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PSYCHOLOGY AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Jeremy Nuttall, *Psychological Socialism: The Labour Party and Qualities of Mind and Character, 1931 to the Present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006)

Glenda Sluga, *The Nation, Psychology, and International Politics, 1870–1919* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2006)

Matthew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006)

It has long been argued by social theorists that psychology has played a pivotal role in the culture and politics of modern life. This argument was influentially developed in Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation*, now nearly fifty years old, which showed how our modern embrace of rationality and normality depends on the psychological "enclosure" of the mad as outside the social pale.[1] The philosopher Ian Hacking has looked at the role of psychology in "making up people", through defining a series of mental problems (such as schizophrenia, neurosis and suchlike) which are then taken up by people so that they become powerful social labels.[2] More recently, influential sociologists ranging from Anthony Giddens to Zygmunt Bauman and Richard Sennett have developed a rich account of the insecurities of the modern self as the need to live in a complex and uncertain world leads to people developing psychological defence mechanisms.[3]

Much of this provocative work lacks historical specificity. It does not probe the variability of psychological ideas themselves in different times and places. The precise mechanisms through which psychology becomes historically significant

1 M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation* (London: Tavistock, 1967).

2 Ian Hacking, "Making up People", *London Review of Books*, 17 Aug. 2006.

3 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991); Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: Norton, 1998); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

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remain unclear. Is it the routines of professional medics and psychologists, and their impact on educational and welfare activity, or the influence of psychology on politicians in shaping their statements and policies, or the wider cultural receptiveness to psychological ideas which is most important? Nikolas Rose's important studies indicate that it was the middle years of the twentieth century that were particularly important.[4] His account of the role of the British Tavistock Institute, founded in 1947, insists that its psy-scientists influenced government policy on child development, shaped management practices in the workplace and helped to define the modern consumer. These initiatives, he claims, helped define the autonomous "self-governing" individual, able to regulate him- or herself with no need for obvious external force. This argument has some resonances with Peter Mandler's claim that psychological notions become more significant in shaping understandings of national character, taking over from literary and cultural currents, during the 1940s and 1950s.[5]

The three books under review, although diverse in topic and method, allow us to redress this historical lacuna so that we can reflect on whether the middle years of the twentieth century do mark a distinctive turning point, and what processes might have been involved in the spread of psychological currents. Nuttall and Sluga write as political historians, interested in the way psychological issues were embedded in Labour Party history and in the formation of national identities respectively. Thomson writes more clearly from the history of medicine and science, and demonstrates the role of psychology in popular culture.

Sluga's intriguing but ultimately frustrating book explores how conceptions of nationalism were infused with psychological elements after the 1870s, and in particular came to play an important role in the Versailles negotiations of 1919. Here she shows how the conceptions of national self-determination which came to the fore at Versailles depended on an idea of psychological types as a means of scientifically defining nations. Rather than just understanding nations as historical, linguistic or cultural entities, their psychological characteristics were identified and used to justify national boundaries. From this interesting account of the Versailles negotiations, she then examines how psychological elements of national identity featured during the First World War, and in racist guise in the period between 1870 and 1914. Her attention switches in the last two chapters to showing how this deployment of psychology allowed gendered discourses to be renewed on an apparently more scientific footing in the early twentieth century.

One of the important contributions of Sluga's work is to show how psychology was concerned not with defining the modern liberal self (as in Rose's work), but

4 Nikoas Rose, *Governing the Self* (London: Routledge, 1990).

5 Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edward Burke to Tony Blair* (London: Yale University Press, 2006).

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with the definition of collective groups, and hence helped to define gender, race, nation and even class on psychological terms. In fact, she says little about how psychology constructed individual identities, though she does draw on the arguments made by Dror Wahrman about the relationship between self and nation, that there was an association between the two aspects of psychology: "the peacemaking process affirmed the status of nationality as the expression of an individual's inner self or natural subjectivity" (147). However, this emphasis is not really demonstrated in the earlier parts of her book, which largely ignore the "self-making" aspects of psychology.[6]

