

Universalism, materialism and class politics: Notable absences in critical psychology

[B O O K R E V I E W]

Parker, Ian (ed) (2015) **Handbook of critical psychology**. Hove & New York: Routledge. ISBN 978-1-84872-218-7 hbk. Pages xv + 477

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Group work has become essential to the modern economy, where most projects are too wide-ranging for a single pair of hands, or, when it comes to intellectual labour, too grand for an individual intelligence to cover in all their detail (Coetzee & Kurtz: 2015). More often than not such projects are organized from the beginning in modular fashion: the final aim is broken down into a series of modules, each of which is then assigned to an independent worker or team to complete. This division of labour, which usually involves following instructions “from above” while being isolated from one’s co-workers, ensures that when the group project is complete, there is no one person who knows precisely how all the parts relate to the finished product as a whole. Indeed, the work-experience of a group preoccupied with a modular project “may be as alienated as that of an individual worker in the factories of Victorian Britain”, as Marx and Engels once keenly observed (Coetzee & Kurtz, 2015: 120).

Conceived in terms of capital’s exploitation of labour, phenomena such as alienation and the division of labour are familiar enough not to need extended rehearsal. But consider their relevance in respect of the general situation of the social sciences today: as itself a group, constituted from within by other groups (disciplines), which are themselves constituted internally, by common foci (areas

of expertise), some of which have attained sovereign status (sub-disciplinary fields), albeit often only by staking a claim to some part of the remaining intellectual commons. About the current crop of specialization in the social sciences, then, one might expect that the more the unqualified intruder is kept out, the more the expert insider tends to lose sight of the wider scholastic landscape of which her (sub)discipline is a part.

Parker's (2015) **Handbook of Critical Psychology** is in one sense a book committed to overcoming the alienated character of modular work in the social sciences. By bringing together an assemblage of perspectives from remote disciplinary groupings, the compendium exemplifies an intellectual orientation that rejects the condition of functional separateness in the universe of academic knowledge production. Its declared target is the gamut of ideas, frameworks and activities which belong to mainstream "psychology" – as a (notoriously venal) academic discipline, (sometimes dehumanizing) professional practice, and (unavoidably value-laden) every day, commonsensical resource. And indeed, what emerges from the combined efforts of its contributors is nothing less than a bold and extensive critique, and sometimes revision, of the discipline on multiple fronts (e.g. cognitive, developmental, forensic, humanistic, community, organizational etc.).

As a primer on the sub-discipline, the breadth and depth of **Handbook's** coverage of critical psychology is unrivalled. The material examined is relevant to psychology students of all stripes, but will particularly interest those who find themselves troubled by mainstream psychology's dubious past and equally scandalous present. The book raises serious questions about the relationship between power, human subjectivity and modern society, and shows why it strains credulity to believe that psychology is simply about what goes on in your head.

Nonetheless, to be sure, one cannot object to mainstream psychology's conception of human life and experience, and still share the fallacy from which that conception springs. For to rethink psychological orthodoxy is also to avoid resurrecting the kinds of divisions between areas of knowledge that so successfully insulate its affairs from the scenes of ordinary experience. Regrettably, on this score, **Handbook's** plurality of mini radical-isms, forty-six chapters strong, can be seen to aggravate a second distinctive feature of the modular problem, namely, when a disunity among component parts becomes an obstruction to any general theory about them.

Which brings us to the question of what it is that holds, or should hold, the committed intellectual to their task. Part of the answer, at least since the turn of the millennium, has to do with a certain standoff between the responsibility to ensure that their ideas win an audience outside postgraduate seminar rooms, that is, to preserve the continuity

of theory with everyday life; and a countervailing demand for theoretical diversity and democratic representation issuing from almost every intellectual agenda mapped out by, and since, “the cultural turn”. That schism, when sizeable, generates an unhelpful polarity in scholarly practice: on the one hand, scholars sensitive to appeals for social relevance will tend to place a premium on diversity of perspective and opinion. On the other hand, however, there is a recognition that diversity adds scarcely more than encyclopaedic value, if the variety of elements that fall under its rubric do not unite to tell a common and enlarged story. That is to say, more precisely, if the array of political interests, sub-disciplinary frameworks and critical assessments – subsumed under the scope of a field – are not themselves brought together by a coherent and systematic internal structure, of the kind that would usually supply a research agenda with its theoretical spine (Chibber, 2013).

