

## **INSTANT CRITICAL**

### **Book review**

Hepburn, Alexa (2003) **An introduction to critical social psychology**. London: Sage. ISBN 0 7619 6210 7 pbk. Pages 278.

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The claim that social psychology is in a state of crisis has been circulating for a good thirty years now. A claim blithely ignored by the mainstream, where the relentless business of conducting mind-numbingly inane research for publication in the more than 70 social psychology journals has kept many thousands of minor academics dutifully employed. Better than letting them sell drugs to children, I suppose. Central to the perpetuation of this melancholy little discipline is the brisk trade in social psychology textbooks, where a remarkable display of literary cloning leaves the initiate with a sense that this alleged crisis (if it exists at all) is a figment of the perverse imaginations of Marxists, feminists, post-structuralists and other unsavoury intellectual iconoclasts. Which is, of course, pretty much what it is.

The crisis was initially advertised in the 1970s by European social psychologists, anxious about the growing USAmerican postivist hegemony in the discipline. They accused the North Americans of a strongly individualist bias and an inappropriate insistence on experimental methods, both of which served to effectively remove the "social" from social psychology. This critique marked a methodological rift between the two continents, where the Europeans leaned towards the integration of social theory and qualitative research, raising questions around social identity, ideology, and intergroup relations.

In the 1980s this critique was updated to include the insights of post-structuralism, drawing especially on the work of Michel Foucault. Through the following decade these theoretical resources were gradually consolidated into a coherent set of research methods in the form of discourse analysis. This was an important development, as previously most critical works in social psychology had to spend nearly all of their energy developing a critique of the suffocating USAmerican hegemony and defending their alternative theoretical frameworks, so had little time to actually get on with the business of actually doing different kinds of research.

The idea that there is an established and coherent alternative to mainstream social psychology emerged only recently with the publication of texts that did not simply

provide a theoretical critique of the mainstream, but sought to showcase the critical approaches. These tended to be edited collections with chapters by a range of authors exploring different problems from diverse theoretical perspectives. Recent South African examples include Ratele and Duncan's **Social psychology: Identities and relationships** (see review by David Neves in this issue of **PINS**), and Hook *et al*'s **Critical psychology**. While these works offer convincing evidence of an exciting and productive field, they have tended to offer diversity rather than coherence, and varied examples of specialized work rather than a broad integrated introduction.

This leaves an unfortunate vacuum: the absence of accessible critical textbooks that can readily be prescribed for students of social psychology. This problem is compounded by two dubious beliefs: that students should first be forced to learn the reactionary traditions of US American social psychology before being exposed to the contemporary alternatives, and that critical social psychology (CSP) is simply too intellectually abstract for undergraduates, and should be kept in reserve for only the most dedicated and committed postgraduates who show a particular affinity for that sort of material.

But we all know that nature (or if not nature, then certainly the market) abhors a vacuum, and thus Hepburn's **Introduction to critical social psychology** appears: a serious attempt to provide an accessible, integrated introduction to a historically contested field notorious for its theoretical complexity and intellectual heterogeneity. A task almost by definition doomed to failure?

### **MIND AND SOCIETY.**

The book is divided into two major sections: "Mind and society", and "Resolutions and dilemmas". The first includes chapters on social cognition, Marxist, psychoanalytic and feminist critiques. From the outset Hepburn traces critical social psychology back to traditions firmly inside the mainstream canon, namely the famous experiments of Allport, Asch, Sherif, Milgram and Zimbardo. These figures are seen as raising the founding problem of CSP: the relationship between the individual and society. This leads into the "first wave" of self-consciously oppositional European social psychology with the development of social identity theory. Here Hepburn traces the increasingly sophisticated investigation of the question of social influence in the various attempts to show how society affects individuals.

The chapter on Marxist critics takes this analysis further by exploring the famous insight that social life determines consciousness rather than vice versa. The introduction to Marxism is rather brief. Hepburn addresses essential concepts such as false consciousness, ideology and hegemony, showing the relationship between society and individual consciousness that these suggest. There is not much exploration of capitalism as a global system that affects almost every aspect of our lives, especially in the areas of work and consumption. Instead she quickly moves on to the Frankfurt School, focussing on Adorno and authoritarianism rather than the traditionally neglected but possibly more relevant studies on late industrial society by others such as Marcuse. This gives way to critiques of Marxist thought, specifically Foucault's alternative view of power, and Derrida's deconstructive re-reading. Hepburn avoids the common extremes of either ignoring Marxism as a quaint historical curiosity, or of positing it as *the* necessary foundation of any critical inquiry. Nonetheless she does move with rather

indecent haste over those aspects of Marx's work valuable for CSP before launching into the critiques. The recently emerging popular critiques of globalization have put anti-capitalism firmly back on the critical agenda, but in this chapter we are left without a sense of how CSP should be grappling with these issues.

