

Book Reviews

Political Psychology: Cultural and Crosscultural Foundations

Renshon, S. & Duckitt, J. (Eds.)

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Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples

Smith, L. T.

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An immediate declaration of interest is in order: It has been my privilege to collaborate on different projects with University of Auckland academics Linda Tuhiwai Smith, author of *Decolonizing Methodologies* and John Duckitt, co-editor of *Political Psychology*. My initial attraction to each of them was for the same reason - an interest in ethnic identity development and in the relationship between indigenous peoples and nation building. Attempts on my part to do research on these themes have been greatly encouraged by Duckitt, but reading Smith, and working formally on the translation of *Decolonizing Methodologies* into Spanish, has often made me want to quit this research altogether. These competing reactions have to do with the fact that my academic training in mainstream psychology is more similar to Duckitt's but more importantly, since reading *Decolonizing Methodologies*, I have not been able to avoid seeing myself as a member of the category *colonisers*. My academic freedom to do research involving indigenous subjects has been seriously undermined by the ethical and epistemological arguments that Linda Smith makes.

Smith shows how research on indigenous peoples in the overwhelming majority of cases has involved, and still

involves, the extraction of knowledge for the primary benefit of the Western researcher, and the larger 'knowledge economy' that is Western science. Such research has produced a wide range of negative consequences for indigenous peoples, from having their supposed inferiority 'established', to having their worlds (spiritual, physical, and social) explored, measured, and even appropriated. "Researchers enter communities armed with goodwill in their front pockets and patents in their back pockets, they bring medicine into villages and extract blood for genetic analysis... Still others collect the intangibles: the belief systems and ideas about healing, about the universe, about relationships and ways of organizing, and the practices and rituals which go alongside such beliefs... The global hunt for new knowledges, new materials, new cures supported by international agreements such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) brings new threats to indigenous communities" (pp 24-25).

It is arguable whether hypothesis-driven research (such as that which John Duckitt and I have been undertaking in Chile, and which characterises the research reported in *Political Psychology*) can be neutral and objective. It may even be questionable on ethical grounds. We cannot just 'look at' cultures, when, under globalisation, cultures are suffering the greatest onslaught since the colonial era, and indigenous peoples are dying. Research on cultures and politics should not aim in the first place at the development of theory but at producing political conditions that permit self-determination for groups defined by culture and allow cultures to survive.

These books have in common that they are both, to a very significant extent, driven by a need to deal with political conflicts between groups that are defined by their culture. Whereas Smith is relentless in denouncing the assault that created the power differences which still exist between these groups, these power differences are only a facet of the issues addressed in *Political Psychology*, and a seldom-questioned facet at that. One could argue that if Western academics are to examine the interaction of politics, psychology and culture, the fundamental conflict to be addressed before any other is that between coloniser and colonised, since it underlies nation building in the vast majority of societies. Leung and Stephan's chapter addresses the Sino-British disputes over Hong Kong, but this is the only chapter where

colonial relations are prominent in *Political Psychology*. Most of the other nations reported on – New Zealand, Brazil, South Africa, Israel, Canada, the USA, Korea – have arguably suffered the impact of colonialism, or have been constituted as result of it, yet the implications of this are not dealt with in any depth. De Vos describes some of the adaptation problems facing the Korean minority in Japan. Renshon quotes without a comment a passage from 1893 by Fredric Jackson Turner, which describes how ‘the frontier’ supposedly shaped the American character: “*The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industry, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railway car and puts him in the birch canoe. It stripes (sic) off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin.*” (p. 287)

Since the topic of Renshon’s chapter is generally the American character, and not coloniser-colonised relations specifically, it might not call for a lengthy comment, but something like the following passage from *Decolonizing Methodologies* would have made the quote appear as something other than the simple reproduction of racist ideology: “*When confronted by the alternative conceptions of other societies [during the colonial era], Western reality became reified as representing something ‘better’, reflecting ‘higher orders’ of thinking, and being less prone to the dogma, witchcraft and immediacy of people and societies which were so ‘primitive’. Ideological appeals to such things as literacy, democracy and the development of complex social structures, make this way of thinking to appear to be a universal truth and necessary criterion of civilized society*” (p. 48).

Culture is much more than the foods, the songs, and the stories that can be happily shared in a multicultural society. The appropriation of indigenous cultures by settler ones is a world-wide phenomenon that does not exclude New Zealand. To view the interaction between different groups defined by culture in a society as ‘enjoyable’ is typical of individuals whose culture is not under threat, and who limit their view of culture to its consumable aspects. According to one of the definitions of culture used in *Political Psychology*, groups defined by their culture have particular “*systems of meaning*” to “*adapt to their environment and structure interpersonal activities*” (p. 70). If people are to adapt to their environment and structure their interpersonal activities according to their own systems of meaning, that is, if a group’s culture is to be realised, that group requires political power. Smith shows how imperialism has deprived indigenous peoples of their political power and strongly argues that indigenous peoples should reclaim research, *inter alia*, in order to empower themselves in their struggle for survival. In the first half of *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Smith tells the story of Western research from an indigenous point of view, condemning its aims and methods as being inseparable from the larger imperialist enterprise. However, in the second half, she rescues indigenous research methodologies, and insists on the need for indigenous peoples to develop their knowledge base for self-determination through research.

Political Psychology is an attempt to gather the

substantial, but nowadays scattered, academic production within a field that goes back to the 1930s and the ‘culture and psychology’ approach of Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead and others. Currently active in this field and contributing to this book we find researchers from a wide theoretical and methodological spectrum: from psychoanalysts going deep into the Amazon jungle to bring back interpretations of the tales of the Matsigenka which assumedly deal with conflicts that their political system cannot control, to cross-cultural studies of state authoritarianism which gather data from up to 174 countries, and involve sophisticated multivariate statistical analyses. It includes both empirical reports and theoretical treatments and is strong on the latter (the chapters by Ross, by Fiske and Tetlock, and by Duckitt in particular).

