

Book Review

Review of *Psychoanalysis, Clinic and Context: Subjectivity, History and Autobiography*. By Ian Parker. Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 208 pages, £29.99 (paperback). ISBN 978-0367144326.

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Structure was a key signifier, and a logical quilting point, informing Jacques Lacan's return to Freud, which amounted to his reinvention of *the unconscious as structured like a language*. Lacan read, and reinvigorated, Sigmund Freud's classic texts primarily through the lenses of Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics and Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology—not mentioning Hegelianism (via Kojève), surrealism, and mathematics as other equally important lenses. The structure of subjectivity was the central question for both Freud and Lacan. While the former understood psychic structure in terms of topography, the latter explicated it through topology. What then of the structure of Ian Parker's recently published book?

Parker is a psychoanalyst among many other things, or as he puts it in Lacanian terms: "I am a divided subject. I divide my time between work in the clinic, research on the construction of subjectivity and political intervention" (p. 196). In other words, in addition to being a clinician, Parker is both a teacher and a researcher with expertise in critical psychology and qualitative research. He is also an activist, a Marxist (Trotskyist). On this last note, although Parker identifies as an Allouchian (or a follower of Jean Allouch), he actually is not.

In the context of an idiosyncratic signifying chain (reminiscent of the following one: if Freud→Lacan→Miller then Marx→Lenin→Stalin), Parker draws a parallel between the schismatic histories of both Marxism and psychoanalysis, which is a problematic, or a thread, that sinthomatically ties and knots the entire book together around this question, which Parker raised with Ruth, one of his early analysts: "I [Parker] am interested in the connection between psychoanalysis and politics" (pp. 64-65). Here is the syncretic logic of Parker's idiosyncratic signifying chain: if Millerians are the first international, Solerians are the second international, and Melmanians are the third international then Allouchians are the fourth international. This is convenient because Parker, a Trotskyist, is an active member of the Fourth International, which rejected Comintern or alignment with the Soviet Union given its perversion of the Marxist project. However, Parker is more than a Freudian/Lacanian/Allouchian, for he is "located in a range of different contradictory social practices" (p. 196); in other words, he is a Parkerian. First, because that is the name of his personal website (www.parkerian.com), which is both an anagram of his full name (Parker, Ian) and the adjective form of his last name (Parkerian). Second, because his practice of psychoanalysis "is actually much closer to the most humanist imaginable ethic, close to a quasi-existentialist approach to each human subject in its *singularity*" (p. 195, emphasis added). This tells us a little bit about the structure of

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Parker's divided subjectivity (after all his book is a memoir), but what about the structure of the book itself? How is the book divided?

The book is structured in five acts like a Shakespearean play. Each act revolves around a central question, and is comprised of four chapters. Finally, each chapter is divided into three sections, and the titles of the chapters are made up of keywords, or signifiers, like 'sex', 'Japan', 'Islam', etc. In the first act (1960's/1970's), Parker writes about his reasons for avoiding psychoanalysis as someone who grew up scared of psychiatry and who ended up studying psychology primarily to know the enemy. Parker traces his personal/political journey, as a scholar-activist, from Marx and Freud through the Frankfurt School, Fromm, Reich, and Foucault to Lacan. Parker documents his navigation of the treacherous terrain of psychoanalytic organizational politics in the United Kingdom. One of the villains in the story is, of course, the International Psychoanalytic Association, which was founded by Freud and which excommunicated Lacan. After Freud's death, the IPA—"no small beer" (p. 21) Parker reminds us—ended up being a conservative, heavy-on-regulations organization representing ego psychology, which is the most popular strand of psychoanalysis in the United States. The other villains, in Parker's account, include Kleinian psychoanalysis and the Anna Freudians (British representatives of the IPA); these are the dominant psychoanalytic strands in the UK, which dwarf Lacanian psychoanalysis. The only IPA group sympathetic to Lacanian psychoanalysis is the IPA's "the Middle Group" (p. 55)—followers of Bowlby and Winnicott—who are often mistaken for Kleinians. Of course, this politico-theoretical drama does not take into account the schisms within Lacanian psychoanalysis itself (remember the four internationals?). I have intentionally left out the Jungians and the humanistic psychologists, so I am only mentioning them now to avoid accusations of repression.

