THE SOCIALIZATION OF THE BODY'S PLEASURES[1]

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Dana Breen (ed), *The Gender Conundrum: Contemporary Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Femininity and Masculinity*, Routledge, London 1993; £16.99 paper.

Across what John Forrester describes as the semi-permeable membrane that constitutes the boundaries of analytic practice[2] comes a series of volumes published in association with the Institute of Psychoanalysis and designed to 'facilitate a greater understanding of what psychoanalysis is really about and to provide a forum for increasing mutual understanding' between psychoanalysis and other disciplines. The eighteenth volume in the series is Dana Breen's edited collection on what she calls 'the gender conundrum', a conundrum, she argues, because an inherent tension between ineluctable biological destiny and psychological construction lies at the heart of the matter. Thus what others might take to be a contradiction between two theoretical positions in psychoanalysis – epitomized by the Freud-Jones debate – re-emerges as a contradiction in the very subject matter itself.

Such a move, of course, is not without precedent, both in this volume and elsewhere. Most memorably, Jean Laplanche argued in *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, that there were two conceptions of the ego within Freudian theory, one of the ego as a limited agency or organ, and one of the ego as the projection or metaphor of the body's surface, a metaphor within which various perceptual systems had a role to play. Both conceptions, he argued, needed to be retained, even if one, that of the ego as organ, had to be conceived of as imaginary or delusory. This delusion, however, 'is not simply that of the advocates of "ego psychology", but of *the ego itself*'.[3] Laplanche, in other words, theorizes a link between these two apparently contradictory models of the ego, in which one of them is a necessary error, thus resolving the epistemological conflict.

Breen, however, makes no such argument, nor would we expect her to in the brief space of an introduction. The disjunction between biology and psychology is greatest, she suggests, in relation to women, and the debate on female sexuality therefore comes to embody that tension. The answer is not to seek to assert the correctness of one or other side of the Freud-Jones debate, but to make positive use of the tension and duality. The aim of this volume would be to contribute to a dialogue across the cultural and discursive barriers between the empirical, developmental and more biological Anglo-Saxon tradition and the more philosophical, theoretical and inter-disciplinary French tradition, and their respective conceptual commitments.

For Breen, then, the differences are not primarily a matter of theoretical commitment; they are, as she puts it, in the nature of the beast. Those essays in

1. This phrase comes from Thomas Laqueur's discussion of Freud in his excellent book *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1990.

2. John Forrester, 'Psychoanalysis: Telepathy, Gossip and/or Science?' J. Donald (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory: Thresholds*, Macmillan, Basingstoke 1991, pp169-87.

3. Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. with an introduction by J. Mehlman, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1976, p82, my emphasis.

the collection in which she sees a way forward are those by Braunschweig and Fain (1971), Montrelay (1978) and Gibeault (1988) in which either a duality is shown to exist within femininity (Braunschweig and Fain and Montrelay) or two modes of thinking are said to coexist (Gibeault). In the majority of the essays here, however, the differences in premises are not taken on board, merely worked around. But the essays are also, for the most part, written in a psychoanalytic world in which Lacan has never had an existence, Breen's extensive discussion of Lacan notwithstanding. Only in the essay by Montrelay (previously published in *m/f* number 1), does Lacan really put in an appearance, and the Freud-Jones debate appear theoretically problematic and potentially conflictual, as indeed Freud himself represented it:

> I object to all of you (Horney, Jones, Rado, etc,) to the extent that you do not distinguish more clearly and cleanly between what is psychic and what is biological, that you try to establish a neat parallelism between the two and that you, motivated by such intent, unthinkingly construe psychic facts which are unprovable and that you, in the process of doing so, must declare as reactive or regressive much that without doubt is primary. Of course these reproaches must remain obscure. In addition, I would like to emphasize that we must keep psychoanalysis separate from biology just as we have kept it separate from anatomy and physiology...
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> (Freud, letter to Carl Müller-Braunschweig, 1935)

Montrelay, like Breen herself, but with much greater theoretical elaboration, displaces the conflict and finds it within female sexuality itself. The basis of her argument is to be found in investigations conducted by Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel and other analysts (including Maria Torok and Joyce McDougall), and published in 1964 as *Recherches psychoanalytiques sur la sexualité féminine*. In the *Recherches*, she argues, the conflict is not so much resolved as transcended: the contradiction is essentially a play of forces which structures the feminine unconscious itself. Whilst the *Recherches* group maintain the Freudian view that desire is only ever a construct and not a biological given, it simultaneously takes up the central point of the English school by arguing that the woman remains more dependent upon the drives than the man and, thereby, on a set of bodily schemas in which these desires are intricated. This she refers to as the *concentricity* of female sexuality.

