

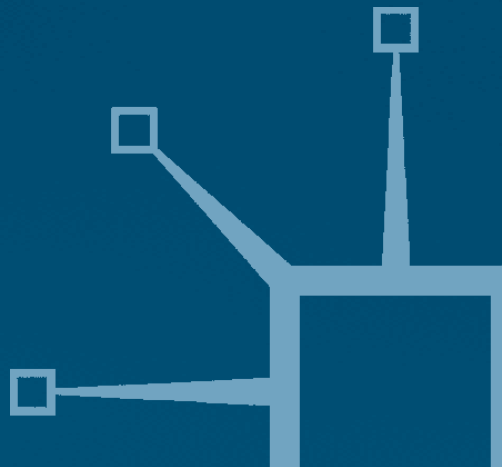
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# Challenging Subjects

Critical Psychology for a New Millennium

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Edited by  
Valerie Walkerdine



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## Critical Psychology for a New Millennium

Edited by  
**Valerie Walkerdine**

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# Introduction

VALERIE WALKERDINE

In beginning a new millennium we face new challenges and a rapidly changing polity. This volume addresses not the familiar terrain of what is wrong with academic psychology and how critical psychology might be marshalled to address these wrongs, but seeks to explore some of the challenges of the present and the future and to ask both how subjectivity is implicated and what kind of what work might be developed in relation to these issues. The volume grew out of a conference, the Millennium World Conference in Critical Psychology, which took place in Sydney in 1999. The conference had three themes, which are reflected in the three sections of this book: new politics, new subjectivities; psychology, survival and culture; spirituality and the body. The aim was to develop and build new approaches to some of the most pressing issues which confront us and the enduring themes which refuse to go away, to take critical psychology away from simply a stress on the academy and towards politics. To make sense of this move, I want to make reference to an altogether different political moment, the 1970s development of a European politics which stressed the theory of the subject, the moment of Althusser, Lacan and the emerging interest in post-structuralism. Although there is much that is critical to be said about that moment, what it did, for me at least, was to stress the importance not of psychology *per se*, but the significance of the subject and conceptions of subjectivity for politics. Indeed, with the emerging interest in the work of Foucault, psychology came to have a dual place in the political. On the one hand it could be understood as part of the psy sciences, a surveillant power/knowledge (Foucault, 1979) through which what it means to be a subject is produced and regulated and on the other as part of the need to understand how the multiple and conflicting sites of being a subject are lived, how subjectivity is produced and what its place in the political is. This twin task is what I take to be the project of a critical psychology, widely understood. As in the 1970s, this work is undertaken by studies in a number of disciplines and not simply within academic psychology. It is not surprising therefore that the Millennium Conference attracted a large number of people working on those issues from outside academic psychology as well as those within it. That lively and important mixture is deliberately reflected

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## 2 *Introduction*

in the chapters that follow. The chapters are diverse in terms of approach, theoretical orientation and subject matter. What joins them together is an engagement with pressing social, cultural and political issues and an innovative approach to the issues of subjectivity contained within them.

Critical psychology can be thought of as an umbrella term which describes a number of politically radical responses to and differences from mainstream psychology; it includes the perspectives I have outlined above, as well as the left, feminism, ethnic and anti-racist politics, ecological movements and new forms of spirituality and radical work more generally conceived. Critical psychology movements can be roughly dated from the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, the anti-psychiatry movement, the new left, civil rights, women's movements and gay liberation. The events of the late 1960s, like other events throughout the following thirty years, have affected psychologists personally, professionally and politically in diverse ways; no matter how mainstream, all psychologists have been affected in some ways by the changed political and intellectual climate. Critical work is no longer the terrain of the margins, at least, it must be said, within social and developmental psychology. However, it must be said that among all of this good news something has been lost. While there is absolutely no doubt that things have moved to a huge extent in the last thirty or so years, with, for example, theoretical work and discursive analysis as well as psychoanalytic work, anti-racist and feminist work now accepted as legitimate, it sometimes seems as though the political commitment which generated these changes has been lost. It is that concern with the political which guides this volume. However, so much has changed on the political stage that the kinds of political and intellectual interventions made all that time ago will no longer fit. The challenge then is to think about both the present polity and our engagement with it, in a new way. It is that which the Millennium Conference sought to address and it is that concern which has guided the choice of chapters here – not because the authors share any common political position or academic approach but because they all tackle issues that are crucial for us to address within the new political climate.

