

Psychology intersecting what?

PINS has been an important reference point for radicals in psychology in the UK, those of us who now sometimes go under the heading “critical psychology”, and when we have tried to connect our critique of psychology with practical action the struggle in South Africa was always on our minds. You were there for us, for example, in academic conferences where we attempted to inject something of the real world into abstract debates about “social constructionism”, and you were there when we took some first steps to mobilise researchers alongside those who use psychological services in the founding of the organisation “Psychology Politics Resistance”. Sometimes the events in South Africa functioned as inspiration and sometimes as a warning; of how political revolution feeds into the composition of psychology as a discipline, and of how a change in constitutional dispensation can reproduce old structures and effectively absorb and neutralise complaint.

And it is important to remember that **PINS** was effectively the first journal of “critical psychology” in the world, and with the crucial difference from most other journals, that it intersected academic and political struggle. The decision of activists around **PINS** to throw themselves into matters much broader than “psychology” in the final years of the Apartheid regime, into OASSSA (Organisation for Appropriate Social Services in South Africa) for example, was a stark reminder for those of us who cleaved to the identity of “psychologist”, that adding the qualifier “radical” or “critical” to that professional designation was not enough; even that a necessary aspect of the transformation of the social might mean that the identity of psychologist might be one of the first to be erased like a figure in the sand. One way of characterising **PINS** might, in this sense, be to say that it was “intersectional” *avant la lettre*. And to think of “intersectionality” in this kind of way, as a message from the past – from the history of PINS under Apartheid – throws a different light on debates about “intersectionality” in academic and political space now.

The intersection between psychology and politics – from **PINS** then to **PINS** today – provides a frame for conceptualising and working with “intersectionality” as a signifier now. As with every radical forum from the 1980s onwards, and especially for those

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influenced by Marxist analysis, we know from our friends around **PINS** that there were repeated attempts to grapple with the interrelationship between different forms of oppression. There were attempts and failures (as always, and sometimes productive failures perhaps) to integrate an analysis of class division and exploitation with the struggle against racism and to attend to the way that gender and sexuality operate as specific dimensions of power that at different moments, and sometimes simultaneously, buttress and subvert what some would like to see as the “principle contradiction” into which we must intervene (Apartheid, colonialism, capitalism, for instance).

Now there is sustained reflection on these kinds of interrelationships of oppression in the work of the Apartheid Archive Project (to take just one example of critical research taking place in the broad oppositional culture that **PINS** sustained for thirty years). Here the question of “Apartheid” and the multiple ways that racism structured everyday life – which the Project taps into by way of narrative accounts of “experiences” during the time when Apartheid was explicitly named as a system of rule – is teased apart in relation to a number of other questions. It is not accidental that one of the key recent reports on this work **Race, memory and the Apartheid Archive** (Stevens et al, 2013) should carry the subtitle “*Towards a transformative psychosocial praxis*”, or that it should be published by Palgrave in their new “*Studies in the Psychosocial*” series. (Yes, I am implicated in this, and co-authored a chapter in that book bringing to bear some Lacanian concepts on the way that the texts might be read.)

This is significant for a number of reasons, one of the most important being that “psychosocial studies” is one of the new fields that has emerged in the discipline alongside “critical psychology”, but enclosing reflection on the interrelationship between race, gender and sexuality (and not so often class, it should be noted) within what is usually an explicitly but sometimes implicit psychoanalytic frame. The role of psychoanalysis in psychosocial studies is, of course, contested, sometimes bitterly so, especially when concerns at the influence of a form of essentialising and evangelistic psychoanalysis touched a raw nerve among enthusiasts for the deployment of Kleinian theory alongside discourse analysis (for example).

One such article voicing some concerns, one which unleashed a torrent of hurt feelings and recrimination in a special issue of the journal **Psychoanalysis, culture and society**, was co-authored, not coincidentally, by Stephen Frosh (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008), who is also co-editor of the Palgrave “*Studies in the Psychosocial*” series. The field of psychosocial studies is now, more obviously so than critical psychology, addressing the way that certain kinds of divisions structure subjectivity, and trying to overcome those divisions. In this respect, psychosocial studies in Britain now is also more politically attuned to debates happening in the sphere of cultural politics, and it seems to grasp the import of them better than critical psychologists (especially those who are still fixated on the problematic of “discourse” and how to use it or avoid it).

This brings us to a paradox. In psychosocial studies we find conceptual mediation of the space between the “personal and the political” (as second-wave socialist feminism would term the opposition) which effectively mobilises the apparatus of “intersectionality”. By “intersectionality” here I mean interpretation and intervention into the overlapping and mutual reinforcement of different forms of oppression. The “intersectional” questions that would be posed to analysis of class, for example, would be over the way that class is always already racialised, not only resting on the assumption that certain bodies of colour inhabit certain class positions but also focusing on the way that class over-determines the way that racism is structured (so that, for example, it is the

working class in Britain that is popularly represented as being the most racist while it is the ruling class that benefits from resulting class divisions).