If I understand her correctly, a number of processes maintain femininity outside repression and, hence, outside the process of representation itself, in a state of nature. These processes are heterogeneous: social, in the form of an absence of prohibitions of the kind that are directed at the boy, which itself derives from the anatomical difference that makes the boy's sexuality more observable and himself less the master of it; instinctual, firstly in the way in which vaginal pleasure is mapped onto the oral-anal drives, drives which provide pre-existent schemas for archaic pleasures, and, secondly, in the way in which the woman relates to her own body such that she cannot differentiate it

from that which was 'the first object'. Femininity is thus genuinely enigmatic because it is unrepresentable.

In the course of a complex argument, Montrelay argues that it is possible that one of the social and cultural functions of psychoanalysis might have been to assure the symbolic representation of femininity through its repression. Concentricity would thus be fundamentally incompatible with phallocentrism and act as an obstacle to it, constituting the blind spot of the symbolic processes analysed by Freud. The notion of a duality of this kind is of course not unfamiliar from other discussions of female sexuality, but the important point here seems to me to be the way in which, differences in argumentation notwithstanding, the building blocks of Montrelay's concerns are echoed elsewhere in the collection; and I want to focus on two of these in particular in order to begin to map out what I find disturbing about some of the arguments in *The Gender Conundrum*: the way in which the body is taken as a given and frequently seen to inflect, even organize, the psychic, and the insistent role of the vagina in the argumentation. Both of these issues derive from the influence of the 'Jones' side of the debate.

In keeping with the argumentation of Jones and the English school, a number of themes recur across the collection: this sense of a duality in female sexuality, which in some respects echoes and reinforces Freud's contention that woman has two sexual organs (an issue I will come to later); the stress on the pre-oedipal, in both men and women; the valorization of the vagina as the biologically-given source of femininity; an emphasis on the negative as well as the positive oedipus complex, and what could be described as a re-inscription of the question of the phallus and penis envy in a variety of ways – as a group error erected into reality (Braunschweig and Fain), as a secondary pathological structure whose aim is defensive and related to persecutory anxiety (Eglé Laufer), as an economy of desire that overlays a more archaic or precocious femininity (Montrelay), and so on.

For example, Braunschweig and Fain, albeit in a different way to Montrelay, also see a duality in women's sexuality:

> The woman thus lives two Oedipal conflicts, one proceeding from a quasi-biological law inscribed in the destiny of being a mother, and which would tend to minimize the role of the man – the angle defended by Melanie Klein – and another conflict marked by the law of the father which contains in itself the simultaneous negation and affirmation of female sexuality, the separate valorization of the clitoris and the subordination of maternity to paternity. (p143)

In this version of the problem, what they describe as 'the phallic shadow' is projected onto the female genital organs, diminishing their original capacity for being able to give pleasure. Nevertheless, the projection of this shadow represents a universal need, which is narcissistic in essence. So the phallus, and some more primary 'quasi-biological' femininity co-exist.

Eglé Laufer, on the other hand, quoting Chasseguet-Smirgel, suggests a rediscovery of the site 'of what is most instinctual and animal to the human being' (p67), replacing what is referred to as the phallic monism of Freud with what is described, rather unpleasantly in my view, as the little girl as *receptacle*. Her article is a useful one to examine because it offers in a relatively straightforward and accessible form the two problematic elements I referred to above. They by no means represent the only concerns that I would have in relation to the theoretical approaches used in this collection, but many of these, the implications of ego-psychology and object-relations theory for example, have been extensively dealt with elsewhere.

