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Between Constructing Agent and Constructed Agency

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Selected Proceedings of the Eleventh Biennial Conference of
The International Society for Theoretical Psychology
Cape Town, South Africa June 20-24, 2005

2007

Captus University Publications

Chapter 28

Beyond Foucault: Tradition and agency

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SUMMARY

In a sense Foucault's critical project remains unsurpassed. The excellent work by Nikolas Rose, for example, applies the critique in a compelling manner to the 'psy-disciplines'. Central to their work is an argument against any need to theorise human agency, emphasising the totalitarian scope of power in our contemporary historical period. However, neither their historicism nor their stance on power as productive of subjectivity are satisfactory substitutes for a full account of human agency, and in this sense the human sciences need to think beyond Foucault. Judith Butler demonstrates a move in this direction, proposing that a corollary account of the agent's psychic life is needed. In a complementary vein to Butler's treatment of psychic life, I argue for a historical treatment of tradition that avoids historicism and provides resources for idealising and enacting agency. In doing so, I rejoin Mircea Eliade's critique of the 'terror' of historical consciousness. Central to my argument is the need for a 'post-disciplinary' basis for theorising that eschews the contemporary fragmentation and expertise of specialised disciplines and finds within tradition possibilities for thinking beyond Foucault and historicism, and for re-membering new identities and a re-newed sense of agency.

FOUCAULT AND THE CRITIQUE OF POWER

What to do with Michel Foucault? Foucault sets psychology a task. The first aspect of this task is to carry Foucaultian critique through, to take him as seriously and maximally as possible. Fortunately this is already being done; perhaps the best example has been Nikolas Rose (1996a, 1996b) developing the Foucaultian thesis of power/knowledge, regimes of truth, governmentality, disciplinarity, within the context of the 'psy-complex', with insight and erudition. Rose presents a powerful and compelling case for psychology's constitutive role in modern society, which raises the second part of the task Foucault sets us: to think beyond him. If we take him seriously this is difficult for the analysis of that interplay of discourse, practice, knowledge, and power that makes up modernity seems to prove totalitarian in its organisation. Nothing escapes the reach of the system. Foucault explicitly rejects any theorising of the subject, whether construed existentially, phenomenologically, transcendentally, or what have you; Rose avows that a thin theory of human agency is sufficient. Presumably this is justified as subjectivity is impossible without its constitution through distributed systems of practices; without the generalised, impersonal institutions of power over which no one has control but which produce the peculiar constellations of our selfhood and self-understanding. The modern era is nothing but the enormous implacable momentum of history playing itself out on a global scale through our persons.

In this totalising sense, Foucaultian analysis functions as the theoretical correlate to the totalitarian socio-political-economic fulfilment of Western modernism; the intellectual expression of the practices (of technology, science, state, industry,

bureaucracy) that have come together over the last two hundred years that collectively designate 'modernity'.

Foucault's attending to effective practice contributes critical insights into a constitution of human subjectivity and our self-understanding as emergent from the *epistème* which is not entirely foreseen from the high-altitude perspective of thought and ideology. The effective reality instituted through the *epistème* manifests unintended consequences; effects of power that were not predicted or thematised beforehand, but which are configured from all the contingencies of actuality. It is these effects of power that tell the truth of the thinking the *epistème* embodies in practice. Foucaultian critique, in revealing these effects, corrects those philosophies, such as idealism, phenomenology or psychoanalysis, that retreat from the actuality of history into an idea of consciousness. Knowledge as power, the truth-producing regimes power instates, is the totality of all discursive and practical relations actualised in the historical moment that is 'modernity'. Whatever of knowledge does not become part and parcel of effective reality is arbitrary invention, a discardable construct of an imaginative, fantastic, abstract, or unrealistic consciousness. The historical moment is the realisation, not of thought or theory or knowledge per se, but of what is effectively powerful within that thought.

