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The foundations of critical psychology

RONALD MATHER

ABSTRACT

The recent turn to discursive psychology has prompted an increasing interest in the work of Michel Foucault, particularly with relation to debates on the possibility and nature of 'discourse analysis'. This variant of discourse analysis has generally emphasized the utility of Foucauldian insights in critiquing existent psychological practices as a manifestation of the proliferation of disciplinary forms in Western society. This utility may have been dramatically over-stated. Key concepts such as discursive practices and power are inextricably linked to theoretical frameworks that radically resist any ad hoc importation into critical practice. Furthermore, they may be antithetical to the kind of reflexive critique promulgated by critical psychology itself. However, the later Foucault's partial retreat from the disciplinary containment of subjectivity only promises to trap critical psychology in the agency/structure hiatus that has so bedevilled 20th-century sociological theory. Foucauldian critical psychology may be a dead end.

Key words critical psychology, discourse analysis, Foucault, realism, relativism

1 AGENCY AND STRUCTURE

G. W. F. Hegel once remarked of F. W. J. Schelling that he 'worked out his philosophy in view of the public' (Hegel, 1955: 513). Recently, social psychologists

have seemingly felt impelled to do the same (though the results have been distinctly less edifying). The imperatives or impulses that underlie this curious pathological disorder are unclear; they are, however, most closely related to the growing dissatisfaction with the 'natural science' model of human relations. This has passed into academic parlance as the 'crisis of social psychology' (Parker, 1989), although given its longevity 'crisis' may be a rather inappropriate term. The alternatives to experimental social psychology are usually subsumed under the rubric of 'social constructionism' or its even more recent partner 'discourse analysis', although recently the term 'critical (social) psychology' has also come to the fore (Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997; Ibanez and Iniguez, 1997). All these variants deal with substantive theoretical issues and all have different sub-groups operating within them. They represent a curious mixture of residual and current methodological debates from other disciplines, a desire to furnish alternative theoretical bases for the practice of social psychological inquiry itself. While the tenability of these formulations is an object of dispute, both proponents and opponents have little doubt that these contributions, in some sense, mark a new beginning for the practice of social psychology itself. Most pervasive of all these trends is of course the celebrated 'linguistic turn' which now saturates the whole gamut of the human sciences themselves. With specific regard to psychology, 'discursive psychology' is an increasingly important part of the curriculum, a curriculum that presents great difficulties in that the point of transition from experimentally based social psychology to discursive psychology cannot be located from within the discipline itself. Sociology, literary criticism, linguistic philosophy, etc., have all played an extremely important part. This 'renewal' (welcomed or otherwise) is an illusion or at least partly illusory. It represents a retrenchment as well as a renewal. For these 'schools' have a common origin (an origin shared by a great deal of 19th- and 20th-century sociological theory); namely, a concern with the question of 'social scientific' method and the dissolution of the Kantian transcendental/empirical subject. This dissolution continues to shape the parameters of even the most radical discursively orientated social psychologies.

At the most basic level Kantian subjectivity was conceived as a solution to the problem of agency in a Newtonian world. The principle of universal causality was at odds with the supposedly autonomous faculties of reason that would provide legitimation for moral and aesthetic judgements in a universe governed purely by natural mechanics. The Kantian solution was the fundamental division that was to be constitutive of Occidental social scientific thinking; that is, that human beings were subject to the laws of the physical universe (the empirical subject) but must be reckoned to possess an underlying source of unity not subject to either physical determination or social circumstance (the transcendental subject). Underlying the contingent circumstances of historical situation and the ebb and flow of space-time relations, an underlying

