

Parker, I. (1989) *The Crisis in Modern Social Psychology – and how to end it*.
London: Routledge

[1]

Introduction

[pp. 1-5]

This book is about one of the smaller, dustier corners of the human sciences. Some readers will, I guess, be trapped there, having painted themselves in. There will be a mixture of personal and career investments and, perhaps, a desire to know what makes people tick in social situations. More to say to them in a moment.

Readers outside the discipline will probably know something of the exciting debates which have occurred in the last two decades over the uses of post-structuralism in the human sciences. They may be aware of the contention of some philosophers and historians that we have entered a new cultural period, postmodernity, in which we experience writ large, in everyday social relations, the processes of language to which post-structuralism attends. Maybe they have turned to this book precisely to look a little more closely at what those social relations, and a study of them, would be like.

Social psychology should be about changes in the real world. It should also, though, be concerned with how people can collectively *change* the order of things for themselves. Unfortunately, social psychology as an academic institution is structured in such a way as to blot out what is most interesting about social interaction (language, power, and history) and to divert attention from efforts to de-construct its oppressive functions in a practical way. This is partly why social psychology deservedly gets such a bad press.

This sorry state of affairs can be turned to advantage, though. I suggest that this book be read in two ways. First of all I will focus on social psychology as an example of how a sub-area of the human sciences seals itself off from the outside world, and how it simultaneously crystallizes as a disciplinary apparatus. Issues to do with the ‘ordinary explanations’ people give of their actions, the [2] shared social knowledge they employ to account to others, and the rhetoric which guarantees their power, are filtered through, and distorted by, this apparatus. The description I give of the crisis in social psychology and the proposals put forward to end it open out into general issues of ideology, power, and the culture of which it is a part. Social psychology supports modern culture, ‘modernity’, in which the world is experienced by people as tied together by stories of humanized science, progress, and individual meaning. These stories, or ‘metanarratives’, have supposedly broken down as a new postmodern culture is arising.

Second, despite the uninteresting (and sometimes ludicrous) way social interaction is re-defined in the discipline, I do not want to imply that social phenomena which lie at the border of our individual activities and of social structures, should be simply explained away. They are not irrelevant, and so each discussion in the following pages of things like ordinary explanation, belief, and conversation links them with their wider-ranging political and cultural effects. If we can rescue our understanding of such social-psychological things from the grip of social psychology we can tackle power and engage politically with our present oppressive cultural arrangements from the base up. This book deconstructs social psychology. I show how attempts to improve it have failed, and why we need instead a political understanding of social interaction

which links research with change.

Such suggestions will sound a mite treacherous to readers inside social psychology. Would this not involve putting in jeopardy the whole enterprise of social psychology? Possibly. However, other societies have functioned perfectly well without a discipline of social psychology (or even psychology) and there is no reason to believe that future societies could not also do without it. In fact, if the theories of language and power advanced by post-structuralists and by the diagnosticians of postmodernity are right, we need to be sceptical about the disciplinary practices we reproduce and the self-images we propagate. Positive images should not have the function of humanizing the present, and legitimising it, but they are spaces for resistance to power and ideology.

The moral of the story presented in the following pages, and of the political analysis offered at the end of the book, could be drawn out in different ways depending on where you stand in relation to social psychology. There will be some readers who will [3] have wandered unwittingly or unwillingly across the borders of our land. They may discover that the state of things here is as bad as they suspected, and decide to keep out. To be honest, there are much richer and more sophisticated discussions of post-structuralism and politics in anthropology, sociology, and history, and more interesting descriptions of subjectivity in literature, philosophy, and cultural studies.

A second group of readers, students who have started to study social psychology, will have made some small commitment to the subject. Perhaps they will have become exasperated at the reductionism in psychology generally, and in what passes as 'social' psychology. They might be encouraged at the prospect of moving beyond fixations on the prediction and control of behaviour and press for their teachers and course texts to address seriously the key issue of how we live our lives and how we could do so otherwise. This group is in the relatively strong position of being able to make demands for relevance and some political sensibility in the study of social interaction. This is not an invitation for a long march through the institutions of social psychology. On the contrary, such demands could be more easily made by those who will always be outside (and whose career investments are not at risk).

The third and final group of readers are those who will be hardest to please and most immune to the arguments in these pages. I have, reluctantly, to count myself in this group. We have absorbed much of the jargon of a discipline that is either irrelevant to people outside academic institutions or is just plain deceitful and unpleasant in the picture it paints of human beings. We are bound into the discipline in two ways: first, through the internalization of the defensive postures we adopt when ridiculed by non-social psychologists at such places as seminars or parties; second, through the pleasure we get from reproducing in our little community the language games which hold it together. A *preliminary* step would be for us to connect what we do and say with changes in culture and abandon the pretence that we can be politically neutral.

The most important part of this book, in fact, is that part which deals with how we may wrench ourselves from the cosy confines of social psychology and link up with debates in other disciplines. This involves being critical about our own history, and asking [4] continually whether, by our activities and theories, we are reproducing or *disrupting* oppressive social practices. As will become clear in the course of the following chapters, the term 'ideology' must mean more than merely a 'set of beliefs' to have any critical purchase on the theories I will be discussing. I will argue that post-structuralism is useful, but that we have to retain the term 'ideology' (despite the protestations of fervent foucauldians or derisive derrideans) for political

purposes.

An adequate notion of ideology must include an appreciation of the importance of *conflict*, and so I will argue that we should understand ideology as the effects of power relations in discourses and texts. These power relations are signalled through conflicts over meaning. Similarly, our analysis of 'power' must pose, at the very moment we use the term, a *resistance* to its operations. I understand power to be the reproduction of relations between people in which resistance is suppressed. I hope that the proposals in the final chapter for a programme of research and activity will at least provoke some debate among radical social psychologists, and that something useful will emerge from the debris of the discipline.

There *are* social psychologists, but this does not necessarily mean that it would ever be possible to have a coherent radical social psychology. The way the tensions erupted into the 'crisis in the discipline some fifteen or 50 years ago is proof that a radical Opposition does exist. The problem is that it is fragmented, and the criticisms and alternatives levelled against the 'old-paradigm' laboratory-experimental approach by partisans in the crisis debates were insufficient. Most of the arguments were simply recuperated (absorbed and neutralized) and are still being recuperated today. That process is analysed in this book.

The precondition for such an analysis, however, is an appraisal of the value of critical arguments during the course of the crisis. At the heart of these conflicts was the self-styled 'new paradigm' *ethogenic* social psychology. A simple definition of ethogeny can also serve as an explanation for the word. Ethogeny is the application of ethological methods (the careful observation of the functions of animal behaviour) to speaking beings, human beings who can give accounts of what they are up to. These accounts, which seem simply to be about what people do, also do things themselves. Spoken (and written) accounts do not only describe, they also change the world, and they change relations between [5] people. Once you grasp that, you are thrown into the midst of debates about the power of language in social life.

Ethogenics marked out a little niche for itself by virtue of its anti-experimental stance, but it also made a bid for the humanist vote by turning to the accounts people offer as an alternative to traditional methodologies. This is one of the reasons why it steered clear of an explicit engagement with post-structuralist ideas. It is necessary to recognize the influence of the ethogenic writings, but also, crucially, we have to insist that the crisis in social psychology is not over. It is, then, with those issues that I will begin. [end of page 5]