I think it is essential for theoretical psychologists to appreciate Foucault's critique of power as maximally as possible; I think doing so is also to begin to move beyond it. There are already numerous efforts that extend and elaborate Foucault's work, most notably amongst feminist and critical thinkers. I have already mentioned Nikolas Rose (e.g., 1996a, 1996b), who is probably the most outstanding example of the development of Foucault's work, examining the 'geneaology of subjectification' and continuously interrogating the discourses, practices, and interplay of the psychological disciplines and modern society. At present there is no question of any theoretical psychology worthy of that title that does not recognise and foreground the importance of their critique of power. I argue it is equally compelling to develop a more fully-fledged theoretical stance that moves beyond the critique, a theoretical stance that is intentionally transgressive of disciplinary boundaries, integrative across human science methods and concerns, and oriented toward an appropriately rich and resonant conception of human agency. Judith Butler (1997) provides an example-in-progress of just such a development of a theoretical stance beyond Foucault and focused on the subject.

JUDITH BUTLER: TOWARD A THEORY OF THE SUBJECT

The claim that to feel the impact of the Foucaultian critique is to already be moving to a theoretical stance beyond it is not speculation, but it has in effect already begun to be realised in the work of Judith Butler (1997), simply in her asking: "What is the psychic form that power takes?" (p. 2).[1] Butler (1997) claims that "such a project requires thinking the theory of power together with a theory of the psyche" (p. 3). Butler has embarked some way along this project, starting from the premise of a paradox inherent to the notion of 'subjection' that allows her to combine the greatly differing discourses

[1] There are of course others, perhaps most notably Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon; also Derek Hook (2005).

of Foucaultian critique and psychoanalysis. She phrases the paradox in a number of ways; most straightforwardly that subjection requires a subject that only subjection can produce. In trying to undo the viciousness of this circularity — that "the agency of the subject appears to be an effect of its subordination" — she argues for a crucial discontinuity within the process of subjection: "A significant and potentially enabling reversal occurs when power shifts from its status as a condition of agency to the subject's 'own' agency" (1997, p. 12). Authentic first-person speech is an achievement irreducible to third-person discourse. To make Butler's long and wonderfully complex explication of this reversal short, she convincingly demonstrates that such an explication necessarily involves psychoanalysis: "I am in part moving toward a psychoanalytic criticism of Foucault, for I think that one cannot account for subjectivation and, in particular, becoming the principle of one's own subjection without recourse to a psychoanalytic account" (1997, p. 87). In the same breath she comments that the criticism can be worked in reverse, too, entailing "the reemergence of a Foucaultian perspective within psychoanalysis" (1997, p. 87).

In critically and creatively dialoguing in this manner between Foucaultian power analysis and psychoanalysis, Butler is thinking beyond Foucault's critique of power and toward a psychoanalytically-informed theory of the subject, representative of the feminist and critical interest in articulating a notion of identity with emancipatory, subversive appeal (for a detailed explication of the Butler-Foucault relation, see Hall, 1996). That it is contested and controversial is a sign of its vitality and importance. Rose, for example, criticises this type of theorising on a number of fronts: first, the reliance of feminist theorists such as Butler or historians such as Norbert Elias on psychoanalysis (1996a, p. 36). Second, Rose remains within the precincts of Foucaultian critique — or at least earlier Foucault — and argues that a notion such as resistance does not need to be theorised (1996a, p. 35); a "thin, weak, or minimal" articulation of agency suffices (1996a, p. 37). Third, Rose apparently understands the concern with identity and the emancipatory aims that invest it to be part of the problem, as he claims "the values of self and identity are not so much resources for critical thought as obstacles to such thought" (1996a, p. 39). To be sure, this last criticism only applies in part, if at all, to the work of someone like Butler, who is vigilant throughout her theorising of identity to problematise it and keep it sufficiently mobile and reflexive to prevent its becoming co-opted by normalising or disciplinary discourses. Further, Butler has the formidable capacity to turn obstacles into resources. I read the controversy between Rose and Butler as indicating the untapped potential of developing a theory of the subject beyond Foucaultian critique; I understand Rose as justifiably defending the integrity of that particular critical perspective for those who wish to remain within and extend it, but this defence does not in any way rule out the productive use of the critique toward developing a theory of agency that issues beyond it. The very articulation of the Foucaultian perspective as a historicist critique creates self-imposed limits. Instead Rose's critical caution regarding the preoccupation with identity signals that these political implications are relative to our specific modern history (a point made by others in unrelated contexts; see e.g., Baumeister, 1986; Taylor, 1989). This critical caution also reveals something Butler's concern with identity does not address, and that leaves her account susceptible to the Foucaultian critique of power; the restriction of her focus to the historical frame of modernity excludes a whole range of agency of those self-same 'subjects' and 'identities' she is theorising — here I am thinking of moral,

