

Parker, I. and Shotter, J. (eds) (1990) *Deconstructing Social Psychology*. London: Routledge.

Chapter Six

THE ABSTRACTION AND REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY
[pp. 91-102]

Ian Parker

[I.A.Parker@mmu.ac.uk]

We need to understand what social psychology is, the way it operates to produce a certain knowledge, and the way that it reproduces certain relations between people in western culture, in order to deconstruct it. That task of understanding and unravelling involves some attention as to how it arose; what were the conditions which enabled an experimental analysis of human behaviour to come about? I want to show in this chapter that if we pursue this question we will also be able to appreciate the significance of the 'crisis' which struck the discipline in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and see why the alternatives that were put forward by radicals then failed to accomplish the much vaunted revolution in the discipline. Some (e.g. Harré and Secord 1972) argued at the time that this revolution would be restricted to 'paradigms', while others, including a number of the contributors to the Armistead (1974) collection, went further to implicate the wider society. The crucial question now is; how can we avoid simply rehearsing once again those crisis critiques, and set in train a dynamic which will actually *change* the discipline?

After sketching out the main contours of the early history in social psychology, I will go on to look at what we might mean by ideology and power so that the descriptions we give help us to deconstruct them. Ideology and power can only be grasped when we put a critical distance between ourselves and the discipline. This will lead us to taking seriously new post-crisis developments inside social psychology, and the culture of deconstruction that has emerged outside it. The conditions which led to the crisis exploding, and throwing into question the theoretical and methodological presuppositions of social psychology, were [92] primarily political and cultural - the dissent in the discipline owed something to the upheavals of 1968. This much was pointed out by Moscovici (1972), and I will return to his ideas below. A point I want to stress throughout this chapter is that a dynamic and enduring deconstruction of social psychology also has to be informed by politics.

THE DISCIPLINE...

If we glance back to the beginning of the century in America where experimental social psychology began, we see economic and political upheavals profoundly affecting academic life. The economic changes, the developing organisation of labour, and the violent company responses made for a series of conflicts within which any account of social behaviour has to be situated. It would not be going too far to say that the tensions in American society *constituted* social psychology. One crucial change in American life, which has been well documented in the critical histories of the relationship between intelligence testing and eugenics (e.g. Kamin 1974), was a massive rise in population. The increase in the indigenous (white settler) population, and

in southern and eastern European communities through immigration, was accompanied by a rise in xenophobia. It is tempting to see this racist response as confined to extremist groups, but it was not. Racism helped structure the way psychology and social psychology treated non-whites. Alongside this, there was a massive concentration of the forces of production which absorbed these people into new factories and industrial plants. There was work for newcomers, but the 'problem' which immediately became apparent to the employers was that these people were not acquainted with the discipline of factory life.

Control

The 'solution' to this problem was Taylorism. Taylor's (1911) programme for the scientific management of workers was used to 'predict and control' the new workforce, and thus required the examination and calculation of human work. Here, in a replay, a century later, of Foucault's (1977) descriptions of surveillance in European prisons, was the penetration of the gaze of the factory [93]managers into the smallest of the workers' movements. Not only did this facilitate the exploitation of labour, but it also resulted in the draining away of the expertise of each individual. The worker was 'de-skilled' and left to carry out simple task-routines. There are conceptual links here with the way cognitive psychology treats its 'subjects' (Shotton 1987).

A critical account of activity at work should include some attention to such de-skilling and to the experience of alienation which arises when others control the labour process. Instead, in 'scientific management' we had, for technical and commercial purposes, the *abstraction* of behaviour from a meaningful whole and the *re-presentation* of that behaviour in the worksheets and ledgers of the managers. Behaviour was broken up and reconstituted. You might think that while individualist cognitive psychology could happily ignore the social context of action, *social* psychology would have reflected on the position of power it holds over its subjects. It did not. For social psychologists at that time, factory work exemplified human behaviour. Many of the early studies on social facilitation had the workshop as the setting or pretext for the laboratory experiment. In the process, social psychologists imagined that they were able to bridge the gulf between pure and applied research in psychology. This breaking up of human action - social action - also solved for social psychologists the problem of how to deal with the spectre of mass activity which was, they read in Le Bon's (1896) lurid descriptions, haunting Europe. The laboratory-experimental framework enabled them to break up collective action into components that would be meaningless to people engaged in it, but meaningful (in a bizarre way) to social psychologists steeped in descriptions of such processes as 'social facilitation'. The enterprise of social psychology became that of abstracting behaviour from its meaningful context and re-presenting it.