structure of rational unity had to be presupposed – ‘otherwise I should have as many-coloured and diverse a self as I have representations’ (Kant, 1929: 156). This ‘solution’ has been subject to more than two centuries of criticism. The intellectual difficulties of an underlying source of unity that exists through time but is not subject to the vagaries of socio-historical contingencies are rather obvious. These were further compounded by the more substantive claims concerning agency of the *Kritik der praktische Vernunft*. Generally speaking, the metaphysical implications of the Kantian subject have proved less and less palatable to ‘social scientific’ thought. However, it did possess a tremendous advantage; namely, the non-violation of the principle of non-contradiction. The ascription of the contradictory predicates, autonomous and heteronomous, to the same human subject proved no difficulty to a worldview that advocated a noumena/phenomena distinction. Newton, rational autonomy, and a principle of Occidental thought that had stood since Aristotle could happily coexist. At the most basic level, I could be a causal agent in a Newtonian (caused) world. The Kantian ‘solution’, Kantian subjectivity itself, would soon come asunder. It remains so to this day. The treatment or containment of this psychosis is, in large measure, ‘Theory’ itself. Causal agency became the ‘sociology of action’ focused on an individual rational (in contemporary parlance, ‘knowledgeable’) agent ‘acting’ in the world. The Newtonian (and Darwinian) realm of empirical determination became socialized to form the constraining world of socio-cultural practices and socio-economic structures, the sociology of social system.

However, the ‘holy grail’ of 20th-century social theory, the unification of Weberian action theory and Durkheimian system theory (which is little more than the reunification of the Kantian subject), has remained forever out of reach. The attempts at synthesis have foundered on the (logical) incompatibility of ascribing both causal agency and social conditioning by existent social structures or practices to the human ‘agent’. Consistency is achieved only via the extremes of phenomenological sociology and structuralism, extremes that seem to preclude the consideration of a critical aspect of human life. The recent debates centred around social constructionism show that psychology has fared little better. This, in itself, is perhaps unsurprising; what is surprising is the seeming determination to reconstruct and rehearse debates associated with the nature (and dissolution) of Kantian subjectivity. It is possible to run through these issues in the most cursory fashion if the Kantian background is borne in mind. The most obvious example is the worry that the recognition of the historical and cultural specificity of personality completely undermines any possible recourse to a conception of a relatively consistent personal identity existing through time. ‘Instead then of people having single, unified and fixed selves, perhaps we are fragmented, having a multiplicity of potential selves which are not necessarily consistent with each other’ (Burr, 1995: 27). This is precisely the state of affairs referred to by Kant in the passage above. However,

it may be economy of academic labour to recognize that debates on the nature of subjectivity (or 'identity') located in the logical incompatibility of concomitant unity and multiplicity are fated to repeat the dead end that is 20th-century sociological theory. The concept of objectivity has fared only slightly better. Kant believed that the human faculties of cognitive reason placed insurmountable barriers on the nature of human knowledge itself. Human beings were synthesizing receptacles of sensory input, an activity that made both human knowledge possible and material reality (the famous 'thing in itself') unknowable. Social constructionism has generally been unwilling to accord the human subject such a 'constitutive' role. Or, to be more accurate, it will concede such a role only to a 'speaking subject'. However, the basic dilemma remains the same. In the most general terms, if 'social constructs' or 'socio-linguistic practices' (knowledge via concepts) are asserted to be exhaustive of the possibilities of human comprehension is it possible or meaningful to refer to reality as it is apart from this contributory medium? Two main trends can be discerned, the transcendental idealism of Rom Harré's earlier work (Harré and Secord, 1972; Harré, 1986) or the transcendental realism of Roy Bhaskar (1977, 1979), the latter arguing that socio-linguistic constructions can be distinguished from material reality and that the adequacy of such constructs can be measured against that reality. The most recent developments in this area demonstrate that the battle-lines between transcendental idealism and transcendental realism are clearly being drawn within social constructionism itself (Parker, 1998).

If the dissolution of Kantian subjectivity was a defining moment then the 'linguistic turn' must be reckoned at least an equal partner. One of the major attractions of the linguistic turn is that it perhaps promises to free social psychology from the repetitiveness that so marked the *Methodenstreit* and the agency/structure debate. Wittgensteinian themes, it might be assumed, will offer a curative to neo-Kantian speculations on the nature of subjectivity or objectivity. It is a long way, apparently, from the rarefied heights of the agency/structure to the analysis of discourse. That distance is more apparent than real at least with regard to one extremely influential version of discursive analysis. 'Discourse analysis' is of course difficult to classify. It is closely related to social constructionism but it is best described (at least initially) as a general rhetoric in favour of the reorientation of psychological 'theory' (the so-called 'linguistic turn'), and a certain understanding of the issues raised either by the work of M. Foucault or (in Saussurean terms) by the increasingly self-referential character of the 'signifier'). The former has generally served as disallowing, or, more accurately, problematizing, any recourse to linguistic idealism. This is not to say that a whole host of other commentators and conceptual issues have not been dealt with in various ways. However, in the UK at least it has been possible to orientate oneself in relation to the degree to which one is prepared to accept or propagate

