

Watch out, psychoanalysis is everywhere!

Book review

Parker, I (1997) **Psychoanalytic culture: Psychoanalytic discourse in Western society**. London: Sage Publications. ISBN 0-7619-5643-3 pbk. 290 pages.

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Freud is reputed to have said to Jung on their journey to the USA - Freud had been invited by Stanley Clark to lecture at Stanford University - that little did they (the Americans) know it, but they (he and Jung - psychoanalysts) were bringing them the plague. Freud's well-known sarcasm and cynicism were often prescient in ways he would have been surprised by. Maybe the metaphor for today would more appropriately be "nuclear fallout", "radioactivity", not because I think psychoanalysis is this lethal or potent, but because it is everywhere and yet we can't see it, smell it, or even hear it! This in part seems to be what Ian Parker is suggesting about psychoanalysis's insertion into the cultural discourse of western society. It is a case of: "Watch out, psychoanalysis is everywhere!"

Parker starts his book by saying that " ... we need to ask why psychoanalysis has taken root in the West, how it has spread through culture in the West and beyond, and how we can best study this peculiar and pervasive phenomenon" (p1). Unfortunately, he doesn't sustain this fascinating question, and all too briefly discusses the "conditions of possibility" of psychoanalysis, both historically (in its formation) and in its current insertion into many societies. He seems more interested in a prior consideration: "The central argument of the book is that psychoanalysis can be used to illuminate cultural phenomena, but that this is because psychoanalytic discourse already *structures* those phenomena. If we read texts carefully we will often find traces of psychoanalytic reasoning and psychoanalytic prescriptions for how we should understand ourselves" (pvii). I think there are at least three separable analytic projects here: the one has to do with the (historical) conditions that may encourage the development of a psychoanalytic culture; another is to trace how infused the cultural formations of the West are by psychoanalysis; and a third is to use psychoanalysis - psychoanalytic concepts - to elucidate cultural and social issues. In my view Parker does too little of the first analytic project, and is strongest on the third.

Maybe my concerns are derived from a view that discourse analysis does not easily lend itself to a thoroughgoing historical analysis. Well, Parker didn't set out to write an historical critique or analysis of psychoanalysis, so why am I wilfully misreading his book in this way? I don't think that western societies are as impregnated with

psychoanalysis as Parker would have us believe, but surely this is an interesting project and in some ways needs to precede Parker's cultural discourse analysis. If the number of new books that appear each year on Freud and the origins of psychoanalysis are anything to go by, then clearly we are nowhere near done with answering the questions about "what psychoanalysis is", and / or why this fascinating body of thought has captivated our imagination for so long. In other words, what I am suggesting is that part of the answer to the origins / development of psychoanalysis, leads us to some of the answers of how and why psychoanalysis has inserted itself into everyday life, and to what extent it has done this. As difficult as it may be, we need to *chart the trajectory* of the insertion, the incorporation, the popularisation, the vulgarisation, and so on of psychoanalytic ideas into the *different* spheres of social life.

I would contend that many of the psychoanalytic ideas that Parker sees as so pervasive in western culture, might not be as psychoanalytic as he suggests, nor as contemporary. When did western culture become "psychoanalytically radioactive"?; are the levels of psychoanalytic radioactivity increasing or decreasing?; are there certain parts of society, or even certain societies, that are more vulnerable to psychoanalytic "contamination" than others?; is this psychoanalytic fall-out spreading to other parts of the globe?; should we try to inoculate ourselves against the contamination of psychoanalysis, or should we embrace our ensuing mutant status?

Surely psychoanalysis is only part of the "psy-complex", and Parker himself notes this very early on in his book when he writes: "The development of capitalism in Europe and North America provided fertile ground for 'depth psychological' experiences and explanations. Psychoanalysis provided a vocabulary for the experience of self that was provoked by an economic system that operates much of the time out of people's control ... " (p3). In my view, Parker too briefly deals with the relationship between psychology and psychoanalysis with regard to the cultural construction of the psy-complex. I think the issue is much more complex than this, and it matters to elaborate it, so that we can assess *what* of psychoanalysis catches on, *where* it catches on in the society, and even *when* this all happens.

