

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

Part two

Responses

[pp. 69-71]

New social psychology is both an opportunity and a danger to those of us who want to develop radical ideas in the human sciences. It is useful in so far as it opens up the contradictions between mechanistic studies of behaviour (exemplified in positivist approaches) and the attribution of intention to autonomous agents (found in psychology's methodological individualism). New social psychology also echoes the tension outside the discipline between structuralism and hermeneutics. Here is the opportunity, for the debates in the paradigm crisis literature focus on the role of language in reproducing social relations. The door has been pushed open for the discussion of power and ideology in social-psychological discourses and texts.

The danger lies in the role that new social psychology plays as a loyal opposition within the discipline. The double demand of such a role is that it both challenges *and* buttresses social psychology as an institution. This neglects the way the paradigm crisis also provoked *traditional* social psychology into taking language seriously. Over the last fifteen years the old regime has taken measures to absorb ethogenic critiques, taking on board some of their ideas, and to mould experimental methodology to meet changing conditions in the real world.

Traditional social psychology is clueless when it comes to the cultural and political context of its research, and wilfully dismissive of its place in the reproduction of ideology and power. It answers criticisms only in order to strengthen itself. More disturbing still is the way it shifts towards the new social psychology positions just enough to bring them back within the fold - to recuperate them and to dilute the force of their arguments. The theoretical and methodological refinements of recent years appear to be genuine responses, but they are actually ingenious *reactions*. They are defences which immobilize the opposition, to pretend there is no longer a crisis.

Part two of this book is concerned with three such defensive measures on the part of traditional social psychology: the turn to 'ordinary explanations', which promises to carry attribution theory outside the laboratory and take what people say in good faith; the theory of 'social representations', which claims to borrow from the best of sociology and to reveal the content of a social shared reality; and ethnomethodology, which appears to support the study of texts and to account for the construction of conversation [70] and rhetoric. Each of these three approaches connects with ethogenic notions and each has been enthusiastically welcomed, to varying degrees, by new social psychologists. Each, however, finally fails to deal with issues of coercion and control in society and social life.

In Chapters four, five and six then, I discuss case studies of developments in social psychology which have occurred as a direct result of the paradigm crisis in the discipline (the research on 'ordinary explanations'); which owe something to the political crisis which conditioned the paradigm debates (writings on 'social representations'); and one of which explicitly addresses poststructuralist outcomes of the conceptual crisis running parallel to the crisis in other human sciences (the work on ethnomethodology).

In each chapter I take a corpus of texts - those delimited tissues of meaning which develop the theory or report the appropriate evidence - treating them as contributions to

overarching discourses. These discourses are the systems of statements which construct objects (which here are those things we recognize to be 'ordinary explanations', 'social representations', or 'conversations').

In Chapter four I subject the discourse of attribution theory to a deconstruction, that is, I expose and subvert the restriction of meaning in the texts which comprise it. I will also show how that deconstruction can be linked with cultural changes, and how new social-psychological responses remain caught within those terms of reference. The lesson is that we must extend our use of deconstruction to account for the impact of history on social theory. Chapter five draws upon these ideas, and takes to task the discourse emerging around the theory of 'social representations'. The issues raised by deconstruction - of how the effects of power relations are relayed in discourses and texts - are glossed over. It is only possible to understand how power relations have those effects by revealing the systems of meanings which operate as *ideology*.

In Chapter six I examine the claims of the most far-reaching attempts yet within social psychology to break away from both orthodox psychology and sociology. Writers in micro-sociology, who have played their part in inspiring new social psychology, now seem to take on board the ideas of deconstruction and even (occasionally) talk of ideology. Their texts, however, still evade the problem of *power*, power which should be conceived of as the reproduction of relations between people in which resistance is [71] suppressed. A recurring theme through these three chapters is that of the power of institutions, and the way that these condition texts. Chapter four is concerned with the absorption of 'ordinary explanation' into the academic institution of social psychology. Chapter five examines the effects of the split between the academic institutions of psychology and sociology on the study of everyday 'social representations'. Finally, at the close of Chapter six the institutional 'framing' of texts is described in order to counter sentimental descriptions of 'conversation' in social psychology.

Part two concludes, then, with a re-emphasis on the historically constructed institutional divisions which have permitted particular theories and practices to arise in social psychology. The purposes of these three chapters, then, are these: when we know how existing alternatives within social psychology have been neutralized we will be in a better position to ensure it does not also happen to us; we will also be better equipped to move on to explore, in Part three of the book, cultural and political options. [end of page 71]