Reviews & Essays

The limits to psychoanalysis: a response to Hannah, Philo, Secor, and Swyngedouw

ERIK HANSSON

Hansson, E. (2026) The limits to psychoanalysis: a response to Hannah, Philo, Secor, and Swyngedouw. *Fennia* 204(1) 128–135.
https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.181158

Engaging four reviewers of *The Begging Question*, this article reflects on what psychoanalysis can and cannot do for social-geographical inquiry. The author concedes that Lacanian theory, while illuminating the unconscious structures of antipathy toward EU déclassés in Sweden, struggles to account for historical change — a gap that only historical materialism can adequately fill. Rather than abandoning either framework, the article defends their uneasy combination as methodologically honest and empirically necessary. The psychoanalytical logic, it argues, explains the relation between differentiated personal-emotional experiences and their combined social structural force. The article also clarifies why begging carries an objective potentiality for discomfort rooted in the asymmetric demand-structure of any gift relation under property relations. It closes by questioning whether spontaneous political rupture can realistically suffice to deliver post-capitalist transformation, and turns instead to Dean's concept of comradeship as a more tractable, if unglamorous, path — one that must nonetheless reckon seriously with geographical envy and the destruction of place attachments that any genuine transition entails.

Keyword: psychoanalytic geography, begging, historical materialism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, geographical envy

Erik Hansson (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7997-7230), Department of Human Geography, Uppsala University, Sweden.
E-mail: erik.o.hansson@gmail.com

Background check

I regret, and feel somewhat ashamed, that so many words from my share will be used for defences, since these reviews contain so much praise (too generous, perhaps). But before I proceed, I shall give a quick clarification of the theoretical process behind the study that turned into the book in question. Most comments have circulated around the book's use of, and combination of, psychoanalysis and historical materialism. To be sure, I am not the first to attempt this marriage — for nearly 100 years, from the Freudomarxists to the Left Lacanians, researchers have tried to complement Freud and

URN:NBN:fi:tsv-oa181158
DOI: 10.11143/fennia.181158

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Marx with each other. My own development of a psychoanalytic ideology critique for the realm of geography and the social sciences was, however, rather uninformed by this rich tradition. When I set off to find answers to 'the begging question' in Sweden, I had no in-depth knowledge of either psychoanalysis or historical materialism. In hindsight, I believe my methodology was quite similar to that of Sartre (whom I had not read either): a Hegelian procedure of abstracting phenomena and then testing these abstractions against their negations, both at the phenomenological level of intersubjectivity (*Being and Nothingness*) and at the historical-geographical level of social alienation (*Critique of Dialectical Reason*). Like Sartre, I became critical of enclosed deterministic systems, yet realised early on — together with Beauvoir — the fact of finitude, and how this negativity determines (but does not determinise!) the socio-individual room for manoeuvre.

It all started with an empirical problem in a certain, particular context: why all this 'irrational' hatred and these passions surrounding the 'beggars' in 2010s' Sweden? How come the abundance of reporting of their life conditions, of letting the subaltern speak,[1] did not seem to matter whatsoever for people's treatment of them? The great turning-point in my investigation was discovering Proudfoot's (2011) mind-blowing geography thesis on 'irrational' responses to panhandling and harm reduction in Vancouver. He applied Lacanian psychoanalysis to reveal the causalities behind these reactions, and I realised that I saw practically the same reactions and logics playing out in my rather different empirical context. From then on, I was a Lacanian and spent years trying to crack the secret code that would explain everything going on at every level through the same structural system of analysis.

Eventually, however, I realised that the way the empirical and socio-political field evolved during my research, there were simply limits to psychoanalysis as the 'grand narrative' in explaining the successively more obvious structures of capitalist social relations and their specific geographical embeddedness. In sum, the theory could not satisfactorily explain historical change. Furthermore, a great shortcoming of much contemporary critical psychoanalytic social research and geography, I believe, is the tendency to flatten out social and geographical variation for the benefit of the theoretical argument. So, while Secor (2026, 114) claims that my book's "theoretical apparatus pulls unconscious processes into the analysis in order to plug the theoretical hole" of Marxism, my own process actually became the opposite: to bring Lacanian social theory 'down to earth' by forcing it into dialogue with the historical-material complexity of a particular political situation. The book's exposition was, however, intended to invite readers from 'both camps': both those not familiar with psychoanalysis and those regarding Marxism, thus to introduce both perspectives. Retrospectively, I believe it nonetheless became an emphasis on the psychoanalytic route at the expense of the historical-materialist one. My defence of this 'bias' is that psychoanalytic and Lacanian theory is less well-known than Marxism and thus needed more elaboration in order to convince the reader of its feasibility.

