

Report on the APPI Clinical Seminar with Ian Parker: Symptoms of the Contemporary Clinic

Dublin, 20 September 2014

Ian Parker is Professor of Management at the University of Leicester, Co-Director of the Discourse Unit and a practising psychoanalyst in Manchester. His books include *Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Revolutions in Subjectivity* (Routledge, 2011) and six books in the series 'Psychology after Critique' (Routledge, 2015).

A cool, rather static September morning in Dublin was certainly enlivened by Ian Parker's presence at a well-attended seminar, during which he spoke of the violence of representation and of art, and referred to the most recent global financial crisis as an event that revealed something of the existing systemic violence which enables the same system to function.

Parker proposed a broad question. How can we bring a psychoanalytic clinical sensitivity to bear on contemporary revolutionary politics – which he describes as 'being in a mess' – without recourse to an applied psychoanalysis, that is to say, how may practitioners and academics alike avoid the trap of the *application of a discourse* and disturb the claim made in some quarters that psychoanalysis is a meta-language? In setting up a series of tensions between 'experience' and 'structure' in academic discourse, the 'personal' and 'political' in political debate, as well as a further complication of the opposition between the 'subject' and the 'statement' in analytic discourse, Parker invited us to consider, in terms of the configurations of subjectivity, the role of the image in politics as well as how an academic *concept* can come to operate as a signifier.

Parker focuses here on intersectionality (Kimberlé Krenshaw, 1989: patterns of oppression and discrimination must be considered together rather than in isolation because they are interrelated and mutually-enforcing). Parker posits something of a cyclical conduit between academia and politics in terms of how the academic attempt to influence social policy, drawing on elements of psychoanalysis, such as in the work of Laclau and Mouffe, Žižek, Badiou as well as Judith Butler, produces what he described as a looping effect, as constructed theoretical categories become embedded in the symbolic, engendering the production of contemporary symptoms in the overlap and gap between the academic and political, symptoms with which we then are confronted in the clinic.

Re-reading Deleuze and Guattari's 'black hole/white wall system' critique, which describes the structure of psychoanalysis as 'faciality machine' – a social projection of face which is in fact

non-universal but where the subject is made present as if it were a product of an abstract faciality machine - Parker argued for a self-reflexive critique of psychoanalysis, a critique of 'identitarian distortions of psychoanalysis'. He spoke of how a contemporary psychologisation of psychoanalytic constructs reduces possibilities for inscribing subjectivities to viewing the individual human condition as an 'affliction of the ego by the unconscious.' A reduction of the divided subject to a normative 'wallowing in narcissistic melancholy' is posited on one axis, while on the other, psychoanalysis is conceived of as a theoretical grid, a world-view, or meta-language. The problem of psychologisation indicated the all-too-prevalent academic tendency to assume that somehow, the 'real world' exists as a field, somewhere outside the University. This, he argued, results in a 'violence of representation' – a problem or anxiety with regard to representing the *other*, outside of academia's imperialist borders.

Parker discussed the role of the image in the political with reference to the artwork accompanying the publicity for this Seminar: a controversial photograph of fashion editor Dasha Zhukova perched on Norwegian *provocateur* Bjarne Melgaard's 'Black Woman Chair', which represents a black woman being bound and a-topped with a vinyl cushion while attired in fetish wear. The image's publication in mainstream and social media produced, Parker argues, a division aptly described as 'The Kinky Split', with allegations of racism, arguments regarding the question of the reduction of the woman to object and a debate concerning the right of art to perhaps question violence within specific contexts, but not to act in itself as violent and offensive representation.

According to Parker, a context was thus formed which resulted from becoming caught up in 'Intersectionalist Discourse' about how people think of images such as 'the black woman chair'. 'Intersectionality' was thus becoming a floating signifier which is articulated differently by different groups of both the left and right: a master signifier which anchors the debate in such a way that the participants think that they know what they are talking about, a signifier subject to an event where its meaning becomes fragmented and decomposed as per the parameters of a discourse dependent on an event from the real. Parker here cites a 'deadlock', irresolvable differences, a point of the real which shifts, the signifier being ineffectual in any attempt to describe the deadlock between, for example, sex and race, the commodification of high art, or indeed in any attempt to name the deadlock itself.

The problem for Parker, when identified in this way, should represent generally then a return to a critique of the origins of academic theory, which has now been highlighted in terms of the

causation of the problem at hand, placing academic discourse squarely in a role of some responsibility with regard to the perpetuation of the systemic violence to which he earlier referred. However, the question of an engagement with sexual desire as political rather than personal remains. To view the symptom as a crisis of representation can offer an opportunity, namely to open up the route towards analysis of a deeper set of representations – those however may well just keep the subject locked away.

The debate which followed was lively, involving a discussion of representation-in-itself as violence, as something bound up with various cultural and historical positions and as something of the concept of absolute otherness.

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