While the left and feminism have been profoundly challenged and are changing, the crises that confront us are no less stark than they ever were. Globalism and economic rationalism are ravaging a world also caught in the grips of ecological suicide. Psychology and subjectivity are absolutely caught up in these changes. Economic rationalism, for example, demands an autonomous subject who can cope without work, social, family and community supports. Psychology is constantly called upon to support the veracity of this subject and to prop up, through psychological practice, its inevitable failures. This prohibits any other understanding of the production of subjects within any particular polity and any other kind of practice. It is

that dual task which sets critical psychology apart. It is not enough to examine the place of psychology in producing the present; it is also necessary to propose alternative ways of understanding and acting. Each of the three sections of this volume deals with a particular topic and explores different approaches to the issues with respect to subjectivity. The three themes, New Politics, New Subjectivities; Ethnicity, Hybridity, Trauma; and Spirituality, the Body and Politics, are designed to address some of the pressing issues that confront us now from a diverse array of theoretical perspectives. The authors in this volume all point to a different conception of subjectivity in a changed polity. Their arguments are both theoretical and intensely practical in that they concern new ways of thinking and intervening in politics as it is lived, creating and being created by subjects both now and in the future.

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## **Part I**

# **NEW POLITICS, NEW SUBJECTIVITIES**





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# Introduction

VALERIE WALKERDINE

Each of the chapters in this section deals with new or changing forms of subjectivity in the public and work sphere. The abiding theme of power, and how to understand the relation of power to human subjects, comes through all of these chapters, though approached in quite different ways. Anthony Elliott (Chapter 1) discusses the politics of the privatisation of the public sphere. The consumer, says Elliott, ‘drifts from seduction to seduction, anxious to keep disabling anxieties from breaking into consciousness’. In a context in which there are no longer any certainties, either in work or family life, these anxieties and keeping them at arm’s length together assume enormous proportions. Elliott discusses the German sociologist Ulrich Beck’s notion of risk in the process of globalisation. He argues that Beck’s sociological approach leaves out the psychic costs of privatisation. In particular, the life of choice, signalled by an end of jobs for life as well as lifelong marriage partnerships, suggests that one can be anything one chooses, that the end of safety nets allows in the possibility of a different kind of life – one that we have chosen rather than the one that our social location had waiting for us. This fiction fuels a fantasy of omnipotence, a fantasy of control over a world in which we actually have less control, not the more we are apparently being offered. The chapter attempts to grapple with the political and psychological way forward in relation to the loss of apparent certainty and the increase of risk. As Elliott says, it is the loss of the modernist technoscientific project which is at issue and the absolute need to find a way out the other side, which is not simply the way of the private but rather a different kind of politics and social organisation which recognises the shifting nature of identity, the subject in process, as the basis for alliances and governance. As Elliott makes clear, that alternative politics has never been more necessary and never seemed more remote. The political and psychological tasks are urgent in the present climate because increasing resources will be called on to shore up globalised privatisation, both economically and personally.

Mary Walsh and Mark Bahnisch (Chapter 2) develop this theme, discussing management discourses about workers’ subjectivities, examining in particular the differences between those accounts which stress class relations as the basis for a liberatory politics of the subject and those who work with

notions of difference and multiplicity. They discuss the debate between labour process theorists and post-structuralists about the possibility or not of resistance. They argue that the disappearance of resistance mirrors the appearance in the workplace of the Other at work: 'women, non-whites, people with disabilities, people who are not hearing the interpellative call of the transhistorical subject of labour'. It is the appearance of these Others which leads Walsh and Bahnisch to turn to feminist corporeal theory to think about the gendered body/mind of the new worker. In this analysis, it is the identification of masculine knowledge with the mind (especially in its regulation of the feminised body of the male manual worker) which is seen to elide 'the lived and situated experience of male and female bodies'. In this context, the subjectivity of the worker can be understood as learned and reproduced in the 'complex psychological realm where body and mind interact'. Like Elliott's subjects under risk conditions, these workers as subjects are always in the process of becoming and always able to reimagine and reconstitute themselves and therefore to always be in a process of resistance. However, as Elliott made clear, this reimagining and reconstitution is no easy task. However, it is precisely the point that we are talking about Others as workers, workers who did not easily fit into the labour-process category of worker in the first place. It is this lack of fit, which I think makes possible the necessity of constantly having to rethink and reimagine, though it is a precarious project, which needs a great deal of support. Hence the huge importance of a different conception of politics and indeed of what psychological practice might be about within this context.

