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Chapter seven

Culture

[pp. 131-140]

Modern social psychology draws upon modern culture for theories and descriptions of social action, and critiques of the discipline must also extend beyond the boundaries of the discipline. Some approaches in social psychology, and almost all of those which fall within the old laboratory-experimental paradigm, fit so comfortably within the old dominant culture that it would be a vain and pointless endeavour to try to prise them free of it.

The identity between the discipline and its society raises the question of whether we could escape modern social psychology by using material from the emergent *postmodern* culture. This would, after all, be a logical step given that the post-structuralist ideas I have considered in Parts one and two of this book are effectively an expression inside literary theory and philosophy of the post-modern age which encloses them. In this chapter I will draw upon some of these ideas to sketch out what a postmodern ‘social psychology’ might look like.

The picture I paint, however, will not be reassuring to those of us who have been seeking to give an account of ideology and power in social life. The purpose of my extrapolation of post-modern tendencies will be to raise an alarm, and to urge caution. What is ‘popular’ as the dominant cultural form of any age is not necessarily *progressive*. We should adopt a more critical stance toward postmodernity, to accentuate its positive progressive features and avoid its reactionary implications.

Postmodernity and language

The idea that a changing language can recategorize a changing world to the point of recreating it is well known to students of the [132] media. From the moment the behaviourist J. B. Watson fled for Madison Avenue and the psychoanalyst A. A. Brill advised advertisers on how to encourage women to smoke, warnings have been sent to the unwitting public about the activities of ‘the hidden persuaders’ or, nearly half a century later at the cusp of post-modernity, how we need to ‘decode advertisements’. Those working on the analysis of popular culture, for example, draw attention to *The Hoover Book of Home Management* which invites us to identify three types of dirt; these categories have the deliberate effect of provoking us to buy the different appliances for each variety (Williamson 1987). For social psychologists, on the other hand, the notion of language producing concepts is brushed under the carpet as just another residue of Sapir-Whorf. The institutions of psychology and social psychology lag behind the expressive sphere of the ‘real’ world and the ideological transformations which affect it (as well as the structure of the practical order which underpins those transformations).

What is emerging in postmodern culture outside social psychology is an awareness that language can construct different realities, that discourses can construct objects. While social psychologists are still using the behaviourist terminology of social facilitation theory to describe

the subjects they observe in lavatories, other vocabularies can be developed in the outside world. If the name of a village in the north of England is plucked out of an atlas, say, alternative meanings can be poured into it which will more appropriately capture a new experience: 'Kettleness (adj.). The quality of not being able to pee while being watched' (Adams and Lloyd 1983: 80). Such a definition makes no pretence to be universal or final. It carries with it a sense of being local and provisional, and draws attention to the 'reality' it conjures into being. ('Middlemist (vb.). To equivocate unsuccessfully when asked for an explanation of scientific activity in public loos.') Each of the metanarratives which were thought to organize the modern world and propel us toward enlightenment has broken down to the extent that, so the new story goes, we inhabitants of postmodernity have even lost our nostalgia for the lost narratives. As the social construction of human attributes is made salient, all 'real' positions disappear. Even rhetorical devices are seen only as *fictions*. We know, for example, that there is no sarcasm on Betelgeuse (Adams 1977:15). The turn to language as the creator [133] of meaning, and the turn away from anything other than language as a source of explanation, has accomplished two things. It has, at one and the same time, given a new twist both to old American pragmatism and to new ethogenic critiques of the positivist behaviour fetish which transfixed social psychology for its first fifty years.

The deconstruction of each of the three aspects of the Classical Age of reason and the Modern Age now finds its end in language: the relativism, which displaced beliefs in absolute truth, is twisted further under a post-structuralist emphasis on discourse and texts as the grounds of reason; the common sense, which displaced science, is also seen as organized into the language games in which science is an equal partner in the search for pragmatic usefulness, and the 'self' loses its position as the central creator of meaning as its dependence on others becomes seen to be constructed by language. Postmodernity provokes an attitude of uncertainty, of studied doubt, and any attempt to gain knowledge involves a continual reflexivity which underlines the provisional and transitory nature of that knowledge. This doubt and reflexivity also informs and subverts self-knowledge. Postmodernity is *différance* writ large. A corollary of this is that it becomes implausible to hold apart the categories of philosophy, epistemology, and ontology. I will follow its effects in the areas of representation, action, and investigation and work down through the layers of culture that press in on our understanding of social psychology.