Foucauldian themes as a 'corrective' to an overtly linguistic or 'textual' understanding of the various discourses that constitute social reality. These discourses are related to themes of gender, ethnicity, inequality and so forth. They have attracted a great deal of attention and debate. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to state that discourse analysis and the constellation of issues that surround it now form the primary alternative to 'traditional social psychology'. This 'revolution' has already occurred in other disciplines where it has taken slightly different forms. Perhaps the best-known example in the UK is in the field of political theory: that is, the application of Derridean motifs to the Marxian concept of hegemony by E. Laclau and C. Mouffe (1985), an application (it is claimed) that cleanses it of class or economic essentialism and provides new resources for political positioning. It is rather noticeable that some of the criticisms made of Laclau and Mouffe are replicated by commentators hostile to the (alleged) detachment of discourse from socio-economic structures, state and other institutions, and social practices in general (Jessop, 1990). The charge of linguistic idealism and/or moral/political relativism is never far away. The perception of Derrida as a 'literary critic' facilitates such critique. Again, the success of Foucault is related not only to the perspicacity of his insights but to his concern with discourses in conjunction with state or carceral institutions. The claim, and it is usually implicit rather than explicit, is that we can rest assured that Foucault is not Derrida or, for that matter, concerned with the more banal chatter so dear to Harvey Sacks (1992).

Indeed, one of the major points of division between the realist school (Parker, 1992, 1998) and the relativist school (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) has been the latter's concern with the social situation of natural language. To discourse is to talk. For Foucault, discursive practices are something rather different. The theoretical contours are very much shifting sands. But it is our contention that Foucault's concept of discursive practice is inextricably linked to the ultimately unresolved debate around agency and structure. This duality forms the absolute theoretical boundaries of the concept of discursive practice itself. It is Foucault's negotiation of those boundaries and its consequences that occupy the middle section of this article. Both versions of discourse analysis do share common features, most notably the Nietzschean dispersal of subjectivity. However, it is the reliance of the realist school on discursive practice that lends it its theoretical distinctiveness. Power relations legitimate veridical discourse. That Foucault is concerned with both is undeniable; however, his concern does not alter the fact that 'discourse' remains in a state of perpetual conjunction with material institutions. Both occupy parallel lines running through the entire gamut of Foucault's work. The exact, or, indeed, proximate, nature of their connection is never satisfactorily demonstrated, a point that was noted very early on in the literature (Sheridan, 1980). The difficulties inherent in appealing to a 'Foucauldian theory of discourse analysis' must reckon with the not inconsiderable difficulty that

there is none. Or, at the very least that the Foucauldian projects are informed by at least three different metatheoretical frameworks. There is the structuralism of the early Foucault, the explicitly Nietzschean phase, the famous analyses of power/knowledge, and what has been termed 'the return of the subject in late Foucault'. Structuralism, Nietzsche, subjectivity, it would be a very brave interpretation of Foucault that could discern any fundamental theoretical coherence to the project of *The Order of Things, Discipline and Punish, The History of Sexuality*. There are of course common themes, the most obvious being power relations, but that is not equivalent to a common theoretical foundation for the treatment of such issues. Rather, it is surely the case that these three moments in the Foucauldian corpus must be treated as theoretically incompatible. More than any other contemporary figure, Foucault has suffered from, to use a culinary metaphor, 'tapas commentary'. The resources for a Foucauldian theory of discourse may simply not be available.

2 FOUCAULT: STRUCTURE, POWER, AGENCY

The above is clearly controversial but it can be substantiated if sufficient attention is paid to the theoretical context that informs the work in general. A perennial favourite of discursive analysis (or at least the bibliographies of its proponents) is *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: a work that seeks 'a pure description of discursive events' (Foucault, 1972: 27) and conforms to the Foucauldian advocacy of 'the positive and irreducible existence of discourse' (Dean, 1994: 17). To put it bluntly, discourse constitutes a level of reality irreducible to the subjective attributes of those who participate in it, a triumphalist de-centring of the subject. Even if we ignore the complexities of a very difficult text, it is seemingly apparent that attention to 'a discursive practice . . . [as] a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical or linguistic area' (Foucault, 1972: 117) is at least initial warrant for an investigation into the method and manner in which veridical discourses 'position' subjects. However, such a contention is valid if, and only if, the investigation is supported by Foucault's own structuralist premises. The work of around this time completely dispenses with any concept of subjectivity whatsoever, there is a radical commitment to the exteriority of the symbolic form – one does not utilize discourse, language speaks the human. 'I therefore claim to show, not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact' (Lévi-Strauss, 1970: 12).

