

OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND OTHER DANGERS

Hogg, M A & Cooper, J (eds) (2003) **The SAGE Handbook of Social Psychology**. London: Sage. ISBN 0-7619-6636-6. Pages 526.

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Hogg and Cooper, in their “Preface and Introduction”, offer a brief description of the scientific genre this book belongs to: “Handbooks describe the state of the art – they survey what we know about social psychology, and in so doing identify gaps in our knowledge, current foci of research activity, and future research directions” (pxvii).

Even from a definition as cursory as this one it is clear that a handbook is not exclusively a reference guide, a summary of what has gone before. It also aims to preempt the future of the discipline it references and so help create the conditions for its appropriate reproduction. Of course, social psychology is portrayed to exist independent of the particular representation of it contained in a given handbook, and the appropriate form of and strategies for its reproduction are left unquestioned – there are, in other words, no internal contradictions, just unfinished work.

A more critical reading would, at least, claim that mainstream handbooks present not only truncated, but also very particular and very biased versions of social psychology. “Mainstreaming” is the *raison d’être* of the genre, and handbooks thus seek to create the impression of internal coherence and self-evident external boundaries. This is done, despite the bewildering abundance of data and references contained in it, through processes of rigid demarcation, silencing and exclusion. The handbook under review here continues the disciplinary function of its many predecessors by legitimating a *particular* kind of social psychology, articulated around specific ideas of science and society, and portraying social and political assumptions as universal scientific principles, as if it is the *only* social psychology.

From the first **Handbook of Social Psychology** seventy years ago (Murchison, 1935), through its later multi-volume heirs and the more concise and often topic specific publisher-driven volumes of recent times, handbooks of social psychology produce and police rather than simply represent, the origins, major theories, debates, proponents and possible futures of the discipline. The fact that social psychology is a contested field – is it a discipline or a sub-discipline?; does it belong to psychology or sociology?; what is the relationship between individual and society? – is generally ignored and its foundational questions defused through wilful displays of disciplinary solidity and

solidarity. The book under review here is no different. Even readers with only a passing knowledge of the history of the social sciences will not fail to be surprised by the extent to which the discussion of social psychology is cleansed of references to meta-theoretical debate, the social and historical role of the social sciences in the development and governance of modern societies, and alternative methodological traditions. By elevating the experimental method to its defining feature, wallowing in de-contextualised “findings” and by and large ignoring the many boundary disputes and internal inconsistencies that characterise the field, such concerns are effectively rendered invisible.

But claims such as these are old hat, especially in a journal like PINS. Readers here have a clear sense of the conservative nature of social psychology generally, its unwillingness to engage with critical alternatives specifically, and also of the rhetorical effectiveness of the mainstream, mass distribution of “knowledge” in glossy textbooks and heavy tomes like the one under review. The interesting thing about a book like this, then, is not that most readers of this journal will probably be able to correctly guess its structure and chapter outline as well as its “oversights” without ever having seen it. It is rather that its veneer of coherence can be maintained: the border patrols of mainstream social psychology still seem to work, and a book like this one continues to project the standard form of social psychology into the future.

Here methodology, as mentioned above, is still the central principle of inclusion and exclusion, of what is and what is not social psychology. Conceptual critiques or expansions from different “methodological” traditions, like discourse analysis, can be ignored – it is simply “not social psychology”. It can be minimised and more frequently overlooked even when it explicitly reworks familiar social psychological concepts, like categorisation, attribution and attitudes. Quinn, Macrae and Bodenhausen (Chapter 5, “Stereotyping and impression formation: How categorical thinking shapes person perception”), for example, end their chapter with a discussion of “functional analyses of stereotyping and the intergroup context” (p102). While the everyday, complex and above all *linguistic* (rather than visual) nature of categorisation is acknowledged, there is not even a mention of Billig and other discursive psychologists, who have built careers on elaborating this insight (Wetherell and Billig, by the way, are both referenced in Chapter 19, “Intergroup behavior and social identity”, but then only in relation to their pre-discursive, mostly social identity theory inspired and quantitative work). The same occurs in Chapter 7, “Attitudes: Foundations, functions, and consequences”: a brief but trivialising mention of “constructionism”, but no explicit mentioning of well-developed discursive approaches to attitudinal talk. The only real exception is the chapter by Noels, Giles and Le Poire (Chapter 11, “Language and communication processes”), which discusses discourse analysis as an alternative paradigm (instead of ignoring it or simply treating it as a “qualitative” embellishment on more seriously generated experimental findings) and, by endorsing an interdisciplinary focus largely absent from the rest of the book, displays some awareness of broader discussions in social psychology and the social sciences.