The book is organised into four parts. The first lays theoretical foundations for the field and attempts to address methodological issues. The second, which includes the chapter by Duckitt using New Zealand data to test possible causal links between collectivist cultures and authoritarian attitudes, and between hierarchical cultures and social dominance attitudes, examines the cultural mechanisms and preferences that may prompt political conflict within or between nations. “*The Political Psychology of Change in Cultural Regions*” - the third part, looks at “*culturally distinctive geographical areas*” (p. xi) such as ‘South America’, Iran, Japan and ‘Eastern Europe’. In relation to what these areas are “*culturally distinctive*” from is not made explicit. The final section covers multicultural societies and the tension between ethnic and national identities.

The historical overview of the field, and of *Political Psychology*, in the chapter by Lucian Pye was a puzzle. Pye paints interesting large pictures with bold strokes (e.g., the evolutionary stages of major social theories), but the chapter is also full of final words on issues that are still very much contested in my view. He duplicates (attempted to better?) the editors’ preface in a rather grandiloquent manner. “*The true heart of psychology as a discipline has been the analysis of the individual*” (p. 19) is one rather irritating statement. His subsequent discussion makes one seriously wonder if he has any familiarity with major paradigms of Social Psychology today such as Social Identity theory and Self-categorisation theory. His mockery of anthropological writings in the 1960s and 1970s— “*Somehow the idea took hold that clear thinking and rigorous logic was a uniquely Western value and that other peoples might not be able to either appreciate or practice it*” (p. 26) - echoes of 19th century ethnocentrism. I hope he is not revealing the ‘true’ agenda of the current revival of political culture studies when he describes it as, “*concerns about modernization and the cultural basis of stable democracies*” (p. 27) in the aftermath of the “*disintegration of Marxist regimes and the ‘third wave’ of democracy*” (p. 27). It sounds too much like yet another attempt to impose the cultural ideal of the American Way of Life as guarantor of democratic stability.

The aim of Renshon and Duckitt was “*to rescue and revitalize the cultural tradition in political psychology*”

(p. ix), something which the theoretical and empirical richness of the book undoubtedly will do. It is an inspiring book but its great breadth is both a strength and a weakness. Renshon and Duckitt acknowledge that the task which needs to be undertaken is to organise and develop a sub-field of political psychology. The editors make an attempt in Chapter 5 to deal with the issues of substance and methodology, but rather than aiming for the "unlikely outcome" of a uniform perspective, they settle for having some of the contributors address a set of questions about the distinctiveness of the field. Smith's views aside, there are important issues that are not dealt with, even when seen 'from the inside' and applying traditional scientific criteria. Can a social psychology, with scientific ideals, be easily reconciled with psychoanalytic political studies? Is "richness of understanding" (Pye praising Johnson's work in Brazil, p. 25) a goal equivalent to accuracy of description? Chapter 5 would have benefited greatly from a summary by Renshon and Duckitt as to what extent the questions they asked were actually answered by the contributors' essays, even if, at this stage in the development of the sub-discipline, it is to be expected that the questions could not be answered fully.

Two of the questions asked by Renshon and Duckitt in Chapter 5 point to issues thoroughly developed in *Decolonizing Methodologies*. "In studying political phenomena/processes within or across cultures are there any particular methodological problem(s) that make certain established methods more or less appropriate or requiring some sort of modification? If so, how have you addressed this in your work?" and "Are there any particular limitations and opportunities for the researcher who shares (or does not share) the culture he or she is examining politically which have implications for their theory and/or methods?" (p. 67). How would someone who wanted to do research in the spirit of *Decolonizing Methodologies* answer these questions? Finding concrete answers in the book is hard for a researcher *qua* coloniser. *Decolonizing Methodologies* was not written with us in mind, however, and Smith makes no concessions to potential coloniser readers, not even 'post-colonialists': "the fashion of post-colonialism [may have] become a strategy for reinscribing or reauthorizing the privileges of non-indigenous academics" (p. 24). I would answer, based on my understanding of *Decolonizing Methodologies* that only participatory action research that aims to (1) decolonise the subjective and objective conditions of all participants involved (including the 'researcher'), and (2) work toward the elimination of power differentials, seems to be faithful to that spirit. Any knowledge, indeed any other resource, produced by the research process must be fed back and contribute directly to the survival and self-determination of the particular group with which one is involved. But is that kind of research the most politically effective?

The difference in approach between *Political Psychology* and *Decolonizing Methodologies* is in part that age-old one between the bottom-up, grass-roots active approach typically used by women and the let's-influence-policy-with-hard-facts, top-down approach used by men

and Western academics (notably, *Political Psychology* has only one female among its nineteen contributors). The commitment of many of the contributors to *Political Psychology*, including Duckitt, to having their research contribute to the eradication of prejudice and racism, and to the prevention of ethnic conflict is real and cannot be denied. But are they - are we - following the advice given to others? According to contact theory, contributions to a successful reconciliation must be explicit as to the group identity of their source. Positive inter-group interactions must retain their inter-group character and not become inter-personal if any generalisation of improved attitudes towards out-groups is to take place. So would it not be a more significant contribution to coloniser-indigenous reconciliation if our coloniser identities were made explicit while making such an attempt? About the contributors to *Political Psychology* we learn only that which will assert their authority; no information is provided about their political or cultural identities.

The decolonisation of our methodologies will require a lot more than commitment from coloniser researchers. Whereas *Political Psychology* easily made me think of four or five possible research projects I could initiate, *Decolonizing Methodologies* left me paralysed. Perhaps that is appropriate.

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