This lacuna is related to a wider failure to adequately conceptualize how these psychological national identities relate to the secondary literature on nationalism. Since Benedict Anderson's pioneering work on *Imagined Communities*, it has become commonplace to root modern nationalism in the deployment of narratives, an argument which has been brilliantly elaborated by the literary critic Franco Moretti, who has shown how the novel encapsulated national boundaries.[7] Sluga ignores this work in making the argument that from the 1870s nationalism shifted towards more scientific and technical definitions. However, the actual psychological ideas deployed seem rather more akin to ideas of "national character" (as, for instance, discussed in the English case by Peter Mandler) which could be complicit with literary, historical and narrative-based accounts of the nation, as Anderson would argue. Thus the evocation of concepts of national consciousness, sentiment or "will" does not necessarily require a psychological framing. Relatively few psychologists themselves appear in her account. Although Freud was clearly known by many of her protagonists, and the idea of the national unconscious was current, it is not clear that his ideas were directly drawn upon.

Here Sluga's own fascinating discussion of Versailles is worth considering further. Despite her emphasis, it turns out that psychologists were not present at Versailles, and it is the domination of classical, humanities academics—rather than psychologists or social scientists—which looks remarkable ninety years on.[8]

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6 Thus at 61 she notes that in the decade before 1914 three theoretical approaches were used—instinct theory, crowd psychology and theories of the self—but she does not discuss the last in any detail and insofar as she does this is conflated with subjectivity.

7 See F. Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel* (London: Verso, 1999); and his edited collection *The Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). P. B. Anderson, *Imagined Community* (London: Verso, 1983).

8 Sluga nowhere discusses the contributions of economists, sociologists or political scientists, presumably because they were actually rather thin on the ground. She nowhere refers to Keynes's thinking, even though his *Economic Consequences of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1920) was one of the enduring intellectual legacies of the conference. She confusingly notes the importance of geographers as a sign of the importance of the social

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Surely this was the last moment in European history when a leading classicist, Arnold Toynbee, could be brought in as a "technical expert" to adjudicate on diplomatic affairs! Sluga suggests that the dominance of historians and geographers at Versailles was compatible with an expanded role of the social sciences and psychology because they eschewed political history in favour of more social accounts, such as are deployed in Turner's "frontier hypothesis" which influenced American president Woodrow Wilson. She even sees the Versailles historians as anticipating the Annales School. This argument is, however, overstated, because from Sluga's evidence the historians did not actively engage with psychological research but simply used a few psychological notions—such as the unconscious—within their work. Thus it would have been interesting for Sluga to have explored how Lewis Namier, whom she sees as influenced by conceptions of "crowd psychology", nonetheless went on in his later career to carve out a distinctive form of political history in which psychology was not actively present.

One reason why psychological assumptions appealed to historians was psychology's ability to provide a language for understanding mass behaviour. The two main forms of psychology which Sluga discusses in some detail—"instinct theory" and "crowd psychology"—were fearful of the volatile powers of mass collective action. It is this which explains the popularity of social psychologist Le Bon, whose treatise on *The Crowd* examined the potency of "swarming multitudes".[9] And here it appears that this kind of psychology, rather than being complicit in the formation of Foucault's rational self-governing individual, seems anchored in a very different problematic—one which believed in innate hierarchy and which was distressed when self-control and regulation appeared not to work when the masses came together in spontaneous and threatening ways. Through this device, popular cultural forms were seen as an aberration from the gentlemanly assumptions of liberal intellectuals, with the implication that psychology might be useful in exploring such deviant states but did not necessarily have much to contribute to an understanding of "civilization" itself—a very different approach to that of Freud, of course.

This last point is indeed one of the lessons to be learnt from Jeremy Nuttall's book. In some respects his title, *Psychological Socialism*, is something of a misnomer, for his focus is on the Labour Party's beliefs about character and

sciences at Versailles, but in this period they were much more closely allied with traditional forms of humanities learning.

9 This term is with apologies to Gilles Deleuze. One of the points of interest arising from Sluga's examination is her excavation of both Le Bon and also Gabrielle Tarde, a thinker who has become fashionable in recent years after a long period of neglect and is especially a source of inspiration to Bruno Latour.

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morality, an arena in which scientific psychology is only one, and, as he brings out, rather minor, component. Nuttall in fact shows that the Labour Party's conception of character and morality has always been more associated with religion, political philosophy and ethics than with psychology. What he therefore shows is the enduring significance of older moralistic conceptions of personality, rather than the shift towards more psychological framing that one might expect from the work of Rose and Mandler.

