

Book Review

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Ian Parker. (2011). *Lacanian psychoanalysis: Revolutions in subjectivity*. In the series: 'Advancing theory in therapy'. Series editor: Keith Tudor. London, UK: Routledge.

The sub-title of this book suggests a focus on the dynamic nature of the relation between Lacanian psychoanalysis and the socio-political, historical conditions within which subjectivity is constructed and situated. But more than that, there is a radical and subversive connotation to the concept of 'revolutions', pointing to a concern with contradiction, resistance, change and transformation at the level of the individual as well as the social. Ian Parker, Lacanian psychoanalyst and Professor of Psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University, is a leading figure in the endeavours of contemporary social, theoretical analysis to navigate the unsettling, if not turbulent, points of juncture and disjuncture that sustain the relations between the various discourses of the 'psy complex' and the social conditions that sustain them. Parker's book pushes this agenda to the forefront, examining the way Lacanian psychoanalysis is both a product of the same socio-political milieu as psychology, psychiatry and psychotherapy, including the classification systems of the late nineteenth century, and yet at the same time tears against every aspect of these traditions, breaking with them definitively. To a large extent, Parker's book establishes the 'scene' within which the points of convergence and divergence across these fields are enacted theoretically and clinically, in both historical and ideological terms.

I think there are at least two readerships for this book, and I strongly recommend it to each of them. One group comprises those non-Lacanian practising and researching in psychotherapies, psychiatry and clinical psychology, for whom psychoanalysis, and Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular, possibly registers on the peripheral vision of their work leading to an interest to learn more. For those whose appetites have been whetted and who wish to extend their appreciation of what Lacanian psychoanalysis is all about as a clinical practice, this book provides an introduction to concepts and processes with considerable clarity, yet without compromising the complexity of the critique and challenge represented by Lacan's work. In addition, it situates Lacanian psychoanalysis in relation to other 'psy' practices, and this within the frame of a critical engagement with the ideology of a capitalist social and patriarchal order actively producing the subjectivities at stake within these interventions. A second readership would be Lacanian psychoanalysts, theorists and indeed others asking questions about psychoanalysis and revolutionary change, who are exploring the vexing issues surrounding individual and collective action to change the conditions of social, political and economic production, and relatedly – the relation between the clinic and 'outside' the clinic.

These are not easy questions, and yet in 'circling around' the main focus of this work, coming at the questions from a number of different 'vantage points', Parker does not detour away from the inherently troubling and problematic lines of inquiry they inevitably open up. Rather, he charts a course that lays out the grounds, traverses the issues in considerable depth, refusing to reconcile oppositions into harmonious wholes or to postulate the possibility of synchronised 'communications'. We learn how, within the frame of a Lacanian psychoanalysis, revolutions in subjectivity can only occur through living the disjunctions that construct the subject in his or her alienation; in doing so, the subject might glimpse, even if fleetingly, that he or she is not produced and reproduced solely through these ideological imperatives.

If there is a complicit relation between psychoanalysis and capitalism, Parker's book aims to break it, or at least challenge and trouble it (p. 89). And the point of leverage he proposes is an explicit disjunction between the space of the clinic and the space outside the clinic. In fact, the very revolution in subjectivity that Parker both points to and calls on psychoanalysis to induce, can only be engendered through the subject's 'use' of the space of the clinic if it is configured as a break from a space that is 'outside'. This disjunction is not proposed in any absolute sense. Indeed, Parker outlines the significance of Lacan's neologism 'extimacy', which is precisely a concept resulting from a deconstruction of the oppositional spatial metaphor of interiority and exteriority. Such a deconstruction, however, does not dissolve the distinction between the two terms, but rather creates a dialectical relation between the boundaries defining them. The exterior, the 'outside of the clinic', can only be realised as constitutive of the 'interior' of the subject, and similarly, that which is most intimate to the subject can only be experienced as exterior to him or her, if the process of analysis can blur these boundaries. For this to be possible, the space of the clinic must be constituted as a break from an 'outside' space, thus creating an otherwise impossible locus as vantage point.

There are numerous features of Lacanian psychoanalysis that tends to make it unpalatable for those embracing the 'good' work of the helping professions more generally, or 'holistic' psychotherapies in particular. One such feature is Lacan's insistence that his reading and practice of Freudian psychoanalysis cannot be one that adapts people to society; that makes disturbed and unhappy people content and at peace with themselves in a seamless relation of harmony with the social order. The very notion of 'happiness' in the neo-liberal consumerism of late capitalism is integral to a utilitarian philosophy, analysed by Joan Copjec (1994) for its propensity to offer the enticements of contentment and satisfaction resulting from participation in the hegemonic social process, in exchange for surrendering the agitations of desire. The psychoanalytic ethic, on the contrary, and as foregrounded in Parker's analysis, enjoins the subject to maintain its desire, and not succumb to these 'pathological' incentives (Copjec's term) that are typically grounded in the subject's perception of his or her own self-interest. This radical Lacanian move

counters any suggestion of an ethics of psychoanalysis being grounded in the 'good'. The subject is not understood as driven to seek his or her own 'good'. Psychoanalysis, therefore, is not a process that removes suffering, understood as an aberration from the 'normal' pacifying contentment of 'happiness'. If anything, psychoanalysis prolongs the subject's 'truth' as conflicted, divided from the object of its desire, and, as we see through Parker's book, alienated both through its subjection to signifiers and through the relations of labour in a capitalist economy.