In the second act (1980's), Parker moves from reasons for avoiding psychoanalysis to attempts at engaging with it both as a therapist and as a client with experiences not only with psychoanalysis, but also with psychodrama and group analysis. His move is inspired, in part, by the following practical reason: "It was, I admit, rather fraudulent of me to teach counseling approaches in the final year of an undergraduate degree course [at Manchester Polytechnic or Manchester Metropolitan University] when I had no first-hand experience of counseling or psychotherapy [let alone psychoanalysis]" (p. 51). A more theoretical reason, however, is this one: "I was interested in psychoanalysis as a set of stories we told about ourselves, and that if we knew they were stories we could then be in a better position to believe them or not" (p. 173). In chapter 5, the question of the relationship between psychoanalysis and politics comes to the fore, and here Parker turns to one of his heroes (Joel Kovel), who argued for "psychoanalytic descriptions of 'defences' that people used to shield themselves from feelings of threat" and against "seeing those defences as only operating at the level of the individual" (p. 45). In other words, Kovel's argument is to not psychologize distress (a psychosocial condition in capitalism), but rather to politicize it through the lens of psychoanalysis as both a "theory of subjectivity, of our lived bodily experience of being human" (p. x) and a "weird practice" (p. ix).

Parker cautions us throughout the book that psychoanalysis is "not what you think" (p. ix) and that it is not a "world view" (p. 47). That would be the equivalent of treating psychoanalysis as a religion, which is Foucault's

critique of psychoanalysis as a cultural practice that gives a more insidious twist on confession demanded in the Christian church. Not only are we disciplined, and not only do we discipline ourselves, but we revel in that discipline every time we agree to speak to a psy-professional, whether it be a priest or a therapist, about what we desire. (p. 18)

The alternative to this reactionary—psychologized or Christianized—version of psychoanalysis is a radical one, which does not use psychoanalytic theory to interpret the world, but which is committed to the clinic as a space, where the world can change (à la Marx) one analysand at a time (à la Freud). This change, of course, comes from the analysand herself, for she is the one who does most of the work in analysis. Parker later adds:

The placeholder for Reich as a radical force in psychoanalysis in Manchester in the 1980s was Lacan. Or, rather, the signifier ‘Lacan’ evoked a possible connection with a radical rereading of Freud, much more so than did ‘Reich’. This was, perhaps, because Reich conjured up a vision of an already-existing, energetic unconscious comprising libidinal forces that sought release – the pressure-cooker hydraulic model of the mind – while Lacan was more in tune with the ‘social constructionist’ idea that what was repressed was created in the very process of repression. (p. 75)

In this act, particularly in chapter 8, Parker delves more in depth into some key concepts in Lacanian psychoanalysis, such as the big Other: “a diffuse, generalized sense of otherness” (p. 71). However, what really stands out in the same chapter is the Freudian notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (afterwardness), which describes one of the ‘weird’ features of psychoanalysis as a practice: non-linear time. In Parker’s words, “Psychoanalytic time is not linear, not ordered in terms of cause and effect... Things are given meaning after the event” (p. 72).

In the third act (1990’s), Parker turns to the process of psychoanalytic training; it took him six and a half years to become a registered psychoanalyst with the Center for Freudian Analysis in London. Parker was going to train as a group analyst (along with his partner Erica Burman), but due to a “complicated chain of circumstances” (p. 88) he ended up beginning his training as a Lacanian psychoanalyst with CFAR in 1997. The rigorous training (or *formation* as the Lacanians like to call it) entails attending lectures and seminars, practicing as an analyst-in-formation, participating in cartels, and being in supervision, and, of course, in analysis. This act, like the rest of the book, is full of anecdotes and jokes, which are one of the ways one can encounter the

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unconscious according to Freud. For instance, the fifty minutes (or regular-length) session was one of fundamental rules in psychoanalysis according to the IPA, a rule that Lacan ignored with his variable-length sessions. Parker writes, “the fifty minutes available between Martha’s [Freud’s wife] plant-waterings this became the basis of standard analytic practice” (p. 98). This joke, of course, speaks to the arbitrariness of rules, which mirrors the arbitrariness of signs themselves (a key concept in structural linguistics). This act in particular will be very enjoyable to readers who desire to become Lacanian psychoanalysts one day.