ethical, and spiritual questions — that aspire beyond their specific historical context. This point returns us to the critique of the Foucaultian critique of power, now not as excluding a psychoanalytic account of the subject's agency in subjecting herself, but as excluding tradition in being historicist.

CRITIQUE OF THE CRITIQUE

To move to a critique of the critique: Foucault, and Rose with him, seems to understand his critique of power as an end in itself. His stress on discontinuity, and presumably therefore the incommensurability of different historical periods, as well as his own enigmatic position and refusal to propose constructive alternatives, have puzzled numerous thinkers and generated much criticism from others, such as Jürgen Habermas (1983/1990) and Charles Taylor (1985). To cite a typical criticism (from Nancy Fraser, 1989): "Not only does Foucault not elaborate a substantive postmodern alternative to humanism, he continues to make tacit use of the same humanist rhetoric he claims to be rejecting and delegitimating" (p. 57). In brief, I understand the various criticisms of Foucault to be critical of what I call the totalising aspirations and the inconsistencies this raises of the Foucaultian critique of power. (Note that this applies to his earlier work; cf. 1966/1970, 1968/1972; in his later work he seems to be moving beyond these positions. Cf. Foucault 1980; I offer a more detailed reading of this move in Peet, 2003.) In aspiring to a totality there is on the one hand a sophisticated form of reductionism present, in the sense that truth is nothing but power, that our personhood is nothing but an effect of power — which immediately creates an incoherence on the other hand, as Foucaultian critique cannot apply its analysis to, or make sense of, its own possibility. However this does not dismiss their work; on the contrary, I argue that the totalising aspiration of their critique testifies to the quality of their empirical analyses, for their totalising aspiration is descriptively faithful to the totalitarian desire at work in the modern will to power. In being 'descriptively faithful', Foucaultian-style analysis remains purely critique. Despite being highly theoretical, it does not itself constitute a theory. The distinction between critique and theory being that a critique, as parasitic on extant practices and discourses, does not need to make explicit the ethical stance it presupposes, whereas a theory does. Nancy Fraser (1989) distinguishes rhetoric from theory in a way similar to my critique-theory distinction. I return to this point below, but note that if this reading is correct, it takes the sting out of many of the critiques of Foucault; although technically and formally correct, they are overshooting the ethical import for the sake of the theoretical point. Butler is more insightful here; she notes that in *Discipline and punish* Foucault (1977/1979) seems unable to suggest any resistance relative to the disciplinary apparatus of the state and hence the body is constructed as 'docile', whereas in *The history of Sexuality* he (1976/1988) emphasises the possibility of such a resistance; discipline as applied to desire rather than conduct finds its intent to fix and normalise unsettled as the disciplining apparatus itself becomes eroticised (Butler, 1997, p. 97).