Lacanian psychoanalysis runs counter-current to notions of a 'depth-psychology'. Parker explains how the psychoanalytic interpretation does not aim to garner hidden meanings that can be conceptualised as 'underlying' the surface manifestation of speech and conscious intention: 'interpretation does not treat the unconscious as a place from which hidden meanings are dragged out into the open' (p. 103). There is no sense of what a dream or symptom 'really means'. Thus in addition to breaking with the notion of 'depth' there is also a break with the idea that the analyst and the analysand are each working primarily with 'meanings'. The very idea that the subject harbours some inner meaning of life that, once revealed, will appease his or her alienation, is rather more an artefact of the capitalist ideology. Meaning construction is certainly a crucial register of subjectivity – in Lacanian terms it figures within the Imaginary – yet the focus on the analytic encounter and process is importantly within the register of the Symbolic, of language, of the structure of signifiers. Through Parker's book the reader is gradually introduced to the way this process works and how it is structurally distinct from the theoretical assumptions and practices of psychotherapies or indeed some other forms of psychoanalysis.

Lacanian psychoanalysis is not humanistic; it is not self-actualising. On the contrary, it is precisely the mis-recognition of a unified and 'actualisable' 'self' that is the focus of analysis. The notion of the unconscious is not posited to be somehow 'inside' the person. Parker makes it clear that the patient's thoughts and 'even the unconscious itself' is 'but a product of symbolic practices that, in bourgeois society, invite each subject to imagine that they are, or should be, an enclosed individual' (p. 77). The refusal of the analytic process to take up the most common understanding of the 'relational' dimension of interaction (between analyst and analysand) challenges the very notions of empathy, connection and containment that structure the way many psychotherapies understand their means of functioning. Lacanian psychoanalysis is famous, or infamous, for the apparent severing of the session that cuts across the analysand's speech. Yet Parker elaborates the crucial role of the 'cut' in analysis that works to section an interpretation rather than augment it; it breaks the identificatory gesture of relationship and 'causes an enigma to appear in the session' (p. 198). This 'cut', or 'scansion' (another term sometimes used by Lacanians), breaks the session, creating a disjunction between the space of the clinic and the outside, and it also breaks the relationship between the analyst and the analysand. Each of these effects

“introduce something of the ‘real’” (p. 198); the ‘Real’ being the third of Lacan’s registers within which subjectivity is constituted as an effect of language.

It is necessary to read Parker’s book to work through his argument regarding the way Lacanian psychoanalysis can facilitate the connection between the collective political resistances of Marxism and feminism in particular, and the revolutions of subjectivity taking place through the structuring of the space of the psychoanalytic clinic. The disjunctions mentioned are crucial to this possibility. At a recent debate at the London School of Economics (1st December 2010), where Parker was one of three authors talking about their recently published books on the topic of ‘psychoanalysis outside the clinic’, he commented on the inevitable limit point to psychoanalysis given its formation within the construct of a social world that presumes the enclosure of the ‘individual’. It cannot directly precipitate collective action, and this limit is demarcated by the very conditions of its possibility. Given this limit point, Parker is adamant in the book and also in his talk at this event, that Lacanian psychoanalysis is not, and must not be considered as, a ‘world view’. It is not a complete system of thought, has no totalising injunction, and as he states, ‘it desubstantialises theoretical concepts at the very moment it deploys them’ (p. 13 emphasis in the original).

I wonder if Parker’s repetitive use of the term ‘under capitalism’ possibly subsumes too much multiplicity, obscuring those contradictions that could usefully be explored in a more finely grained analysis for their intersections with the particular forms of alienation within contemporary subjectivity. Possibly this would be another book. With reference to contemporary social changes and their implications for revolutions in subjectivity, Parker cites the decline of the paternal imago in late capitalism. While the book does give gender and Lacan’s theory of sexualisation due attention, with reference to its patriarchal supports, the decline of the paternal imago is such a crucial phenomenon that, given the context, it could have been worthy of further analysis than Parker provides here. I also wonder, in turn, about the decline of capitalism? As the mythical supports of a capitalist economic hegemony appear to be decaying day by day in our globalised world, along with its very ‘real’ material infrastructure, the question of further turns in the revolutions in subjectivity will, if we take Parker at his word, inevitably be posed.

This volume is a highly significant intervention that addresses questions currently at the forefront of psychosocial and psychoanalytic theory as well as the relations between Lacanian psychoanalysis and psychotherapies. It is particularly commendable for the way Parker articulates the contemporary clinical and theoretical field of Lacanian psychoanalysis with the political economy of our times. I think we will be reading this work and using these ideas for many years.

Reference

Copjec, Joan (1994) *Read my desire: Lacan against the historicists*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.