Foucault's early work is a classic example of a structuralist analysis of social phenomena. The transformation of discursive practices was the condition of

the possibility of the human sciences themselves – economics, psychology, sociology, etc., did not come on the scene as discoveries – discoveries do not cause shifts in discursive practices – shifts in discursive practices cause discoveries – the human sciences themselves. The subject itself is but one particular manifestation of discursive practices themselves. This is the Foucault who moved Marshall Berman to write: ‘there is no freedom in Foucault’s world, because his language forms a seamless web, a cage far more airtight than anything Weber ever dreamed of, into which no life can break. The mystery is why so many of today’s intellectuals want to choke in there with him’ (Berman, 1983: 34–5). The reply to Berman (and numerous others) by the first Foucault is comfort: ‘I can understand those who feel this distress. They doubtless had difficulty in recognizing that their history, their economy, their social practices, the language they speak, their ancestral mythology, even fables told them in childhood, obey rules which are not given to their consciousness’ (Foucault, 1991: 71). One does not deconstruct, negotiate, resist the epistemes of early Foucault. That much is obvious, what should be equally obvious is that the programme of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* should not be transposed or extracted from its theoretical context (structuralism) without substantive justification, or, more usually, mention. It is surely the case that the very concept of discursive practice itself as a series of anonymous rules or categories containing subjects is intelligible only from within the structuralist programme. It resists importation to any perspective that does not eschew critical self-reflexivity as its basis. The consequences of such a usage are potentially very damaging. For the discursive containment of subjectivity allied to even the most minimal, or problematized, concept of moral/political agency leads not to a radical reorientation of social psychology but a reiteration and retrenchment of its Kantian heritage. The utility of discursive practices for the purpose of critical psychology is minimal. For on structuralist premises, critical psychology is either useless or impossible or based on some unstable fusion of moral/political agency and discursive containment.

The next incarnation was of course Nietzschean rather than Saussurean Foucault – ‘one’s point of reference should not be to the great model of language [*langue*] and signs, but to that of war and battle’ (Foucault, 1980: 114). If the episteme was previously constitutive of all discursive practices and all possible subject-positions, the ‘second’ Foucault sees social reality as a much more fluid affair – a history of domination and resistance. Discursive practices remain important, power produces discourse, the era of power/knowledge which received its classical exposition in *Discipline and Punish*. The broad thrust of Foucault’s analysis is well known, the famous ‘capillary’ notion of power; the replacement of sovereign power with the disciplinary society of hierarchical observation and normalizing judgement; a less than flattering account of the role of the human sciences in the burgeoning of

micro-penalty and so forth. This is the Foucault of power and 'resistance', themes which continue into 'the final Foucault'. This is the Foucault much beloved by discourse analysts of various hues. It is here that reality as discursively constituted meets non-discursive carceral institutions – power/knowledge. But the point of fusion never arrives. The Foucauldian notion of power seems oblivious to adequate conceptualization – power is conceived in positive terms, it produces the social world in ubiquitous fashion. This is what power 'does'; the question of what 'is' is rather more difficult. Most characterizations of the Foucauldian concept of power proceed by the process of negative determination. Power is not located in the economic base. The capitalist mode of production is a notable and significant feature that occurs alongside the appearance of the micro-technologies of disciplinary power. Neither is reducible to the other. Foucault is not Marx (a point I shall return to later). Nor is disciplinary society something nasty that happened to a once happy subjectivity that found meaning and symbolism in the world. Foucault is not Weber (Dean, 1994: 65). Nor is he Durkheim despite his frequent lapses into functionalist modes of exposition. The problem with the concept of power in *Discipline and Punish* is that it completely lacks a point of social origination. The primary difficulty lies in the materialist ontology that lies at its basis.

