

## **BETWEEN BEAUTY AND HUMILIATION: CASTING A SHARP EYE ON THE PANACEA OF PSYCHOLOGY**

Parker, I (2007) **Revolution in Psychology: Alienation to emancipation**. London: Pluto Press. ISBN-13 978 0 7453 2536 1. Pages vi + 265.

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I can think of no better way to begin this review – in an attempt at capturing Parker’s reminder and challenge of Psychology’s foregrounding within *institutions* and *practices* and not just theoretical and empirical deliberations – than with an old Afro-Cuban myth:

“Olofi created the world and all the things in it. He created beautiful things and ugly things. He created Truth and Falsehood. He made Truth big and powerful, but he made Falsehood skinny and weak. And he made them enemies. He gave Falsehood a cutlass, unbeknownst to Truth. One day, the two met and started fighting. Truth, being so big and powerful, felt confident and also very complacent since he didn’t know that Falsehood had a cutlass. So Falsehood cunningly cut off Truth’s head. This jolted and enraged Truth and he started scrambling around for his head. He stumbled on Falsehood and, knocking him down, Truth felt the head of Falsehood which he took to be his own. His strength being truly awesome, a mere pull from Truth yanked off the head of Falsehood and this Truth placed on his own neck. And from that day what we have is this grotesque and confusing mismatch: the body of Truth; the head of Falsehood.” (quoted in Jeyifo, 1990:33).

**Revolution in Psychology: Alienation to emancipation** spans twelve chapters, each building on its predecessor, painstakingly introducing and illustrating the often “grotesque” and “confusing mismatch” that characterizes much Psychological theory and practice. The argument and central thrust of the book is that the discipline of psychology is complicit in exploitative uses that render the discipline political and ideological in effect – a much welcome critique although one at risk of becoming redundant. This is especially so when one considers the pertinent and biting critiques of the discipline that have arisen from an increasingly diverse array of critical practitioners. Although widely diverse in approach and orientation, these critiques have as a unifying agenda and principle the role of the discipline in promoting social and material tensions within society and seeking ways to not

only challenge but also seek solutions. To brush Parker's **Revolution in Psychology: Alienation to emancipation** as merely another text falling within this genre however, would be misleading and something of an injustice to the challenges posed in the book. I eagerly embrace the book's envisioning of agency in its attempt to move beyond mere denouncement of the discipline to actively seeking new answers and solutions to the potential and limits of psychology. Indeed, on a second reading of the text I was reminded of Zygmunt Bauman's paraphrasing of Albert Camus's description of "beauty" and "humiliation": "Beauty is the expression of the human ability to make and think a different world (it is a going beyond the necessities of this world), and humiliation (whether the physical humiliation of suffering or the material humiliation of poverty) is the piling up of necessity over and against possibility ..." (Bauman & Tester, 2001:11-12). **Revolution in Psychology** is an important and necessary reminder of the propensity of social science to contribute both beauty and humiliation within the world we live. It is this dual engagement with the place and function of Psychology to the project of beauty and humiliation that the book makes its particular contribution.

Chapter one introduces a contradiction and thus sets the general gist and agenda of the book: if we agree that the society we live in is fundamentally exploitative and thus embodying differential relations of power ... to what extent can a "helping" profession that is focused on adapting people to their society truly "help" individuals and society at large? The general argument is clear: there is no clear-cut breach between academic and political uses of knowledge. The discipline of Psychology is implicated in this reinforcement of neoliberal agendas, often providing the vocabulary for individualization processes. Chapter two builds on this notion of complicity in exploiting and reinforcing social and other tensions in society through a specific discussion on the ideological tool of "individualism".

The ways that human individuals are "managed" in liberal democracies comes under the spotlight here. Through the promotion of very specific self-policing modes of identification, what has come to be known as "subjectification", the discipline of Psychology has come to exert much invisible forms of power that is legitimated through academic research. Chapters three, four and five extend this issue of subjectification with particular emphasis on different domains of the exercise of power; from the regulation of workers both within and outside of industry to the family as a key site of reproduction. The pathologising of dissent, from quarters that do not fall within the "normal" boundaries of behaviour and identity, is explored through the lens of so-called "political" and "social" psychologists. The chapter argues that the attempt by traditional social and political psychologists to understand group "behaviour" through the lens of "normality" and "pathology" invariably means that collective forms of social action that challenge existing social and political systems are pathologised. The recourse to seeking individualized kinds of explanations for political actions promotes the reductionism of social and political action and movements.

Not only traditional psychological practice comes under critique. The so-called radical and liberatory fields of Critical and Postmodern psychologies with their emphasis on critical and alternative approaches to doing research are also held up to scrutiny. In Chapter seven for example, Parker challenges those psychologists and practitioners seeking to practice more critical and emancipatory forms of Psychology to consider the ways attempts at "improving" and thus redeeming the discipline may be fraught with alternatives that

themselves prove exploitative and futile in failing to truly empower people. We are given much to ponder here: can we improve psychology from within? Can we ever step outside of our practice? What problems of epistemology, for instance, hinder much critical work from within traditional *and* alternative practices? How does psychological research, for example, feed into social tensions and problems [the postmodern notion of identities as fluid for instance may unwittingly feed capitalist agendas, what Sennett (1998) refers to as “corrosion of character” that is implicit to globalizing and exploitative labour relations]? And related to this, what problematics of subjectivity become prominent? The corrosion of character ironically also include new forms of “alternative” forms of practice – qualitative, interpretive, spiritual etc that portend to speak to the disillusion with “hard” science. These new approaches are often inseparable from neoliberal agendas of fragmented selves. It is these “therapeutic alternatives” and their complicity in dehumanizing practices that comes under scrutiny in chapter six.

**Revolution in Psychology** reflects a note of possibility that exists for more emancipatory forms of practice and toward which we may begin to work. In this regard the book re-imagines agency in terms of new kinds of coalitions and therapies that envisage and enact power – *not* power that humiliates but power that embraces a possibility of beauty through interrogation and active reflection on potential for transformation by continually considering psychology’s limits and potential for political agendas. Seeking solutions to the “grotesque” and “confusing mismatch” of psychology’s ideals and effects within society, Parker engages with alternative approaches and struggles for emancipation – at both academic and practitioner levels – towards the end. The book is comprehensibly written (another welcome departure from the genre), introducing psychology to the undergraduate through a different lens from the conventional psychology text. The discipline and its ideology is the central point of introduction – the place of psychology *within society* is emphasized. The *power* that the discipline exudes is critiqued in relation to its ideals. A lucid introduction – not just to the field of critical psychology – but to psychology itself.

## REFERENCES.

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