Critical Social Studies

Editors: JOCK YOUNG and PAUL WALTON

The contemporary world projects a perplexing picture of political, social and economic upheaval. In these challenging times the conventional wisdoms of orthodox social thought whether it be sociology, economics or cultural studies become inadequate. This series focuses on this intellectual crisis, selecting authors whose work seeks to transcend the limitations of conventional discourse. Its tone is scholarly rather than polemical, in the belief that significant theoretical work is needed to clear the way for a genuine transformation of the existing social order.

Because of this, the series will relate closely to recent developments in social thought, particularly to critical theory – the emerging European tradition. In terms of specific topics, key pivotal areas of debate will be selected – for example, mass culture, inflation, problems of sexuality and the family, the nature of the capitalist state, natural science and ideology. The scope of analysis will be broad: the series will attempt to break the existing arbitrary divisions between the social studies disciplines. Its aim is to provide a platform for critical social thought (at a level quite accessible to students) to enter into the major theoretical controversies of the day.

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IQ and Mental Testing

An Unnatural Science and its Social History

Brian Evans
and
Bernard Waites

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Preface

Interdisciplinary studies are very much in vogue at present in academic institutions, but it is not at all easy to put them into practice successfully. All too frequently the disciplines coming together simply collude in mutual congratulation. Ideally, disciplines should collide with a sense of shock. A special sort of shock can come to both the social historian and the psychologist who cares to dig back into the history of psychology. Social historians are apt to assume that their methods for analysing social phenomena, in terms of certain key areas of social relations, are inapplicable to the growth of knowledge in any discipline having the slightest claim to being a natural science. They have shown only half-hearted interest in the current debates as to how scientific knowledge is produced, tending to assume that there is an easy well-charted passage to a realm of objective knowledge which is no concern of theirs as social historians. An investigation into the history of psychology can quickly disabuse the social historian of this innocent belief.

Psychologists, if they show any interest in the past of their own discipline, are equally likely to display an innocent and disingenuous view. Most histories of psychology have been written by professional psychologists with a strong commitment to the body of belief accepted as achieved knowledge within their profession and also with a strong commitment to the corporate integrity of the profession which produced it. Such histories are not necessarily uncritical, but the critical point of view is very restricted. Past error appears merely as a series of hurdles successfully overcome on the road to current theory. In the particular branch of psychology with which we are dealing, some of the best-

known practitioners betray an utterly cavalier attitude to their profession's past. They are prepared to ransack its voluminous literature for any data (or, perhaps more accurately, 'scholarly citations') which will support current theory without, at the very least, acknowledging the gross social prejudices that accompanied its making.

It is not easy to disturb psychologists wedded to an internal and terminal view of their subject, for this view insulates them against an historically critical view of their profession's past. But we hope that they, like we, can still be shocked by some of the more flagrant instances of social prejudice in the history of psychology, and can start wondering what exactly was the status of the psychological knowledge produced by the people who shared and cultivated these prejudices. Consider these quotations from a lecture by Sir Cyril Burt to a group of London social workers in January 1918 on the subject of 'Individual Psychology and Social Work':¹

The nature of the mental differences in different individuals, the frequency with which particular differences occur among certain classes, the signs by which they may be recognised, the causes which will produce or remove them – these problems, one and all, may legitimately form the theme of scientific enquiry. To the social worker they are plainly of the greatest interest: indeed it is very largely to the social worker that we must look for their future solution. Solved or unsolved, they constitute a new and growing branch of knowledge – the science of individual psychology . . .

Burt suggested that a key tool in diagnostic social case work would soon become the psychological profile or 'psychogram', but he saw it as having applications far beyond this narrow field:

Eventually a complete 'psychogram' of every school child might be compiled. Each, as it left school, would be the subject of a special *dossier*, passed on, like the school leaving form, to some juvenile advisory committee. In such a *dossier* innate abilities, both general and specific,

would be noted according to some comparable quantitative scheme Everybody might be thus indexed according to their mental powers . . . mental and moral resources are a far greater asset to a nation than agricultural [or] mineral [and] if we are to make a rapid recovery from our present sacrifice of wealth and men, not only man power but mind power must be registered and organised. Such a census of our psychological resources might easily be undertaken through the schools.

Burt then suggested that such a numbering of abilities would be a basic step towards replacing the traditional system of apprenticeship and labour recruitment, whose deficiencies had been exposed by the needs of the war-time economy:

A method of placing young workers which ignores each individual's aptitudes and disabilities must inevitably issue in vast preventable waste The key, then, to social efficiency is vocational fitness – a place for every man, and every man in his place. The place must be suited to the man by a careful study both of the qualifications required by the one and of the qualifications possessed by the other.

At a later point, Burt enlightened his audience as to how social work might be informed by 'abnormal' individual psychology:

In different ranks of society mental conflicts appear to differ somewhat in their origin. Among the so-called lower orders they seem due chiefly to external and material causes; among the so-called higher orders they are more often due to internal and social causes The view, common among those of superior intellect, that the poor are by nature a little mad, comes considerably closer to the truth than does the still commoner view that they are more than a little wicked. Indeed, the psychology of madness often helps us to understand their insufficiencies, just as it helps us to understand the inefficiencies of ourselves.

We have come to such programmatic statements – and the more technical papers which gave them scientific credence – from very different directions. One of us (Bernard Waites) began with an interest in the rearticulation of perceptions of social class during that great divide in human society, the First World War. Increasingly, he came to feel that British psychometrics has mediated not simply a view of class, but a view of society, throughout its history, and that this was worth examining in its own right. He also found that this could not be undertaken simply by using statements in which the small world of psychometrics outlined its relationship with the wider world, as Burt did in his lecture. Some attempt had to be made to go beyond a disciplinary competence and grapple with the history of the science. The other (Brian Evans) began with a disciplinary competence in mathematical psychology and an interest in the scientific validity of IQ psychology, but felt that no treatment of this issue would be complete without an historical analysis of how this psychology has functioned as an ideology and as an instrument of social administration and selection.

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