Fragmentation

These events are important, for the past is not just like another place. What happened then conditions, limits and creates, what happens now. We live out the effects, live as heirs to that state of things when social psychology was a kind of 'laboratory for the manufacture of souls' in which experience is individualised and [94] quantified (Garner 1985: 214). The ideological effects of the crowd theories, as of other popular theories, live on, and later developments in the social psychology of collective action reproduce the politics of the early Le Bon inspired accounts. The effects also live on in the way individual activity is deliberately fragmented in

social psychology.

There is a dual, double and dialectically connected, consequence of the breaking up of social action. The two aspects of this twin effect are these. First, the individual subjects are torn from social context, and collective action is depicted as abnormal or deviant. It is no surprise, then, to find that social psychology joined the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* in 1921, and with its 'sister science' attempted to track down pathologies. Second, and crucially, the individual subject was 'protected' against collective phenomena. Part of the function of social psychology was to defend the ideal rational autonomous citizen from the horrors of the crowd or group mind. Sometimes the defence against the collective mind was developed by way of a refusal to accept that such a thing existed, but so much energy was spent on such denials that the phenomenon was continually re-produced as an absent presence. This double effect of the 'deconstruction' of social action in the service of oppression means that a radical social psychology will not succeed in deconstructing the discipline by simply reintroducing meaning. Social psychology as a set of theories and practices, of texts and discourses, succeeded in tearing apart the individual and the social in such a way as to ensure that the two halves when joined again in academic work do not make up the original whole.

The upshot of my account so far is that a cultural and economic crisis constituted social psychology, so that the concepts it employed and the methodology it adopted ensured its isolation from analysis of properly social behaviour. The First World War ensured the isolation of the now dominant American strand of social psychology from European theory, and G. Stanley Hall's comments immediately after the war capture a feeling for the experimental and national climate (as well as for what gender our discipline is): 'As we have put more psychology into this war than any other nation, and as we have more laboratories and more men than all the others we should henceforth lead the world in Psychology.... Hence the future of the world depends in a [95] peculiar sense upon American psychologists' (Hall 1919). These optimistic sentiments also inspired psychologists concerned with 'social' behaviour, and fuelled their activities, until critics broke through in the early 1970s and asserted the importance of personal meanings.

... AND THE CRISIS

Paradoxically, the crisis some fifteen years ago, and the arrival of 'new social psychologies' (Harré and Secord 1972; Shotter 1975), reinforced the very isolation of individuals from social life that they intended to overcome. The account gatherers of the supposed 'new paradigm' imported material from microsociology (Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1971; Mead 1934) and they tried to use this to capture the meaning of action. The key mistake they made was to attribute that meaning to individuals using the dubious touchstone of 'common sense'. Unfortunately it was not good enough calling for people to be treated as if they were human beings (Harré and Secord 1972) when the dominant image of the human being was the traditional individual of liberal western political thought (see Shotter, Chapter 11, in this volume). The crisis literature, such as the Armistead (1974) book, contains many powerful political arguments against social psychology, but the most influential strand of thinking on the radical fringes in the following years was to be a generous commonsensical image of our 'selves' as potentially autonomous undivided beings (in post-structuralist parlance what we would call 'unitary subjects'). It is difficult to step back from that image of ourselves when it is rooted in the common sense of an academic discipline and its circumambient culture. However, we *must* do so if we want to

deconstruct its ideology and its power.

