

## **HOW THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST GOT HIS FACTS: A POSTCOLONIAL TALE**

*Anthony Collins*  
*School of Psychology*  
*University of Natal*  
*Durban 4041*  
*email: anti@mweb.co.za*

### **Abstract.**

*What follows is a script for a video, prefaced with an explanation, which was developed as the opening lecture of an introductory course in Social Psychology. The aim of the video was to destabilise the ways in which Social Psychology is imported and marketed as an authoritative body of knowledge, without reflection on the problems and limitations it might face in being implemented in local contexts. As explained in the preface, the strategy chosen was not to contest the arguments and findings of Social Psychology, but rather to subvert its method of self-presentation. Hence the video is a children's fable, a postcolonial "Just-So" story, this time told by the native, about the process of colonisation by the western academy.*

### **CONCRETE.**

*"The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning"*  
(Foucault, 1980:160).

### **THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK.<sup>1</sup>**

In any war over a domain of academic knowledge, a crucial site of tactical engagement is the introductory textbook. For it is here that the basic training takes place: it is the ritual of initiation that defines the battleground for the hearts and minds.

The textbook is a crucial ideological apparatus in the maintenance of the bureaucracies of

---

<sup>1</sup> At the initial presentation at PsySSA, conference, a member of the audience argued that the video was problematic in presenting a paranoid account of the emergence of social psychology. At the time (suspecting the unwitting invocation of rhetorical rule developed for delegitimizing oppositional discourses) I somewhat facetiously defended the importance of paranoid interpretations. A double task then emerged: how to write an introduction to the video script for this publication, and how to explore the utility of a paranoid standpoint? Methodologically, there was also the problem of avoiding replicating the rhetorical structure of academic writing, which is one of the things that the video sought to problematize. Given that military paranoia seems to be the prototypical paranoia of our age, the solution presented itself: it must surely be presented as *an act of war*.

academic knowledge. Ostensibly its aim is to provide an introduction to content of a particular field. In fact its role is to constitute that field by offering a narrative that produces an effect of coherence: presenting a clearly bounded, internally consistent, meaningful and authoritative network of practices, circumscribing the domain and organising the content of the field. Not simply reflecting the field, but producing it.

The real lesson of the textbook is hidden, which serves primarily to make it unassailable. While seeming to present an overview of significant theories and research findings, it is in fact presenting the exemplars that covertly structure what is admissible in the field. Specifically, it claims to presenting *content*, while in fact trading in *method*. It is not the arguments but the rules of argument; not the findings but the research designs, that are being set in place.

As with all initiation, it is a lesson in power: not just a humiliation, but a practical assertion of who must be respected. And a second lesson: the only way to engage it is to attempt to systematically become that authority by submitting to it and proceeding to ascend its internal hierarchies. You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile.

Like the nation-state, under normal conditions, disciplines tactically agree not to engage in acts of war, leaving each one to occupy itself with its own domestic administration and policing. The discipline is thus protected from outside attack by implicit non-aggression pacts, and from inside by the establishment of the rules of engagement that radically limit the modes of internal opposition.

Conventional war implies that adversary accepts the rules of engagement. But in the case of an oppositional grouping that lacks a fully developed institutional military apparatus, there is the possibility of guerilla war. The guerilla army, knowing it is massively outgunned, articulates new rules of engagement. The effectiveness of the guerilla war is determined by the degree to which it manages to analyse and attack the hidden mechanisms of power, while winning popular support by exposing the way precisely those mechanisms of power are in fact being used against the domestic population.

The guerilla attack on Social Psychology can proceed using these very principles. Rather than accepting the tacit rules of argument and research procedures of the discipline, it should seek both to reveal these regulations, and to reveal them for what they are: the mechanisms by which the discipline excludes radical internal critique and maintains its domestic policing against other possible modes of organisation.

