

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

Part three

Alternatives

[pp 129-130]

Now we are in a position to understand that the crisis in the discipline was part of wider cultural changes. I want to show in these last two chapters that radical work in social psychology has to be pursued both in the sphere of culture outside the discipline where the stuff of social psychology is dreamed into being *and* in the institutions inside where social psychology is formalized and practised.

Chapter seven is concerned with culture, and in particular with the transformations in social interaction and self-understanding which have attended the emergence of postmodernity. First I will consider what a *postmodern* social psychology might look like by piecing together the descriptions of social action that our culture now encourages. We should tread carefully though. The implications of uncritically adopting postmodern culture as the template for a new approach would be pretty grim.

One useful contribution made by new social psychology is its distinction between the expressive sphere, where meanings are circulated, and the practical sphere where the physical necessities of life are answered. I want, despite the arguments of uncritical enthusiasts for post-structuralism and postmodernity, to hold fast to this distinction. But I shall modify it, pour my own meanings into it. The material I will deal with in Chapter seven lies in the expressive sphere of social life, and in this sphere the 'realist' hopes of the mainstream ethogenics inspired by structuralism (in Harré's work) will always come to grief. Realism will not work when applied to discourses, and texts. In the expressive sphere, where cultural and historical meanings lie, the thoroughgoing scepticism of post-structuralism is useful. The problem is that this scepticism can be given an unhelpful political twist when it turns its gaze to the *practical* order of society. It can lead to an apolitical or liberal relativism which cannot accept the reality of conflict and resistance.

In the practical order, which new social psychology deliberately chooses to neglect, on the other hand, a realist account *can* be given. Economic, climatic, demographic and biological factors do yield up to a scientific observer regularities of 'cause' and pattern. It is in this practical sphere that post-structuralism has little purchase. This does not mean that the modes of investigation of, and meanings attributed to, this practical sphere do not change as the expressive order changes. It does mean that a political account [130] of the phenomenon of social psychology must be based on an appreciation of issues other than those normally addressed by social psychology itself. At this point we must take social psychology as an *institution* seriously. The split between psychology and sociology not only prevents social psychology from understanding the nature of ideology and power, but that split makes it unlikely that it will ever be able to generate useful knowledge about those phenomena.

In Chapter eight I turn to the way the institution of social psychology has built upon practical divisions of labour in the 'real' world. As I move back inside social psychology, therefore, I consider the various political positions social psychologists have proposed to solve the crisis. What is the crisis other than a real contradiction - the appearance of conflicting discourses in a text? Such a crisis should be pushed by radical social psychologists as far as it will go. One way of organizing the various solutions that have been

put forward is to map them on to the modern and post-modern positions I discuss in Chapter seven. This is useful but not good enough, for debates over the nature of modernity and post-modernity alone could obscure an account of the ideology and power which glue social psychology together. Can we save social psychology by gradually improving its methods and building better theories, or should we reject the whole enterprise as a dead end, a diversion from a properly progressive understanding of social relations? By considering these questions you will at least see how the conceptual responses to the crisis in the discipline have political repercussions, and then be able to take some steps to end it. [end of page 130]