To be sure, I still believe in the psychoanalytic benefits for social analysis. I do, however, want to caution against the constant risk of conflating the particular with the universal — which is indeed very tempting with both psychoanalysis and historical materialism. As Deland (2025) reminds us, the original quests to unite Marx and Freud were concerned with a very empirical and practical, one might say even geographical, context — that of the inter-war German and Austrian working classes' social conditions in the wake of Nazism. With *The Begging Question*, I hoped to provide a social-psychoanalytic analysis that took the finitudes of its empirical context seriously.

Principal pragmatism

Most likely, this explanation of the limits to, yet benefits of, psychoanalysis would not be enough for Hannah. To him, the book's first part's explanatory strategy, my way of assembling "piece-by-piece, a kind of additive tally of different factors that could motivate the intense hatred and aggression" against the begging racial Other, is "doomed to fail" from the outset (Hannah 2026, 111). What he has particularly in mind is my argument that one could, analytically, conceptualise different expressions of aggression as variants and degrees of an overarching antipathy against 'the beggar'. Hannah questions why these actions should be interpreted as (my words) "the *same* antipathy" (Hansson 2023, 78, italics added). Such a move makes antipathy "generic" and, to Hannah, an ultimately quantitative phenomenon as I

> assign different quanta of it to different factors, and then [weigh] the 'sum' of these factors against some kind of estimate of what an 'appropriate' level of animosity would be *absent* the psychological factors… What if some or all of these factors interact in ways that intensify animosity exponentially? More fundamentally, what if the intersectional position occupied by begging Roma in Sweden provokes a *qualitatively* different form of antipathy than 'class + race + foreigner + homeless +…' A more serious engagement with the literature on intersectional injustices might have taken the narrative in this direction and allowed Hansson to avoid these kinds of questions. (Hannah 2026, 111)

It is a great shame Hannah did not suggest any examples of this literature and its counterarguments. If he had, I might not have been able to dismiss this criticism as a misunderstanding of the book's overarching purpose. First of all, the research question guiding this explanation aimed at the universal beyond intersectional differences — to search for, as Hannah (*ibid.*, 111) himself acknowledges, the situation's "enormous transcultural significance". The whole procedure starts from an 'intersectional' perspectivism (my own situated experience) and works towards the 'generic'. One might argue that no such metaphysics exists ontologically, and then we simply have to disagree here. I could, however, have phrased the claim of 'the same antipathy' differently: not everyone is feeling the same feeling. What I aimed at was to treat 'antipathy' as a social structure, at a similar *level of abstraction* as 'racism', 'patriarchy', or 'capitalism' — always expressed differently, nonetheless a metaphysical social force that determines myriads of spatiotemporal contexts.

This brings us to the accusation of the procedure's mechanisticism and ignorance of qualitative differences, which I guess is what Hannah aims at when he disregards "the psychoanalytical strand of argumentation" (111). The dialectical contradiction here is the inherent tension coming out of trying to say something general out of something particular — without erasing the latter altogether. Namely, Hannah's remonstrance made me think of Adorno's defence of psychological typification in *The Authoritarian Personality*. Given the whole enterprise of studying prejudiced thinking, this method was indeed problematic since typification precisely enhances stereotyping. To Adorno, the solution was to make a 'critical' typology that was "productive pragmatically", making for "a certain conscious 'superficiality' of typification" (Adorno *et al.* 2019, 750). Indubitably, this is the standard practice for mental health care (or indeed any health care practitioner) of pragmatically typifying patients' symptoms, "though one is fully aware of the fact that these distinctions are likely to vanish the deeper one goes" (*ibid.*, 750). I tried to avoid typifications of the antipathetic subject in favour of unconscious factors affecting the (abstracted) subject's social reasoning . Of course, some of these pragmatically stipulated factors weigh heavier than others in different contexts, and dialectical thinking takes for granted that each 'identity' (abstraction) is qualitatively different from the (quantitative) sum of relations and processes it is made of.

