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Psycho-social studies: transitional space or new discipline?

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I have for many years been interested in the intersections between sociology and psychoanalysis. Although I first encountered sociology and began teaching it in the 1960s, my involvement with psychoanalysis developed very soon after this. I have been very committed to both these perspectives ever since. Thus the relation, or mostly non-relation, between them, became an issue for me early on. It cannot be said that the mainstream of either perspective has usually been very receptive to the other, despite the fact that Freud himself was keenly interested in the social relevance of his psychoanalysis, and the fact that on the sociological side of this divide there have been major figures (Adorno and Horkheimer, Elias, and Parsons, are four) who believed that unconscious states of mind were essential to the explanation of at least some social phenomena. (Rustin 2015 in press). Much of my own work has taken place on the interfaces between these disciplines, attempting to make use of both to understand certain social, cultural and political phenomena.

However an interest in the relevance of psychoanalysis to the sociological, and of the sociological to the psychoanalytic, is not quite the same as a commitment to the 'psycho-social' as a distinct domain of study and research. About the potential evolution of psycho-social studies as a distinct perspective or discipline I remain somewhat uncertain, although of course there can be no doubt that it has already created a significant space for itself in the academy which has already been beneficial and liberating to many.

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So far as both students and teachers are concerned, psycho-social studies has provided a location in which contemporary concerns with the spheres of subjectivity and emotions were able to be engaged with in ways which even some 'interactionist forms' of sociology were resistant to, on account of a widespread deep-seated preference for the cognitive. Where students choosing to study sociology in the 1960s and 1970s found studying the constraints and inequalities first of class, then of gender, then of race, to be extremely absorbing and sometimes transformative for them, it became evident that their interest in questions of individual identity and its meanings later become more pressing. At the University of East London we found that the popularity of sociology with students began to decline, while that of our psycho-social studies hybrid grew substantially.

It seems likely that the appeal of psycho-social studies to students who were coming from an initial interest in psychology was somewhat assymetrical to that of those who were initially sociology-minded. Psycho-social studies has offered critical psychologists an opening to the 'social' via the social constructionist perspectives of discourse theories, for example, which have been well adapted to capturing differences of race, gender and class. But perhaps just as important has been its liberation of students and researchers from the besetting positivism and scientism of much academic psychology. Many students and indeed teachers, having been originally drawn to psychology from an interest in minds, feelings and, as students would say at their interviews, 'people', then discovered that only a very restricted view of the mind usually featured on that academic agenda, and interest in feelings, persons and relationships hardly at all. What sociology brought to this conjunction after its own anti-positivist and interpretive

revolution of the 1970s was above all an exploratory and open-minded attitude to methods of study and research, and a commitment to trying to understand the world as 'social áctors' (and especially disadvantaged and marginal ones) themselves saw and experienced it. One can say that sociology was much more deeply affected by the 'turn' to interpretative, biographical, and narrative methods, and to orientations to the world as seen 'from below' which was taking place in fields such as anthropology, history, cultural studies and even geography at this time than was the case with mainstream psychology. ('Critical psychology' constituted an exception within that discipline). Generally one can say that the 'rationalistic' disciplines of economics and psychology have proved much more effective in enforcing their orthodoxies, policing their boundaries, and expelling or marginalising their dissidents, than was ever the case for sociology. One could say that these two disciplines found no problem in accommodating themselves to, and indeed developing the rationales for what has become a dominant ideology of neoliberalism, to which the more humanistic end of the social sciences was antipathetic.

What does it take for a new discipline or perspective to emerge? It seems to me that it is worth posing this question, both strategically and analytically, given that the new Association of Psycho-Social Studies has just been launched.

One aspect of the establishment of new disciplines or disciplinary perspectives is organisational. Sociology developed and expanded as a discipline in the 1960s and 1970s through determined efforts by a generation of sociologists to expand the field beyond its original centres of strength in universities such as the LSE, Leicester and Leeds, first to the new universities founded in the 1960s such as Lancaster, Warwick and Essex, then to the technological universities, such as

Surrey, and then to the polytechnics and new universities as they become after the Educational Reform Act of 1992. I remember the help given to courses and departments by senior sociologists such as Philip Abrams, Robert Moore and John Westergaard, in their roles as assessors and external examiners for new sociology programmes. Had the 'binary division' between universities and polytechnics remained, it is possible that a more ''applied' and vocationally relevant version of sociology would have developed, perhaps for the good, since the early pressures had been to differentiate the 'new' and 'old' sectors from one another. (Degree courses in Sociology with Professional Studies and in Cultural Studies were the outcome of such pressures at UEL when the External London University degrees had to be replaced.)
Also influential were the efforts made to ensure a flow of student recruits to new programmes by developing GCE and A level programmes in sociology, a pathway also followed by other disciplines which previously had no base in secondary or further education, such as psychology and philosophy. It is obviously easier to extend a well-established academic base such as existed in sociology and psychology, than to start from the margins. But one should not underestimate the significance of professional and organisational commitment in establishing or extending academic fields.