The third chapter tackles psychoanalysis. Here again the chapter compresses a range of theoretical positions that could fill several books - but then those books already exist, and the aim is rather to provide a brief introduction. We are given a clear sense of how psychoanalysis subverts the idea of the rational individual and can offer powerful explanations of seemingly incomprehensible social behaviour. The basic Freudian notions of repression and the unconscious are covered, but then we rapidly move to Kleinian object relations and the more contemporary work of Hollway. Parker and Billig's critical uses of psychoanalysis are discussed, followed by an exploration of the post-structuralist psychoanalysis of Lacan and later feminists. Hepburn points to the danger of psychodynamic explanations falling back into individualism - explaining everything in terms internal psychic processes - but shows how many critical theorists have instead used psychoanalysis to show precisely how individual subjectivity is penetrated and structured by the social world. Here Lacan is a useful resource in providing an explanation of how identity is shaped in terms of the available systems of social meaning. Hepburn also evaluates the feminist critiques of the psychoanalysis which seek move away from the tendency to view current notions of gender as normal, appropriate or healthy, and instead to show their arbitrary and unstable character. Here again the reader is left a little out of breath by the rapid sweep over nearly a century of critical thought in a single chapter, but on the way the key arguments and theorists are clearly signposted, opening the path for further investigation.

The final chapter in the "Mind and society" section explores the importance of feminist theory in critical psychology. Feminism has been one of the healthiest streams of recent critical psychology, providing an extremely well developed example of the ability to show how a seemingly natural or normal state of affairs is both socially constructed in specific ways, and conceals systematic inequality and violence against certain people. Hepburn briefly outlines the traditional strands of Marxist, liberal and radical feminist thought, but quickly moves on to her real interest, post-structuralism feminism. She explores some of the wealth of recent feminist discourse analytic research, especially Margaret Wetherell and Ros Gill, showing how current identities and arrangements are maintained and justified by range of contradictory and complementary discourses. There is also discussion of Kitzinger's critique of heterosexism and the pathologization of lesbian and gay experience, moving on to an explanation of Judith Butler's contribution to queer theory. Hepburn reviews recent research on female experiences of embodiment, ranging from the effects of religious fundamentalism researched by Nawal El Saadawi to the issues around eating disorders and sexuality in the work of Helen Malson and Jane Ussher, as well as the provocative explorations of gender and technology in the work of Donna Haraway which deeply disrupt traditional notions of femininity. Hepburn concludes this chapter with a detailed consideration of feminism and relativism. While feminists have been eager to take up social constructionist arguments, many have felt anxious that taken to its logical conclusion, this leads to epistemological relativism where material realities get lost and it becomes impossible to defend a moral position. Hepburn clearly presents the main arguments that have been raised in this regard, showing why she remains unconvinced by them, and instead sees

significant critical possibilities in avoiding the traditional appeal to absolute foundations as the only basis for valuable knowledge.

### **RESOLUTIONS AND DILEMMAS.**

The second section of the book focuses more extensively on the post-structuralist approaches to Critical Social Psychology, comprising the following chapters: "Subjectivity critics", "Discourse critics", "Postmodern critics" and "Integrations and subversions".

The notion of subjectivity is vital for CSP, because it provides some conceptual distance from the notion of "the individual", an idea that already assumes too much: an independent entity with certain innate qualities such as consciousness, rationality, agency, the ability for self-reflection, and personality - to suggest just a few. Instead the notion of subjectivity allows us to investigate how people have come to be, and to experience themselves as being, individuals. Hepburn gives a clear account of Foucault's analysis of the specific historical practices that produced the modern individual. Here the discipline of psychology is itself an object of critical enquiry, for it is argued that psychology does not simply describe individuals, but has been as essential technology in their production, producing ideas of the self and practices of self-monitoring that produced precisely the contemporary subjects that consider themselves to be individuals. Hepburn cautions us against assuming (as even many critical psychologists do) that we need to build our work on a specific idea of identity, personality, or the self, but rather that our analysis needs to show how these are themselves effects of other social processes.