The appearance of the notions, and hence experience, of a private self are surprisingly early in the differentiation of society under the increasing dominance of (emerging) capitalist relations of production. These changing relations of production, and hence for "family life and family structure", changing relations of reproduction bring about social practices that, in the words of Nikolas Rose, "shape the private self". Marx's critique of capitalism finds in place an "abstract individual" created by the capitalist logic of *private* property, who is alienated both from her / his own humanity, and that of her / his fellow beings. And for private property relations to take hold, a whole panoply of ideological practices come into play to ensure the "naturalness", the obviousness, the social rectitude of these forms of ownership and (exploitative) entitlement. Notably, psychology as a separate discipline, takes hold in the mid-nineteenth century, in (industrial, capitalist, western) Europe, when the socio-historical conditions for its possibility are (already) present. Thereafter, psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and even sociology become active in shaping the *reality* and the *discourse* of modern identity. Consequently, I am not sure how easily we can separate out the discourses of the psy-complex as psychoanalytic, or as psychological, or even as (social) welfarist. That the psy-complex increasingly structures our experience of ourselves, and our *conceptions* (language, discourse) of our experience of ourselves, I have no doubt.

However, I would doubt how even these effects are, across class for instance, or how pervasive they are. To determine this, we would at least need to trace the specificity of the discourses of the self, both substantively and historically, as they emerge and take hold. I could never be as bold as Parker when he asserts: "Psychoanalysis structures social relations in Western society" (p236)!

Turning to the specific discourse analytic methodology of **Psychoanalytic culture**, we find in each chapter quite unusual and elucidatory readings of cultural and social phenomena. For example, Parker uses Bion's notion of groups to make sense of the anxieties in British higher education concerning disciplinary boundaries - what is the container, and what is contained? - and to question how universities in fact generate knowledge. Parker is particularly adept at reading adverts, and subjects the adverts used by a number of British charities to a psychoanalytic discourse analysis to reveal their (psychoanalytically) imbued sense of *care*. He adds that the understanding that these charities have of care, for instance, is influenced by the circulation of Winnicottian ideas in the wider culture. In a discussion of the ideas of Lacan, Althusser and Kristeva (in chapter 8), Parker highlights their conceptions of "the semiotic" and "the symbolic". He then uses these ideas to analyse an alternative finance system, called LETS (Local Exchange Trading System). His analysis also shows that LETS is simultaneously a symbolic challenge to capitalist financial systems, while still reproducing the contradictions of capitalist exchange relations. What is more difficult to swallow is Parker's comment that "... the argument is not so much that we can use psychoanalytic theory to interpret or pathologize LETS (though this may indeed be one of the functions of the analysis), but that particular notions of the social and subjectivity that are gathered and crystallized in the writings of Althusser and Kristeva circulate in the wider culture and then their versions of psychoanalytic discourse play a part in structuring the way in which LETS are described and practised" (p228). The extent to which psychoanalytic ideas already circulate in, and structure, cultural practices, seems to require a more rigorous account than the somewhat circular analysis of psychoanalytic culture presented here. In some ways Parker presumes what he needs to explain: psychoanalysis is everywhere in the culture, because the culture is psychoanalytic!

My main criticism of **Psychoanalytic culture** has been that for the argument to work it should have adopted an *historical methodology* so as to ground the discourse analysis of psychoanalytic culture. It would appear that my problems with the central argument of the book, leave me with very little positive to say about **Psychoanalytic culture**. Strangely, **Psychoanalytic culture**, is a frustratingly fascinating text! If one disaggregates the book, and reads the nine chapters as quite separate articles, then I think there are fewer problems of the type that I have outlined. There is some logic in approaching the book this way, given the fact that most of the chapters were written (and published) as separate journal articles in the first place. While there are continuities and overlaps in the nine chapters (for example chapter 5 on "Authoritarianism, ideology and masculinity", and chapter 8 on "Mirroring, imagining and escaping the local economy"), there are also some quite divergent pieces (for example, chapter 2 on "Religious belief, charity and crooked cures", and chapter 6 on "Culture and nature after Enlightenment"). Parker's retort might be that while the nine chapters are thematically grouped, there is at the same time an openness, a discursiveness, to the three main themes of the book ("Self and society"; "Individuality and culture"; and "Subjectivity and the social"). I agree, and I think the book would have worked better

had the nine chapters been presented as a *collection of (re-worked) articles*, and not forced into the, at times, somewhat strained coherence of the central argument.

Regrettably, Parker has tried to do too much, and yet not enough. There are many, maybe too many, provocative ideas in this book about how we might think about psychoanalysis as a cultural institution. Ironically, it is the book's (overly) discursive perspective which let's it down.

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