Eglé Laufer's assumption, like that of a number of writers here, is that the little girl has a very early awareness of her body as containing an inner space and of openings in her body such as the mouth and the anus, and possibly, but most crucially, the vagina. What is pivotal in the little girl's development is the relationship that she establishes to her own body, for this affects her capacity to effect a necessary change in that relationship during the oedipus complex. Girls, she says, have a biologically-determined *relative* difficulty in maintaining a sense of their bodies as a source of pleasure and instinctual gratification.

Eglé Laufer's approach to the body is roughly speaking that of an invariant. She declares that she wants to 'take seriously events in our patient's lives as biological realities and not only as a metaphor that can have interchangeable meanings in fantasy.' (p69) What matters is the *relationship* that the girl or woman manages to establish to these realities. In this framework, it is, to use a non-psychoanalytic phrase, the emotionally dysfunctional relationships pre-oedipally and oedipally that prevent the girl forming a particular type of relationship to her body and having the 'subsequent ability to form a relationship to her own *sexual* body after puberty.' (p80) Although the actual experiences of infancy may not be able to be established, it is evident that it is they that shape the child's relationship to the body, within a set of possible alternatives. Thus Eglé Laufer's patient Mary's suicide attempt, and her disturbed relationship to her body, might have had its origins in a belief that she had had insufficient bodily care or it might have been defensive against a fear of an excessive intrusion in infancy, probably both judging by her mother's contemporary behaviour. Either way, she has been unable to make the appropriate transitions.

The role of the body is generative here rather than symptomatic, and the body and bodily experiences are the constants around which this revolves. Yet to me one of the most powerful aspects of Freud's theory, evident from the *Studies on Hysteria* onwards, is the phantasmatic character of the lived body. It is not that phantasy is missing from this or the other accounts in this collection, far from it, so much as the fact that phantasy only plays a part in *negotiating* what are deemed to be realities, and biologically given and determining realities at that. This is not to deny the existence of somatic impulses, simply to assert that the relationship between them and the psyche is not the kind described here. After all, the very conceptualization of the drive in Freud is in

terms of an *ideational representative*; the manner in which a somatic excitation is expressed in the drive as an impulse is through its attachment to thoughts, memories and images. Somatic excitation in itself does not seem to me to have a meaning. It is only in the binding to representation, representation which will subsequently be the object of repression, that acquires both meaning and aim. It is phantasy that attaches desire to sensation rather than sensation which induces desire. A number of the authors in this volume, however – and perhaps Eglé Laufer is not the most prominent in doing so – speak of bodily schemata which are unmediatedly given by biology and have a determining effect in shaping the psyche.

Eglé Laufer herself talks not in terms of the living of a particular phantasy of the body, or of a multiplicity of phantasies within which physiological sensations are mis-en-scène (after all a phantasy is an orchestrated scenario), but in terms of a coming to terms with the realities of sexual difference. The relation of the body, or more precisely, bodily sensations to phantasy, seems to me to be inverted in such an account. Rather than sexual difference being an elaborate and precarious *construct*, in which bodies and bodily sensations take on meaning, the successful negotiation of sexual difference amounts to *acceptance* of penis and vagina, the realities of sexual difference. Thus the confluence of biology with normative social situations has psychic consequences: for example, Eglé Laufer also assumes that penetration of the young woman for the first time is by a man, who attracts opprobrium for forcing her to give up her masculinity complex insofar as she is forced to acknowledge the penis. My point, however, is that whatever may be happening at the social level is no indication of what may be happening at the psychic level and, whilst this is acknowledged in *some* measure, phantasies are fundamentally in the service of that acceptance of realities: they obstruct or facilitate it. It is a slight difference but a significant one. The result, of course, will be an essentially normative account.

