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Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain

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Psychological Subjects ?is a book about how twentieth-century Britons viewed both themselves and their world in psychological terms. It examines the extent to which psychological thought and practice could mediate not just understanding of the self, but also a wide range of social and economic, political, and ethical issues that rested on assumptions about human nature? (p. 1). There are three thematic sections to the book, which also move the story forward in time, although there is considerable overlap between the chronological boundaries of most chapters. The first part, ?Psychologies of the New Age?, explores the excitement surrounding the new possibilities of understanding human nature and character raised by psychology from around the turn of the century to the mid-1930s. Its chapters respectively tackle popular psychological ideas and practice, academic and professional psychology, and the ?intellectual culture? of psychology. The second section, ?Problems and Prospects?, is concerned with how psychology attempted to respond to some of the major dilemmas raised by industrial civilization, and contains chapters on education, industry, and medicine and health. The substantive, although by no means exclusive, focus here is on the interwar years. Finally, the two chapters which comprise the final section, ?Ends?, focus on particular historical moments which could serve as ends to the story of popular enthusiasm and opportunity which has

emerged: the Second World War, and the era of the permissive society of the 1960s and 70s.

One of Thomson?s main aims is to move the history of psychology beyond the purely professional or academic, and to illuminate the breadth and depth of popular psychological understandings. The opening chapter, ?Practical Psychology?, is a vigorous induction. Practical psychology describes an almost bewildering array of ideas, techniques, and practices which shared an ?enthusiasm for psychology as a practical tool within regimes of self-improvement? (p. 19). A series of specific examples are discussed, each of which could easily fill a chapter of its own: Pelmanism, a system of mental training conducted via correspondence course, which had enrolled 200,000 by 1915; the London Psycho-Therapeutic Society, founded in 1901, which sought to demystify psycho-therapeutic practice; and a variety of other local clubs which thrived throughout the interwar years. Practical psychology was anti-expert; it appealed to those with ambitions of personal improvement and upward social mobility; it was characterized by a belief in the close interplay between body and mind; and it involved a reconfiguration (not rejection) of Victorian ideals of character, with a new emphasis on harnessing the subconscious for the power of good rather than repressing it, but an equally strong conception of the social, rather than purely individualist, self. The specific techniques recommended to foster psychological health changed somewhat over the course of the opening decades of the century, but a transcendent strain, a belief in the liberating possibilities of psychology to open up a new and benevolent era, remained remarkably strong until at least the mid-1930s.

This chapter effectively sets the tone for all that follows, in terms both of topics and mode of treatment. The argument is based on rigorous and impressive research using journals, magazines, books, clubs, advertisements, and so on, which will be unfamiliar to most historians of psychology. The psychologies expounded in all these forums are not dismissed as mere quackery, no matter how naïve or bizarre they might seem, but analysed as important indicators of the mind of the age. In highlighting the vitality of popular psychologies, and the almost evangelical enthusiasm of their adherents, a portrait of early-twentieth century psychology emerges which is almost a reverse image of the Freudian-inspired introspection of the elite Bloomsbury group. Designs for life which stressed self-improvement and social service were based on a vision of the ideal, integrated self very different to the tortured and fragmented modernist conception: abrupt shifts in ideas of psychological subjectivity were not the order of the day. Practical psychologies exploded from the ground up and sought to place power in the hands of ordinary people, rather than being imposed from above by the stereotypical expert in a white coat.

The first impression on reading this chapter, therefore, is of its utter strangeness when set alongside most extant histories of psychology. It would sit most comfortably alongside more recent work on the spiritualist dimensions of some early twentieth-century psychological movements, but it also deals with a far wider terrain?venturing in its closing pages, for example, into the proliferation of women?s magazines, with their focus on personal relationships, in the 1930s. By the end of the chapter it is evident that the popular psychologies discussed are central to understanding the place of psychology, in its broadest sense, in the cultural history of turn-of-the-century Britain. If this book gains the reception it deserves, future readers will not experience this sense of disorientation: for what has been achieved in this opening chapter, and is carried through with appropriately scholarly verve to the close of the book, is a shifting of the entire historiographical terrain. This is, without question, the major achievement of *Psychological Subjects*.

As Thomson discusses in his introduction, the history of psychology is dominated by two interpretative models. The first might be described as the ?psychological modernity thesis?. In this model, the reception of Freud and psychoanalysis is the most important standard by which to measure the development of psychological thought, and British psychology emerges as generally resistant and backward. Despite some excellent studies which have argued that psychoanalytic ideas reached a broader audience than is commonly assumed, this view still retains a strong hold, perhaps because, as Thomson suggests, it fits ?a more general view that the British were reluctant modernists, culturally conservative, anti-intellectual, and resistant to the sway of ideology just as they were to theory? (p.17). The second model is inspired by Foucault: in this view, most powerfully argued by David Armstrong and then Nikolas Rose, ?psychological subjectivity is either imposed on the individual through the discipline?s increasing influence as a tool of governance within the modern welfare complex, or is internalised in the individual through the growing influence of experts and

their advice in private life? (p.5). The history of British psychology emerges from this analysis as a dark tale of control, regulation, and the imposition of ever-tightening psychological straitjackets on its curiously docile subjects.

