The End of Psychology: Review Essay of Changing the Subject*

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* Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity. J Henriques, W Holloway, C Urwin, C Venn, V Walkerdine (Editors). London: Methuen, 1984.

There was a time when psychology carried the torch for a certain kind of personal enemcipation, a liberation founded on an evolutionary sequence of human qualities that applied equally to the cognitive, affective and social domains of personal functioning. Psychology could, so ran the story, assess our relative standing with respect to a vast number of attributes. It could also apply certain methods that would shift us more quickly towards that distant but free end, when we would find ourselves to be cognitively evolved and emotionally adjusted human beings, at one with ourselves and society. The heyday of this humanistic mumbo-jumbo was the mid sixties, that apex of late capitalism just before the second slump and the onset of the international fiscal crisis, when the multinationals held undisputed sway at the colonial periphery while at home in the civilised centre liberal welfare democracy seemed to be holding, if only just.

In the wake of the ensuing world recession and legitimacy crisis came a widespread cynicism about unreflectively optimistic fairy tales, a cynicism focussed most wonderfully by those debacles of liberation like the May 1968 uprising in France, the student movement in Europe and the USA, the impractical and complicit politics of the hippies, and most importantly, by what has come to be called the failure of the working class to achieve its historical mission. Whether these perceptions and diagnoses were justified or not does not matter here. What is important is that these circumstances inaugurated a process of intense re-theorizing in every domain of the human disciplines - with the conspicuous exception of psychology. That this process was uneven, at times localised, arcane, often childishly vituperative and abstruse beyond belief cannot be denied. By the late seventies however, a series of convergences could be discerned: specific theoretical gains found a large sympathetic audience and a certain paradigm

called post-structuralism began to dig itself in and to file a bid as the new orthodoxy in studies of the human and the social. In areas like media and cultural studies and in literary theory the take-over bid has been largely successful. In politics and sociology the contours and stakes remain bitterly contested. A particularly unfluential if much misunderstood strain reigns in european psychoanalysis. But in psychology - nary a ripple.

That is really neither accidental nor surprising, for the entire project of post-structuralism strikes at the heart of humanistic psychology. It denies the existence, on theoretical grounds, of the unified individual, or subject. What theoretical anti-humanism entails - for that, to the horror and outrage of the humanists is what it calls itself - is the understanding of persons as non-unitary, as a field of effects produced by discourse; in other words, as a by-product of meaning. Furthermore, this by-product is stripped of autonomy, agency, and all forms of effectivity central to the object of humanistic psychology, the self-functioning person. To put the case at its simplest: post-structuralism seems to propose the impossibility of psychology as we know it.

There have of course been periodic rumbles of discontent within psychology most of them addressing the issue of the pristine unified subject of psychology by way of arguing for an understanding of persons in terms of their social context rather than solely in terms of potentialities locked up in the monad. The collections by Israel and Tajfel (1) and Armistead (2), and the writings of Archibald (3), Shotter (4), Kelley (5), Gergen (6) and Ingleby (7) all attempted various forms of bridge-building that were in the end more tantalising than successful. The reason was that bridge-building tends to leave its promontories intact. The bifurcation between the individual and the social was being produced and perpetuated by the very conceptions of the individual and the social that were to hold up the bridge. The rapprochement efforts of the late sixties and early seventies could do little about that. The debate became trapped into a person-centred versus a society-centred argument about relative determination, an argument reminiscent in many ways of the phenomenology - behaviourism debate of the fifties and sixties.

Meanwhile what structuralism and post-structuralism had been busy with, had the psychologists only looked, was an extensive retheorisation of the

nature of subjects and the social, and what it was achieving was a new wayof conceiving of them. The fundamental insight central to all forms of post-structuralism is derived from structural linguistics : the world, or the 'real', can be encountered only via a representation of it. So far so phenomenological. The idea is however pushed considerably further in post-structuralism. The representations (preferably called signifying practices) are not reflections of the 'real' as they are for most forms of idealism. For post-structuralism, they have an autonomy, an effectivity and a positivity such that what the 'real' is, is constituted by the emsemble of signifying practices, otherwise known as discourse. Discourse is less a gateway to the 'real' than the network that makes up the 'real' itself. Care has to be taken not to crudify the issue. The post-structuralists are not saying that all material is somehow dissolved into mere meaning, although some otherwise canny commentators like Stuart Hall(8) sometimes feel they ought to impute this idealist move to them. The point is that the 'real' we percieve and act upon can only exist for us as a set of signitive differences. This is simultaneously an epistemological and an ontological claim. When we deal with the world, we act upon, connive or interfere with a set of differences. A capitalistic mode of production or a schedule of reinforcement, romantic love or humanist pedagogy intersect with human lives as a specific structure of differences, that is, as a discourse. They cannot and do not brutely and prerepresentationally bang us on the head. They are not any the less real for all that. Materiality and meaning are isomorphic.