Its origin lies in A. Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1966). This work posited that underlying the everyday world of cognitive awareness lay a primordial energy-force, the world of the 'will'. Everything and everybody was an objectification or an instance of this primordial energy. The concept of will cannot be understood as a personal or psychological mode of consciousness, and, crucially, it cannot be an object of reflection, rather it is the ceaseless ground of movement that makes human reflexivity itself possible (Schopenhauer, 1966: 1, 110). All matter, organic and inorganic, is a manifestation of a groundless, infinite energy. There is neither God nor purpose. This energy or will manifests itself to different degrees (in ascending order, inorganic matter, vegetation, animal life, human life). It is ubiquitous, it constitutes the world, it is at variance with itself – 'this same human race reveals in itself with terrible clearness that conflict, that variance of the will with itself, and we get homo homini lupus' (Schopenhauer, 1966: 147). The world, and everything within it, is nothing but a groundless energy-force, inwardly dirempted, taking this form then another, but all ultimately futile. The 'will to live' is the nearest level of experiential awareness, the highest manifestation of 'the will', the continual power struggle of human against human, the result of nothing but the continual transformation and re-transformation of energy/matter. The material forms that embody the will are in a perpetual state of struggle, there is no rest; human rationality is but an evolutionary adaptation to the struggles of an infinite and irrational energy-force. There are clear connections between Schopenhauer's will

(primal energy)/matter couplet and Foucault's power/knowledge couplet (a connection *vis-à-vis* Nietzsche's *Wille zur Macht*). Energy/matter became power/knowledge (discursive formations and carceral institutions). Will and power are identical; they are both productive, ubiquitous, infinite, self-dirempting, anti-subjectivist. In the most general terms, the sociological critique of mid-Foucault has tended to believe that Foucault's physicalism radically underestimates the difficulties of subsuming the Schopenhauerian/Nietzschean metaphysics of the will in the service of social critique. That is not to say necessarily that this principle is invalid or deficient in itself (though Habermas and others would), only that it simply cannot perform the work that social scientists in general and discourse analysts require. It is simply an undifferentiated, metaphysical principle that is said to be constitutive of reality; a monism, furthermore, that repeats itself in the concept of resistance.

The resistance to which *Discipline and Punish* refers is essentially corporeal in character but again lacks positive characterization, there is no theory of drives, desire, etc. It is as lacking in social referents as that of power. It is not, and cannot be, about the resistance of individuals or distinct groups – if power cannot be located, if it does not prohibit or mediate, then resistance to that power cannot be located in specific social groups or a unified class. Resistance is underlain by 'something in the social body, in classes, groups, and individuals themselves which in some sense escape relations of power . . . an inverse energy, a discharge . . . a plebian quality or aspect' (Foucault, 1980: 138). The occult qualities of resistance bear further testimony to the (social) vacuity of the concept of power itself. That is a very substantial deficit indeed to those who would utilize mid-Foucault to criticize existing 'social practices'. The Foucauldian dispersal of subjectivity so apparent in a text like *Discipline and Punish* has rather obscured this aspect of his work of this period. The infinite locale of power is a theme Foucault returns to in *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault contends that 'it is the name we give to a complex strategic situation everywhere' (Foucault, 1979: 93). Here, at last, it might be assumed are the resources for discursive analysis and social critique, the potential subversion or 'deconstruction' of normalized subject-identities. And Foucault does indeed formulate two modes of resistance to the modes of normalization that characterize disciplinary society: the formation of 'counter-discourses' and 'bio-struggle'. Both have been highly influential. The latter informed a perspective that emphasized the transgressive potentiality of 'the body' via self-creation, the former informed a perspective that believed that discourse could be 'unmade', 'deconstructed', 'strategically displaced' and so on. Foucault explicitly mentions the discourse of perversity that was appropriated by the gay community and used to articulate political demands. However, as was immediately apparent, the notion of counter-discourse or self-creation presupposes an attitude of critical reflexivity. An I

or an it has to reflect on itself as object – an object of discourse or an object of disciplinary power – in short, it has to be a subject. The later Foucault is an unstable combination of early Schopenhauerian/Nietzschean aestheticism – ‘it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that life and the world are eternally justified’ (Nietzsche, 1966: 3) where the onset of Christianity is the fall-guy, and a return to Enlightenment subjectivity. Both tendencies are present. However the so-called ‘technology of self-creation’ is to be interpreted, it is clear that its struggle with the ‘technology of domination’ (the previously identified disciplinary society) repeats, in some form, the agency/structure problematic of recent social theory, and marks a return to the Schopenhauerian theme of the aesthetic life as somehow making a fleeting respite from the ‘will’ possible (Schopenhauer, 1966: 1, 146–9).