To Hannah (2026, 111), however, "the psychological argument is more like salt in the stew: it suffuses the other ingredients with a more convincing 'personal' flavour" before producing actual answers. In a sense, my explanatory assembling indeed had such illustrative functions. This is especially true when it comes to the book's appropriation of different psychoanalysts' (Freud, Klein, Kristeva, and Lacan) theoretical concepts in order to introduce the study's overall psychoanalytic argument. Philo (2026, 125) queries me about "the extent to which" I view "these different psychoanalytic cuts as complementary or contradictory?". In the case of the book's object of analysis, the extent to which these thinkers' "cuts" become contradictory is negligible. What Lacan, Kristeva, and Klein share is their emphasis on Freud's late discovery of the death drive (a concept which other psychoanalytic schools downplayed or dismissed), and I used Kristeva's *abjection* and Klein's *bad* and *good object* for their more straightforward qualities of pointing out the same phenomenon Lacan speaks of through his own mystifying discourse. Nonetheless, to me, it makes more sense to base one's social psychoanalysis on Lacan's take on Freud before Klein's, which is why we can now answer Philo's (*ibid.*) question regarding "what is at stake in the 'post' of [my] advocacy of Lacan's 'post-object relations theory'". While Klein is the implied founder of object relations theory, she treated *the object* (for libidinal attachment) as an original physical object: the mother's breast and body. This inherent fetishism is overcome with Lacan's treatment of the object as not designating any given physical phenomenon beforehand — this is what I meant by Lacan's theory as 'post-object relations' (see also De Kesel 2009).

While most of the book's argument relies extensively upon Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, Lacan himself claimed his theory to be simply a 'return to Freud'. I have taken this call somewhat literally, in the sense that I have aimed to return to 'the basics' of a death-drive-psychoanalysis. For example, the book's absence of some of the terminology of Lacan's full-blown theoretical apparatus (like *objet a, jouissance, Nom-du-Père*) was, however, due to a deliberate move simultaneously to make Lacanianism more accessible and to counteract the temptation to subordination under the Imaginary 'Master' of Lacan himself.

Nevertheless, I disagree with Hannah (2026, 111) that the psychoanalytical component does not establish any "increment of explanatory power". If Hannah approves that psychodynamic forces nonetheless matter here (which he seems to do), how else, given his emphasis on intersectional, qualitative difference, were we to get to the actual personal experiences of anxiety within the social situation? How else to avoid treating collective affective responses as the result of *folk* spirits, mechanical reflections of political-economic relations, or random (idealist or postmodern) energies? How would we otherwise account for the differences that nonetheless remind us of something shared in the experiential realm?

Cats and neighbours

Meanwhile, Secor's (softer) critique also questions the theory's supposed over-generalisations — but this time regarding the historical-materialist analysis of the world history of begging. What she problematises is that I would argue, based upon my literature review that shows a genealogy of social fear of the begging gesture since Mesopotamia, that "'begging' is *always* uncomfortable" (Secor 2026, 115). She suggests that I here have begged the question, so to speak, since

> if one looks for ancient examples of the demonisation of the hungry that then gives rise to the denigrated category of 'beggars', one finds them — but this doesn't mean that it was always, everywhere thus (*ibid.,* 115).

Guilty as charged. My question for the book's first part was why begging becomes constituted as a social problem. If my question instead had been "Why does begging (continue to) exist?", we might have reached other foci and answers. Indeed, as I point out (Hansson 2023, 43, 141), begging exists throughout (written) history since throughout history there have been people who have helped those begging. It all comes down to, as Secor (2026,115) rightly asks us, the question of "When and how does asking become begging?" In the book, I have *abstracted* 'begging' to mean the asking of someone of *lower economic status* for sustenance from someone else with a higher one *in a situation determined by property relations, within* a social formation *determined* by the same relations. Indeed, I could have spelled this out better.

I still maintain, however, the conclusion that the begging gesture is objectively uncomfortable — 'objectively' in a particularly structuralist sense, as what I actually mean is that there is an objective *potentiality* for discomfort in every single case, and this potentiality is uncomfortable in-itself. The gesture implies the offer of a gift relation, which demands a response of some kind, even if no transaction takes place. Furthermore, this potentiality is harboured in every gesture of asking, always close to the articulation of a demand. For example, many times, every day, my neighbour's cat (Tupac) scratches our door and complains that he wants us to open the street door. Semantically, we could say that he *begs* me to assist him, and that his behaviour is that of 'begging' (for food included). While this scene takes place in a class society, this interaction does not suffice to become part of the practice of begging as abstracted in the book. But there is, nonetheless, a *potentiality* for discomfort every time Tupac 'begs' for my services, even though I am very fond of him. His gesture demands something out of me, and I am forced to respond to this demand. It is really this 'generic' aspect of sociality between creatures that I aimed at, but with begging-for-property, this aspect becomes amplified. It becomes so because of the combination of a hierarchy between the asker and the responder and, especially, the lack of social institutionalisation of the interaction and transaction that effectively neutralises this potential for mental and interpersonal friction.