Peter Blos's object relations approach in his essay 'Son and Father', makes this consequence more evident. There is a clear teleological path towards heterosexuality, in which 'displacement on to object relations of the father series will endanger the son's heterosexual identity' (p63) and in which there can be 'developmental injury'. His argument is that there has been an underestimate of the significance of the boy's negative edipus complex which is, in its origins, *pre*-oedipal and dyadic in character. This dyadic father complex has, as he puts it, a nuclear role in neurosogenesis. Crucially, however – and this is the important point for our purposes – it persists into adolescence when the

> ... object libido which gave life to the negative complex is compelled and propelled by sexual maturation to undergo a transformation into a psychic structure which is sustained by narcissistic libido. (p63)

But *how*? Clearly the alleged role of biology is more declared than theorized. By means of what precise mechanism does sexual maturation *compel and propel*? This type of relentlessly normative and teleologically heterosexual account

makes one long for the analytical complexity of Freud's dissection of the Wolf-Man's mental currents – whose somewhat restricted but socially appropriate heterosexuality was overlaid on an unresolved passive homosexual desire for his father – or the circuitousness of Freud's account of the genesis of male homosexuality in identification with the mother and narcissistic desire for the *self* as object of the mother's desire. Within such psychical circumnavigations, sexual maturation is not a major player.

In some respects, approaches like these provide psychoanalytic versions of what have been described in another context as doctrines of natural difference,[4] which is perhaps why the displacement or rejection of phallic monism, which is psychical in character, automatically seems to lead to the claim of vaginal sensations and impulses. This is an evidently compensatory move given the role that biology plays in scientific discourse: something which is biological and chronologically prior can obviously be accorded primacy. But it is one thing to accept the existence of vaginal sensations, yet another to declare that such sensations generate impulses, and yet another to declare these impulses to be impulses to 'receive' and link them to 'attraction to the opposite sex' because of the morphological consonances of anatomy. In Freud's *Three Essays*, the existence of impulses in no way prescribes their mode of satisfaction or their object. This revisionism does not have to be criticized, however, on the basis of salvaging phallocentrism. It does not much matter whether phallocentrism turns out to have been mistaken or to be a transitory clinical phenomenon in the history of analysis. But what it *represents* in terms of the mobility of the libido, the libido's initially auto-erotic character, its 'bisexuality', in the sense of its *indifference* to the gender of its object, the essentially phantasmatic place of the body (within which sensations and impulses find a place), represents all that is radical in psychoanalysis.

Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, who directly addresses Freud's account of female sexuality, in what is perhaps the central section of the book on 'The Phallic Question', suggests that both boys and girls have an innate knowledge of the vagina which is subsequently repressed in the service of denying the difference between the sexes. Phallic monism represents a defensive phantasy which offers the child, boy or girl, the means of coping with the narcissistic wound entailed by the difference in the generations and the child's insufficiencies in respect of the adult it desires. This goes some way towards explaining its persistence within Freudian theory in spite of what she sees as contradictory clinical evidence. In particular she argues that Freud's acceptance of the possibility of vaginal sensations fails to recognize 'that the existence (at least unconscious) of the vagina would completely upset the theory of female sexuality, particularly in our understanding of the female Oedipus, of the girl's wish for the paternal penis and the wish to have a child, all of which would become in this respect, *primary* and fundamentally feminine.' (p107) Equally, she sees Freud as denying 'erections of the penis before puberty and *concomitant wishes for penetration* (*ibid.*, my emphasis).

To describe adult, much less infantile drives, as, of necessity, 'penetrative' or

4. R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1987, p67.

'receptive' is, it seems to me to claim too much. In what is apparently the same sexual act, or, more simply, the pursuit of erotogenic satisfaction, a very wide variety of phantasmatic possibilities could be in play. To assert that the primary infantile drives are penetrative and receptive is to put in place at the outset a cultural heterosexuality linked to the possession of particular bodily organs, even if appropriate object choice does not ensue from that heterosexuality in the vicissitudes of development.

For Horney, of course, the unpleasantness of the idea of penis envy was mitigated by her argument that penis envy and the desire for the penis were difficult to distinguish from one another because they were often closely interwoven, and attraction to the 'opposite' sex began early. For Freud, however, and rightly so in my view, heterosexuality required as much explanation as its alleged converse, and in the *Three Essays* he described the sexual instinct and the sexual object as 'merely soldered together'. Libido is masculine, it seems to me, by reference to the cultural destiny of both sexes. Whilst at one level it is an oxymoron to refer to the clitoris, that quintessentially female organ whose only purpose is sexual pleasure, as 'masculine' – whatever its shared embryological origins with the penis – at another it makes perfect sense if the social destiny of woman, especially in Freud's day, was the elevation of passive and penetrative sex and maternity as the ultimate cultural desiderata.

