

Foucault, Psychology and the Analytics of Power

Critical Theory and Practice in Psychology and the Human Sciences

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Derek Hook

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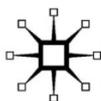
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Derek Hook

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For Joan and Derek

It seems to me that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticise them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them.

(Foucault, 1974, p. 171)

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Preface

The 1999 film *The Matrix* portrays a system in which humans experience going to work, having relationships, eating, sleeping and otherwise living out their daily lives, while in fact they are merely imagining or dreaming these realities as part of the energy production system of a machine-controlled earth. Along with the protagonist Neo who chooses to take the pill that allows him to grasp the human situation from a more complete perspective, film audiences are stunned when they confront the truth and the reality of this oppression. For those of us caught up in the machines of modern consciousness in various ways, there exists a similar hard pill to swallow. We must confront the possibility that psychology may have been similarly deluded about the human situation and, more seriously, about its own functions in connection with the machines of power in modern societies.

In the case of psychology, swallowing the 'truth' pill opens up a panorama of the following sort: Psychology, both through its practices and through the concepts that justify its practices, operates for the most part as an ideological apparatus. This means that its array of discourses and activities constructs and sustains systems of domination and oppression even as they appear to support self-understanding and well-being. Therapy, counselling, assessment, research, self-help, prevention work, clinic spaces, case studies and all forms of psy-work *construct* specific forms of understanding and experience as they operate. In so doing, relations of power are worked up, sorted out and established along the lines that existing systems allow. Simultaneously, modes of resistance and counter-systems take shape. These ideological functions of psy-work and their subversion have been noted in previous scholarly work, but it is obvious from the ongoing expansion of the psychology enterprise that the critique is not taking hold.

The critical conceptualization of ideology employed here is still debated extensively even among progressive social theorists, with many arguing that we are doomed to be locked in ideological processes and discourses that reinforce the status quo and should therefore not hold out the possibility that resistance might lead to experience 'beyond ideology'. It may be that solutions to this apparent dilemma are prevented mostly by a lack of clarity about concepts. Yet, should we not insist, as we are engaged in the critical human sciences, on the goal of understanding

and transforming social relations that systematically produce human suffering? Should we not at least attempt to participate in the collective dismantling of ideological structures? And if a major scientific discipline and industry such as psychology is part and parcel of such structures, should it not be our task to expose and confront the collusion?

Derek Hook's *Foucault, Psychology and the Analytics of Power* makes a huge contribution towards clarifying both the limits and possibilities of contemporary psychology. In this book, Hook leads readers from the received view of psychology as a helpful science to a glimpse of its foundations in ideological pseudo-realities. In the process, Hook provides critical conceptual tools for digging towards analytic practices that reveal oppressive forms of power. As the title implies, Foucault provides the vessel for this journey.

For several decades now, the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) has transformed the perspectives and analytic strategies of numerous disciplines in the human sciences. His work provides a framework as productive and powerful as that of the Frankfurt School of critical social theory associated with Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and Habermas. Derek Hook reminds us that Foucault's work deserves the critical attention of psychologists for a variety of compelling reasons.

First, Foucault saw psychological knowledge and practice as one of modern society's new strategies for disciplining and shaping the action of individuals. His studies of prisons, asylums and therapeutic self-reflection are obvious examples of this interest. But, in fact, Foucault's entire outlook butts up against the realms of human experience addressed by psychological inquiry and his analyses allow us to grasp how changing social relations and institutional practices themselves constitute particular historical forms of subjective experience. So, Foucault describes the structuring and production of modern individual 'consciousness' in ways that turn standard psychological understandings upside down. To put it simply, what we know as experience and consciousness within psychological frameworks are understood in the Foucauldian vision as the effects of discourses and 'disciplinary technologies' in modern society that produce individuals who experience themselves as 'experiencing' and 'being conscious'. Psychological knowledge and psychological modes of assessment and intervention are part of the processes that produce these effects.

Derek Hook argues, however, that we cannot simply explain away 'the psychological' as the effect of modern forms of power. These effects need to be fully understood and such understanding entails a

grasp of the workings of power at the level of the individual subject. Hook works to fill in the gaps created by the fact that Foucault was committed to understanding social relations in ways that did not require what we would usually think of as psychological accounts. He takes care to avoid filling in these spaces with problematic psychologizing. Without abandoning the critical lens developed by Foucault, he establishes the grounds for an account of subjectivity that encompasses features of experience such as memory, emotion and self-awareness. These aspects of experience are often seen as irrelevant in Foucault-inspired work, but they are essential to a fully developed critique of power. Hook shows how the apparent contradictions can be thought through.

Finally, this book powerfully develops the idea that Foucault's analytics of power, in particular his methodological contributions (analytics of space, critical history and discourse), raise serious questions about the new orthodoxies of qualitative research in psychology and provide innovative and potentially even complementary directions. These possibilities are exemplified by excerpts from Hook's own studies on racism in contemporary South Africa. Researchers in the human sciences will find plenty of inspiration here, especially with regard to neglected yet fundamental aspects of social relations.

This book will deeply reward the efforts of all readers who seek to escape the matrix and embark on the long journey entailed in exposing, resisting and transforming both the workings of the psychology industry and the systematic forms of oppression that characterize modern and post-modern society.

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