

The political economy of psychology

Book review

Parker, I & Spears, R (eds) (1996) **Psychology and society: Radical theory and practice**. London: Pluto Press. ISBN 0-7453-0879-1 pbk. 248 pages.

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That Marxism has lost something of its lustre as an academic brand name is illustrated once again by this collection of articles on psychology and society, the original title of which, **Psychology and Marxism**, had to be withdrawn for marketing reasons. The trouble, as Hayes reminds us in his chapter on "The psychology of everyday life", is that even though Marxism proved itself to have considerable explanatory capacity as a theory of the capitalist west, it offered few tools for critiquing the various forms of crude totalitarianism which were perpetrated in its name, and was therefore discredited along with the regimes which claimed to draw inspiration from its tenets. Ironically, however, the collapse of communism could now breathe new life into Marxist theory, relieved of the burden of having to defend the indefensible, and thus able to focus more clearly on its continuing critique of the capitalist world order. **Psychology and society** may be one of the early indications of such a Marxist renaissance.

The editors of this volume are prominent figures in critical psychology circles. Ian Parker (now professor of psychology at Bolton Institute) has long been a driving force at the Discourse Unit in Manchester and in *Psychology Politics Resistance*, the British-based society for critical psychologists, and has authored, co-authored and edited a dozen books on the role of psychology in society. Russell Spears is known for his research on the critical edge of mainstream social psychology and is chief editor of the **British Journal of Social Psychology**. The chapter authors are, understandably, mainly from the UK and the Netherlands (where Spears is professor of psychology) but - appropriately for a book with Marxist leanings - there is also a considerable international presence, including authors from the United States, Mexico and South Africa.

The chapters have been arranged into four sections: Historical material, critical traditions, everyday life, and practices of empowerment. *Historical material* is

concerned with (the largely failed) attempts to forge a Marxist psychology in places such as the Soviet Union, Germany and the United States (reviewed by Robert (Bob) Young of **Science as Culture** and **Free Associations** fame). The chapters in *Critical traditions* also consider the joint histories of Marxism and psychology, but the focus is on intersections between Marxism and various theoretical systems in psychology, including behaviourism (which Jerome Ulman argues has more critical potential than it is normally given credit for) and psychoanalysis. There is also a chapter by Lois Holtzman on the work of Lev Vygotsky, which unfortunately at times appears more concerned with exulting Fred Newman, director of the controversial *Institute for Social Therapy* in New York, than with examining Vygotsky's relation to Marxism.

Part three, on *Everyday life*, contains some of the more interesting chapters in the book, dealing as they do with the ways in which psychology and Marxism can be used to understand and intervene in the micro-politics of our daily existence. Mike Michael's chapter, although perhaps not sufficiently critical of postmodern fantasies of multiplicitous free dialogue, is a fascinating attempt to show how Marxism and critical social psychology can meet in their joint commitment to a social utopia. In his chapter on Marxism, psychology and everyday life, Grahame Hayes identifies the concern central to this section: "The irony and tragedy of Marxism and psychology is that they are both potentially theories of the ordinary, the everyday, and yet both have remained aloof from the promise of their theoretical possibilities." (p159) Psychology, Hayes argues, has tended to veer between scientific abstraction and atheoretical phenomenologism, while Marxism, too, has tended to be overly abstract and structuralist and unwilling to take account of agency or cultural and historical specifics. In his chapter on the life of Trotsky, Parker tries to show how, through critical biography, these shortcomings can in part be mitigated.

The final section, *Practices of empowerment*, is nominally concerned with "the role of Marxist research in changing the world" (p195), but in fact these chapters appear to draw as much on other paradigms as on Marxism proper, for example Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Angela Davis' chapter on incarcerated women, which suggests that in order to change the world of female imprisonment Marxists will have to take greater account of different ways of analysing repression, for example feminism. Stephen Reicher ends on a reflexive note, showing how the essential economic dependency of radicals in academia ensure that they function not as an effective counter to hegemonic forces, but rather as a kind of "loyal opposition" - useful for keeping up the appearance of intellectual freedom. In a sense this book is of course a case in point in that it confirms that western academic intellectuals are still free to take contrary views (even in that most conservative of disciplines, psychology), while in itself it poses no immediate threat to the status quo.

Many of the chapters, including the introduction by Spears and Parker, contain finely wrought explications of how Marxism articulates with psychology and how each of these in turn articulates with theoretical forces such as humanism, cognitivism, psychoanalysis, feminism and social constructionism, and the book will therefore be treasured by those already engaged in such debates. However, it is my impression that (unlike for example some of Parker's early work such as **The crisis in modern social psychology**) the presentation is not punchy and direct enough to have much of an

impact on those unfamiliar with either Marxism or recent critical traditions in psychology.

Psychology constitutes a flight from the real in two ways - firstly in that it imagines its object of study, the individual psyche, as separate from the historically specific economic and political realities which bring that subject into being, and secondly in that it imagines itself as a discipline functioning in a realm of ideas and facts independent of such realities. Marxism is a powerful antidote to such idealist tendencies, and this is well canvassed in the volume, but probably not in a sufficiently elementary or forceful manner to garner many new recruits. Although this is a pity, it remains an impressive attempt to reclaim Marxism for psychology, and to collect together some of the best recent work in this tradition. There is also a subtext evident in many of the chapters, which speaks of a healthy impatience to start turning theoretical formulations into programmatic critical action within and beyond academia. With *PPR* starting to gain momentum and new initiatives, such as the planned international critical psychology and action research conference in July 1999, I expect that we will hear much more of this in the near future. If this is the case, the current volume will serve as a useful resource on the theoretical background to and conceptual and practical dangers of such action.