In some respects, the vagina occupies a paradoxical place in psychoanalytic theory. Its association with reproductive heterosexuality and what we now know to be the acknowledged anaesthesia of its superficial mucous membranes through two-thirds of its length lead to the assumption that drives associated with it must be passive and 'receptive' and to the construal of intercourse as 'penetration'. Yet the desire to find an homologous organ to the penis – which is also conveniently reproductive – leads theorists to postulate that the vagina is the anatomical locus of female sexuality. There is in effect no reason, given the physiology of intercourse, for the representation of the vagina as *the* heterosexual organ and the description of intercourse as 'penetrative' – such a metaphor being the phantasy not merely of analysands but of psychoanalysis itself.

To some extent, of course, the designation of the vagina – and, arguably, its elevation – as the quintessentially feminine organ here is all of a piece with Freud's use of pine shavings and logs. Thomas Laqueur has eloquently argued that Freud, in keeping with the cultural preoccupations of the day, was finding in penis and vagina not merely the signs of sexual difference but its very foundation. As Gillespie has argued in this volume, quoting Mary Jane Sherfey, we now know that an orgasm is an orgasm and the notion of a 'transfer of excitation' is unnecessary (p128-9). As he points out, however, it does not follow from this that the *psychological* response is uniform. Since sex certainly requires learning, there is something to be said for the view that successful heterosexual intercourse requires somewhat more skill and a deal more experience than clitoral masturbation. However, the opposition of

clitoral to vaginal orgasm and clitoris to vagina as masculine and feminine becomes more problematical. Gillespie's suggestion is that, henceforth, the terms 'vaginal orgasm' and 'clitoral orgasm' should be reserved to describe the manner in which the orgasm is *brought about*, whether through clitoral stimulation alone or thrusting movements in the vagina. This would still leave open the issue of the obstacles that stand in the way of vaginal orgasm as he redefines it, 'and here we shall find ourselves on familiar psychoanalytic ground and shall be concerned with many psychological problems, such as fear of penetration or invasion, problems of penis envy, masculine identification, and countless others.' (p128)

Whilst there are clearly differential forms of sensitivity in different portions of the female genital, and these may well acquire differential psychical significance, the notion that woman has *two* genital organs is only necessitated by the notion of the one giving up its sensitivity to the other in the interest of heterosexual intercourse. As Laqueur so elegantly puts it:

> Freud's answer, then, must be regarded as a narrative of culture in anatomical disguise. The tale of the clitoris is a parable of culture, of how the body is forged into a shape valuable to civilization despite, not because, of itself. The language of biology gives this tale its rhetorical authority but does not describe a deeper reality in nerves and flesh.[5]

5. Thomas Lacqueur, *op.cit.*, p236.

Freud, he suggests, must have been aware of the absence of anatomical or physiological evidence capable of supporting his claim in the common medical knowledge available in any nineteenth-century handbook. After all, '... if the advent of the vaginal orgasm were the consequence of neurological processes, then Freud's question of "how a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition" could be resolved by physiology without any help from psychoanalysis.'[6]

6. *Ibid.*

In the majority of the essays in this volume, it seems to me, it is psychoanalysis which is given a helping hand from biology – the same helping hand it received from the analyses of Jones and the English school – and there is an argument that there is, by contrast, a specifically feminine libido: the archaic experiences that accompany it leave, as Montrelay puts it, an indelible trace. That is evident, I believe, in the stress given to the vagina as the marker of femininity and, on occasion, to maternity (rather than the desire to give or receive a child which might be proper to either sex) as an archaic fundamental. In order to accomplish this, the role given to biology and anatomy in the account has to shift, almost imperceptibly, but in a way which is telling. Soma and psyche are in much more direct communion than they seem to me to have been in Freud's work.