Both models are inadequate to explain or to understand the evidence of widespread popular engagement with psychology, in all its multifarious forms, which Thomson has discovered. He demonstrates, most substantially in the chapters on education, industry, and medicine, that efforts at control and regulation faced serious practical obstacles at every turn. To take education as an example: mental testing in schools was sporadic and inconsistent, dependent on the support of often ill-informed teachers; child guidance clinics, a potential tool for regulating behaviour, were numerically limited, unevenly geographically distributed, often operated on a part-time basis, and dealt with only tiny numbers of children per year; while pedagogical strategies influenced by behaviourism were ?too markedly out of line with the British attraction to a psychological subjectivity of self-realization? (p.121) to gain support in more than one or two radical schools.

Turning away from top-down narratives of regulation and control, there is ample evidence of popular enthusiasm, bordering on utopianism, for the potential of psychology to reform the problems of industrial civilisation. Although workers did not engage with industrial psychology to any great degree, several thousands took courses on psychology run by the National Council of Labour Colleges or the Workers? Education Association. A 1947 survey of WEA psychology students found that nearly half were motivated by the desire to understand and influence themselves and others. In more radical forums, psychology also offered new ways of conceiving class-consciousness and class-conflict, as well as a potential path to self-realization for the working class. Histories which focus on governance will be forced to modify their accounts to integrate this evidence that workers were also concerned with understanding and constructing their own psychological subjectivity.

Histories which view the development of psychology through the prism of psychoanalysis are even more severely affected by Thomson?s analysis. The book begins with Freud, although he is quickly dismissed as not a central figure in the British context. Although interest in psychoanalysis was more widespread than once thought, Freud was ?most likely to appear in a bastardized form, usually only once translated into a more acceptable idiom?. More generally, those qualities ?often associated with an embrace of the psychotherapeutic?introspection, emotional expression, an interest in sex and relationships, and the use of some kind of talking cure??were ?notable far more for their absence than regular presence? (p.19) in popular psychologies. The individual will was simply too important a facet in British conceptions of self from the Victorian era down to at least the 1930s, although its role shifted over this period, for Freudianism to make serious strides. Freud therefore merits several entries in the index, but most often appears in the text to highlight the difference between psychoanalytic ideas and popular psychological philosophies.

Relegating psychoanalysis to the sidelines gives Thomson the freedom to discover, explore, and restore to their rightful place in popular psychological culture a range of hitherto neglected ideas and practices. It also mounts a quiet challenge to the standards by which the development of British psychology, and more broadly its ?modernity?, has been judged. Often deemed stagnant and backwards, Thomson shows that the absence of psychoanalysis does not equate to a vacuum in psychological thought, most obviously at the popular, but also at the professional, level. The eclecticism of the new British psychology, which ?offered a route to higher values in a cultivation of personality that drew on existing discourses of character and spiritual growth?, demonstrates that ?psychological popularization was a much broader and pervasive phenomenon, and that much of it was of a rather different hue? to psychoanalysis (pp. 21, 23). The historiographical paradigm of the ?Freudian revolution? is powerful and entrenched. Thomson?s accomplishment in breaking free of it, and the judgments of ?right? and ?wrong? in psychological knowledge and development which it often implies, cannot be overstated.

This is not the only place where Thomson questions definitions of the modern or progressive which have infiltrated the writing of the history of psychology. A similar feat of redefinition is achieved in his chapter on psychology in the 1960s and 70s. Histories of ?the permissive society? often assume that the counter-

cultural vanguard led a rejection of values. Contemporaries levelled the same accusation at popular and professional psychology. Thomson shows that on the contrary, ?psychological permissiveness invariably rested on its own very clear sense of liberal-democratic values? (p.257). Hans Eysenck, the best-known psychologist of the era, is a case in point. Eysenck reached a massive audience through his constant appearances in the press, radio, and television, and his books written for Penguin. His psychology was presented as resolutely scientific, offering facts, not values: the psychologist should not measure behaviour according to assumed moral standards, and should offer advice rather than ideal solutions, always avoiding the language of right and wrong. So far, so permissive: but Eysenck was also attacked in the 1970s by ?groups who saw themselves as supporters of permissivism?, but objected to ?his assault on a more humanist, ethical psychology as unscientific, and his support for behaviourism in its place?. Who here, Thomson asks, was the real permissive?