Ute Osterkamp (Chapter 3) writes about a different kind of resistance, the resistance to fascism in Nazi Germany. The self-control and compliance that she explores relates to the need to purge oneself of any improper impulses and desires to ensure loyalty and meekness. It is this control of one's own impulses which, she suggests, is central to the task of the control of others by those who are allowed to participate in power providing they restrict their own aspirations by efficiently carrying out the controlling and disciplining of the less privileged and less compliant. In turn, she argues, this calls for the need to keep oneself aloof from below and deadening any feelings of sympathy or solidarity with an 'emotional immunisation against the awareness of others' misery and one's responsibility for it'. It was this quality which was understood as essential for the fascist elite in Germany. However, we might also point out its necessity for middle managers carrying out so-called rationalisations in all manner of organisations under globalism and economic rationalism. This emotional immunisation may be less violent than in wartime Germany, but I would argue that it is nevertheless necessary for carrying out the corporate tasks that produce a misery that leaves no organisation immune. The corollary to this, as Osterkamp points out, is the terrible

suffering of those inmates of the camps, for example, who had to watch others being killed and suffering terribly while not being able to do anything for fear of their own lives. It is this which brought with it the most terrible burden of guilt and shame for their inability and the inability of the world to stop what they had been forced to witness. It is therefore necessary to understand the mechanisms and function of the processes of demoralisation as both supremely social and psychic. Osterkamp takes the analysis further by thinking about the role of psychology and psychologists and the way in which psychology and its practitioners can become similarly insulated. She calls for us to remove our 'ideological blinkers' in order to question the moral stances and actions that we too are asked to take within our present polity.

Couze Venn (Chapter 4) seeks to refigure subjectivity in the light of the postmodern and postcolonial interrogations of the discourses of modernity. This means that this refiguration begins from a critique outside the space of occidentalism, that is, 'outside the space of the becoming West of Europe and the becoming modern of the world'. He wants to question the privileging of the autonomous subject. Like other authors such as Elliott and Walsh and Bahnisch, Venn talks of the possibility of a different kind of subject, of different ways of being. Echoing also Osterkamp's discussion in the previous chapter, he writes of the necessity to renarrativise and reposition particular selves in order to facilitate the work of healing and memorialising the past. The subject position is not fixed. Osterkamp's fascists can and could renarrativise their position, though there is no doubt that this would be a momentous emotional as well as political work. How is one therefore to write another history of the subject which would then be another history of modernity, asks Venn. The modern logocentric concept of the subject has a way of erasing history and memory. The refigured subject is produced at the intersection of history, biography and the body. Its intersubjectivity is learned through a system of apprenticeship which is not internalised or willed but rather enfolded, entwined, interior and exterior. Venn goes on to discuss the work of Fanon and out of that to consider the process of subjective change. He argues that the production of dissident discourses is a necessary but not sufficient condition for change. As he says, we know well that counter-hegemonic discourses, for example, to do with racism, do not persuade racists to change their values. What is needed, he suggests, is something that works additionally 'at the level of affect. A discursive practice that plugs into the economy of desire'. That artistic practices can sometimes tap into this economy is important – a poetics of transformation. This transformation needs to tap both into the past and its losses and also into the being-in-the-world, which can move us on and apprentice us into new ways of being, while dealing with that which was left behind. This process relates to

the theorisation of the changes in subjectivity in the present polity discussed by all four chapters in this section. For all of the authors, subjectivity is mobile, not fixed, implying a subject in process who has a shifting relation to a past and the creation of a mobile future. Never has the project of working on this concept of subjectivity been more urgent politically as old allegiances and ways of being in the world are constantly shaken and destroyed. This work presents for us the possibility of the profoundly social yet profoundly psychological work which is needed to engage with the transformations that we are all facing in a way which is productive of a new politics and of new possibilities of being.

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# 1

## **Identity Politics and Privatisation: Modern Fantasies, Postmodern After-Effects**

ANTHONY ELLIOTT

Ours is the age of privatisation. From the narcissistic lures of psychotherapy through the technocratic imaginary of cyberspace and virtual reality to the consumerist ideologies of late capitalism (in which, as decentred subjects, we slide blissfully from signifier to signifier), experience today, much like everything else, is essentially privatised.

A deregulation of public institutions is not only on the agenda, but is an increasingly fundamental aspect of politics today. In our culturally cosmopolitan, globalised world, the activities of government are more and more centred on the restructuring of political responsibilities and public institutions, one consequence of which has been an effacing of past commitments and prior values. Out with the old, in with the new: the 'common interest' and the 'public good' have been replaced by the benchmark of individual choice, the freedom of the market and of pleasure-seeking.

At a political-institutional level, this is evident from a range of policy changes that have brought about the demise of the Keynesian welfare compromise in the west. These include:

- the pro-market restructuring of national economies into global economic competition;
- the deregulation of financial and labour markets, currency and banking systems;
- the dismantling or privatisation of public institutions (such as the partial or complete sell-off of banks, gas, electricity, water, airlines, telecommunications, and the like).