3 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: FOUCAULT’S LIMITATIONS

One of the primary difficulties of Foucauldian discourse analysis is that it tends to be a concoction of all three positions but it is surely time for those who wish to present their theoretical cheques at Foucault’s account to realize that they may incur debits as well as credits. Some of these have already been mentioned. There are numerous others. It is reasonably clear that the ‘realist’ school of discourse analysis favours mid- and late Foucault in the sense of offering the basis of some critique of existent social arrangements and the traditional practice of psychology. The crucial question is why this is the case. The general programme of discursive analysis was announced in the heyday of structuralism but that early programme clearly lacked any major reference to existent social relations of power, a point Foucault himself conceded (Foucault, 1980). The explicit treatment of discursive practices and extra-discursive social practices belongs to the era of *Discipline and Punish*. As previously mentioned, it is unclear how power/knowledge can ground any form of social critique based on the social action or ‘praxis’ of particular groups. It is for this reason that the attempt to unify Marx and Foucault must be reckoned highly problematic. Such a contention is diametrically opposed to that of one of the most eloquent proponents of discursive psychology: ‘it is entirely understandable that Foucault declared his work to be situated within the broader project of Marxism’ (Parker, 1996). The attraction is immediately obvious. The emphasis on discursive practices may provide Marxism with that which it has always lacked, an account of the mode of transmission between socio-economic base and socio-cultural superstructure, but Foucault steadfastly refuses to localize power in any particular area. The capitalist mode of production and disciplinary society are mutually supportive but the proliferation of disciplinary forms is the result of a process of

normalization beginning in the Christian era. Foucault does acknowledge the necessity of positioning oneself *vis-à-vis* Marx and Marxist concepts (Foucault, 1980: 53); however, the analysis of the proliferation of disciplinary forms owes as much (if not more) to functionalism in the Durkheimian/Parsonian mould – ‘the moralization of the working class . . . was accomplished because it met the urgent need to master a vagabond, floating labour force. So the objective existed and the strategy developed, with ever-growing coherence, but without it being necessary to attribute to it a subject’ (Foucault, 1980: 81).

Power/Knowledge is perhaps the best example of the theoretical indeterminacy that lies at the heart of Foucault’s work. The text abounds in a morass of arguments and concepts freely drawn from the most disparate theoretical traditions. Furthermore, with specific regard to Marxism, Foucault explicitly denied its inherent essentialism – ‘it is false to say, with that famous post-Hegelian [Marx] that the concrete existence of man is labour. For the life and time of man are not by nature labour, but pleasure, restlessness, merry-making, rest, needs, accidents, desires, violent acts, robberies etc.’ (Foucault, 1979: 62). Again, the influence of Nietzsche on Foucault’s proposed (and unfortunately underdeveloped) alternative philosophical anthropology is unmistakable. Power for Foucault consists in the radical perpetuity and diffusion of *Wille zur Macht* rather than a prelude to the tunes of disco-Marxism (that is not to deny that Foucault regularly invokes Marxian concepts to describe effects of power, but it is strictly an ad hoc importation that bears testimony to the conceptual vacuity that lies at its heart). The attractiveness of the latter is obvious in that it provides at least some hope of an archimedean point in the void that is Foucauldian power-relations. Later Foucault may bring greater opportunities for those who would be ‘critical’ but this raises perhaps the greatest irony of all; namely, the reintroduction of the concept of subjectivity itself, the very concept that the shift to discursive analysis was intended to circumvent or eradicate. The resurrection of subjectivity, reflexivity and the possibility of ‘counter-discourses’ raises a whole series of fascinating issues but it boils down to a very unpalatable choice for those critical or discursive psychologists who perceive themselves as ‘Foucauldian’; either a socially amorphous conception of power/resistance or a conception based on self-reflexive subjectivity. This realization is yet to dawn on the two major trends of critical or discursive psychology currently coalescing around the banners of ‘critical realism’ and ‘relativism’ (or attempting to find the mean between them). This is unquestionably due to the fact that the debate has largely been conducted in terms of whether linguistic statements refer to anything other than themselves. The latter is a rather eclectic combination of ethnomethodological conversation analysis and ‘speech-act’ theory allied to a complete disavowal of the subject as anything other than a multiplicity of discursive ‘constructions’ or discursive conventions (Edwards *et al.*, 1995).

