Book review : # E.E.Sampson : Justice and the Critique of Pure Psychology.

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For Sampson, the study of justice gets to the very heart of the legitimacy of the social order. The requirement ought to be therefore to examine the social processes which operate to maintain legitimacy. But psychological approaches to the study of justice have failed to achieve this. Rather, in terms of the very assumptions by which psychology conducts its analyses, it tilts towards reproducing the existing social order instead of offering much of a challenge. How is this so?

The central argument of Sampson's Critique runs something along the following, not entirely original, lines. Knowledge derived from modern psychological research is not necessarily false, but reflects existing social arrangements, neither understanding/explaining their origins nor contributing to their change. He takes as his illustrative vehicle, psychological theories and empirical work on justice. Contributions placed under his searchlight include social exchange theory (J. Stacey Adams and

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Homans' view of distributive justice), equity theory (Walster et al), theories of relative deprivation, Lerner's 'just-world hypothesis', game theories, Hardin's tragedy of the commons and derivative approaches, as well as some examples from the field of industrial psychology, such as the human relations movement emerging from the well known Hawthorne studies. While these perspectives provide different emphases - they are all guilty according to Sampson of the twin failings due to psychologism and positivism. In addition, all mainstream approaches to the study of justice give primary attention to distribution or allocation of resources, neglecting entirely examination of processes whereby resources are produced. Such emphasis falsely restricts understanding of justice to distribution, not production. Economic and social structures and systems are taken as given, thus by default treated as universals. The market economy is viewed as natural and timeless, not as itself a sociohistorical product.

In accounting for this failure Sampson rests his case on a critique of 'pure psychology' characterized as a field built on three major foundations : (i) a positivist-empiricist approach to knowledge (ii) a truncated understanding of human subjectivity, and (iii) a romance with abstracted individualism.

Weaknesses of positivism, chiefly its illusions of objectivism and universalism, are raised and alternatives proposed : realism, which assumes non-empirical structures whose presence must be inferred in order to explain phenomena; hermeneutics which privileges meaning, i.e. non-literal or non-objective observation, and claims that only indexical (i.e. context bound) analysis is possible; and post-structuralism which attempts a synthesis of realist and hermeneutic perspectives. Post-structuralism agrees with the hermeneutic view of taking language and symbolic practices as key components,

then draws on the realist moment by examining social and historical practices in fixing certain meanings. Human subjects are no longer seen as the embodiment of some pregiven idealist essence, rather as formed in and constituted by language. Individuals are already subject-ed to structure.

In the truncated view of human subjectivity held by 'pure psychology', cognitivism is usually dominant and the subject stands forth as primary. Ironically however, human agency is minimized in favour of a view which sees reality as processed by meaning-endowing systems. In the truncated view furthermore, materialism is disavowed in favour of idealism. The alternative, suggests Sampson, drawing on Habermas, would seek to locate features of human subjectivity within the social and the historical, as well as within hermeneutic and emancipatory groundings of human knowledge.

The abstracted individual of 'pure psychology' generally takes the person, as object of inquiry, to be a factual and self-evident entity. This abstracted view of the integrated, centred individual may be held to be ideological in helping to sustain underlying socio-economic forms. According to critical theorists, this fictitious character is but the appearance, while reality is different. Under the advanced capitalism of state intervention and market manipulation, this model of human autonomy and abstracted individualism has become increasingly dysjunctive, yet the myth continues to be used to define what is real.

Like the 1984 book by Henriques et al, Changing the Subject (see J. Muller's review article in Psychology in Society, Vol.3, 1985, pp.33-42), Sampson tackles the thorny, but oft ignored theoretical question of the relationship between psychology and society. He concludes that sciences of society and of persons, since they constitute the very subject matter they study, cannot be neutral : they assist in either the reproduction or

transformation of society. Not surprisingly, Sampson's Critique favours the latter and provides a rationale for a transformative view. Since persons are constructed in and through ideology, efforts to challenge the unitary subject form part of a process to break up ideological practices that support domination and exploitation, which ultimately serve to objectify the human subject.