The phenomena of ideology and power were sometimes acknowledged by the critics (with laboratory-experimental social psychology portrayed as the villain of the piece), but new social psychologists generally laboured under the illusion that if the laboratory shackles were removed good common sense would gush out from the free subjects. What were missing from the critiques were two points. The first was to do with the hold of power and ideology in social psychology, and the second concerned the external forces which social psychology supports.

[96]

The power of ideology

First then, ideology and power cannot simply be wished away. To be aware of them does not automatically solve the problems they pose for social psychologists, for these phenomena form as well as constrain human action. Power, as Foucault (1980) pointed out, is not only repressive; it is also productive. The relations it reproduces then require justification through an ideological 'social reality' that all the participants should adhere to. During the crisis, Moscovici published a review of the state of the discipline. There he argued that social psychology should be the study of 'everything that pertains to *ideology* and to *communication*' (Moscovici 1972:55). We need to reassert this point now, and insist that included within that 'everything' should be social psychology itself; what is the influence of ideology in social psychology, and what is the significance of its power?

For an adequate answer to these questions the link between ideology and power is the key, and in order to forge that link we have to uncouple ideology and 'communication'. They are not the same thing. The everyday commonsensical meaning of communication that Moscovici appeals to is that of the transfer of information from one person to the other(s). Communication is not actually like that at all, and can be deconstructed (as Easthope shows in Chapter 5, in this volume), but if we follow Moscovici for a moment and accept the traditional picture, we will find that a consequence is, that when we run ideology and communication together, we lose a sense of the particularity of ideology. Ideology certainly 'communicates' something, but its power is to do with what (individual or collective) actions are enabled or inhibited by it. Ideology sets the framework for the continuation of, and resistance to, power (Billig *et al*, 1988). The struggle against it is a struggle to recognise contradictions and to try to move beyond them. In deconstructionist terms, the struggle involves the positing of new terms, new practices, which disrupt the present concepts.

So, for example, our 'subjects' are generally viewed as active when alone and aberrant when allied with others. But in the face of economic changes and attempts to research such phenomena as unemployment in the real world, subjects out of work are depicted as passive when out of company (or companies). A case [97] in point is Bhavnani's descriptions of the social psychologists role in the study of social representations of politics (in Chapter 10, in this volume). As one of the recently proposed solutions to the confusions in social psychology, the concept of 'social representations' repays some attention. Moscovici's (1984a) development of the theory of social representations has actually run together ideology and communication in exactly the way I have been warning against, and ideologies are all too often treated as if they were just systems of ideas, which they are not.

The ideology of power

The role that social psychologists play in the oppression (or empowerment) of its 'subjects' raises the second point that was missing from many of the crisis critiques of social psychology. This was a recognition that social psychology's part in the production of disciplined 'subjects' used to being individualised and observed was actually very minor. Social psychology is a mere thread in the webs of modern culture. In order to understand the ideological function of social psychology, and the limited power it does enjoy, we have to be able to strike some critical distance not only from particular mistakes in the field, but also from modern culture as a whole. There are two ways we can do this:

A spatial metaphor

The first is to strike a critical distance by thinking in spatial terms. This may mean turning to the struggles of women, or of black people or of other oppressed groups, as reference points to engage with what social psychological knowledge does, and who it excludes. This means going further than simply allowing the oppressed to speak. It means dragging political examples into academic forums (e.g. Reicher 1988), and employing a political vocabulary to reflect on how social psychology shuts them out. For example, to talk of sexism and racism is to name, to constitute as a recognisable problem. The words chosen, and the discourse within which those words operate, identifies an ideological process. In these cases, the criteria for affixing the label 'ideology' are essentially glosses on the political support we give to the groups that social psychology, as a matter of course, traditionally disempowers.

[98] It is true that I am appealing to a variety of common sense in this case as a stepping stone to taking ideology seriously. The difference I want to mark from the new social psychologies is that it is an *oppositional* a deliberately and transparently fragmented, common sense which arises from experiences of oppression rather than from within the dominant culture. At the same time, we should beware of objectifying experience, and of using ideology as a noun, for that will mislead us into imagining it is a fixed thing. Borges (1985), among others, has suggested that there need be no nouns, and in this case he is right. We have to be able to think, as Borges did, 'otherwise' to support our practical objections to the cultural power social psychology enjoys. We also have to leave some space for the analysis economists give of the material interests that underpin that cultural power.