Nuttall's book is peculiar. Ostensibly its aim is to move the intellectual history of the Labour Party away from a focus on narrowly political and economic issues in order to bring out enduring concerns with what he rather quaintly terms "qualities of mind". In places, especially in the earlier parts of the book where he examines the period up to the 1950s, he elaborates an interesting intellectual history which shows how the cultural framework of Labour intellectually drew on links with Victorian evolutionary thought. However, the tone changes as Nuttall moves towards the present day. Since it was predominantly the Labour right wing which vested itself in concerns with character and qualities of mind, chapters covering more recent periods slip into a partisan defence of right-wing Labour intellectuals such as Richard Crosland and David Marquand (whose influence is surely exaggerated here, though we learn from the acknowledgements that this might be due to the fact that he was the supervisor of the thesis from which this book derives[10]) and finally of the New Labour project itself.

The book is therefore a blend of analysis and advocacy, in which the boundaries between these two are rather confused. This blurring is due to the book's serious methodological limitations. It is conventional in its organization, with its main chapters dealing with bounded chronological periods. It avoids organizational, social or cultural issues, and rarely strays from orthodox documentary sources. He nowhere attempts to broaden his focus away from the party's intellectuals and spokespersons. Here there is a point of contrast with Lawrence Black, whose recent study of the Labour Party's suspicions towards the affluent consumer society shares some common ground with this study, but who more effectively uses a wider range of sources such as local branch records and is thereby able to convey a greater sense of rank-and-file attitudes.[11] This limitation might not have mattered so much if Nuttall had provided a serious intellectual history which systematically analysed the key texts of Labour intellectuals, but in fact he invariably prefers to use potted biographies and brief vignettes to make his case.

[10] At 195 we are told that "New Labour, driven by the Christianity of Blair and Brown, drawing from the call of writers like Marquand for a rediscovery of socialism's 'moral' tradition . . . have placed something of a new emphasis on qualities of mind".

[11] L. Black, *The Political Culture of the Left in Affluent Britain, 1951–1964* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2003).

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The reader does not therefore come away from the book thinking he has read a defining account of any particular Labour intellectual or activist. This lack of rigour catches up with Nuttall in the second half of the book when he widens his account to examine the "qualities of mind" of leading Labour politicians themselves as if these are germane to an analysis of their ideas. Thus the moral and personal qualities of leaders are paraded in front of this rather bemused reader. We learn that Denis Healey was "a political bruiser" (107). Apparently there were "few, if any, genuine philosopher kings in the upper ranks of the Labour Party" (108). Ken Livingstone, we learn, "had a gentle, calm, oratorical style". The Bennite left contained "pathological dissidents" (136). Indeed, Frank Field's view that the party had a "severe mental breakdown" in the early 1980s is offered as some kind of serious comment. Nuttall's book thus moves too far away from a focus on psychological socialism and drifts into a wider history of the Labour Party, but one which is superficial, largely retells familiar stories and contains little original archival research. At times he even moves away from a focus on the Labour Party, with a detour on the character of grocer's daughter Margaret Thatcher taking up three pages. The book ends up by pronouncing meaninglessly that the "British people . . . seem to have broadly got the governments they 'deserved'" (193). Someone should have told him to get a better grip of his material.

It would, however, be wrong to dismiss the book in its entirety. The earlier chapters are somewhat more original in bringing out the ideas of leading academic sympathizers in the 1930s and 1940s and do focus more specifically on psychological ideas. Nuttall argues that Labour's partial replacement of the Liberals during the 1920s involved a greater focus on inequality and the importance of economic issues displacing concerns with intellectual and moral improvement, yet it also involved them inheriting this Liberal mantle. He thus emphasizes that socialism was seen as a moral project, which might thus justify taking hard economic decisions. This is not an entirely new argument, being quite familiar through the example of Ramsey MacDonald, but it is interestingly elaborated through a dissection of how left academic intellectuals such as Harold Laski, G. D. H. Cole and R. H. Tawney accepted the existence of an aristocratic intellectual elite which saw the masses as morally deficient. This leads on to an interesting analysis of how the intellectual Evan Durbin took up the thinking of the psychologist John Bowlby to argue for the need for socialism to support well-adjusted children. In fact, this emerges as the only occasion on which psychology directly affected the thoughts of Labour leaders. This is an interesting commentary in its own right given the grand claims which have been made about the role of the psy-sciences elsewhere. There is also some interest in his chronological framework (derived from the ubiquitous David Marquand) charting the oscillation between morally activist phases (mid-1940s to mid-1950s, mid-1970s to early 1980s, later 1990s to the present) when politicians strove to build

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new forms of cultural engagement (such as the welfare state in the first period) and the intervening "passive hedonistic" phases when politicians adopted a passive cultural role and saw their job as a form of neutral management. This framework, although not systematically deployed, usefully allows Nuttall to sidestep linear accounts of the party's history in favour of a more cyclical framing.