My *identification* with Tupac's needs brings us over to Secor's argument that there is a difference between 'identification' and what I term 'empathy' (which is not sympathy). She exemplifies with her experience of, as an American, identifying with a begging individual's situation in the precarious U.S. Interestingly enough, I have heard many Swedes reason in the same way — both regarding their feelings for seeing begging EU déclassés *and* Swedish déclassés. But I would like to argue that there is a great difference between conscious and *unconscious* identification, which I label as 'empathy'. And it is here that Secor and I seem to talk past each other. To me, the identification Secor speaks of with her begging neighbour is a *conscious* reasoning, a way to make sense of and identify one's unconscious sensations. This reasoning is unconsciously encouraged as a result of the 'defence mechanism' route that seeks to neutralise (potential) anxiety through a hermeneutic of — what I term as — sympathy.

Those who do not draw the same conclusion as Secor make other (negative) identifications that tend to verify the dominant ideology of a class society. Namely, the identification of the neighbour as lodging evil intentions (which is the result of one's own phantasies and therefore an unconscious identification) is also normal for interactions where the social, cultural and/or economic difference between the two subjects is minimal. In chapter 5, I lay out abstractions of social positionalities in a capitalist society to explain how begging so readily becomes overdetermined to be interpreted as a moral wrong across social value systems. There, I say: "If begging is racialized, the dominant race's working class might project it as a 'lifestyle' that exploits members of their demographic, whereas the dominated races fear its resultant guilt by association" (Hansson 2023, 140). This thesis is based upon interviews, auto-ethnographic observations, and textual analysis. Many times, those who have been most blunt in their condemnation, even hatred of 'the beggars', are *precisely* those who, with Secor's (2026, 116) words, "are now naturalised citizens but weren't always" and those "whose toehold in Swedish society is less secure" — i.e., those Secor hopes will be less anxious.

We are thus back at the problem of typification of different subjectivities into one-dimensional identities. That is why I prefer to 'generalise' beyond different social identities, to seek after the commonalities beyond supposed differences, and why my arguments lead to historical materialism — to the *setting* in which feelings are conditioned and played out. Secor, on the other hand, finds my analysis too deterministic and suggests Graeber and Wengrow's (2021) interesting, yet problematically anti-materialist, interpretation of early world history as a possible correction. Namely, I agree with Örestig (2022, 8, my translation) that "by writing out the importance of biological, ecological, and socio-material conditions from the narrative," Graeber and Wengrow "leave us in voluntarism" which is the result of their spinal reflex to "equalize materialism with determinism". Undeniably, however, Secor is right that throughout history there have existed communities not determined by property relations (i.e., not 'class societies'), and everywhere, every day, there are gift gestures taking place between beings that could have — but did not — become articulated as begging interactions.

Finally, Secor is absolutely right that the book rehearses a Marxist "imaginary" (Secor 2026, 114) in the Lacanian sense. Given that no one can step outside the realm of the *imaginaire*, what's left is to critically submit to the discursive constellation that comes closest to the Real at hand — although this constellation also affects, even determines, one's reasoning. My only defence for the book's own fetishism — treating the Marxist theoretical apparatus as reflecting real phenomena — is that the Marxist Imaginary is, to my knowledge, the one ideology that most closely resembles the reality of world history out of all the options we (as of yet) have. To quote Sartre (1963, 30), Marxism "remains [the] philosophy of our time" since "we cannot go beyond it because we have not gone beyond the circumstances which engendered it". By no means does this mean that Marxism is not plagued by the Real — not even Lacanianism itself. The greatest symptom of both theories' 'imaginary' character is, namely, their lack of content for the solution to the problem of capitalist social relations.

Acting as comrades

This brings us to Swyngedouw's (2026) suggestion to consider the Lacanian-Žižekian notion of the (*political*) Act for the book's theoretical-empirical context. Swyngedouw summarises this concept of radical resistance as

> often associated with a deep subjective destitution, where everything one believes in becomes questioned and uncertain. The Act aims to replace existing power structures and challenges the fantasy of a lost [nation] that can be reclaimed while adhering to (enjoying) neoliberal capitalist consumer culture. It also dismantles the fantasy that some organic whole can be reassembled (because it was never there in the first place). It fully affirms that all human beings are subjects of lack. In doing so, the political act revolves around the creation of a different *objet* a, one that is structured around the urgency to produce a new socio-political framework, articulated through universal inclusion and shared organisation. This is a political imaginary that has always historically circulated around the signifier 'communism'. (Swyngedouw 2026, 121)

To be sure, I agree with Swyngedouw that this *should* be the solution. But *will* it be? And, most acutely, *how* to work towards this desired outcome? My biggest issue with the theory of the Act is that it seems, to me, to indicate a Badiouan event — a *spontaneous*, radically open and unplanned situation that, almost like a *deus ex machina*, will allow humankind to restart from scratch. To quote Heron and Dean (2022), given the emergency of climate change and global fascism, "we no longer have the luxury of spontaneity". Thus, I suggest an interpretation of the Act as a metaphor for the desired outcome of a transition before an actual event — the interNational Thing of tedious and unspectacular global-popular organisation.