There are two notable reasons why **Handbook** champions the call for diversity and relevance. Both are detailed in Parker’s introductory chapter, and are worthwhile mentioning. The first is historical: that, ever since its birth, which for the sake of clarity dates from the beginning of its “short history” and not its “long past”, mainstream psychology has suffered from a constitutional inability to define the proper scope of its subject matter (Ebbinghaus, 1908). Unsurprisingly, then, **Handbook**’s dedication to diversity appears to mirror the hodgepodge of topics and approaches that betray the indeterminate, or as yet undetermined, interests of its host discipline. The second, related reason is sociological: with the globalization of psychological discourse, the demand for social relevance has given voice to Third World discontents, where mainstream knowledge is reviled as a sort of miasma that pollutes and corrupts the aims of true revolutionary scholarship. As a rhetorical strategy belonging to the “margins”, the upshot of this demand has been an inspired eagerness to deconstruct psychology’s semantic architecture, lay bare its cultural blind-spots, and to indigenize both its disciplinary form and prescribed content areas in the interests of more regional aspirations. This accounts for the catalogue of critical psychologies one finds in **Handbook**, which is an attempt to capture the substance of these aspirations as they vary with time, place, and political standpoint.

The foregoing reflections suggest a particular understanding of the critical psychological project, as outlined in **Handbook**. There are a number of aspects to this understanding: (a) that the field seems held together by the loosely shared political aspirations of its contributors, rather than by a commitment to any core set of theoretical propositions. (b) That (a) is largely a function of the field’s built-in responsiveness to calls for social relevance, and the diversity of perspective which it is therefore obliged to showcase in an increasingly “psychologized” world. (c) That the resultant transdisciplinary posture is primarily geared toward overcoming the functional separation of knowledge areas,

both within and between the relevant soft and hard sciences, respectively. And finally (d) that, recast in terms of the “modular work” analogy, the strategy arising out of (c) is akin to reorganizing the workplace environment such that workers assembled of a morning labour cheek by jowl *alongside*, but not necessarily *with*, one another.

There remains the question, however, of the disunity among **Handbook**’s component works - of what we might call their property of existing “alongside, but not together”. The modular analogy would suggest that, in addition to the sociological and historical reasons given above, the book’s theoretically footloose orientation derives too from an intellectual-technical division of labour, where “production not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object” (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2017: 25). On this view, diversity, multiplicity, and juxtaposition, rather than synthesis, are simply the formal elements of personalized consumption brought about by that mode of academic production which assimilates social and cultural differences into its highly specialized division of labour. The point, though, is not whether this productive mechanism fosters the proliferation of discrete academic fields and sub-fields. Rather the point is whether the force of this mechanism is so strong as to forge an intellectual and analytic climate of inquiry that stops short of recognizing the common humanity which binds us together.

Certainly, there is no reason to expect that such a climate should congeal automatically as a by-product of “the marketization of institutions of higher education” (Long, 2014: 32). Explanations citing the political economy of the social sciences may well shed light on the neoliberal pressures behind the rapid growth of niche theory. However, such explanations do not sufficiently account for the set of meta-theoretical commitments, both nowadays in vogue and everywhere visible throughout **Handbook**’s chapters, that effectively naturalize theoretical disunity and political fragmentation in the name of plurality and social difference:

1. An undue emphasis on, and valorization of, “marginality” as an antidote to the hubris of mainstream, universalizing categories: overwhelmingly present in the bulk of *Handbook*’s chapters, the importance of recognizing all things marginal is an argumentative strategy that often assumes *universalizing* categories are equivalent to *homogenizing* ones. But that is a conceptual slip of the first order (Chibber, 2013). For example, the fact that we, as human beings, are eternally alike in some ways and yet profoundly different in others, does not compel the conclusion that we are more alike than different.

2. The preference for a discursive over a materialist ontology: with some notable exceptions (specifically chapters 2, 5, 28, 38 and 45), **Handbook** embraces the decidedly postmodern turn to culture, discourse and ideology as the primary forces shaping our

collective definitions of reality. Interpretations of social action that assume actors are motivated by their material needs, or that dare to connect psychological suffering with the mundane struggle for physical security, basic healthcare, or freedom from interpersonal coercion, are unsurprisingly absent.

3. The implicit racism of ethnocentric/indigenous psychologies: failing to illuminate how social differences exist against the backdrop of common structural forces leads some theorists (in chapters 15, 19, 37, 39, 41, 43, 44 and 46) to exoticize and essentialize the non-Western ‘Other.’ Needless to say, the familiar insistence that “we do not think like *them*” scarcely provides the raw materials to build an entire social ontology *sui generis*, even if dressed in radical prose. In the more egregious version of this story, however, contemporary reifications of the East-West divide remain the heirs of nineteenth-century colonial ideology, which attributed rationality, universal rights and the pursuit of scientific knowledge exclusively to the West, and tradition, communal identity and spiritual belief systems wholly to the East (Chibber, 2013).

Overall, **Handbook** more closely resembles a guide to the postmodern heartlands of middle class radicalism, than it does a critique which tries to abstract away from isolated, individual analyses, general principles that might universally apply across different local contexts and cultural boundaries. That is not to detract from the number of lucid and persuasive contributions which students and researchers in the field will certainly appreciate. But it is to call attention to the limitations that bedevil critical psychology insofar as its politics is rooted largely in debates about language, individual identity and cultural difference, to the exclusion of those about economic oppression, universal needs, and material interests.

References

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