In the case of the introductory textbook the attack should not contest the arguments and findings on their own terms, but to expose the hidden rules of rationality and assumptions about research methodology by which it asserts its authority. This entails identifying an underlying conceptual hierarchy, in which certain terms and concepts are taken as markers of authority, while others are rendered dubious and illegitimate. Some elements may include:

Science	Myth
History	Story
Rational	Emotional
Objective	Situated
Facts	Interpretations
First world	Third world
Man	Woman
White	Black
Adult	Child
Serious	Humorous
Dispassionate	Manipulative

The textbook presents its narrative as the history of scientific findings. Here science is precisely that method that avoids the mistakes of religion, superstition and myth. While these systems of ideas offer interpretations, science offers the facts. The facts are established most securely by experimental design and statistical inference. Scientific methods allow unmediated access to the material world that exists prior to human perception, and thus eliminates the distortions of subjective experience. In this way it claims the ultimate authority: it is, quite simply, and by definition, true.

The textbook's narrative is first of all rational, and emotion would be out place. It is serious and dispassionate, neither entertaining nor deliberately designed to shift your thinking in a specific way. It is told by nobody in particular and to everybody in general, as it is simply the neutral vehicle of objective truth. This is its authority, its condition of truth.

In the face of this apparently seamless fortification of knowledge, what is the guerilla to do? The first strategy is to reject the terms. Against this formidable seriousness, to play a joke. Against this science, a myth. Against this abstract truth, a local situated account. Against this dispassionate information, a deliberate intervention. Against this rational adult history, an imaginary children's story. Against the invisible white male voice, a black woman speaking: not to a universal audience, but for our children.

Against the tanks in the streets, some graffiti scribbled on the walls.

*Many years ago, before you were born, even before your grandparents were born, maybe when your great-great grandparents were still living, the greedy people in a faraway land devised a new plan for making money. The people of this land were crazed by money, and had tried everything to get richer and richer. They had gone around the whole world, taking everything they could find and selling it. Often they even sold things they had stolen back to the people they had stolen them from. So shameless were these people, that they even*

*stole people and sold them, shipping them across the sea and selling them like animals to work in the fields and factories.*

*They kept inventing new things to sell, and made machines that could make things faster and faster so that every day there was more to sell. These machines were hungry and had to be fed all the time, so the people of this land had to look further and further for the materials to feed the machines. They spread all over the world, invading many countries, taking what they could find and forcing the inhabitants to work for them to make supplies for their devouring machines.*

*But our story is about a **new** way of making money that they invented. These people had realized that some kinds of knowledge were useful for making money, especially the technical knowledge that could be used for making new machines and new things to sell. So they became great scientists, with knowledge of all the material things in the world. And although they neglected the wisdom of other matters of life, their scientific knowledge brought them great power and wealth, riches and splendour which had never before been seen in this world. But even then they were not content, so some of them devised the plan to make money out of understanding people.*

*Now every culture has its ways of understanding people, and its wisdom about human matters, but these people wanted a different kind of knowledge. They had wise elders with knowledge of philosophy and religion, but they wanted their knowledge of people to be like their scientific knowledge. This knowledge should not just be the wisdom of their culture, based on everyday truths observed by people in their daily lives, or the results of debates amongst the wisest of them. It should instead be based on the experiments of scientists, like their knowledge of machines and material things in which they had already excelled. It should not just bring them sympathetic ways understanding of people, but rather technical and scientific ways of understanding how to change people.*

*They realized that if they could tell those in charge of the factories how to make the people who work for them work harder and more efficiently, and those in charge of countries how to make their citizens more obedient and productive, their knowledge would be worth a lot of money. So they grouped together and invented a new profession, which they called Psychology.*

---

*Now all this took place in Europe and the United States of America about one hundred years ago. This new profession of psychology quickly became powerful, especially in the United States, where industry was growing at a rapid rate, and the new techniques for making workers more productive was very popular with the bosses. But the real success of this Psychology came with the outbreak of fighting between some of these countries. We must remember that these people were not only insatiably greedy, but inclined to great violence, and just when it seemed that they had finished conquering all the other countries in the world, they turned on each other. Believing, as they did, that they were the centre of the world, they called this terrible outbreak of white-on-white violence the First World War.*

*In this war the American army recruited many thousands of new soldiers, and then had work out how to fit each person into a job they could do properly. This was difficult as these Americans were mainly an uneducated bunch, many of whom could not even read or write,*