Consequently, we focus on the end of the book, where I speculate on the need to combine, with Philo's (2026, 125) words, "*unspectacular practical interventions*" with the "*highly speculative* (and abstract) manoeuvre" of rescuing equality as an idea and signifier in order to salvage the idea of solidarity. This mission must escape the traps of chauvinism and identity politics, and must aim towards a social bond that "fully affirms that all human beings are subjects of lack" (Swyngedouw 2026, 121). A beginning of a solution might be found in the strategy proposed by Dean (2019): reviving the idea of comradeship. Proceeding from a Lacanian-Žižekian position, her conceptualisation of *the comrade* acknowledges the lack of every subjectivity and identity. Comradeship does, however, turn this alienation into something productive, since being nothing more, nothing less, than a comrade relieves one from the quest of finding and being true towards 'oneself' or one's (particularist) identity. To be sure, Dean takes most seriously the threats of disavowing the realities of intersectionality (gender, race, sexuality, etcetera) — which has been a historical tendency in socialist and communist movements. As all comrades are equal to each other yet acknowledge each comrade's particularity *besides* being a comrade, Dean's strategy aspires towards the universal in the sense that indeed anyone, although not everyone (i.e., those who do not want post-capitalism), can become a comrade. What is important is never to fall into the temptation of turning solidarity into loyalty — then, equality-through-difference evaporates.

The greatest obstacle to this strategy is to underestimate the continued presence of aggression and envy among comrades, accentuated by the fact of geography (Hansson 2026 198–99). I here rely on Jameson's insight into (what he termed) 'the problem of federalism'— or what a geographer might call the problem of *geographical envy* — for utopian projects.

> [Any] attempt to combine the global with the local, must avoid the predominance of one province over all the others at the same time that they resist fragmentation and dissolution. … [One] can envy industrious populations just as passionately [as] lazy and pleasure-seeking ones. Add to this the deeper economic level of geography and raw materials, and indeed the more material resentment of the redistribution of wealth [from] the prosperous provinces to pay the expenses of underdeveloped ones, and you have a dilemma of a multidimensional kind for which no ready-made solution exists. (Jameson 2016, 78–79)

Human geography is well equipped to address this problem, given its long tradition of claiming that people's *sense of place* is (at least) as important to their decision-making as standard rational concerns. Psychoanalytic geography meanwhile can help humanistic strands of geography to take the idea of place attachment seriously. Indeed, psychoanalysis provides a strong theory of how subjects'

attachment to an 'object' — whether property, commodities, aesthetic surroundings, or the space one identifies as home — readily becomes treated as one's very being. What one must not forget, whether as a (humanist, psychoanalytic, or critical) geographer or as a post-capitalist activist, is that this attachment is as important for society's privileged subjects as it is for its underdogs — and everyone in between. Any genuine transition from a capitalist to a post-capitalist world must entail a never-before-seen amount of *destruction of attachments* (cf. Fletcher 2018). Not only will millions of 'consumerists' lose their attachment to commodity objects (without which they believe they cannot be who they are any more); whether or not the transition will be fast or slow, all over the world subjects will see their libidinal surroundings transformed for the sake of a new global system of distribution — for the sake of distant Others. Most likely, some people will benefit (materially and/or mentally) more than others from this transition. Not only the wealthy, but also the poor, will lose attachments to the lifeworld they now call 'home' or their 'way of life'. The comrade strategy must therefore be prepared for the fact that many comrades will not embrace, and some will violently fight against, these losses when the time comes.

Years ago, Callard (2003) warned geographers of 'taming' psychoanalysis for their own normative purposes. The risk is to treat psychoanalysis as a fetish itself — to objectify its insights at the expense of the Real complexities of the unconscious. Indeed, I fear that ideas such as that of comradeship, the Act, treating history as fundamentally 'open', and indeed that psychoanalysis cannot give us significant answers, might easily fall prey to such temptations. If one is not careful, that is.

Notes

1. Given Philo's (2026, 121) accurate "possible criticism" that "the 'voice' of the Other is not heard in his book", I shall recommend Levy's (2022) excellent study as an enriching complement to mine.

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