In reflecting on the book's argument that Labour thinking drew on an older progressive and moralistic tradition, it would have been useful for Nuttall to have explored the thinking of the sociologist T. H. Marshall, whose emphasis on broadening the definition of citizenship away from narrowly legal issues to encompass social concerns became a vital and enduring intellectual underpinning of social democratic thinking. Yet, as T. H. Marshall makes clear in the first (now largely unread) part of his 1949 lecture on "Citizenship and Social Class", his overarching concern was to reflect on the anxiety of the Victorian economist Alfred Marshall concerning how the working class could be made into gentlemen. Recognizing that in Britain's post-war austerity an appeal to gentlemanliness cut no ice, T. H. Marshall instead changed the terms of Alfred Marshall's question to consider how everyone could become citizens. Through this framework, T. H. Marshall focused on how to extend the remit of citizenship, and helped define a lineage of "ethical socialism" which remained powerful in the post-war years. A key example is A. H. Halsey, who was in the 1960s a catalysing force behind comprehensive education (and whose contribution is briefly mentioned here). However, the important point here is that this framing accepted that the issue was how to bring full citizenship to the working class, hence taking middle-class values largely as given and not engaging in a critique of the inadequacies of the "qualities of mind" of the powerful and privileged themselves.[12] In fact, one of the merits of Thomson's book is to show that left-wing political movements, ranging from Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation in the later nineteenth century to the anti-psychiatry movement and feminism in the 1960s, were equally vested in concerns with personality but in a way which contested politically legitimated accounts of what "qualities of mind" actually were.

Of the three books under review, Thomson's is by far the most scholarly and will almost certainly become a key reference work in years to come. Drawing on an extensive range of sources, especially obscure periodicals, he excavates the role of psychology in the civil society of twentieth-century Britain, focusing particularly on the first half of the century. His revisionist account has three main tenets, all of which pose serious challenges to the social theorists. Firstly, he challenges a

[12] There were, of course, numerous socialist activists, such as Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams or Edward Thompson, whose ideas could have been elaborated to exemplify this view. The fullest account of the issues here is Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (London: Routledge, 1985).

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simple linear model in which, after general neglect in the first part of the century, psychology becomes increasingly important. He draws attention instead to its early presence and also the extent to which its importance was challenged in the post-war years. As part of this rereading, he emphasizes the limits of psychological penetration, in terms both of the weakness of its institutional hold in the post-war years and of the degree of competition it faced from other forms of knowledge, such as other social sciences. Secondly, he emphasises how psychology not only was concerned with the Foucauldian project of self-governance but also was implicated in collective identities and social movements of various kinds. Finally, he emphasizes the sheer diversity of psychology itself, in terms of its political affiliations, its oscillation between the positivist behaviourism of Eysenck and its psychodynamic and psychoanalytical champions. One comes away from the book wondering whether it is possible to categorize a distinctive "psy-science" formation in the way that Rose implies in *Governing the Soul.*

Thomson begins by recovering the "low culture" of popular psychology in the early years of the twentieth century. This is less concerned with Freudian influence amongst highbrow intellectuals and instead recognizes a diverse range of psychological movements. These include Pelmanism, which emphasized mental training and had taught 400,000 people up to 1918 (23), and the London psychotherapeutic society, formed in 1901 which had several thousand treatments a year. This led onto the practical psychology clubs of the interwar years. The focus of these interventions was on using practical techniques to strengthen the will (such as the "everyday, in every way, I am getting stronger and stronger" mantra). This fascinating excavation of the murky world of practical psychology could have been strengthened by a greater consideration of what kinds of people were drawn to these movements, though Thomson's sources presumably say little about this.