A small but, in the context of the whole volume, significant section of the book is devoted to the effect of bodily schemata on the psychic apparatus. Breen states in her introduction to that section that considering the psychological impact of physiological events such as menstruation and

maternity by no means implies a one-to-one, unmediated relationship between biological events and psychological events, 'since physiological processes will be lived differently by different women' (p187). However, the article by Doris Bernstein which sets out to describe female genital anxieties, conflicts and typical modes of mastery argues that, in Freud's theory, psyche and soma function as one. Having adduced the evidence from a variety of sources as to the girl's awareness of her genital – which is only specified as the vagina – her argument is that, as male and female bodies are different, 'the nature of the resulting anxieties, the developmental conflicts, the means of resolution and many of the modes of mastery must of necessity be different as well.' (p190) The anxieties she describes are a direct outgrowth of supposed morphological or physiological features: a girl does not have ready access, especially visual access, to her genitals (something which is clearly only applicable to the vagina), and therefore develops a cluster of experiences that could be placed under the heading of 'access'. Secondly, the girl, in contrast to the boy, experiences a spread of stimulation to other areas, whereas for the boy stimulation focuses (a contrast for which the physiological evidence would seem to me to be dubious). There is therefore a cluster of anxieties around 'diffusivity'. Thirdly, the vagina is a body opening over which there is no control, which leads to a fantasy of a 'hole'. Girls struggle, she says, with definitions and boundaries, and, based on Stoller's contentions about 'core gender identity', such anxieties have to be placed early in a girl's development. She describes a two and a half year old called Candy who evinced marked anxiety over a hole in her sock 'after exposure to sex differences'. The problem is that we do not know precisely what form such 'exposure' took: was it perceptual? If it was, did any explanation from an adult accompany or frame it? Or are we talking, perhaps, solely about a verbal representation? Girls are frequently told these days that they have a genital 'inside'. If the origins of such anxieties are deemed to be at base morphological and physiological, then what are we to make of the possible hymeneal closure of the vagina (something which can make the insertion of a tampon intolerably difficult for the adolescent girl) and, more importantly, of the fact that the walls of the vagina only open out, in their *upper* third, in adults, with extensive sexual stimulation. At the very least, the phantasy of a 'hole' seems improbable as a universal with *morphological* origin.

Many of the psychoanalytic accounts that assert the primacy of the vagina and of specifically feminine desires – those in *The Gender Conundrum* being no exception – seem to me to be almost curiously *un*-biological. Of course, the idea that biologism is fundamentally about a phantasy of biology which serves social ends is nothing new, but finding this socialization of the body's pleasures within psychoanalysis can usefully direct our attention back to representations of the 'biological' within Freud's own work, to their discursive role and conceptual implications. The insistence of the biological within this collection, then, is fortuitously timely.

IMAGES OF AFRICA

Timothy Champion

Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination*, Yale University Press, London 1994; £35.00 cloth.

In 1897 the British army conducted a punitive expedition against Benin City in eastern Nigeria. It was the resolution of a trade dispute, and in many ways was a minor episode in imperial history, though it encapsulated in microcosm many of the features of British policy: gunboat diplomacy, the entanglement of political, military and commercial interests, and a failure of communication with local commanders itching for action. But its aftermath produced a major symbol of British imperialism, for among the looted treasures of Benin were the so-called Benin bronzes which rapidly found their way into private collections, public museums and the art markets of the western world. They became one of the most distinctive, and one of the best known, series of African objects and thus a focus for the crystallisation of European attitudes to Africa. European, and in particular British, knowledge of Africa and consequently the meanings attached to it were largely shaped by the exhibition of African material culture, and *Reinventing Africa* is a fascinating examination of the cultural practices of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain which fostered and projected these varied meanings.