A temporal metaphor

The other way to produce a critical distance from ideology and power inside and outside social psychology is to think of it in temporal terms. Historical shifts can be described and used to legitimise new ideas and to discredit old ones if a notion of 'progress' is proposed (e.g. Billig 1976), or the supposed changes can be used to support traditional notions dressed up as radical signs of the times. I want to use the rest of the chapter to tease out the implications of a historical shift we appear to be undergoing into a culture of deconstruction, and I will do this by following Moscovici ten years on from his argument that we should study ideology and communication, to a claim he makes which attempts to solve all our crisis and paradigm problems by establishing social representations as a proper field of study for social psychology.

POST-CRISIS, AND THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

Moscovici claims that we are moving into a 'new era of representations. He says: Just as painting has returned from abstract art to representational art, psychology has reverted from behaviour to consciousness' (Moscovici 1982: 117). Equivalences are being drawn here between abstraction and behaviourism on the one hand (and we are invited in his rhetoric to see both of these negatively), and some variety of realism and mentalism on the other. It is this second link (which Moscovici applauds) which causes [99] problems. Among the problems is the ease with which 'communication' can be slotted into the pair of terms cited by him as the solution, and the corresponding way in which 'ideology' (used as a pejorative term in this case, in contrast to Moscovici's earlier usage) would be associated with abstraction and behaviourism, and thus seen as fortunately fading into the past.

I do not have the space to pursue these connections here, and they run counter to the pessimistic picture of the present Moscovici (1984a) paints elsewhere (Parker 1987). It is helpful, though, to attend to such inconsistencies, for contradictions are characteristic of ideology and, when we find them, they are the points where we can start deconstructing it. The suspicion that ideology is being relegated to the past in Moscovici's statement arises not out of other things that he says, but from the way that a corresponding historical shift has been described in contemporary cultural and literary theory. This theory locates the emergence of deconstruction at the close of modernism and in the move into a 'postmodern' condition (Lyotard 1984).

We have to take these theories seriously for two reasons. First, because talk of 'ideology' and 'power in collections like this one is uneasily jostling for space with talk of rhetoric (Billig 1987), discourse (Potter and Wetherell 1987) and social representations (Farr and Moscovici 1984). Some of this material is very useful, some not so immediately radical. This means we have to hold firm to *political* criticisms of the discipline, and be aware that an optimistic delusion that ideology was a 'thing' whose power has come to an end would seriously blunt our criticisms of the ways those approaches are used in traditional (ideological) ways. Second, because the cultural changes are being discussed in other disciplines, it is a useful interdisciplinary tactic for us to make these links. (Incidentally, if it was *just* a tactic, then this would be in keeping with the way that the theories are usually used in postmodern social science; Parker 1990). The shift in culture is a shift to a state of things in which deconstruction is continually at work, continually undermining the cluster of old modern beliefs in the power of individual rationality, truth and underlying meaning, necessary historical progression and scientific social reconstruction.

[100]

Pastiche....

In architecture the postmodern culture of deconstruction is found in the whimsical eggcup designs at TV AM or in the technicist pastiche of the Lloyds building and Pompidou centre. In music in the lyrics of 'Half Man Half Biscuit', or the ostensibly repetitive chants of Laurie Anderson or Philip Glass. In film in the surreal but pointless *Zed and Two Noughts* or *True Stories*. In literature we could find it exemplified in the self-consciously textual Italo Calvino or Umberto Eco. In television it could be Dallas or Dynasty. In philosophy we might find it in the critical readings of Derrida or libidinal deconstructions of Deleuze. In psychoanalysis it exists in the non-rationalist writings of Lacan or Kristeva. In sociology it appears in the dizzying rhetoric of Baudrillard or Castoriadis, and in microsociology in the descriptions of the grasping and losing of meaning given by Garfinkel. Coming closer to home now, we find the unravelling of truth claims and reflexivity in discourse analysis and studies of rhetoric.