Politics has, of course, long carried the burdens of the erratics of the marketplace, its ups and downs. Today's politics, however, deepens the social and moral indifference of the market. For the unquestionable priority given to market competition is itself part and parcel of a relentless process of privatisation. This is a privatisation of politics in the broadest sense: of the individual, citizenship and moral responsibilities.

Privatisation, then, should not only be thought of as an institutional matter. The intended or unintended consequences of deregulation of public agencies has been a thoroughgoing privatisation of life (or life-strategies) in general. In privatised, postmodern society, the individual as consumer drifts from seduction to seduction, anxious to keep disabling anxieties from breaking into consciousness, and revelling in the libidinal *jouissance* of bodily appetites and sensory pleasures. Jobs for life are replaced by individualised contracts; till-death-us-do-part marriages are broken, restaged and broken again; and intimate ties are of the 'until further notice' variety. From one angle, then, privatised culture simply is that sixties' maxim – 'the personal is the political' – lived in reverse. Today's politics is privatised, and privatised to the hilt.

This chapter is an intervention into some current controversies over politics: specifically, the politics of privatisation. I begin by contrasting two broad constructions of identity ideology in the contemporary era. The sketch of these ideologies is primarily psychoanalytic in character. My focus changes in the next section, where I turn from identity disputes to the more structural problem of risk in today's politics and institutions. There I consider the path-breaking work of the German social theorist Ulrich Beck, looking in particular at his thesis that the deregulation of the commonality of risk is an outcome of the process of globalisation. I then analyse what Beck's sociologism of risk leaves out of account: namely, the psychic costs of privatisation. By drawing on the psychoanalytic contributions of Julia Kristeva and Wilfred Bion, I contend that the politics of privatisation is premised upon pseudo-rational fantasies of omnipotence – fantasies that serve to deny the globalised risk we face today as individuals and collectivities.

### **Strategies of Identity, Modern and Postmodern**

Much talk these days is about identity: identity and its problems, the transformation of identity, and, perhaps most fashionably, the end or death of the subject. Nowadays notions of identity seem inevitably to capsize into either modern or postmodern forms of theorising. In modern theorising, the catchword for identity is that of 'project'; in postmodern theorising, it's that of 'fragmentation'.

The 'project' of modern identity is that of identity-building. By identity-building I mean the building up of conceptions of oneself, of one's personal and social location, of one's position in an order of things. It is such restless self-activity that replaces the ascriptions of tradition and custom. Freed from the rigidities of inherited identity, human beings are set afloat in the troubled waters of modernity – in its unpredictability and flux, its global transformations, cultural migrations and communication flows. Modernity, we might say, is much preoccupied with identity as an end in itself: people are free to choose the kind of life they wish to live, but the imperative is to 'get on' with the task and achieve. To put it in another way, the order-building, state-constructing, nation-enframing ambitions of modernity require human subjects capable of picking themselves up by their own bootstraps and making something of life, with no rationale beyond the market-driven imperatives of constructing, shaping, defining, transforming. Perhaps the most comprehensive analysis to date that we have of this modern conception of identity building has been provided by the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992), who lists 'life-planning', 'internal referentiality' and 'colonisation of the future' as defining features. But the paradox of self-construction, if we read Giddens against himself, is that modern craving of identity maintenance or identity preservation results in a drastic limiting of life-stories, the denigration of meaning in the present and its projection into the future. What Giddens calls the future colonised is a spurious form of self-mastery, if only because the predictable, the routine and the determined always involve destructive forms of unconscious repetition.

Indeed, the psychic costs of life lived as project are grave. For the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, the crux of the problem is that of delayed gratification. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud argues that psychic violence erupts in that gap between demand for pleasure and pleasure actually attained. 'What we call happiness', writes Freud, 'comes from the (preferably sudden) satisfaction of needs which have been damned up to a high degree, and it is from its nature only possible as an episodic phenomenon.' The more culture presents itself as future-colonizing and project-orientated, the more life becomes repressive: the very contingencies of human experience are imagined insured against by the promise of future certainty, a certainty always tantalisingly out of reach. Elsewhere, in his magisterial cultural analysis *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud speaks of the modern adventure as a drive for order, a drive which he links to the compulsion to repeat. The trimming of pleasure into that of order, says Freud, spares us the painful ambivalence of indecision and hesitation. So too, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan sees the human subject as marked by the impossibility of fulfilment, an empty subject constituted through a primordial lack or gap of the Other. Indeed, such a decentering of



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