Thomson goes on to explore the development of psychology in the UK as a distinctive academic discipline before the Second World War. Here he criticizes the orthodox view that its emergence was retarded and instead draws attention to the role of its leaders, notably William MacDougall, and the existence of several journals. Thomson brings out its hybrid associations with "new age" social movements and religious currents, so indirectly criticizing Whig interpretations of the discipline which would emphasize its scientific character. He argues that Freudian currents were only one, by no means dominant, element in this psychological movement, and he draws attention to a wider range of intellectuals and activists, such as A. R. Orage, David Eder, Maurice Nicoll, James Young and Dimitri Mitrinovic.

The second part of Thomson's book focuses on the role of psychology in the key institutional domains of education, the workplace and medicine. It is in these venues that Foucauldian interpretations have been especially influential, and Thomson uses his case studies to show that although psychological currents were

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active in these areas, they were by no means straightforwardly successful, and that on balance their influence on mental testing, child guidance and behaviourism were limited. Thomson emphasizes the limited influence of industrial psychology down to the Second World War, and the degree of resistance from both employers and workers to its use. Thomson examines the slow but significant insertion of psychology into the health services, a move encouraged by First World War concerns over shell shock, which led some doctors hesitantly to become more enthusiastic about the potential for psychotherapy down into the 1930s.

The final part of Thomson's book is the most hesitant. It seeks to take the story beyond 1945, but is necessarily selective in coverage and treatment. These chapters are therefore best seen as interesting vignettes rather than as a comprehensive analysis. Thomson shows how psychology was implicated in the political transformation of the 1940s through the emergence of social-democratic politics. He notes the role of psychology in the politics of planning and in definitions of the social and in the politics of the Labour Party, with a further study of the LSE economist and revisionist intellectual Evan Durbin showing how far psychological conceptions informed progressive thinking. He also shows how psychology, related to issues of wartime morale, fed into concerns with surveying and self-knowledge which were evident most notably in "mass observation". The final chapter then explores the role of psychology into the mid-1970s, tracing its association with the culture of the permissive society. This took different forms, including the libertarian behaviourism of Eysenck, and the anti-psychology of Laing, Red Rat and feminist politics. There are some lovely discussions here, for instance, of the role of MENSA as a significant social movement of the time.

Thomson's account will undoubtedly become the major frame of reference for reflecting on the social significance of psychology. This is not to say that it is not without its frustrating aspects. Given that the most sustained empirical analysis of the role of psychology, that by Nikolas Rose, concentrated on the role of the Tavistock Institute in the middle years of the century, it is a shame that Thomson ignores this institution altogether, so preventing any direct evaluation of Rose's arguments. Further, the periodical sources used by Thomson, whilst extensive and informative, have certain limits in gauging the ultimate effectiveness of the psy-sciences. It is almost inevitable, given this kind of source material, that it will lend itself to exploring links between overt cultural and political movements which tend to be mobilized around journals. It is also possible to overemphasize the role of such sources given that only a small minority of the population would have read them. It is for these reasons that it would have been useful to have explored more popular sources to develop a fuller sociological account of how various constituencies related to psychology. This would have been possible, for instance, by using similar strategies to those that Jonathan Rose used in his magnificent *Intellectual History of the British Working Class.* A further consideration of the

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nature of popular culture might have allowed him to develop his understanding of the hybrid and complex role of psychology, and allowed him to examine how forms of subjectivity were organized and modified during the course of the century.

These three books do not, taken together, constitute a comprehensive account of the role of psychology in modern British history, but they are at the very least suggestive in emphasizing three themes. Firstly, there is much more attention, especially in Sluga and Nuttall, to the way that psychology was not just associated with individualizing disciplines (e.g. psychotherapy) focusing on the mental state of the individual "self"; they bring out how it was also implicated in the formation of collective group identities, of the nation (Sluga) and of the Labour Party (Nuttall). Secondly, especially in Thomson's careful account, there is much more recognition of the diverse nature of "psychological penetration", and an awareness that it was not only the academic psychology associated with Freud that was important but also a range of more "cranky" ideas. Thirdly, rather than an insistence on the modernity of psychology, and an account of its rapidly enhanced role from the middle years of the twentieth century, there is more attention here on showing how psychology originated out of, and in some respects perpetuated, older forms of knowledge and practice. Its deployment during the twentieth century did not necessarily mark such a fundamental break as some might think.

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