A different pathway was that followed by Cultural Studies in the 1970s. Here the emphasis lay on the development of the field of study itself, and on the research and writing necessary to establish it. The intellectual example and leadership of its founding figures, Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams among others, was crucial to this development. Cultural Studies in its earlier days defined its fields of study as existing in a relation of antagonism to established definitions of what was regarded as 'culture'. In this sense it was implicitly even

where it was not explicitly political. Born of the new left's commitment to give voice to those excluded from recognition as social equals, Hoggart's retrospective ethography of the lived lives of the working class, Williams' historical analysis of the role in social domination and resistance of many cultural institutions, and his reworking of traditions of literature and drama in similar terms, and Hall's work on popular cultural genres, such as television, news reporting, and youth cultures, are central examples. Their work, and especially Hall's at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University in the 1970s, inspired several generations of graduate students to undertake their own researches into fields such as popular music, ethnographies of youth, and expressive forms of consumption, which they could now feel free to pursue as legitimate fields of academic study. This 'political' commitment of Cultural Studies entailed simultaneous conflicts on several fronts. On the one hand, its advocates insisted on a social and political dimension to 'culture' which was denied by its establishment interpreters. But on the other, they had also to insist on the significance of culture and cultural agency in arguments with defenders of more traditionally materialist left-wing ideological positions These multiple fields of argument – differences and conflicts of gender and race soon came into the picture – as well as a rapid turnover of graduate student generations, helped to create a free space in which different perspectives could co-exist creatively. The Centre also had a quite unusually democratic culture, in which Masters students found themselves engaged in collaborative intellectual work from an early stage, sometimes leading to recognised and inlfuential publications even before they obtained their degrees. Books such as *Resistance through Rituals* (1976) and *Policing the Crisis* (1978 and 2013) , and the Centre's series of Working Papers, reflected this development. Individual CCCS members, such as Paul Willis, Dick Hebdige, Paul Gilroy, Angela McRobbie and numerous others went on to produce their

own distinguished work. Its graduates went off to found cultural studies departments and programmes in other universities, UEL included. It is probably only the political commitment of the Centre's leading members, in particular Stuart Hall, which made possible such an unusually collaborative atmosphere, in what was felt to be a common cause.

But of course the 1970s was a time of radical innovation in many academic fields, these sometimes interacting with and drawing upon one another. Radical journals in this period were influential organisers and developers of work which challenged dominant perspectives. For example, in history, *Past and Present* and then *History Workshop Journal*, in film studies *Screen,* and in philosophy, *Radical Philosophy* (committed to 'Continental philosophy', against the Anglo-Saxon grain) were standard-bearers for new perspectives in their disciplines. A previous example of such a formative journal had been *Scrutiny*, from its dissenting high cultural standpoint, although its example was well known and not without its influence on the first generation of the New Left.

It is much more difficult to envisage such a vigorous climate of intellectual innovation in contemporary conditions, either within universities or outside them. Many of the earlier 'free spaces', such as in further and adult education (where Hoggart, Williams and Edward Thompson all began their academic careers) and in 'liberal studies' in which Hall once taught popular culture, have been closed down or assimilated to credentialised education. Academics are constrained to teach, research and write as competing individuals, driven to meet externally-given norms of production in fear for their jobs. Entry to academic careers is usually now only achievable as a final stage of a long ladder of qualification, which is more likely to establish

habits of conformity than dissent. Milieux of apparent improvisation and self-regulation which were to be found in these earlier days, and which at least sometimes facilitated innovation, are now rare in a hyper-regulated world, and in any case carry high occupational risks.

A third example of a field of innovation is STS, Science and Technology Studies, the critical application of the social sciences and especially sociology to the field of science. This depended on the 'crossover' studies of a rather small number of sociologists, and scientists, located in certain departments, who invented new ways of thinking about the social context of scientific discovery. The critical development here was the close involvement of social scientists, as observers and researchers, in the work of the scientists themselves. The fact that this aroused resistance and antagonism from some scientists may have given this field an additional creative edge. But in the nature of its subject-matter, and the interdisciplinary engagement it requires, this sub-field was perhaps always likely to remain relatively small and specialised, though very productive. Perhaps its development has however enabled social scientists to contribute more knowledgably to crucial debates such as that surrounding climate change.

What then are the options and opportunities for psycho-social studies to develop as a distinct field, if indeed it can be constituted in this way? In all of these other fields, the precondition of development has been the identification of 'foundational texts', the clarification of appropriate methods of discovery (methodologies), and the retrospective recognition or new undertaking of exemplary programmes of empirical research which can serve as models for the further development of the field. One can see how in sociology, or indeed in psychoanalysis, all these conditions have long been amply met – in psychoanalysis with the crucial presence of its fields

of clinical and other practical application. The most important moments in the post-war development of sociology were surely the carrying out of major research studies which had theoretical, methodological and empirical significance, such as (to take three from many examples) the *Affluent Worker* studies by John Goldthorpe and David Lockwood, Elizabeth Bott Spillius's *Family and Social Network*, and Robert Moore and John Rex's *Race Community and Conflict (*Marshall 2002*).*

No-one should doubt the value of sustaining the 'transitional space' which psycho-social studies has already come to occupy. But if it is go further than this, it seems to me that a large work of intellectual archaeology, map-making, theory-building and empirical research is now needed. Success cannot be guaranteed.

References

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