There has been a considerable outpouring of scholarly literature on imperial and colonial themes in recent years, but surprisingly little has been written about the involvement of the developing academic disciplines and the world of science in the imperial project.[1] The role of the Royal Geographical Society in promoting exploration, and the involvement of evolutionary biologists such as Darwin and Huxley in naval expeditions, are obvious examples, but other disciplines also emerged during the nineteenth century inextricably linked to Europe's overseas adventures. Anthropology and ethnography were late-comers to the academic scene, only being formally organised in British universities around the turn of the century, and their long struggle for official recognition was based on a triple justification of academic scholarship, contribution to colonial administration, and popular education. Histories of anthropology have concentrated mainly on the development of the scholarly discipline, and though the relationship with colonial administration has been recognised,[2] much still remains to be investigated. The great strength of Coombes's book is to open up the links between the developing sphere of professional academic anthropology and the popular imagination. Ethnographic material was widely used in a range of displays, including museums and the commercial exhibitions which formed such an important object of the late Victorian gaze. The major world exhibitions, starting with the Great Exhibition of 1851, are well known, but one fact that emerges from this book is

1. For example, J.M. MacKenzie, *Imperialism and the Natural World*, University of Manchester Press, Manchester, 1990.

2. Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology 1885-1945*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991.

the sheer number and frequency of such events; shows with titles such as 'The Stanley and Africa Exhibition' (1890) or 'The Franco-British Exhibition' (1908) are merely examples from a rich vein of late Victorian representation. Coombes thus brings together themes from the history of academia, colonial history and Victorian popular culture in a strikingly innovative manner. What emerges is an exciting account of some of the most important mechanisms by which meanings, not always consistent, were attributed to Africa, modified, developed and projected to a large public audience.

Public attitudes to Africa were shaped partly by literary works, ranging from traveller's tales through the imperial novels of authors such as Rider Haggard to the increasingly strident output of the mass newspapers, and owed much to print technology and the economics of the publishing industry.[3] But these literary images were augmented by a material representation of Africa and Africans, in particular through collections of their physical objects. Coombes is not primarily concerned with the exhibition of African humans, whether live or dead. There is still an important history to be written about the collection of human skeletons and their incorporation into European museums, a practice closely connected with the rise of anatomy and physical anthropology as academic disciplines, and this too would show a similar pattern of repeated representations of cultural difference rooted firmly in evolutionary science. Live Africans were also regularly present at the colonial exhibitions. There have been some recent studies of their experience of European culture in this context, but a systematic account of their response is still lacking. They were the most obvious and immediate image of Africa, regularly displayed in 'authentic' portrayals of everyday village life, but heavily stereotyped on the basis of ethnic identity and gender. Men were often shown in such manly pursuits as wrestling, while women engaged in dancing, weaving and other domestic activities. The erotic overtones of the wrestling and dancing were clear; even more, the frequent representation of African women in sexually suggestive poses (safely through photography rather than threateningly in person) provided an engendered reading of the imperial relationship as well as the acceptable face of Victorian pornography.

The main concern of the book, however, is with material culture as a metaphor for Africa as a whole. The Benin bronzes illustrate some of the ambivalence of this material. They were clearly the products of a highly skilled technology and thus conformed badly to the image of a degenerate African tradition. One solution was to deny their origin in west African society, and they were at times attributed to Egypt in the same way as the architectural sophistication of Great Zimbabwe was assigned to the Phoenicians, the Arabs or the Portuguese, anybody in fact except the ancestors of the Shona. The 'bronzes' were also assimilated into the European artistic tradition and its terminology, although they are technically made of brass. They could more easily be accommodated as aestheticised and decontextualised art objects than as the products of a contemporary society with its own artistic and historic heritage. With other objects in European collections they became more the symbols of domination, with value attributed by the nature of their acquisition

3. B. Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993.

and the status of the owners through whose hands they had passed, than of the true achievements of African peoples.

Many items of African manufacture were easily portable and highly durable, and there is a long history of collecting such material, reaching a peak in the nineteenth century, especially in cities with extensive overseas connections such as Liverpool or its German equivalent, Hamburg. Many private collections became the property of institutional museums (especially the three which form the main focus of Coombes's study, Liverpool, the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, and the Horniman in south London), and played an essential role in the growth of the museum profession and the academic discipline of ethnography. The interplay of these conflicting interests is itself an interesting story, but the manner of display, whether in formal museums or in more temporary commercial exhibitions, had a wider significance for the image of Africa. There were intense debates about the appropriate manner of exhibiting these items; schemes based on explicitly universal evolutionary principles prevailed long after academic anthropology had turned away from evolutionism to a more functional approach to the study of individual cultures, and undoubtedly had a significant part to play in the projection of concepts of progress and of European superiority. Coombes also examines another repeated mode of display, showing an arrangement of objects, especially weapons, in a symmetrical pattern reminiscent of a trophy; again, the symbolism of European domination was impressed by regular repetition.