Representation

The idea of postmodernity originates in discussions of changes in architectural practice. One influential account of the end of modernism in architecture names the date, and the time: a high-rise modern housing block in St Louis was pulled down in 1972 at 2.32 in the afternoon, and with it the great reform projects to construct total environments (epitomized in Le Corbusier's desire to construct the house as a 'living machine') came crashing to the ground (Jencks 1977). Now architecture is increasingly promoted as being 'multivalent' and 'multicoded', with frivolous snatches from the past often pasted on to pastiches of high-tech design. Gothic columns started to appear on car factory sheds, Japanese pagodas on school playgrounds, and egg cups on breakfast [134] television studios. Postmodern architecture draws attention to itself, and to its own construction, through these devices, and so it is that heating, electric, and air conditioning entrails have sprouted from Paris arts centres and London banks.

Out of architecture came postmodern languages for classical music (Philip Glass), pop (Laurie Anderson) and postpunk (Half Man Half Biscuit), as well as cinema (*True Stories*),

theatre (Berkoff), and dance (Merce Cunningham). Just as architecture displayed itself as 'post' (a popular shorthand term which competes on the continent with 'pomo'), so the different varieties of postmodern culture have sold themselves by drawing attention to their own artificiality, and generated a massive parasitic literature on those forms as representatives of postmodernity. References to post-modernism are even to be found in free British Rail magazines (Pawley 1987). The obsession with self-reference, and a commentary on the 'unreal' status of the art forms, then feeds into everyday descriptive vocabularies for things as 'real' or 'natural' as emotions. Eco (1986) points out what while a modern expression of affection might be 'I love you madly', the postmodern rendering might be 'as Barbara Cartland would say, I love you madly'. Even before devotees of deconstruction could get their hands on it, the notion of 'love' itself slips away from the realms of 'pure' meaning and intention, into culturally constructed webs of signification.

American soaps have long revelled in this postmodern self-referentiality, with pretences to 'represent' the real world mocked through devices ranging from Pam in *Dallas* dreaming a countless number of past episodes so the scriptwriters can wipe the slate clean, to celebrities appearing in *Dynasty* as 'themselves'. In traditional British stodgy BBC soaps, the subversion of modern representations of settings and characters has been slower, but no less dramatic. Take *The Archers*, which started as 'an everyday story of country folk' in 1950, broadcast eleven times a week on Radio Four. The fictional village of Ambridge started to produce faked newspapers and autobiographies as early as the 1960s, but by 1987 the game was up. The final scene of one episode (22 May 1987) has the village shopkeeper Martha Woodford attempting to seduce Freddie Danby. They are sorting through some of Freddie's old records, and Martha suddenly comes across an old one she used to dance to with her husband. The name 'Vic Miller', and the audible [135] scratches as it starts playing, clue us into its nature as 1930s dance band music. It is this music that plays out the episode, but the peculiarity of the tune strikes the listener half way through; the 'Vic Miller' record is a reworking of *The Archers* theme tune. The programme, then, draws attention to its own status as a fiction by dissolving the theme frame which *should* mark it off from the 'real world'. Any academic literary deconstruction then becomes superfluous, and can then be used simply to make theoretical points about the nature of meaning instead of 'discovering' anything (Parker 1988b).

Action

One way of understanding the transition to postmodern architecture is to see the political ambitions of architects dashed to the ground with the old modern reform projects. There has been a rapid switch in other spheres too: from radical hopes to politicize aesthetics to desperate appeals to the potential consumers of their solutions sweetened by *aestheticizing politics*. On the British Left, for example, this has been the chosen trajectory of the new 'euro' versions of the Communist Party; designer boxer shorts sporting hammer and sickle vie for space with a filofax ('post' diaries in which, of course, the past can be taken out and conveniently thrown away) embossed with the journal's logo.

This is recuperation (the neutralization and absorption of once-radical ideas) in a new form, and works as if the activity of recuperation had itself been recuperated by the new culture. While the modern recuperation of radical political ideas works by reinterpreting them as interesting alternative opinions or suggestions for improvement, *postmodern* recuperation now consists in the representation of politics as just another representation. This is how it is possible,

and not at all subversive, to walk around cities of America and Europe with carrier bags advertising 'Che Guevara' or Kalashnikov' boutiques, to read colour supplement articles on wine in the British Sunday newspaper the *Observer* under the heading 'Rival factions in the red brigade', or on clothing under the heading 'Militant tendency' (15 November 1987).