Regarding the dilemma of individual-social polarity, Sampson's Critique is similar to Henrique's Changing the Subject in being rather better at pointing out wayward paths than providing definitive solutions. Yet both works do sketch useful route-maps toward a way forward, Sampson giving greater weight to recent writings of Giddens, Bhaskar and critical theory in contrast to the heavier reliance upon Foucault and psychoanalytic theorizing favoured by Henriques et al. But similar terrain is covered by both texts, both have similar aims. and are in concert in wishing to reject the Humean epistemological (laws refer only to empirically observed regularities, not to logical or necessary connections between events) and Cartesian ontological (the entity of a centred individualism) heritages.

Returning to psychological theories of justice, Sampson shows their limitations in terms of each of the characteristics of 'pure psychology'. That is, psychological approaches to justice are dependent upon the actors' phenomenology (truncated subjectivism), remain within individualistic terms, ignoring social processes, describe only 'what is' rather than what 'might be' or ought to be (uncritical empiricism), are ahistoric, and show restricted social and economic understanding. The social mechanisms which allocate injustices in the first instance are simply never examined. Exchange principles upon which most psychological theories of justice are based, draw as their model upon earlier forms of capitalism (market exchange)

not upon advanced capitalism. Yet this historical falsity goes unacknowledged.

At a time when the state, under advanced capitalism, seeks to manage legitimation crises (and maintain existing injustice) by entering into sociocultural and private spheres as well as the economic, the ground rules of 'pure psychology' in maintaining the myths of 'self-contained individualism' serve both the reproduction and legitimation of the existing social order rather than challenging its legitimacy.

Finally as a 'modest proposal' Sampson outlines a new 'frame of address' approach to the study of justice. Focus is given to justice as a public accounting practice; grounds for explaining acts as fair or just. In laying stress on the conversational, self-presentational and negotiated quality of justice, the 'address frame' view does distance us from standard theories which take equity solutions (rather than say equality) to be basic attributes of human nature, and not products of current social conditions. It does also alert us to the fact that negotiation is rarely a matter of equal partners, but involves power and domination at its very core. Social context and power conceptions are seen as part of the very notion of 'address frame'. He uses Habermas' ideal speech situation to remind us that ethical principles are only constituted in dialogue but that for participants to evaluate the validity of competing claims, the objective conditions of optimum social structures and formations are required. There can be no dialogue of competing justice claims under conditions of domination and exploitation. South Africa is a splendid case in point.

All very well. But there is something of a disappointment in the end result of Sampson's quest. There is a danger of moving back to the interpersonal levels of dynamics; there is a danger of the analogies - of

negotiated conversations, of ideal speech situations - superceding the real nature of struggle for justice. Particularly for those in South Africa, there is something far too tranquil, pleasant and decent about the 'address frame' model. There is too much of the flavour of drawing-room or armchair about it, in contrast to the petrol bombs, detentions, military vehicles and mass killings characteristic of our own battle for justice. There are also the dangers, on twin flanks, of not adequately addressing the way in which the social interpenetrates the personal, and of being left with a somewhat empty human subject, albeit now formally decentred! To be fair (aha, justice as 'address frame' after all!) Sampson himself recognises some of these problems, and the present niggles hardly negate his considerable achievement.

Since both themes in Justice and the Critique of Pure Psychology are of major importance in South Africa at present - indeed the struggle for a just social order is our very raison d'etat - the book is clearly most relevant. There is a good deal of material to mull over and digest. The critical analysis of 'pure psychology' is particularly valuable in its clarity and summary of major failings. For those of us who had hardly realized that psychology had even attempted to study justice, this book is an eye-opener. The book is also refreshingly open and honest for Sampson gives a candid view of his own 'social amnesia' when he admits that for years his own involvement in research left him unaware of preceding critical work such as that by the Frankfurt School. At the end one is left with a feeling of relief - in that, along with other works such as those of Henriques et al and Wexler (1983), this book enables one to conclude that the 'crisis' of psychology in the 1970s was not without some positive outcomes, just as one began to fear that nothing had changed. If the theoretical way forward

is still rather murky, and the implications for psychology in South African society even less clear, then the pleasure is in having at least some useful assistance in taking up these vital challenges.

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