*and some who hardly spoke English. Here the new psychologists showed themselves to be useful. Taking the idea from IQ testing, which had already been developed for placing learners in different classes, they made tests for assessing people and streaming them according their skills and abilities, and thus helped assign the new troops into suitable positions. It soon became clear that this skill could be just as useful in the workplace, and out of this testing the field of Industrial Psychology was born. For the psychologists who had been dealing with emotionally disturbed people, the war was also good for business, and they had many victims of shell-shock who they could now treat and use to develop their treatments. These years were so important for American psychology that by the end of they could proudly announce that:*

*“As we have put more psychology into this war than any other nation, and as we have more laboratories and more men than all others, we should henceforth lead the world in Psychology ... the future of the world depends in a peculiar sense upon American psychologists” (Hall, 1919: 49).*

*As Psychology grew from strength to strength, it had to show how it was different from other professional approaches to studying people. Just as it had claimed to be better than philosophy because it used experimental methods, Psychology also tried to make itself separate from other area of study like Anthropology, Sociology, and Politics by studying individuals on their own rather than groups of people. This concern with the individual fitted very well with the culture of these Europeans and Americans, who were a selfish and uncaring people, with little sense of community. Their greedy and aggressive nature made them compete against each other to try and be richer and have more possessions, and those that were very successful in this striving liked the psychological approach most of all, because it told them that they were successful because they had greater abilities and higher intelligence. This let them ignore the fact that the rich almost always started out with wealth and privileges, and how the poor were poor not because of laziness or stupidity as the rich liked to believe, but because their society did not offer them the same opportunities that the wealthy were given.*

*So Psychology carried on ignoring the problems in the culture and instead looked for problems inside each individual. Psychology became powerful as it always had friends among the privileged, and in each country the psychologists formed professional societies so that they could control who could become psychologists and how much they would get paid. Psychology grew to have large departments in the universities, with a multitude of researchers publishing in many different academic journals, and developed specialized knowledge and training in several professional areas such as Clinical, Educational and Industrial Psychology. Only a privileged few could complete these training programmes, with the hope of lucrative career ahead of them.*

*But because Psychology was concerned only with studying individuals, a problem remained. It is obvious to us that people live in a social world, but the psychologists, having cut themselves off from the other social sciences, did not know how to think about this properly. This was a common mistake in their culture, and their greatest philosophers had said, “I think, therefore I am”, not realizing, as we all do, that we do not just exist in our thoughts, but in our culture, and in our relationships with those around us. Psychologists had turned this mistake into a profession, and now had to try and think of ways of solving the problems it created.*

---

*So in their discipline the psychologists invented a small area called Social Psychology, to investigate how social groups influence individuals. They avoided questions about how cultures and societies work, and concentrated instead studying small groups of people. Because they wanted to seem scientific, they devised experiments to examine how people would behave in different situations. Although they did many thousands of different experiments, nobody really seemed very interested in the results, and it was only after the next major outbreak of white-on-white violence (this time they called it World War II) that things started getting interesting.*

*This long and brutal war left the Europeans and Americans in a state of shock. Finally they realized that the science and technology that they had believed would solve all their problems could also be used destructively, and that the brutal methods that they had developed for conquering other parts of the world could just as easily be used at home. They were especially shocked by the concentration camps, realizing with horror that they could treat each other the way they had previously only treated other races, and by the atomic bomb, which gave them the ability to destroy each other completely.*

*Finally the Social Psychologists became interested in why they could inflict so much harm on each other, and why violence was so common in their societies. They designed new experiments to investigate these problems, several of which became quite famous because of their disturbing results. One such experiment was done by Stanley Milgram, in which he asked people to take part in a study of punishment and learning. The participants were told to give stronger and stronger shocks to learners every time they made a mistake remembering groups of words. Milgram really wanted to see how severely the participants would shock the learners before refusing to carry on with the experiment. Most of the people he asked beforehand thought that the participants would not give very strong shocks at all, but in the actual experiment most of them carried on making the shocks stronger and stronger until they were giving extremely dangerous and potentially lethal shocks to the learners when the experimenter finally told them to stop.*