Cases in which standard definitions or narratives are questioned and challenged could be multiplied endlessly. An important final example is the respective place of the two world wars. The First World War is usually perceived as of far greater importance, with shellshock ushering in a new era of greater acceptance of psychoanalysis and other psychodynamic approaches. Thomson argues that the boundaries between pre-war, wartime, and post-war psychology are overdrawn in this analysis: pre-war medicine engaged with psychology to a far greater degree than is often assumed, and the promotion of psychodynamic medicine in its immediate aftermath was limited. Tellingly, although shellshock is mentioned in quite a few places, the most in-depth discussion takes place over only four pages, nearly half-way through the book, and?an absolute anomaly?no original research is used in this section. This is, as Thomson explains, partly because shellshock is one of the only topics discussed throughout the book to have attracted a great deal of scholarship. The comparatively minor space it is accorded efficiently conveys the argument that the episode had a very limited influence on civilian psychology. Nevertheless, Thomson undersells the originality of his conclusions here: none of the historians he references makes the argument that shellshock did not cause a fundamental shift from organic to psychological modes of explanation for mental breakdown as strongly, effectively, or for the same reasons.

The Second World War was, for Thomson, a moment of far greater potential opportunity for psychology, although its lasting effects were limited and ambiguous. The national emergency provided a context in which professional psychology could potentially take centre stage in efforts at social engineering. Despite the wartime emphasis on morale, however, psychologists were viewed with suspicion at the highest levels of government: several gained an ear, but little more. The rise of fascism throughout the 1930s and the subsequent international crisis were also the ideal circumstances for a psychoanalytical psychology, with its emphasis on potentially destructive instincts and drives, to gain greater influence. In practice, proponents of such ideas still had to make the necessary accommodation with existing values to be heard: and in tasks such as the management of home front morale, ?more pragmatic behaviourist, statistical, and physically orientated types of psychology often found favour instead? (p. 248). In the aftermath of the war, the gap between the aspirations and actual influence of psychology was painfully exposed by the pitifully small role and resources awarded to it in the new welfare state. The main legacy of the war was not fundamentally to alter psychological practice, or extend the reach of psychological thought, but to accelerate a process in which psychology was dispensed by experts. This was in marked contrast to the situation for the first half of the century, when developments in popular and professional psychology often marched hand-in-hand, explaining why the war is a possible ?end? to the story told here.

This is a book of many achievements. It is lucidly written, well-organized, based on impeccable original and scholarly research, and the footnotes, bibliography, and index are faultless. It fills a gap in the market in more ways than one. The ?long? history of psychology is most often relayed through multi-author edited collections. Excellent as many of these works are, the single-author approach offers a unified perspective and analysis?a more joined-up history?which is fully exploited here. The focus on the particular, and in many ways peculiar, development of British psychological thought and practice is also welcome. Britain was markedly out of step with developments in America or continental Europe for much of the twentieth century, and in pan-Western histories this difference can be portrayed as a fundamental lack (of Freud, of

behaviourism, of any dominant personality or school). This history reveals rather the existence of manifold culturally-specific, but nevertheless vibrant, discourses on psychology. The majority of the book deals with topics which have been, at best, under-researched: but even where a larger body of scholarship exists, as in the chapter on Orage?s *New Age*, Thomson?s determination to confront and reappraise established historiographical narratives means that individuals, movements, and other developments are reassessed within an original framework. The history of psychology is also related to the dominant frames of mainstream modern British history (the turn-of the century ?new age?, industrial civilization, World War Two, and the post-war consensus) throughout, meaning that social and cultural historians of these eras should also find much find much to interest them here.

Thomson shows that the psychological gradually encroached into most, if not all, areas of life over the course of the century, and that it did so in a variety of hitherto unexpected or unacknowledged ways. In doing so, the limitations of the history of psychology in its current state, and the manifold possibilities for its future, are exposed. *Psychological Subjects* unwittingly reveals the relative paucity of research on certain key areas. Take the popularization of Freud in Britain as the ultimate example: the detailed research referenced (the only detailed research which can be referenced on this subject) amounts to one unpublished Ph.D. thesis and three articles. If this is all the attention that the single most important figure in the world history of twentieth-century psychology can muster, is it any wonder that so few of us have ever heard of Pelmanism? This is a book which is, as much as anything else, a map for future research. The individuals, clubs, and movements Thomson has uncovered all merit even more extended analysis. *Psychological Subjects* could, and should, spawn a hundred Ph.Ds: for the present, historians of the field will find more than enough within the pages of this volume to interest, excite, provoke questions, and force revisions.

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