If Foucaultian analysis is, then, purely critique, without this totalising aspiration it would lose much of its impact. In regard to our modern individualism, our contemporary obsession with the self, the politics of identity, and all the problems this self-centred ideology presupposes, this would be too great a loss. In taking their critique

as maximally and seriously as possible, the very impact of the critique suggests a theoretical stance that moves beyond it. For to become critical of their 'totalising historicism', to suspect that it breaks down, signals the hope — or belief — that the modern will towards totalitarian domination also fails. Butler has exploited one principal avenue wherein the failure of the totalising aspiration of Foucaultian critique manifests: a theory of the subject centred on desire that articulates itself in terms of identity. The theory can be formulated because the person's aspiration to an identity proves to unsettle any totalising attempts — even its own (in these regards Butler is following the intriguing reading of psychoanalysis offered by Bersani, 1986). I am suggesting another such principal avenue, a theory of tradition centred on an orientation to transcendence, to radical nonhuman Otherness ('spirit', 'nature') that articulates itself in terms of myth, and is analogous to desire in its paradoxicality as a self-expression that undoes the self. I argue such a theory of tradition complements a theory of the subject in developing a theoretical stance beyond the Foucaultian critique of power that, taken together, constitute the contours of a viable theory of agency. To make this argument I want to turn to the work of the great religionist Mircea Eliade.

THEORISING TRADITION: ELIADE AND THE TERROR OF HISTORY

Eliade's thesis (1949/1954) in *The myth of the eternal return* proceeds from the well-established assumption that the modern view of history, which he calls historicist, is a peculiar and relatively recent viewpoint (cf. also Gauchet, 1997). Eliade (1949/1954) argues that this view of history isn't ultimately viable; it cannot provide the sort of transcendent, spiritual vision of the cosmos humankind need to defend themselves against what he calls "the terror of history". To valorise suffering, traditional man places it into a transcendental, that is transhistorical, framework of meaning represented by and through tradition.[2] The framework is ultimately sanctioned and legitimised divinely, i.e. mythically; the same placement done with all human actions as well as naturally occurring events. In being emplaced against a cosmic horizon, actions, and events and suffering as well, gain their reality, their fullness of meaning, through connection to the sacred ground that authenticates them. No historical occurrence is original, but every action, event, or suffering replays some divine archetypal pattern. "It was the myth that told the truth: the real story was already only a falsification" (Eliade, 1949/1954, p. 46). Through this 'mechanism' of valorisation whereby the sacred action re-enacts itself through the profane imitation, traditional man simultaneously leaves the ordinary, profane time of man-made history — in Eliade's phrase, "abolishes" it — and attains to contact with the sacred time of eternity. In this abolition of profane time, traditional man is renewed; the sins and faults of the past redeemed; and suffering made real and meaningful through its participation in the divine archetype of which it is but a shadow. Thus for a Christian their suffering is relativised and redeemed through the

[2] In the interest of brevity, I am using the term tradition in much the same monolithic, singular sense that Eliade often employs terms like 'archaic' or 'primitive'. The truth, of course, is far more pluralistic and differentiated. I understand the notion (and intent) of 'indigenous psychologies' — such as Campbell (2005), Gavala (2005), Tamanui (2005) — as expressing the diversity hidden within my use (and intent) of the singular, 'tradition', quite perfectly.

suffering of Christ; for a Hindu or Buddhist their suffering is relativised and redeemed through its placement in the cosmic scheme of karma, and so on. What is crucial to this valorisation is the connection of mundane ordinary suffering to a transcendent meaning.

Moderns do not resort to this 'mechanism'. The justification moderns find is that their identity as free and autonomous grounds the claim that they make history. History is not imposed by nature, accident, or God, but we moderns make ourselves; history is the record of this making, the expression of our freedom and autonomy. Eliade points out, however, that this is not empirically accurate; only an elite, if anyone, makes history happen. Foucault has provided a detailed account of how this understanding of power as exercised by an elite minority and imposed on the masses below them is false; power has to be understood as distributed throughout practices and across institutions according to its own logic. But although Foucault's reading corrects this component of Eliade's argument, it reinforces the contention that the modern person does not make her own history. The contention is central for Eliade's thesis, which is how to tolerate our suffering, above all the sufferings we inflict upon each other that composes much of our history, without some transcendent valorisation that redeems it?