The idea is taken still further. Having achieved discourse does not mean that the 'real'/discourse is automatically then transparent to everyone. What meaning as a system of differences effects is an opening up and a closing of positions from which it is to be accessed. It constructs positions from which people may encounter it: and encountering the discourse means being positioned in it in a particular way. We cannot experience anything outside of a particular subject position in a particular discourse. Indeed, we don't even exist pre-predicatively outside of a discourse! Discourse positions us as particular subjects and it is only from a particular subject position that our sense of self and of world is constructed. Discourse in effect constructs subjects, and empirical persons are simply the time/space intersection of their subject slots in the hierachy of discourse extant in society at a given time. This is the precise meaning of theoretical anti-humanism.

The breathtaking counter-intuitive impertinence of this way of talking is not lost on practicing humanists even when the accompanying ludic dimensions most usually are, and the yelps of dignity - impaired outrage like those of E P Thompson have become commonplace. But the implications for psychology had yet to be tackled head on. This is the monumental ambition of Changing the Subject (hereafter CTS). The title announces a dual intention: first, to change the subject of psychology, to open it up so that its complicity with power is seen and, perhaps, re-aligned to a properly emancipatory account; and second, to develop a politics of changing the human subject from its thrall in dominant discourse. CTS anounces itself therefore as a project of reconstruction, or at least demystification. This project is not unproblematic, as I shall show.

The five authors divide the work into three sections, each section prefaced by a longish introduction that tries to make various chunks of post-structuralism understandable if not plausible to Anglo-Saxon eyes. Section one dissects the individual - social dualism in current psycho and then goes on to discuss two issues: one, how that dualism, and especially its individual-centredness, fatally flaws the practice of psychological assessment in organisations (Wendy Holloway) and two, the way in which social psychology approaches the issue of racism by thematising individual prejudice (Julian Henriques). Section two dives in at the deep end and takes the reader by a long and complicated route through early anti-humanism via Althusser, discusses his failure to understand the issue of signification, then introduces us to Foucault's early work. The introduction ends with a useful discussion of Foucault's notions of discourse, power and knowledge. It is worth saying something about these, since Foucault is the central theoretical resource in the book.

For Foucault, power is not an external force, nor is it a possession of for instance a king, a jailer or a class. It is the vital current that animates the micro-circuits of human commerce and sociality. It enables as much as it constrains. It is explicitly theorised against a marxist notion of power as the-power-to-exploit. Power, says Foucault, should not be tied to a locus in this way. It is ubiquitous. It is, in short, a field concept, and as such has a lot in common with the concept of power used in systems theory. Raven and French's (9) social psychological classic on social power uses such a notion, as did Kurt Lewin (10) before

them. More scandalously, it has been suggested that Foucault's power is the obverse of that deployed by Talcott Parsons(11). Be that as it may, what all of these field notions of power have in common is their refusal to privilege either a source for power (like the ruling class) or, by extension, a source for its overthrow (like the working class or some other social movement). What Foucault calls knowledge is correlatively a set of signifying practices constituted in discourse always in tandem with power. What this ineluctable bondage of knowledge to power does is to refuse to privilege any form of knowledge. All power/knowledges are social constructions that in turn produce specific subjects. No one is truer than another. The discourse of clinical psychiatry, for instance, produces madness and mad people; the discourse of penology produces the incarceral subject, the modern criminal. It is not hard to see why Foucault is so frequently accused of relativism although the charge is, I think, misdirected. It is less easy to defend him against the charge of nihilism, for without any privileged forms of sociality it is difficult to see how any idea of emancipation could be forged (12).

Couze Venn's chapter produces an account of the conditions of possibility for modern psychology. the major condition is of course the construction of the solitary, radically interior, private and very bourgeois individual the birth of which Venn, along with Foucault, but also with Derrida, the phenomenologists and Bertrand Russell, - pegs in the seventeenth century with Descartes and his Meditations. This condition is only realised in the later nineteenth century when specific social technologies of regulation were developed to facilitate the transition of early capitalist society into a disciplinary regime policed by these technologies. These technologies worked by constructing a Darwinian 'normal individual' as a scientific object of study and normalisation. A psychology hellbent on calibration was the most important of these.