The sense the idea of postmodernism makes for radicals is twofold. First, it serves a function in

the distance it marks from the culture of 'modernity' of which our discipline is a component. Modern social psychology attempted to discover the truth about behaviour, safeguarded the autonomy of the 'subject' in whom that truth was thought to reside and constructed an elaborate series of scientific mechanisms to observe and control social action (Parker 1989). Its ideological power, which we are now in a position to reflect upon, lies in its ability to carry out this programme of observation unquestioned by all but the occasional maverick. Its cultural power derived from its *identity* with a modern culture which is characterised both by a concern with the regulation of behaviour and, paradoxically, with the attribution of responsibility, and of consciousness, to individual subjects (Foucault 1979a).

Second, the idea of postmodernism allows us to see the context for the contradictory modern project of wrenching units of behaviour, action or experience from one another and then pretending to give a representation of what the object of study is presumed to be. We have an abstraction of action from its whole and a re-presentation of it. Scientific management and social psychology, then, are just two of the apparatuses of this process of [101] abstraction and representation. We now have to recognise the cultural specificity of all the concepts we employ, including that of representation. To 'represent' appeared in English in the fourteenth century with two overlapping and contradictory senses: to make present to the mind, and to stand for something that is not present. To abstract the key elements of something may or may not serve to represent that thing (Williams 1976). The concept itself is contradictory, and so it is not possible to clearly represent it. The category poses a problem rather than a solution.

If we return now to Moscovici's statement about the promise of the new era of representations, we should read him as a *modern* social psychologist who simply switches focus from behaviour to consciousness or from abstraction to representation with *none* of these terms marking a real critical break with the discipline. He remains in modernity. While this helps deconstruct Moscovici's claim, we should also be aware of the negative side of uncritically falling in the company of postmodernism, and this is because the new times can come packaged with post-capitalism and post-marxism (or, worse, with post-feminism and the end of ideology). We could risk buying something which will rot away our critical work on ideology and power the moment we put it to work.

... *or politics?*

There are, however, at least three positive reasons for adopting the idea. The first is that the phenomenon has already been correlated with economic changes - the growing service sector, information technology and microelectronics (Jameson 1984). Postmodernism may reflect not 'post' but merely late capitalism; and it is vital that we hold on to some notion, however 'modern' that may be, that real material interests influence culture (Mandel 1978). The second positive reason is that the deconstruction of a deconstruction is not such a bad thing. It is useful as a tactical procedure, and there will always come a point when we will want it to unravel itself so we can move on from ideas to practices. The third reason for adopting it is that it opens the discipline of social psychology up spatially to developments in other academic fields and to the voices of the oppressed outside the academic world. It also pushes us temporally beyond each seemingly radical [102] alternative social psychology which threatens to capture and immobilise opposition within the subject.

We cannot do the job of connecting each and every action to material economic changes because the connections are not that direct. We are, after all, only social psychologists. However,

we *can* open up the contradictory meanings of social psychology's discourse and practice and thereby reveal its nature as a social construction. This is a necessary step to revealing its power. Every social and social-scientific construct is fragile, and this sometimes makes deconstruction seem easy. It is easy to get caught in the temptations of being 'post' and just leaving it at that, but by using political spatial and temporal reference points we can keep our critical distance from the re-emerging modern social psychologies (such as the theory of social representations) as well as the newer postmodern approaches (such as discourse analysis).

To say we are post-something is to mean that we are after it, dislodging and replacing it. We should be after modern social psychology in this sense. However, we are also after it in another sense. We need to be close behind it, continually chasing it to track down its ideological, and power effects. This is what motivates the deconstruction of social psychology. So we are behind and beyond it. I have tried to show that in order to stay in both positions at once we have to ensure that deconstruction is accompanied by a historical analysis of ideology and a political awareness of the power relations which hold disciplines together. We have to know what it is we are after. [End of page 102]