In the fourth act (1990’s/2000’s), Parker problematizes the application of psychoanalysis outside of the clinic, which is a further exploration of his earlier critique that *psychoanalysis is not a world view* because some theoretical concepts (like transference) are applicable only in the clinic to describe a specific relationship with a particular function between the analysand and the analyst. Žižek is an important figure in this act given his influence on Parker, particularly his linking of Marxism with psychoanalysis (through the symptom) since the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Parker, of course, wrote *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction*, and, in chapter 15, we are treated to some amusing behind the scenes encounters between Parker and Žižek in Slovenia in 2003.

Parker, like Neue Slowenische Kunst, eventually outgrows Žižek due to the ambiguity of his political project (or lack thereof) and his self-avowed position as a “commissar” (p. 147). Žižek, after all, is a philosopher and not a psychoanalyst, a Hegelian more than a Marxist. Nevertheless, Žižek’s concept of ‘over-identification’ is an interesting intervention at the intersection between psychoanalysis and politics, particularly in terms of how Laibach applies it not as a world view but as embodied in their music and their self-representation as a group. Laibach’s over-identification with fascist imagery and symbols empties them of their significance, but also enacts a radical critique of the ideological fantasies that sustain liberal democracies (like Slovenia).

In the fifth and final act (2000’s), Parker is concerned with the limits of psychoanalysis as a universal theory and practice. He unpacks his experiences with psychoanalysis in Brazil, Japan, and Russia to make a point about the cultural specificity of psychoanalysis as a product of European modernity. Although one can argue that even though Freud was an atheist who believed in science, he was also a Jew who came from a transmodern culture that is exterior to European modernity—this is why Edward Said identified *Freud as a (non)European*. In Parker’s words:

Kabbalistic concern with the meanings of symbols, including letters and numbers, can be detected in Freud’s decomposition of dream texts into their component parts, and the nature of psychoanalytic training itself as a craft based on oral tradition and the reinterpretation of classical texts is further evidence of the influence of elements of Judaism. Perhaps it would even be possible to characterise

the first wave of psychoanalytic theory and practice as operating as a form of secularised Judaism. (pp. 176-177)

This historical argument has nothing to do with the racist conceptualization of psychoanalysis as a ‘Jewish science’ because it is neither a religion nor a science. As such, it ought to be compatible, as a pluriversal praxis, with any culture as long as no ideological fantasy is informing the analysis, which is tricky. This point takes me to chapter 19 on Islam, wherein Parker reflects on the Islamic Psychoanalysis/Psychoanalytic Islam conference that he co-organized with Sabah Siddiqui in Manchester in 2017. I presented at this conference, and in my paper I was critical of how secularism, particularly in the form of *laïcité*, can operate unconsciously as an ideology for Euro-American psychoanalysts working in particular with Muslim analysands. This critique ties in well with chapter 20, the final chapter, which is on transference and the ethics of psychoanalysis (i.e., the desire to listen). After a long journey down memory lane, and a struggle with the question of psychoanalysis vis-à-vis politics, Parker is driven full circle to what radical psychoanalysis is (not):

Psychoanalysis is not what you think; it challenges, subverts the very idea, challenges and subverts each and every normative notion about subjectivity. That is what makes it *radical*, and that is why I remain committed to it as one among many different radical frameworks for grasping what is it to be a human being. (p. 198, emphasis added)

In conclusion, this book is a must read for anyone interested in (Lacanian) psychoanalysis, particularly those who aspire to become practicing psychoanalysts one day as well as those who are interested in theoretical psychoanalysis’s applicability outside of the clinic. For those readers who are not interested in psychoanalysis or who do not know much about it, this book is an enjoyable memoir regardless of the reader’s expertise because it is a personal/political narrative that is full of amusing stories and vivid characters—not mentioning lots of jokes!

Autobiographical Note

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