> [H]ow can man tolerate the catastrophes and horrors of history... if beyond them he can glimpse no sign, no transhistorical meaning; if they are only the blind play of economic, social, or political forces, or, even worse, only the result of the 'liberties' that a minority takes and exercises directly on the stage of universal history? (Eliade, 1949/1954, p. 150)

There are two related aspects considered central in the constitution of human society for Eliade's thesis: one is the basically totalitarian, radically anti-individual, character of religiosity within traditional societies, and the other is the spiritual-moral conscience borne collectively, and therefore individually, by traditional societies. (The self-making historicist understanding of modern autonomous man or woman is the anomaly here.) I will call these the totalitarian aspect and the conscience aspect, respectively; their relation can be understood in numerous ways, although the most accepted view is, I think, the repression hypothesis. Put differently: in traditional societies the normative force of tradition that reproduces the social order at the cost of individual desire and self-interest is conflated with the religious doctrines that legitimate that social order's morality and therefore sanction the disciplining and controlling of deviation. The conflation of power, religion, and morality serve to maximise conformity and conservatism and the tradition represses individuality and difference. Because tradition intercedes between the divine order and the individual it is justified in repressing all difference that would upset the social order, and therefore upset a proper relation to the transcendental. Morality distinguishes those expressions of the individual which are proper (the conscience of the person) from those which are not (inappropriate desire, willfulness, self-aggrandisement, and so on).

Modernity — and here we should be precise and qualify this interpretation as the legacy of the Enlightenment — gives the appearance of escaping totalitarianism and repression. The radical autonomy of Reason, which is both universal and individual, avoids the totalitarian power of tradition, which when put into practice dispenses with the repressive morality legitimated by the myths of religion, realises a new progressive society legitimated on Nature as the nontraditional source of authority rather than

reproduce the old social order legitimated on tradition, and hence maximises the Freedom of every individual. Foucault has shown the falsity of this account, as what has been achieved in maximising Freedom is a new form of totalitarian power; the individualism of modern society is inseparable from its totalising practices of surveillance, discipline, inquiry, and so on, that produce (rather than repress) our selves. In other words, by comparison to Eliade's description, modern society displays continuity in terms of the totalitarian aspect of power; although the practical, technical, institutional form that power takes is discontinuous from traditional societies. The normative force exerted by power practices aims not at a traditionally-defined orientation to the divine order inseparable from morality, but effects a 'normalising' that is presumed natural and ostensibly therefore neutral with respect to morality. That is, this historically-emergent form of totalitarian power subsumes the conscience aspect within itself (the conscience, or as Foucault more famously describes it, the "soul as the prison of the body", is another clever stratagem of power) and in construing power as productive dispenses with the repression hypothesis altogether. The discontinuity between modern society and traditional society would appear to be radical and total. Whereas in traditional society, the power of tradition is exercised through morality at the expense of individuality and desire, in modern society totalitarian power is exercised through the creation of free desiring individuals at the expense of tradition. The connection of suffering to meaning through its being valorised by a transhistorical myth is severed, and with this, the transhistorical criteria of validity idealised by tradition to judge that history disappear. (Leaving us, apparently, with nothing but critique; the kind of sophisticated reductionism I have been calling historicism.)

CONCLUSION

That the Foucaultian critique of power appears as historicist due to its totalising aspiration, stems from its historiographic emphasis on the discontinuity of the modern period that ironically serves to uncritically reinstate the Enlightenment's claim to a progressive break with tradition that began modernity. We have to move beyond this historicism that in the Enlightenment sense is equivalent with modernity; with apologies to Henry Ford, history is not just one damn *epistème* after another. We overcome historicism in instigating a theory of agency that recognises, first, the irreducibility of desire that in constituting our identity as subjects, refuses closure — a refusal inherent in the very functioning of desire — and second, that recognises the orientation to a transcendence centred on a radical otherness, a nonhuman agency, to be an orientation expressed in traditions but irreducible to history. We are not just the realisation of history, but at one and the same time the realisation of tradition. No history perfectly realises a tradition: in this imperfection resides the possibility of the idealisation of human agency as a fidelity to something other than what is and other than what has been. If you like, to use a much more traditional terminology, in this imperfection resides the possibility of spirit, and this possibility is where we escape historicism.

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