However, isolationism reigns supreme in the rest of the book, and this is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the historical overview of the field by George R Goethals (Chapter 1, “A century of social psychology: Individuals, ideas, and investigations”). The opening historical survey is of course an integral part of the genre. It sets the stage,

establishes the identity of the discipline diachronically and synchronically, but also consigns history to its appropriate role and position: as a descriptive background, and as something to be done after the hustle and bustle of scientific labour is over. History is certainly not part of the object of social psychological study itself.

Goethals, unsurprisingly, produces an entirely stereotypical historical account. What sets this chapter apart, however, even from other mainstream histories, is that it neglects to discuss or even mention in passing the so-called “crisis” in social psychology during the 1960s and 1970s. The emergence of a European social psychology is subsequently presented in a manner that ignores the meta-theoretical and political contradictions in response to which it (partially, at least) developed. European social psychology is thus presented as nothing more than evidence of the steady “internationalisation” of this once American pastime. While it is possible to overstate the radicality of the crisis literature and the emergence of European social psychology, neglecting it here has the effect of making the volume, in terms of the historical self-understanding and disciplinary positioning foregrounded in this chapter, seem even more claustrophobic than many of its predecessors and contemporaries, where at least some lip service is often paid to a history of conceptual and political upheaval. Here, however, even the *memory* of critique is erased.

What we are left with, it seems, is a coherent, growing and especially *international* product: “We felt that such a volume should reflect the international nature of contemporary social psychology. Although most social psychological research is conducted in the world’s wealthiest and English-speaking countries, most particularly the United States, there is significant cutting-edge research done by leading scholars from other parts of the globe. In this volume we have 56 contributors, 39 of whom are from North America (37 from the United States, two from Canada), seven from Europe (five from the UK, one each from the Netherlands and Portugal), seven from Australasia (five from Australia, two from New Zealand) and three from Asia (one each from China, Israel, and Japan).” (Hogg & Cooper, 2003:xvii).

The gaps (no one from South Africa, South America or Eastern Europe, and so one can go on) are obvious, but also not really important. Cutting edge simply means people from other countries pursuing American-style social psychology, and one indeed has to check the contributor biographies to locate authors to countries or regions – nothing in their chapters reveal location or the specific social and political concerns of the places they function in as social psychologists. Social psychology is not becoming more international; international social psychology is becoming more American – at least the social psychology that is represented here. And it is becoming “American” not only in its methodological and theoretical form, but also in its implied social and political imaginaries, if not its paranoia.

It is in the light of this that one can understand why “culture” (Smith & Harris, Chapter 3, “Honoring culture scientifically when doing social psychology”) is presented as *dangerous*: “there is a *danger* that ever more social psychology will be done in ever less typical cultural settings by ever more social psychologists from ever less typical cultural heritages” (p43, emphasis added). This danger is to be overcome methodologically, “so that the harvest of findings from what some consider to be more exotic locales may be integrated into the general corpus of social psychological knowledge” (p43). But is

culture “dangerous” only because it threatens the appropriate scientific reproduction of social psychology as a discipline? Here it is important to remember that social psychology functions as “discipline” not only in the academic sense but also in a broader political sense. It has a societal and political functionality that includes, beyond its own reproduction, also the reproduction of received, mostly liberal democratic practices and forms of political self-understanding. It should thus come as no surprise that the discussion of “culture” in this handbook ends with the following, politically loaded question: “Is it true that the nations with predominantly Muslim populations forms a distinctive cluster exemplifying behavior patterns that cannot be accounted for by existing characterizations?” (p57). The “danger” of culture is not its ability to disturb the normative version of social psychology, but to threaten the normative political imaginaries assumed and pursued by this social psychology. The danger of this kind of social psychology, in turn, is that the political imaginaries and values that animate it are never mentioned or interrogated.

These remarks lead to the obvious question: is this a bad book? How does one answer such a question? One can be generous and say that many of the chapters, judged on their own terms, are quite “good”: they are clearly written, they cover the literature they deem relevant from their perspective of the field, and they provide comprehensive accounts of their own research agendas. As a reference work (even for the purpose of *negative* referencing as I have done here) it is useful and fairly exhaustive. However, a generosity based on “its own terms” is problematic: these terms are maintained through a considerable neglect of serious alternatives, and, much more importantly, the social and political world.

Critical social psychologists are not going to read this without experience a sense of déjà vu – not to mention boredom. And of course, it is exactly a sense of déjà vu that this kind of text seeks to instill. Luckily for us, other forms of social psychology exist – and given the genre’s and this book’s strategy of defusing dissent through selective and distorted incorporation, we should quite likely be grateful that it has not been “incorporated” into this text.

REFERENCES.

Murchison, C (ed) (1935) **Handbook of social psychology**. Worcester, MA: Clark University Press.