Now this is notoriously difficult stuff to read and evaluate not least because Venn does not show us the emergence of the bourgeois individual and the normalised subject by examining specific texts, as the deconstructionists do. He simply asserts connections and we have no way of judging them. He also radically backgrounds parts of the history, at least as I read it. What the emancipatory doctrines of the nineteenth century saw in Darwin's evolutionism was a man-made road away from

feudal pessimism and divine inevitability. This is why Marx, for example, was so impressed by Darwin. By marrying Darwin's primitive social engineering to Descartes' 'tremulous private body'(13)by fiat,Venn obscures the fact that an entirely different, more optimistic, assertive, and social theorisation of the individual could happily cohabit with Darwin, and did: Marx's social subject of the Manifesto and the Theses, for instance. That evolutionism was ultimately a constraining doctrine does not void its positive features. Broad-brush history of the sort produced by Venn tends to blast all such subtleties away.

Valerie Walderdine's chapter tackles the conditions of possibility of developmental psychology and child-centred pedagogy. She effectively unmasks the liberatory pretensions of humanistic pedagogy, and by looking at the actual classroom production of this pedagogy as well as at the way child-centredness began to be theorised by Montessori and Neill and also by Piaget - that is, by looking at both the transformation of practises as well as the transformation of discourse - she shows the emergence of a new form of scientifically produced regulation, what Foucault would call a new regime of truth.

She skillfully shows how the child-centred claims for freedom, caritas and unfetteredness emerged in the context of the medicalisation of poverty, the criminalisation of unemployment, and the principled isolation of individual children: "It is perhaps the supreme irony that the concern for individual freedom and the hope of a naturalised rationality that could save mankind should have provided the conditions for the production of a set of apparatuses which would aid in the production of the normalised child." (p.190)

There is enormous richness in this chapter, but there are also absences which require explanation or at least some contextualisation. This account of a new subjectification at the very site of the discourse of freedom and liberation succeeds in part because it is peopled by passive subjects, subjects constructed by virtue of practices which deny them effective agency. Indeed, this account is laced together by gerundives and the passive tense. Now, the problem is not simply one of omission. Once the turn towards theoretical anti-humanism is made, the issue of agency is automatically backgrounded, and this backgrounding

has itself become the site of a seemingly intractable misunderstanding. Judith Williamson for instance asks in by now familiar humanist exasperation how Walkerdine imagines pedagogy can be changed unless by some politics of agency, some humanistically-inspired political will to change (14). It doesn't suffice to rehearse against Williamson the theoretical arguments which underpin her misunderstanding of the kind of account produced here. The uncomfortable fact remains that subjects are passively constructed in Walkerdine's account, and passive they remain. The theoretical advance is made at the expense of a politics of liberation, or at least so it seems. By denying power a locus and a counter-locus, the possibility of subjection being an outcome of struggle is precluded.

By basing itself on the ubiquity of power, it theorises the issue of the social as the construction of a vast collectivity of individually-constituted subjects; it does not theorize the construction of a collective subject, a class or a social movement. This is a doubly strange lacuna since the success of the collective struggle of feminism from which 3 out of 5 authors of this book come is an obvious demonstration of its inadequacy.

The final section of the book grows more explicitly out of feminist concerns, having to do with gender difference (Wendy Holloway) and mothering (Cathy Urwin). The theoretical introduction takes on the developmental psychoanalysis of Lacan, and in particular tries to make workable his notion of desire. It will come as no surprise to learn that desire is discursively produced, but Holloway goes on to demonstrate that the subject-slots in discourses concerning sexuality are variably taken up, and the variation is produced by different investments of desire, which in turn depend upon a psycho-social history that has ultimately got to do with that tutelage of desire which we commonly call growing up.

What's nice about Holloway's chapter is that she develops her account through interviews and self-reflection. She tells us that as an adolescent she wanted "to walk, swim, run, drive - as far and as fast as my men companions" (p.229) and goes on to show that the terms of that investment were set by the particular gender discourses available to her. But her method raises questions of its own. There is a disconcerting

tendency in her account for the agency of subjects to turn imperceptibly into the agency of discourse. For instance she tells us how Clare uses her 'feminity' to ensnare Phil. Or are they both snared by the 'male sexual drive discourse'? The problematic nature of the notion of discourse surfaces here. Foucault's own use of the concept changes from one of discourse-agency in his earlier work (Archeology and Discipline and Punish) to one where subjects construct themselves, and latterly he barely mentions the notion of discourse (History of Sexuality). The distance marked by his theoretical development translates into a perplexing slippage in CTS.

An uncharitable view of what Holloway accomplishes here would see her developing a kind of political economy of courting, a post-Eric Bernian scenario of adolescent sexuality as a battlefield where boys are discursively predisposed to win. That would be unfair. In the end she shows herself to be less an intrusive interviewer than an extremely perceptive counsellor to her interviewees. Her method exemplifies a paradoxical politics of counselling where her theory might suggest that it could not succeed.