Attempts to maintain a sense of historical progress (a key metanarrative of modernity along with those of human science and individual meaning), which have traditionally been a part of [136] radical political projects, are defeated by the postmodern representation of the past. These representations are so absurdly romanticized as to be useless either as a reservoir of lessons for present activity or as signposts for the direction the future might take. So, for example, the Wigan Pier Heritage Centre Shop draws tourists who have heard of the modern writer George Orwell (who combined descriptions of working-class life in the north of England with dire warnings about the dangers of bureaucracy), and sells them 'Country Kiwi Fruit & Lemon Preserve' (Hewison 1987).

With the decline of modern notions of progress or individual meaning, the descriptions do not even have the function of parodying in the service of ideals of moral or social improvement. Postmodernity is governed, instead, by the process of *pastiche*, in which the fun of using one form to evoke another is the only point of the activity. To refuse is to risk being, in words of an American mall rat, 'totally-tres-uncool'. In the language of another of the new etiquette texts a whole range of such behaviours, choices, and acts of self-presentation would simply be 'naff' (Bryson, Fitzherbert, and Legris 1983). Appalling though these descriptions may be, they capture *more* of what is happening in social interaction and experience than academic social psychology. Now most of the research in the discipline is a bit naff.

Investigation

The third metanarrative of modernity, that of human science, quickly folds once notions of progress and meaning have succumbed. This is the point where the cultural debates feed into the enterprise of social science, and then into social psychology. Old psychology and social psychology experiments have the form of the modern television intelligence quizzes. The British television programme *Mastermind* pins the contestant under the beam of a strong spotlight and the gaze of a camera to extract a measure of a knowledge of 'facts', then celebrates the abilities of the overall winner. We become, momentarily, the investigators, the occupants of the central tower of the Panopticon, and observe the activities of the prisoner in the black leather chair. While new paradigm social psychology might seek to elicit a shared answer or elucidate the meaning of the situation from a number of contestants (as in *Ask the Family*), postmodern [137] investigation is actually more akin to shows like *The Price is Right* where the only measure of success is how deliriously happy the winners are with their prizes. When a correct answer is required, it is superfluous; it is the guessing which is the main point of the exercise.

Approaches within microsociology, which new social psychology drew upon, show an affinity with postmodern perspectives on the self and social action. Goffman's (1971) descriptions of self-presentation, for example, treat social settings as stages, and, through the determined application of the dramaturgical metaphor, break down the distinction between the theatrical and the everyday. Goffman's sociology has been singled out as representative of the new age in which modern morality has been edged out by Machiavellian social 'actors' (MacIntyre 1981). The most dramatic precursor of postmodernism in sociological social psychology, however, is ethnomethodology. The similarities I described in Chapter six between

ethnomethodology and deconstruction are the basis for the link between these types of investigation and contemporary culture. The social construction of individual meaning, the power of language to undo all claims to progress, and the unravelling of the truth claims of science are common themes. Ethnomethodologists have notoriously avoided any contact with political activity which might involve the 'objectification' of social categories such as 'classes' or 'states'. Because the social world is a product, and 'accomplishment', of shared meanings of social actors, it is unknowable as a thing in itself. The thorough-going scepticism must apply equally, of course, to any proposals for alternatives made by radicals. This position paralyzes politics.

It is only recently that the ethnomethodologists involved in the sociology of science, who have inspired the new 'discourse analysis' in social psychology (Potter and Wetherell 1987) and who demonstrated that notions of replicability and falsification are rhetorical constructions, have dared to suggest an appropriate politics. This politics is explicitly presented as a variety of *pluralism*: 'postmodern pluralism recognized that it is not reality which is too complex or too rich but that there is always something more to be said' (The 2nd January Group 1986: 26). *After Truth: A Postmodern Manifesto* turns away from the metanarratives of modernity to the little stories of the 'new age', for 'every story contains its own potentialities for progress' (ibid.: 29). Were we to move on [138] from relativism to *reflexivity*, the manifesto contends, it would be possible to 'reinvent the world' and respond not merely theoretically by way of 'performance'. A lesson is that when postmodernists from the social sciences do put forward a positive principle to replace the old modern nostrums, it usually boils down to the same ingredients of reflexivity, an idealized notion of conversation (with philosophy continuing the 'conversation' of the postmodern age), and pluralism served up on a linguistic base. 'Difference' is in vogue. It then all too easily sounds like a rehash of old modern liberalism which tries to pretend power does not exist by treating us all as if we were also all the same. This context, for example, allows celebrities writing in Intourist holiday brochures to allay fears about the Russians, and assert that 'they are people just like any other and, like any other, different from other people, as all people must be' (Ustinov 1988: 3).