*Another psychologist called Zimbardo did a study of how people's behaviour is affected by the social roles in which they find themselves. He got students at the elite Stanford University to set up a mock prison, where some of them played the parts of prisoners and others were guards. The participants started acting as if their parts were real, and after a few days Zimbardo had to stop the whole study because the guards were becoming so abusive to the prisoners, who had quickly become scared and depressed.*

*In another famous study, Sherif took some young boys to a holiday camp to study the ways in which conflict between groups developed. The boys were divided into two groups who competed for prizes in various games and activities. Sherif found that the boys from the different groups became increasingly hostile to each other, and that this hostility carried on even when they were not competing with each other anymore, and that it was very difficult to find ways of reducing this conflict once it had started.*

*You might think that these disturbing findings made the social psychologists start worrying about the consequences of their culture, built as it was on ruthless competitiveness and exploitation. But this was not the case. Because they did not know how to think about*

*culture and society, they just assumed that they had discovered the universal laws of human nature, which applied to all people everywhere. They believed that all people would behave in the destructive ways that they had seen in their experiments. They never thought about the fact that almost all their studies were done on middle class white American men, and usually university students at that.*

*But soon afterwards some voices of discontent started to be heard in American society. Black Americans and women had grown angry that they did not have the civil rights that America so proudly claimed for its citizens. The official discrimination against women and blacks was challenged, and as they gradually managed to take up professional and academic positions in the field, the white men who had always run Psychology were faced with criticism about the way they had assumed that their limited perspectives could explain all of human existence.*

*At the same time there was a bit of a squabble going on between American and European psychologists. The Americans had always been greatly impressed with the advances of the physical sciences, and had thought that the only way for Psychology to become a respected field was to use the methods of the physical sciences as guidelines for their work. That is to say, that they should at all times use experimental methods in their research. Now the European psychologists argued that there were two problems with this belief.*

*Firstly, an experiment relies on results that you can see and measure, which is a problem when you are trying to understand people, because you can't see and measure their thoughts and feelings. So all you can study is their behaviour, and it was argued that restricting yourself to examining behaviour without being allowed to talk about people's experiences meant missing the whole point of studying psychology.*

*Secondly, the Europeans argued that people need to be understood in the social environment in which they exist, not just as isolated individuals in artificial laboratory settings. They were more influenced by ideas from the social sciences, like sociology and anthropology, than by the physical sciences. So the European social psychologists wanted to study people in real-life situations, and speak to them about their experiences*

*The European social psychologists wanted to find out more how people about how people **think**, and were more willing to pay attention to the influence culture and society in these matters. They said it was more important to study things like **language** and **ideology**, to find out how society shaped the way people think. They showed that the way in which people think about themselves and the world they live in was greatly influenced by the culture and society and which they live. These findings were very interesting, but the European social psychologists kept trying to justify their work by getting caught up in complicated philosophical arguments about language and the nature of reality, and so most of the time people didn't really understand what they were talking about.*

*In any case the American social psychologists were not very concerned with these arguments. Although they also wanted to make their work relevant for current social issues, nobody really paid much attention to them, and they had to get on with the business of making money. All that was left for them to do was to design more and more experiments*

*and publish them in academic journals, which nobody else really read. But at least this helped them to get jobs in universities, teaching learners about all these experiments that they had done. Some of them even wrote big textbooks, with glossy pages and pictures, telling of all the things they had found. They sold these textbooks all over the world, yes, even here, were university lectures prescribed them for students of psychology. If you look around you are sure to see them.*

*So now when you see learners weighed down with big books on social psychology, looking very confused by all the of strange ideas, you can explain to them where these things came from, and tell them our story of how the social psychologist got his facts.*

## **REFERENCES.**

Foucault, M (1980) Power/knowledge, in Gordon, C (ed) **Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings by Michel Foucault, 1972-1977.** New York: Pantheon Books.

Hall. G S (1919) Some possible effects of the war on American psychology. **Psychology Bulletin**, **16**, 48-9.

The video may be ordered from:  
Anthony Collins  
School of Psychology  
University of Natal  
Durban 4041  
R100 for institutions: R40 for individuals.