



Book Review

The Unhappy Divorce of Sociology and Psychoanalysis: Diverse Perspectives on the Psychosocial. (2014). Eds. Lynn Chancer, John Andrews. Springer.

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Interdisciplinary Conflicts as a Way to Understanding Changing Societies and Personalities

Sociological conceptualization of the individual has often been marked by behaviorism and generalizations about the impact of society and social groups on individual identity and life strategies. However, psychoanalytical and, more broadly, psychological and psychiatric concepts and projects, have been employed in the past by some sociologists. This often involved critical reflection on of both disciplines. Erving Goffman, for example, was critical both of psychiatrists' understanding of mental illness and of sociologists' tendency to characterize mental illness as simply being a label that society attaches to certain individuals. This led to their conclusion that mental illness is merely a socially constructed notion rather than being a genuine medical condition.

Goffman wrote "Asylums and the Social Situation of Mental Patients" (1961) in an effort to counter the tendency of many sociologists to ignore the disturbing consequences of psychiatric illness on the individual and on society. Goffman's fieldwork on institutional psychiatry (he conducted a participant observational study in St. Elizabeth's Hospital, Washington, D.C.) resulted in thennovative use of the total institution model and the development

of the interesting concept of a “moral career” of the mental patient, looking both at the social situation and the individual. However, the prevailing understanding of the common use of the two disciplines’ potential is marked by many biases. In fact, the classics of both psychoanalysis and sociology openly expressed these biases themselves. If, on the one hand, Freud believed that sociology ‘cannot be anything but applied psychology’, on the other hand, Parsons reduced psychoanalysis to an applied theory and concluded that Freud’s most important result was the conception of “the human person as a psychological entity operating as a self-regulating system”.

It is fair to say that the predominant trajectory of the two disciplines relations in the twentieth century has been one of increased alienation. Fortunately, twenty first century researchers have produced a book, in which they reflect on the failure of two disciplines to engage in a productive dialogue and express, in particular, concerns about the development of mainstream American sociology towards becoming a science that fails to see individual people and is reluctant to admit to what extent social behavior is connected to unconscious desires and irrational motives. The sociological concepts, whether these are ‘nationalism’ or “xenophobia”, are employed to explain violence, murder and rape while the irrational, controversial motives of the individuals who commit these crimes are ignored as causative factors for their actions.

The authors of eighteen essays have compiled cases drawn from an impressive variety of social situations in an attempt to demonstrate the misfortune that, within American sociology from the 1940s through the present, the psychosocial and, in particular, psychoanalytic perspectives became relatively marginalized. Before their divorce, since the inception of two disciplines, their mutual engagement was gradually unfolding, and in the Foreword to the book, Craig Calhoun charts the remarkable similarities between the ways in which sociology and psychoanalysis have developed (both fields having benefited from the wealth of classical European intellectual traditions). He also points out a number of fruitful connections between the two fields, i.e. the psychosocial interest towards ‘character’ which resulted in a whole

new sub-discipline in sociology, namely, the studies of personality and socialization.

Jeffrey Alexander begins his Preface to the book by eulogizing Freud as “one of the most original and compelling social thinkers of the twentieth century” who “opened up the emotional dynamic and cultural strains of modern life as brilliantly as Max Weber, explored symbolism and solidarity as indigenously as Emile Durkheim and in his capacity for conceptual elaboration and theoretical complexity surpassed them” (p. xiii).

In the Introduction to the book, the editors Lynn Chancer and John Andrews delineate the reasons behind the on-going marginalization of these ideas. The first factor was, ironically, the growth of social movements of 1960s and 1970s, which made Freudian ideas increasingly unpopular. The second and third factors were the increasing positivist influence in the mainstream American sociology in 1980 and 1990s, as well as the growth of right-wing predilections among academics. The positivist influence resulted in part from the popularity of using quantitative methods in sociology and, since it was impossible to measure and observe things such as, say, defense mechanisms, many Freudian ideas were rejected.

The links between conservatism and institutional harassment are investigated by Catherine B. Silver in the chapter “Paranoid and Institutional Responses to Psychoanalysis among Early Sociologists”. She comes up with the concept of positivistic “epistemological unconscious” in order to demonstrate that the paranoid thinking of a number of conservative early American sociologists, who attacked individuals and marginalized psychoanalysis, was connected to the establishment of sociology as a separate social science discipline and subsequent struggle for legitimacy and careers. The reorganization and consolidation of the American sociology was marked by “the marginalization of interpretive, introspective and other qualitative and essayist methods – all stylistic approaches that implicitly reference the personhood of the writer” (p. 75). In the first chapter of the book “Opening/Closing the Sociological Mind to Psychoanalysis”, George Cavalletto and Catherine Silve, using statistical and thematic analysis of the articles published in major sociological journals in USA, demonstrate the central role of Department of Sociology at Columbia

University and Talcott Parsons in ensuring that psychological ideas were acknowledged and used in sociology in 1940s and 1950s.

Sociology's disengagement from psychoanalysis has closed off important pathways for understanding social life. The book seeks to understand the causes and tendencies of this disengagement and to further psychosocial perspectives.

The work is a collection of fine essays written by New York based academics who wished to discuss "the social/sociological and psychic/psychoanalytical dimensions of diverse topics" (p. xv).

The book is composed of four parts.

In part One of the book titled "The History of Sociology and Psychoanalysis in the United States: Diverse Perspective on a Longstanding Relationship" the contributors summarize the controversial historic links between the two disciplines which eventually led to what a prominent sociologist Jeffrey Alexander calls in the Preface "a grievous mistake" (p. xiii)

Part Two of the book "Are Psychosocial/Socioanalytic Syntheses Possible" includes great essays by Neil Smelser and Nancy Chodorow. If Smelser investigates the impact of the academe on his uneasy relationships to psychoanalysis, Chodorow describes the predicaments of combining sociological, psychoanalytic and feminist perspectives and the baffled reception of to her work in psychoanalytic circles. Chodorow claims that, although the psychoanalytic conceptualization of subjectivity can be very fruitful to sociology, a complex set of professional interests of sociologists have led to an unfortunate dismissal of psychoanalysis as being "a-sociological".

Part Three of the book "The Unfulfilled Promise of Psychoanalysis and Sociological Theory" is about the ways in which three renowned social theorists - Erich Fromm, C. Wright Mills and Pierre Bourdieu – use psychoanalytic concepts (or have avoid such use).

Part Four of the book "The Psychosocial (Analytic) in Research and Practice" contains essays that seek to show that psychoanalytic concepts can be productively utilized to interpret otherwise incomprehensible sociological phenomena. Arlene Stein's chapter stands out where she demonstrates how the notion of "mutual recognition" can be drawn on

to make sense of the extraordinary feelings of shame that survivors of the Holocaust have. She goes on to point out that since many survivors moved to the United States after the war, they were not able to find a group whose members would be willing to express sympathy with their suffering and were thus deprived of “mutual recognition” needed to overcome shame.

This book is an attempt to rectify the “contemporary sociological resistance” (p.10) to psychoanalytic approaches. It contains reflections on the reasons and consequences of the dominance of the particular paradigm of sociological research which favors massive surveys and the processing of statistics. The deficiencies in quantitative sociological methodologies are mentioned in the book while such concepts as the unconscious, anxiety and defense mechanism are repeatedly mentioned with expressions of regret that their potential was not fully realized in sociology. However, the benefits of the psychoanalytic paradigm are left for the reader to hold as a matter of mere belief. This book does a better job of explaining how the “divorce” between the two disciplines happened than explaining how exactly their “marriage” can now be achieved.