Cathy Urwin continues this theme in what is probably the most conventionally psychological chapter in the book. She comprehensively and persuasively re-interprets the current account of the development of children's language, and shows the need for a psychoanalytic dimension of power/language which she mines from Lacan. Subjectivity, she shows, is produced by specific mother/child practices which have far more to do with issues of control, loss and desire sited in the unconscious than with either developmental stages or pragmatic mothering strategies. Urwin goes furtherest in according an agency to desire/investment. Indeed, she shows that in their relations with their babies mothers choose whether to position themselves as active lovers or passive love objects: "we are produced as capable or assertive action, yet also fragile and acutely vulnerable".(p.321) This is an extremely important conclusion tho' it comes right at the end of the book. The next question must be: what are the discursive conditions which optimise such a production of assertiveness? This is surely the question posed by any project directed to 'changing the subject'. By a prolix, subterannean and extremely informative route, CTS falls just short of addressing it.

How are we then to evaluate this dole-queue theorising, and activity that would rather avoid premature totalisation or that "microscopic fascism installed at the heart of the machinery of desire" (15), than provide what Judith Williamson and the masses would regard as material useful for struggle? Detractors would probably want to see their theorisation of the 'private normalised individual' as being more a product of their theory of discourse than a necessary feature of late capitalism. This would quite simply be wrong. An important non-Foucaldian 'discourse-theoretic' politics is emerging in the work of Laclau and Mouffe (16), one which explicitly theorises how the democratic collective subject can be produced in discourse without sacrificing any of the theoretical gains won by the turn to discourse. Another response would find it passing strange that a long book on psychology almost totally neglects the issue of consciousness: the word is glossed only twice in the index, both times in the final chapter. Indeed, a parallel project to CTS can be found in Philip Wexler's recent book (17), an exemplary account of how the 'technologies of the social' like psychology have recapitulated the dominant cultural logic of late capitalism, and what critically conscious social movements might do about it. Perhaps also one could respond with Anthony Giddens and say that what Foucault lacks is a notion of 'discursive consciousness', a notion that points to the subject's knowledgeability about his or her fatal imbrication in discourse, and the very real material consequence this has for action (18). In the end, all of these responses would deflect attention from the main point of CTS: that human subjects are non-unitary, and that all unifications are the product of some or other form of discursive closure. Psychology has been party to one of the most insidious forms of unification, by putting the idea of the self-contained, unified individual at the heart of its practice and constructively ensuring that it stays there. If this book has done anything to dislodge that construction, and I think it most assuredly has, then it will have helped to return an "ethics of politics" (19) to psychology. That is not a contribution to be sneezed at.

NOTES

1. Israel, J and H Tajfel (eds). The social context of social psychology: a critical assessment. London : Academic press, 1972.

2. Armistead, N (ed). Reconstructing social psychology. Harmondsworth; Penguin, 1974.

3. Archibald, W.P. Social psychology as political economy. Toronto : McGraw-Hill, 1978.

4. For example, Shotter, J. 'Homo duplex, the personal and the political' unpublished paper presented to the BPS, UK, 1978.

5. Kelley, G.A. The psychology of personal constructs. New York: Norton, 1958.

6. For example, Gergen, K. 'Social psychology as history'. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 26, 1973

7. Ingleby, D. 'The job psychologists do' in N. Armistead op.cit

8. Hall, S. 'Authoritarian populism : a reply to Jessop et al' NLR, 151, 1985, esp. p. 122.

9. French, J.R.P. and B. Raven. 'The bases of social power'. in D. Cartwright and A. Zander (eds). Group Dynamics : research and theory. London : Tavistock, 1970.

10. Lewin, K. Field theory in social science. New York: Harper, 1951.

11. Kroker, A. 'Modern power in reverse image : the paradigm shift of Michel Foucault and Talcott Parsons'. in J. Fekete (ed). The structural allegory. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1984.

12. See for instance the case made by Gillian Rose in Dialectic of nihilism : post-structuralism and law. Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1985.

13. The phrase used in the title of Francis Barker's The tremulous private body : essays in subjection. London : Methuen, 1984.

14. Williamson, J. 'Is there anyone here from a classroom? and other questions of education! Screen, 26, 1, 1985.

15. Introduction to Section 3 : Theorizing Subjectivity, p.226. They are in fact the words of Deleuze and Guattari.

16. Laclau, E and C. Mouffe. Hegemony and socialist strategy : towards a radical democratic politics. London : Verso, 1985.

17. Wexler, P. Critical social psychology. Boston : RKP, 1983.

18. Giddens, A. The constitution of society. Cambridge : Polity Press, 1984.

19. See 'Politics and ethics : an interview' in P. Rabinow (ed). The Foucault reader. New York : Pantheon Books, 1984.