The advocates of such a position are more interested in the everyday linguistic construction of discursive subjectivity than the veridical discourses of the human sciences of the early Foucault. Nevertheless, there are parallels, the most significant being their common origin.

By far the best advocacy of the relativist position is Friedrich Nietzsche's *On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense* (Nietzsche, 1989). The emphases on the self as grammatical function, metaphor, the arbitrariness of signification, even the supposed or asserted moral/political relativism of such a position receives its most memorable exposition in this text. Clearly such a position can offer only endless entreaties on the inevitability of chains of signification, 'dissemination' – 'the indefinite referral of signifier to signifier' 'which gives signified meaning no respite, no rest' (Derrida, 1978: 25). In straightforwardly Saussurean terms, the relativist school is the end-position of any human science that completely dispenses with the signified (conceived either as conscious intentionality or as materiality prior to signification). Railing against the moral/political implications of such a theory is, frankly, a complete waste of time. The first point to note is that Derrida himself is well aware that any critique of existent social practices must emanate from a 'subject-position' or a humanist teleology (Derrida, 1989: 56). Nevertheless, it must be conceded that the general primacy of signification over signified intimated by structural linguistics and culminating in Derridean deconstruction has seriously undermined the epistemological and ethical bases of the human sciences themselves. The pragmatic concession of humanist subjectivity or teleology cannot override the ultimately illusory nature of these positions. It is clearly the need for 'ontological security' that motivates the critical realist school in its attempt to recast or re-think the linkage between signifier ('discourse') and signified (materiality understood via a critical realist ontology or a Foucauldian account of social practices). The primacy of signification remains but the signified remains integral – this linkage is attained *vis-à-vis* the concept of 'discursive practice'.

The most sustained treatment of 'Foucauldian discourse analysis' has recently been undertaken by Parker (1992). However, certain crucial ambiguities remain in the formulation of this approach. The definition of discourse as a system of statements that constructs an object is taken directly from Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*. 'Discourses are, according to one post-structuralist writer, "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak"' (Parker, 1992: 8). This is certainly the case though the portrayal of this Foucault as a post-structuralist is rather pre-emptive. Discourse and practice are identical (though the concept of 'practice' is as difficult to define as that of discourse). The pre-emptive nature of Foucault's supposed *post*-structuralism is evinced by the contention that 'we are positioned as a subject in discourse' (Parker, 1992: 10). This suspicion is reinforced by the claim that 'a discourse contains subjects' and the apparent

approval of the Althusserian concept of interpellation (Parker, 1992: 9). This is not *post*-structuralism. In actual fact, the key issue is summarized in the following passage:

Post-structuralists contend that thought is bound up with language, and that reflexivity is continually captured, and distorted, by language. If they are right then reflexivity itself should be understood to be merely the employment of available discourses. At the very least, to take a weaker line on this, the *articulation* of our reflections on discourse must require the use of discourses. (Parker, 1992: 12–13; author's emphasis)

The key issue is whom or what is doing the articulating given the early Foucauldian notion of discursive practice itself? 'Discourse analysis is about *discourses* as objects' (Parker, 1992: 9). In actual fact, the usage of the term 'articulation' acutely sums up the dilemma; either an object is an object for a subject or there is recourse to the distinctly Althusserian notion of articulation with its structuralist determination of subject-positions. There is throughout Parker's work a continual oscillation between radical anti-humanism and the language of political agency and critique. Nevertheless, there is an implicit appeal to Althusserian Marxism throughout Parker's work, or, rather, it is the Althusserian reading of Foucault that sustains the entire theoretical project. This becomes more apparent when the attempt is made to link early Foucault with the Foucault of *Discipline and Punish*.