There are very close parallels between the displays of the academic museums and those of the temporary exhibitions, and indeed professional anthropologists were often involved in the preparation of the latter to bolster the necessary claims to authenticity. While museums argued about their conflicting purposes, whether academic or popular, there was no doubt about the target of the commercial exhibitions or about their ability to attract very large audiences, at least in part due to the availability of a mass transport service capable of putting on special trains to bring workers from the north of England, or even from France, to events in London. They set out to attract a wider audience than just the educated middle class, and must have provided one of the most important means for disseminating the image of Africa throughout society. They have something of the air of Disneyworld or modern theme parks, and the magnificence of the architecture of many of the pavilions belied their temporary nature. They soon evolved a regular format combining static displays, reconstructions of native villages, and live displays of village life. The immediacy of these representations undoubtedly reinforced their potency, but also emphasised the danger of Africa, as a constant concern for cleanliness and fear of racial mixing demonstrate.

One of the strengths of *Reinventing Africa* is the way that it emphasises how the superficial similarity of the displays of material culture could support a variety of conflicting meanings to be attributed to Africa, and the range of social and institutional contexts which determined those varied meanings. The academic museums were influenced not just by the changing scientific theories

of evolution and functionalism but also by the ambitions of the emerging profession to establish themselves and to promote the importance of their role in training future colonial administrators, and so a prevailing image of Africa in need of European control was generated. On the other hand, the missionary societies, another major sponsor of exhibitions, were keen to demonstrate the success of their work, and thus a more positive image of the progress of Africa was promoted and their potential to respond even more was emphasised.

Concerns for national pride and national identity were also reflected in attitudes to African material. Academic rivalry with German ethnography and German museums was itself a smaller scale enactment of the imperial scramble for Africa, and academic appeals for state funding were regularly based on the need not to be eclipsed by an imperial rival. Defining Africa also called British self-identity into question. At the Franco-British Exhibition of 1908, celebrating imperial success and the signing of the Entente Cordiale, the French reconstruction of a Senegalese village was matched by a British exhibit of a mock Irish village, complete with round tower, ruined Early Christian church and dancing colleens. Set in the context of an international imperial exhibition, such a village had many conflicting meanings, for the role of Edwardian women, for a folksy Gaelic tradition as the basis for a united Ireland, for Ireland's role in the United Kingdom, and not least an implicit comparison between the Irish and Africans.

By selecting a small number of case studies of objects, museums and exhibitions for detailed discussion Coombes has explored an important area of popular imagination and given us new insights into the history of imperial propaganda and scientific institutions. She has illustrated not only the intensity of the messages transmitted about Africa and their subtle variability, but also the critical role of the cultural institutions such as museums in the creation and projection of an imperial ideology. Referring not only to their messages but also to the symbolic power of their architecture, she describes museums as temples of empire, a phrase which recalls Susan Sheets-Pyenson's title *Cathedrals of Science*[4] for her study of natural history museums.

There are striking, but rather disturbing, parallels between the way in which the European colonialist societies treated the indigenous populations with which they came into contact, and their attitude to the natural environment of their new territories. Botanical specimens, and even more so animals, became the symbols of European triumph over Africa. Specimens were shipped back, alive or dead. Dead animals, whether stuffed heads on the wall or skin rugs on the floor, made acceptable trophies. Live animals became the focus for many different forms of public gaze,[5] whether in private collections, commercial exhibitions or zoological gardens which shared with the early ethnographic museums the split purpose of scientific research and popular entertainment and education. The ideological and symbolic overtones of our treatment of animals may be more obvious than with fellow humans, but how should we read the difference between a village full of African dancers and a cage full of African gazelles?

4. S. Sheets-Pyenson, *Cathedrals of Science: the Development of Colonial Natural History Museums During the Late Nineteenth Century*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1988.

5. H. Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: the English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1987.