THE TROUBLE WITH HELP

Beyond Help: A Consumers' Guide to Psychology. By Susan Hansen, Alec McHoul and Mark Rapley. Ross on Wye: PCCS Books, 2003. 251pp. £16.00 pb.

Initially I had some real problems with this book. Indeed, I did not want to finish reading it and I found it a chore to get through some of the initial chapters. But I found two sides to this book – one intensely annoying, the other provocative and challenging. *Beyond Help* has an explicitly political edge that challenges the very basis of psychology and some of the so-called caring professions. It is not subtle in this challenge and the authors are not afraid to display their politics or their Foucauldian theoretical position. The work of Foucault pops up everywhere in the book (see Foucault, 1967, 1977). The authors state their aim quite clearly in the introductory chapter:

> Our overall aim is, therefore, explicitly political. This is not a balanced book. Rather it is a balancing book, unearthing and running counter to the massive dissemination and intrusion of psychological techniques into (indeed, as) the life of the consuming subject in late modernity. (p. 7)

The argument therefore runs in parallel with Foucault's well known ideas about the creation of Cartesian rational man, technologies of the self, discipline, normalization and the pathologization of anyone who does not fit the model of what it is to be rational in modernity. For Foucault, psychology was born not as the truth of madness but as a sign that madness was now detached from its truth, which is unreason. So, in the classical age, we could say the rational man was created by locking away all the people who did not fit the picture of rationality and morality of the time. The production of expert discourses in psychiatry and medicine led to the creation of the insane, or the pervert, or the deviant (Clarke, 2005). We now pay to confess; indeed Foucault challenges commonly held beliefs about self, identity and the modern subject and it is from this Foucauldian model that this book takes its underlying structure and ethos. This book, then, is essentially about the commercialization of popular psychology and therapies. It is structured around eight chapters, which examine the growth and trade in psy-professions that manage the production of the self.

In Chapter 2 we see a barrage of information about the current state of psychiatry, the prescription of drugs and the medicalization of the human condition. The authors argue that we truly live in an antidepressant era and that up to 20% of males in the UK are diagnosable with a 'mental disorder' in any given week (p. 11). We are told how the number of psychiatrists practising in the UK has doubled over the last 20 years or so and how the 'global explosion' of mental disorder has called for more and more psych-professionals. This can be gauged, argue the authors, by the growth of mental disorder described in the DSM-IV, which has tripled since its first edition – 'shyness', along with smoking, is now a psychiatric condition. Children do not escape either – being a child can now be seen as a form of psycho-pathology with an estimated four million

American children being diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (p. 12). Our Western world is saturated with advertisements and agony aunts; indeed we have a culture of consumption of psych-products and it is primarily the analysis of different forms of 'media' that forms the methodological backbone of this book. Chapter 3, 'Psychocomercials', for example, examines the commercialization of professional psychology and the way in which 'we', the public, have become 'empowered' consumers of psychological products and services (p. 23). The authors argue that professional psychology is now 'resolutely' orientated toward the consumer in much the same way that students in universities are now customers – 'patients have now metamorphosed into clients' (p. 25). Consumers are captivated as psychologists pitch their work to the media. Indeed, for the authors, even the serious question of professional ethics has not gone untouched by the onslaught of the psych-industry. Ethics are no longer about protecting people from harm *per se* but:

> It seems that professional education on ethical matters need no longer include any actual discussion of ethical matters. This trend is not peculiar to psychology. Today, professional ethics committees are more likely to convene to discuss legal liabilities than to reflect on ethical issues as such. (p. 40)

This chapter therefore largely deals with the commercialization of psychology and the engineering of customers (rather than patients) for the profession – the new customer is an 'empowered consumer' in contra to the formerly compliant patient. Choosing a therapist is now akin to making a shopping trip where we make an informed choice about our options and products.

In Chapter 4 we get more of the same stuff – historical overviews of the 'self-help' 'sex manual' 'good marriage' industry laced with Foucauldian criticisms of this industry – objectification of the subject, control of the 'self' by others, sex as sexuality. I think this is one of the better chapters of the book but by this point felt weary by the long lists of well rehearsed criticism that have been better done elsewhere, and notably by Foucault himself. The chapter is then interrupted by a long transcript from a radio show, which for me signalled an opportunity to close the book for a while. I think, in this respect that the book could really have benefited from some fluent prose, rather than endless lists, quote after quote, and transcription.

When the authors said that this was a political project they were certainly not wrong about their style: the endless repetition of a simple message over and over again. This irritation, though, does have to be tempered in light of some of the more provocative ideas in this book. For example the chapter titled 'psych dot com' provides an interesting critique of the encroachment of the psych industry into the computer, then Internet-related realms of the world, including the introduction of psychological tests online and self-help groups – indeed cyber-analysis. This is where we see the most prolific meeting between human misery, marketing and consumption.

This feeds logically into the next chapter, which starts with a discussion of media portrayals of mental illness and the often negative and stigmatizing stereotypes that are produced. The critics, as the authors point out, are usually the psych-professions who ague that popular media – in particular, cinema, television and the popular press – misrepresent the truth about mental illness to the detriment and harm of those who suffer from it. Work, therefore, needs to be done in order to inform the public about the 'true' nature of mental illness. If this is the case, argue the authors, then we should subject the

information given by professionals to the same kind of critical scrutiny. It is then argued that the psych-professions' own mass media are subject to a whole range of problems around the characterization of mental illness, indeed the authors claim that there is 'a conflict of interest in action, in publications purporting to be "educational health guides" ' (p. 168). This conflict of interest remains largely between the goal of the pharmaceutical industry and those encouraged to consume its products. So, from the literature produced by the psych-professions themselves to the popular magazine we see a plethora of ideas about mental wellbeing and judgements of pathology that are part of a larger mass market of consumption.

I found the final two chapters of this book most interesting. The penultimate, a defence of Foucault if you like, is well crafted in relation to the work of psychologists and the role of art in interpretation. The final chapter asks what an alternative project of psychology might look like. In other words, what are the other possible ways in which we might conceive of the human condition that are not rooted in psychodoxy – what could the 'self' be? The authors argue that we are constantly told the same story about ourselves:

> That is, we are continually informed that contemporary woes and miseries are a result of the kind of *being* that we fundamentally are: a being externally divided within itself; divided between cognition and behaviour, inner desires and outer pleasures, spirit and matter, mind and body . . . (p. 228)

But this division of self is only one of many possible stories, historically contingent and fairly recent. In other words, the 'psychologized man' of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment scientific thinking. For the authors, we can start to think about a possible counter politics of the self by rec-

ognizing this historical contingency or, as Foucault has done, to question the link between reason and modernity, experts and discourses, power and knowledge. Foucault has shown us that there is a growing tension in modern society between reason and unreason and the way in which rationality slowly encroaches on our private life, and indeed the way in which our identity is constructed by, and in relation to, Others (Clarke, 2005, 92).

To conclude, *Beyond Help* offers a critique of the psych-professions, popular psychology and the commercialization of the profession as well as an underlying Foucauldian critique of our ontological insecurity in modernity. I found the style of writing difficult in many places and quite offputting – too many lists, and too much repetition of the same message. I do, however, think that the message is an important one, that is, in the spirit of critical theory, to reflect constantly on our methods and practices. I feel that there could have been more balance; for example, the work done by psychotherapists and analysts to free people from chemical straight jackets; work done in the community, for example by Marie Langer, and work in South Africa (see Clarke et al., 2006). This may however have detracted from the political message of the book, I'll leave that to its audience to decide.

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