

## REPORT ON THE INTERNATIONAL CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY CONFERENCE, BATH, AUGUST 2003.

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The recent International Critical Psychology Conference in Bath was the third in what has loosely emerged as a biennial series of conferences beginning with the Millennium conference in Sydney, and continuing with the 2001 Praxis: Beyond the Theory/Practice Divide conference in Monterey.

The conference was clear evidence of the maturity of the critical psychology scene, in both the good and bad senses: that it has emerged as a stable and well developed network of institutionalized thought and practice, and (of course) in so doing has tended to become a rather well-domesticated professional niche within the psychology shopping mall - an alternative lifestyle choice complete with its own subculture and accessories. This is not to accuse the conference of descending into the nightmarish banality of the typical PsySSA / APA / BPS professional psychology round-ups, but simply to scratch at a tendency which might trigger the attention of those paranoiacs who develop an intellectual nervous tic whenever they sense power being consolidated (that is to say: critical psychologists).

The conference was hosted by the University of Bath, who were also promoting their new Critical Social Psychology MSc Programme. The university is one of those generic modern institutions that illustrate so clearly that British middle-classness is not really about great cultural pretensions or displays of wealth or prestige, but simply about keeping things neat and tidy. This blandness is in contrast to the town of Bath, whose architecture evokes a social history going back to the Romans. But of course nowadays in the age of MonteCasino such things read less as historical than as History Theme Park, and one is annoyed that the traces of contemporary have not been airbrushed out. Alternatively, you celebrate the juxtaposition as postmodernism.

The usual suspects were rounded up for the keynote addresses, the Great White Men of 1980s critical social psychology: Gergen, Parker, Reicher, Billig and Stam. And of course the ladies: Burman and Walkerdine. The opening was a astoundingly cringeworthy performance by Ken and Mary Gergen. After recounting his allegedly transgressive life as a middle class white USAmerican psychology professor, Ken broke out the banjo and strummed along to some jovial and apparently parodic lyrics by Mary. It was like one of those terrifying Christmas parties where it suddenly becomes clear

that the favourite uncle has become utterly and irredeemably senile and in their horrified panic no one can work out whether it would be less embarrassing to shut him up as quickly as possible or just to let him drone on indefinitely until he finishes. Perhaps it is possible to read the unhappy experience as a performative intervention, highlighting the discursive rules and legitimisation tactics of the conference paper as a genre by refusing to reproduce them. But thereafter the critical possibilities rapidly collapse. We are left with that particularly USAmerican academic brand of alleged postmodernism where the play of signifiers is neatly severed from substantial questions of marginality, exclusion and power, and it all recuperates itself as so much more storytelling down at the Old Boys' Club. Maybe one should ask whether this farce, like Heidegger's Nazism, was symptomatic of a systematic epistemological flaw in the Gergens' work from the outset, or whether it is simply some idiosyncratic personal failure.

But it all got better from there. Amongst the highlights, Steve Reicher convincingly demonstrated the effectiveness of using lots of colour pictures projected onto a really big screen. He thoughtfully discussed a reality-TV restaging of the Stanford Prison Experiment, proving that you can do worthwhile critical psychology using quite conventional methods if you keep your intellectual faculties intact. Daniel Bartel discussed the importance of using real-life situations as material for developing critical psychology, using vivid examples from the Israeli war against Palestine. Michael Billig again established himself as a master storyteller in his compelling analysis of the social psychodynamics of humour, and did not spare that grinning lapdog/warmonger of British politics, Tony Blair. At the end, Valerie Walkerdine raised some troubling issues around the ways in which critical psychology can be conscripted to support neo-liberal ideologies.

Outside the keynote addresses it was the usual insoluble problem of too many papers, too little time, and the usual solution of streaming people off into multiple parallel sessions. Here the topics and quality varied widely, and the overall impression was that critical psychology is paradoxically an extremely broad and varied enterprise, while at the same time having established a specific internal hegemony of methods and practices. Discourse analysis, especially the scientific-realist variant, seems to have stabilised as the methodological flavour of the day, while the micropolitics of gender (and to a lesser extent race, and sometimes even a nostalgic evocation of class) in the first world seems to dominate the terrain of enquiry. What appeared to be missing was a sense of the world, in several senses: life outside the academy, the global network of social forces, and the innumerable sites of difference and social struggle beyond the UK and Australia. Most tiresome were the reflections on the stresses of being a critical psychologist in a mainstream psychology department; most interesting were the awkward sprinkling of papers from developing countries with their alternate frameworks, methods and problems.

Perhaps for this reason, the small but significant South African contingent (those who had sacrificed the cultural excitement of attending the International Society of Theoretical Psychology (ISTP) Conference held in Budapest for the critical vigour of the ICPC in merry England) rashly offered to host the 2005 conference in South Africa, and have subsequently been held to their word.

In fact both conferences are to be in South Africa in 2005, the ISTP Conference in Cape

Town from 20 to 24 June (\*\* for contact details see below), followed by the **International Critical Psychology Conference** in Durban from 28 June to 1 July. We hope that this conference will specifically broaden the English-speaking/Anglo-Australasian/First World character of the previous meeting and open it to a greater diversity of participants, prioritizing emerging critical psychologies of African and other non-Western countries. Anyone interested in getting involved with the conference, either organising or participating, is encouraged to email Anthony Collins at: [collinsa@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:collinsa@ukzn.ac.za)

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**\*\* International Society for Theoretical Psychology Conference \*\***

**20-24 June 2005, Cape Town, South Africa**

The conference will be at the Breakwater Lodge Conference Centre, V&A Waterfront, Cape Town, South Africa from 20-24 June 2005. Please visit the conference website at [www.istp2005.org](http://www.istp2005.org) or contact Vasi van Deventer at [vdevesh@unisa.ac.za](mailto:vdevesh@unisa.ac.za) for abstract submission and registration information.

Since its inception, the ISTP conference has evolved into a vibrant meeting place for psychologists and scholars from other disciplines to debate emergent themes in contemporary theory and practice. The 2005 conference in Cape Town, South Africa will build on this tradition. The venue provides a powerful metaphor for the conference namely new possibilities beyond the constraints of past theory and practice. The building that now hosts conferences in Cape Town's vibrant waterfront district was a prison in the 19th century, and within sighting distance of the mainland lies Robben Island where Nelson Mandela spent many years in captivity. Transformational freedom is a distinct theme that runs through these places and buildings, and the people who were once captured there.