Post-politics

There are issues which must be dealt with if social psychologists are not to end up abandoning all descriptions of power and ideology, however inadequate they might be. I will flag those issues now, and will connect them with more directly political matters relating to social psychology as an institution in the next chapter.

Inside the discipline

In terms of the representation of interaction and methods of investigation, the postmodern age is fraught with problems, Saussure's (1974) proposal, for a new 'science' that studies the life of signs in society, has been stretched to an extreme by the post-structuralist emphases on texts and discourses. A claim we meet time and again in this work is that because the organization of 'signifiers' in any tissue of meaning is self-referential, it is not possible to produce any representation of what lies outside in the 'real'. One of the characteristics of the discourse in social psychology is precisely that it systematically undermines all claims to truth. Similarly, the fetish with language, and the consequent dismissal of research into the structure of

power relations in the practical order of society, paralyses any action a new social psychologist [139] influenced by 'post' ideas might be tempted to take. The conceptual pluralism can result in a political pluralism which lets things be. Then the investigation of interaction simply becomes a series of pointless journalistic exercises. Social psychologists who have followed the route out of the crisis, via ethogenics into literary theory, then find to their chagrin that others are doing it much more effectively outside the discipline anyway.

Outside the discipline

Three more general problems also arise as a result of the attempts to overthrow the culture of modernity. The first concerns the attack on the importance of the intentions of speaking 'subjects'. While academics in literary theory might be happy to think of themselves as 'dispersed subjects' (Young 1982), the notion of the 'death of the author' (Barthes 1977), and a simple emphasis on discourses and texts regardless of who wrote them, cannot be allowed to pass unchallenged. There are dire political implications in allowing others to take the place of the oppressed and to have them speak for them if they adopt the correct terms of a discourse. An example can be seen in the withdrawal by the London feminist publishing house, Virago, which had to call back and pulp 10,000 copies of a book *Down the Road, Worlds Away* (Forward 1987) about the experiences of young Asian women in Britain. The shy Islamic writer turned out to be a white male vicar from Brighton. This is not, of course, to say that the problem is postmodern prelates, but that a discourse of the postmodern which only parodies the truth claims of modernity can also invite academics and ex-radicals simply to play with, instead of politicize, texts.

The second problem concerns philosophy, and political perspectives. The politics of a deconstructive strategy twists around to deconstruct the position of the critic. The proposal that the world consists merely of discourses then entails that radicals must recant attachments to a truer account, admit that their own account is just another discourse and seek solace in 'reflexivity'. We should also be aware that simple attacks on power as 'totalitarian' are not necessarily the property of *progressive* 'radicals'. The radical Right is well aware of debates over the power of language, discourse, and hegemony, and is using those notions to reconstruct the form [140] of popular debates over the nature of cultural and sexual 'difference' (Seidel 1986). In some forms this involves the deliberate promotion of relativism as an alternative to the old liberalism which traditionally masked various forms of right-wing discourse. This risks doing the theoretical work to underpin unwittingly a backlash *against* the political resistance to ideology and power that has been built outside the discipline. This rhetoric is then picked up, for example, to justify imperialist intervention in Latin America: the 'Santa Fe' document' argues that 'Human rights which is a culturally and politically relative concept ... must be abandoned and replaced by a non-interventionist policy of political and ethical realism' (cited in Didion 1987). Finally, there are issues to do with the geographical locations of these ideas which should signal caution. We should be aware of geographical correlates of the shift from modern to postmodern culture. It has often been said that the radicals of 1968 started their activities on the Left in Paris and conceptually migrated to end their political lives on the Right in California. The ideas have a radical European flavour, but the enthusiasts in America are able to emphasize particularly effectively, their conservative effects. The problems which post-structuralism and postmodernity pose for social psychologists, and the more general political problems which flow from those sets of ideas, need to be treated as *contradictions*, There are conflicting discourses at work as the

Modern Age appears to die, and there are conflicting political responses by social psychologists to the crisis the death throes have provoked. We will explore these in the final chapter. The moral I want to draw from this chapter is that the social sciences have witnessed ideas similar to those attending the current 'post' craze before, and the positive aspects of post-structuralism must not be allowed to disappear under the popular postmodern illusion that language is free from ideology and power. The attempt to save a space for some form of 'realism' is intimately bound up with the attempt to save a space in social psychology for resistance, a refusal to respond within dominant meanings. [end of page 140]