For Foucault (1972), discourses and practices should be treated as if they were the same thing, and it is true both that material practices are always invested with meaning (they have the status of a text) and that speaking or writing is a practice. Foucault's (1977) work on discipline and power is concerned with the ways in which the physical organization of space and bodies developed. . . . Discursive practices, then, would be those that reproduce institutions, among others. (Parker, 1992: 17)

The author acknowledges the conceptual distinction between discourse and institution but it is unclear how the capillary notion of power and 'the system of statements that construct an object' exactly coincide. However, there is no real intention to unify the conception of power of mid-Foucault to the structuralist programme of subject-positions. And it is here that the real nature of this version of 'discourse analysis' becomes apparent. 'Foucault (1980) and his followers popularized the couplet power/knowledge, but the two terms are not the same thing. It is important to distinguish discourse from power' (Parker, 1992: 18). There then follows an attack on the capillary notion of power, the significance of which has barely been recognized and which completely and utterly destroys the salience of mid-Foucault to anything that Parker might recognize as useful – an attack buttressed by an

appeal to the work of another leading structural-Marxist, Nicos Poulantzas in his classic work *State, Power, Socialism* (Poulantzas, 1978). This is not to deny the cogency of Parker's and Poulantzas's critique. They are unquestionably correct in both their assertion that if power has no locale then it can hardly be critiqued and if power is everywhere then resistance makes no theoretical or pragmatic sense. The final *coup de grâce* to anything resembling to a genuinely Foucauldian position is the attempt to revive the concept of ideology itself, a position, it is conceded, that Foucault himself would have rejected (Parker, 1992: 19). The upshot of all this is that it is incredibly unclear as to what constitutes Parker's theoretical position. We start with Foucault, but Parker steadfastly refuses to accept the theoretical/political implications of the theoretical programmes of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Discipline and Punish*. There is substantial agreement on the nature of these implications, but does it make sense to persevere with the characterization of such a position as Foucauldian? It is Foucauldian only insofar as Foucauldian themes sometimes overlap with Althusserian Marxism – the linkage between the discursive containment of subjects and the passive *Traeger* of Althusser; the rejection of economic determinism (for Althusser the 'last instance' never did seem to arrive) in favour of treating specific regions as 'relatively' autonomous; a complete denial of dialectical logic in regard to 'method'; the complete rejection of any humanistic anthropology linked to the concept of alienation. Taken together, the only viable Marxian position is Althusserian Marxism, the reproduction of the relations of production that dispenses with an individual or class subject. This version of discourse analysis is a version of Althusserian ideology critique. That, at any rate, is the ultimate theoretical point of arrival for such a position.

Marxist critical psychology is a project doomed to failure, at least as currently formulated. It is clear that this version of critical realism would strongly resist the characterization of itself as Althusserian – 'Discourse analysis should become a variety of *action* research, in which the internal system of any discourse and its relations to others is challenged. It alters, and so permits different spaces for manoeuvre and resistance' (Parker, 1992: 21 my emphasis). Such a position, it might be objected, is not Althusserian. However, the critical question lies in who or what resists or manoeuvres? How and why have the various disciplinary discourses including the 'psy-complex' proliferated in Western society? And, most crucially of all, can a 'critical psychology' (Marxist or otherwise) or any social theory answer or hope to answer such questions without some concept of (inter)subjectivity or some version of a philosophical/social anthropology? The utilization of discursive practices constitutes a dead end for psychology. They will end up by their own conceptual logic in either structuralism or systems theory. Foucault himself is proof enough of that. Even the most intellectually sophisticated of Foucauldian commentators have to concede, sooner or later,

that a history of the conditions of possibility of thought (or discursive expression) minus a philosophy of history or overarching philosophical anthropology presents difficulties incapable of resolution (Dean, 1994: 215). It may be time to face the theoretical consequences of what is already apparent de facto, that no normative critique of any existent social practice or arrangement can avoid some form of commitment to (reflexive) 'subjectivity'. That commitment might ensure that the concept of discourse itself loses its status as the 'floating signifier' *par excellence*. It might take a Habermasian form. Conditions of the possibility of discursive interaction might be specified and defended dialogically. It may necessitate a recourse to a much fuller concept of intersubjectivity akin to that of German Idealism. That, in turn, entails a much more rigorous examination of the historical constitution of subjectivity. That is the task of a critical psychology.

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