Hepburn goes on to explore the other major term in contemporary CSP: discourse. Discourse analysis currently means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, and this chapter does much to clarify the varying stakes. Most discursive approaches start with the view that language is not simply a neutral medium that people use to communicate whatever is in their minds, but beyond that there are marked differences in the extent to which they see discourses as either practical means of achieving certain interactive ends, or in contrast, as the means by which experience and identity are socially constructed. In the first case, writers such as Potter and Edwards provide detailed analyses of conversations in which people are shown to be producing specific effects while creating the impression of simply telling the truth. Here, and in the work of other discourse analysts such as Wooffitt, what is most interesting is how the truth effects - evidence, plausibility, coherence, rationality, reasonableness - are produced. Once one looks beyond the simple question of truth or falsity and explores how truth effects are produced, one can also ask why? This leads to the other major question in discourse analysis: the relationship between knowledge and power. While many on the conversation analysis side of discourse work avoid making claims about the social distribution of power, on the social construction side this is often the essential question. Discourse here becomes the means by which power is produced and sustained, and it is by critical analysis of the workings of discourse that power relations can be revealed and transformed.

The chapter on post-structuralism tackles the fundamental epistemological shift away from the traditional modernist assumptions about knowledge that psychology is built on. Here both the story of the growth of scientific knowledge, and the idea of the neutral

scientific fact that simply describes some feature of the external world, are made deeply problematic. But Hepburn goes further than this, showing how even the qualitative and interpretative approaches of earlier critical social psychologists usually appeal to some unquestionable claims that must be protected from critical enquiry - usually a set of assumptions about knowledge or subjectivity that function as taken-for-granted or self-evident truths. She shows how post-structuralism shifts the question from the traditional scientific one of "is this claim true or false?", to the more political enquiry into specific conditions which make the claim possible or plausible, and the effects of making it at all.

Hepburn provides an overview of Lyotard's critique of the metanarratives that are used to organise knowledge - the stories of science, capitalism, religion - and the ways in which they authorise certain kinds of knowledge and marginalise others. She explores the structuralist critique of the idea that language is a set of labels for pre-existing things in the external world, and instead shows how it structures the experience of those things it claims to simply name. Hepburn remains one of the only critical social psychologists to go further than this and seriously engage the work of Derrida on deconstruction, avoiding the usual sloppy tendency to use the word deconstruction to describe any critical analysis, and instead giving us a serious attempt to explain Derrida's key arguments and their significance for CSP. This enables her to interrogate our most basic assumptions about the self, society and knowledge, including many assumptions that have escaped the scrutiny of most previous work in this field.

The final chapter, "Integrations and subversions", provides a perspective on the whole world. Hepburn identifies three major lines of enquiry within her CSP:

- i) How society works, and how it can be changed.
- ii) How knowledge is justified and made factual, and how it can be changed.
- iii) How the subject and personhood are made sense of, and what the implications of such understandings might be. (p228).

She shows that ideas about subjectivity, reality and knowledge are necessarily interrelated, and argues against positions that avoid questioning any one of these areas, especially where they simply advance a particular set of claims as being necessarily true and immune from further enquiry. In conclusion she shows the practical interventions and possibilities of transformation that follow from the critical approaches she suggests, although here the South African reader might want to develop their own more specific agenda.

Hepburn leaves us with a strong sense that CSP in Britain is deeply divided by an antagonism between realists and relativists. What is interesting is that while most of South African thinking has been influenced by the avowedly realist work of writers such as Parker and Burman (or the "soft constructionism" of Vivien Burr), Hepburn is firmly on the relativist side of the fence. We are treated to a serious defence of relativism against the usual anarchy and madness arguments: relativism means that "anything goes", that competing claims cannot be evaluated, and that it leaves us unable to defend an ethical position or commit to any coherent social action. In this sense it is one of the more epistemologically radical presentations of CSP, and all the more refreshing for that.

While the book has attempted the impossible - to present Critical Social Psychology in a

single accessible textbook - and is thus doomed to certain shortcomings, it does better than any other comparable effort. While the book covers a huge range of complex theory, and must necessarily simply skim the surface, it does so in a way that provides the reader with a clear map of the terrain, and all the tools necessary to set out on further explorations. It remains remarkably accessible given the material, and could usefully be prescribed for an advanced undergraduate or postgraduate course. It also serves as a very useful introduction and primer for anyone exploring the field. One shortcoming is the almost inevitable tendency of academics in the overdeveloped world to imagine that their own parochial backyard can provide for a model for everywhere else, and so there is a real failure to engage social realities beyond the middle class suburbs and campuses of the West. But even as this is not done, some of the possible tools for doing it are made readily available, and it remains for local enthusiasts to take up the gauntlet. Perhaps in providing an integrated overview, this book is an excellent companion to the more contextually focussed but more fragmented recent local publications such as Ratele and Duncan's **Social psychology: Identities and relationships** and Hook *et al's* **Critical psychology**. In any event, this book provides an excellent introduction to contemporary Critical Social Psychology, which anyone exploring the field would do well to read.

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