most, it also engaged with them more than any other discipline and took the greatest interest in putting them to the test.

### **On the unique quality of Freud's anthropological hypotheses**

It's interesting to consider that Freud's anthropological theories are unique in his collected writings, in that he never altered them once they were formulated in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and later. In these theories on evolution, culture and society, there was nothing comparable to the revisions that he never stopped making in his better-known *psychological* theories, such as his 'abandonment' of the *seduction theory* or his redefinition of the *dual instincts* (as *Eros* and *Thanatos*). In fact, Freud only became more firm in his anthropological conclusions once he asserted them, even depending on them for the working out of his other psychological and metapsychological concepts. Only a year after writing *Totem and Taboo*, for example, Freud (1914) was already applying the concepts of archaic '*survivals*' and magic to his new theory on narcissism. In his anthropological theory, the murder of the "primal father" and the origins of totemism become the evolutionary *prototype* of the *resolution of the Oedipus complex* for individual development and these formulations will show up in his elaboration of the *id*, *ego*, and *superego* in his *structural theory* (1923). In his last major work, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), he re-applied the primal horde theory to a history of the Israelites, the murder of Moses and the founding of Judaism.

This confidence that Freud maintained in his anthropological conclusions, once he first published them, is particularly interesting given the fact that by his own account they were

among the most *speculative* of all his published works. Freud (1987) did venture even bolder evolutionary speculations, in which he correlated the neurotic and psychotic disorders with corresponding *stages* in human evolution; but he considered these “hardly suitable for public expression”. (p. 79) For this reason, they were only discovered after his death and published in 1987 as *A Phylogenetic Fantasy: Overview of the Transference Neuroses*. In any case, they were never a focus of the debates that concern us here.

### **On revisions to Freud’s Anthropology**

As we’ll see in the remaining lectures, revisions were made to Freud’s anthropology, but these came from others and mostly involved watered-down versions that threw out Freud’s theory of its evolutionary focus. The most well-known of these were the Neo-Freudian integrations, such as Abram Kardiner’s, with the “culture and personality” theorists in anthropology. Integrations by others that remained true to the evolutionary project that Freud initiated in *Totem and Taboo* were rare, however. Exceptions can be found in the writing of Freud’s earlier followers, such as Otto Rank’s *The Incest Theme in Myth and Literature* (1912/1991) and Sandor Ferenczi’s *Thalassa: a Theory of Genitality* (1924). Ferenczi’s work was perhaps the boldest in taking up Freud’s evolutionary project but it was all but ignored by anthropology, if not also by most psychoanalysts. There also was the faithful ‘*ontogenetic*’ (developmental) approach worked out by Geza Roheim (1950) who was the first true psychoanalyst-anthropologist. His application of Freud’s *psychosexual stages* to the study of ritual practices and beliefs in different cultures was brilliant and extensive, but for non-analytically trained anthropologists it remained inaccessible for the most part. In any case, Roheim himself rejected Freud’s Lamarckian assertion that adaptive characteristics acquired during development could be inherited. And Hartmann, Kris and Loewenstein (1951), representing American *ego psychology*, would concur in their tribute to Roheim that, “...we do not find it necessary to stress as much as [Freud] the hereditary elements in the formation of the Oedipus complex”. (p. 16) They agreed with Roheim that “many features that suggested to Freud a phylogenetic [evolutionary] explanation can be accounted for by ontogenetic [developmental] factors.” (ibid) In other words, by the 1950’s Freud’s essential evolutionary

conclusions in *Totem and Taboo* had *already become somewhat taboo even in mainstream psychoanalysis*.

### **On reappraisals and new evidence in favor of Freud's anthropology**

On the other hand, in spite of downplaying Freud's hereditary argument, Hartmann, Kris, and Loewenstein were nonetheless careful to point out the remarkable fact that "*strictly speaking* [Freud's Lamarckian assumptions] were not invalidated" by modern biological studies. (p. 13) I consider this to be a remarkably perceptive observation made at that time. As we'll see in the fourth lecture, recent evidence from biology and genetics support it.

In anthropology, renewed interest in evolutionary theories began to take place around the 1950s and 60's, and signs of a revival of *Totem and Taboo* came increasingly in the 1970's and 80's. Reappraisals like Paul's (1976) first essay on the subject, "Did the Primal Crime Take Place?", Fox's (1980) *The Red Lamp of Incest* and Spiro's (1982) *Oedipus in the Trobriands* resurrected Freud's anthropology for legitimate scholarly attention. In particular, Spiro's analysis demolished Bronislaw Malinowski's (1927/1937) long-standing case against the universal Oedipus complex made in *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*. For fifty years Malinowski's critique had gone unchallenged within anthropology. For fifty years! And even from psychoanalytic psychiatry, Edwin Wallace's brilliant *Freud and Anthropology: a History and Reappraisal* (1983) offered a far more nuanced assessment of Freud's anthropology as well as of previous critiques. An indication that this trend *within anthropology* has continued into the present can be seen in the title of Paul's second reappraisal, "Yes, the Primal Crime Did Take Place: A Further Defense of Freud's Totem and Taboo" (2010). Forty years have passed since Paul wrote "Did the Primal Scene Take Place?" and he is even more convinced today about the validity of Freud's thesis.

In the next four parts of this lecture series, I'll return frequently to the writings of both Paul and Spiro, as I believe that they've been particularly helpful *from the side of anthropology* in bringing to light the value of Freud's own anthropological theory in relation to contemporary research. We'll proceed in the next Lecture 1 with a more thorough examination of the debates over the universality of the Oedipus complex and my argument on behalf of Freud's claim.

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