The most developed forms of this kind of analysis have appeared in feminist analysis of the “intersectional” nature of oppression (the way that women experience their position as mediated by their “race” or their “class” or their “sexuality”), and this is where there has been a resurgence of interest in Black feminism (Nayak, 2014). Despite (or sometimes because of) the interest in psychoanalysis, psychosocial studies attends to “experience” and then to questions of “standpoint” (even when not explicitly using that term) to analyse oppression in terms of “intersectionality” (even when that concept is not often named as such). Some of the most nuanced debates around that concept are taken up and re-circulated, even if they are now being circulated inside academic institutions.

Meanwhile, the slight unease and bad feeling provoked in the psychosocial debates over the role of psychoanalysis are nothing to the levels of vituperation and spite to be found in some of the corresponding debates on the Marxist left in Britain. Here the term “intersectionality” is actually being bandied about to try and make sense of a crisis of the far left, but is distorted out of all recognition. The “crisis”, briefly put, consists of a series of incidents of sexual violence in the largest revolutionary organisations, one of which (the Socialist Workers Party) went into meltdown after it tried to deal with accusations of rape against a central committee member by circumventing the bourgeois state. The victim was told to stay away from the courts while an “investigation commission” decided if the case was proven or not, and after an annual conference, when the commission declared that it was not proven, a series of purges and splits took place over the course of the next eighteen months. A positive result, if this disaster for revolutionary politics can be seen as such, was that many ex-members of the group began deliberately to adopt the previously suspect descriptor “feminist”.

The latest twist in the saga came when one of the new groups (the International Socialist Network) spawned by the crisis, and sensitised to questions of sexism (and racism) itself went into crisis in what has been termed “the kinky split”. (Again, yes, I am implicated in this, being involved in a group that has been desperately trying to hold together “regroupment” negotiations with this and another revolutionary organisation that has explicitly embraced feminist politics as “intersectional” to its Marxism.) The occasion for the split was the response by one of the group’s steering committee to a photo of the Russian fashion designer Dasha Zhukova sitting on a chair sculpted as the figure of a black woman. The steering committee member, Magpie Corvid, who is also a professional dominatrix, was berated for her racism and then the exchange went out of control (mostly on Facebook) with accusations that Magpie’s own sexual preferences were a reflection of her white privilege, these accusations being traded with defences that what comrades do in their own bedrooms, whether or not that involves “race play”, is their own business. (Richard Seymour, a key protagonist in the implosion of the groups through his blog “Lenin’s Tomb”, and currently doing his PhD at LSE, supervised by Paul Gilroy, who is now at Kings College, University of London, defended Magpie and then got caught in the crossfire.)

The proliferating “analysis” articles by other far left groups revelling in all this and a series of other commentaries seized on “intersectionality” itself as the culprit. So, “intersectionality”, we are now told, is that it is about: (a) privileging the experience of any and all who deem themselves to be suffering from oppression (which would, if it were true, represent the full triumphal entry of psychology into politics as its defining factor, which is one reason, at least, why we should

notice this rhetorical trope); (b) forcing anyone with a position of power to “check their privilege” before speaking and to come to the conclusion that they should perhaps not speak at all (which would effectively shut all the academics up on the basis that they clearly benefit materially from speculation about oppression, and I have mixed feelings, not all negative, about that consequence); or (c) updating what the old left used to call “multiple oppression”, as if degrees of experience could be accumulated and used to trump rivals when adopting positions (a) or (b) (and in at least one far left internal group discussion this reading of “intersectionality” as “what we used to call” multiple oppression was tellingly offered in generous conciliatory spirit rather than as critique).

Among the issues that arise from these sets of parallel debates inside and outside the academic world are the following four. First, we need to take seriously the way that psychological notions are wielded in debate in the real world, especially in the field of politics, and all the more so in the forms of politics that are closest to ours. Second, the disconnect between the two worlds of academic and political debate are symptomatic of a deeper problem, and that academics rushing to the rescue by diagnosing what is going on (a too-temptingly easy task if we were to focus on individual pathologies) would simply exacerbate the increasing psychologisation of contemporary culture (including of Marxist and other oppositional political culture).

Third, academics trying to frame what is happening in terms of the categories that make sense to them might help us, but would actually then engage in what has been neatly described as the “academicisation” of discourse that proceeds alongside psychologisation today (De Vos, 2012). Fourth, rather than put to work what we think we know about “intersectionality”, and then applying it to the outside world, we need to repeat the **PINS** project, which was to really work at the intersection of academic and political struggle. There were certain conditions of possibility for you to do that – the pressure of political power from governmental structures down to everyday life under Apartheid – and maybe it will not be until we in Britain are forced to acknowledge those conditions of possibility for power and resistance that we will really be in a position to have our own version of **PINS**.

References

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