

Psychology and Liberal Democracy *A Spurious Connection?*

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Does psychology have a special affinity with any kind of political system? At first glance, it would appear not. Since its appearance in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, psychology has existed under just about every kind of political system that has existed in various parts of the world. It has existed in the democracies of Western Europe, North America, and Australasia, and it has existed in Nazi Germany, as well as in the former Soviet Union and its allies. Clearly, psychology can exist under a variety of governments, but the question remains as to whether it is particularly compatible with any of them.

Nikolas Rose would suggest that it is. In many of his works, he has argued that psychology and what he calls “liberal democracy” are particularly compatible. Following Foucault, he suggests that the liberal democracies of the West have an aversion to the direct exercise of political power. Freedom and liberty are stressed. Because of this, their citizens have to be ruled in less direct ways. In fact, they often rule themselves through “technologies of the self” (Martin, Gutman, and Hutton, 1998). Thus in modern liberal democracies, what Rose calls the “psy disciplines”—psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis—have an important role in “governing the soul” (Rose, 1999).

This presumed link between psychology and liberal democracy runs like a thread through Rose’s work. For example, in chapter 4 of *Inventing Ourselves*, he writes:

To conclude, let me sketch out the three principal forms of connection between psychological expertise and liberal democratic forms of government:

rationality, privacy and autonomy. First, in liberal democratic societies the exercise of power over citizens becomes legitimate to the extent that it claims a rational basis. . . . Second, liberal democratic problematics of government depend on the creation of “private” spaces outside the formal scope of the authority of public powers. . . . Third, liberal democratic problematics of government are autonomizing: they seek to govern through constructing a kind of regulated autonomy for social actors. The modern liberal self is “obliged to be free,” to construe all aspects of its life as the outcome of choices made among a number of options. (Rose, 1996, pp. 99–100)

Although Rose is fundamentally interested in the liberal democratic societies of the West, he also has something to say about the former socialist countries of the east:

It appears that, as the apparatus of the party and the plan is dismantled, other forms of authority are born, other ways of shaping and guiding the choices of these newly freed individuals. . . . Perhaps we will find that the transition to market economies and political pluralism will require, as its necessary corollary, not just the importation of material technologies of liberal democracy but also their human technologies—the engineers of the human soul that are the other side of what we have come to term freedom. (ibid; p. 100)

These statements were made in a particular context. The chapter is based on a paper that Rose gave at a conference in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) in 1990. I was present at that conference and could not resist the temptation to point out that Rose’s audience consisted mainly of East German psychologists, that the discipline was flourishing in the GDR, and that there had been no need for liberal democracy for that situation to occur.¹ I could say that with some confidence because I had been an exchange student of psychology at the University of Leipzig and had previously attended other conferences in the GDR (Brock, 1991). It seemed to me that Rose had wandered into a situation that he did not understand.

I am sure that I am not the only person who raised objections of this kind, since Rose makes an attempt to address these objections in the introduction to *Inventing Ourselves*. The fact that these issues are considered in the introduction to a collection of previously written papers suggests that they were an afterthought. Rose (1996) is happy to acknowledge that

psychology existed in Nazi Germany, but he is eager to play down its importance: “Psychotherapy, rather surprisingly, could be accorded a role under the Nazis . . . but it did not become a widely deployed technology for their regulation of conduct or subjectivity” (p. 14). Similarly:

Geuter concludes that, while many psychologists did try to place their place their discipline in the service of organs of Nazi domination, psychology contributed little to stabilising that domination. . . . It was not systematically involved in the deployment of official propaganda, and psychologists are not known to have been used by the Nazis or the SS in persecution, torture or murder. (p. 14)

Then Rose turns his attention to the Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe. He acknowledges that some psychology existed in the early years of the Soviet Union but points out that psychological testing and attitude questionnaires were banned:

Although there was undoubtedly a rebirth of psychology after World War II, the governmental role of psy expertise in postwar communist nations remains to be analyzed. From the few detailed studies of local party apparatus that are available, there is little evidence that the psy experts were of much importance in the “pastoral relations” of the Communist Party bureaucracies through which everyday life was regulated in the former communist states of Eastern Europe in the period preceding their collapse. (p. 15)

Thus the special relationship between psychology and liberal democracy is preserved. No one pretends or could pretend that the relationship is mutually exclusive, but there is clearly an attempt to postulate an affinity between the two. Other evidence in favor of such an affinity can be produced. Johann Louw (chapter 1 in this volume) examines the spread of “psychologization” in South Africa and, following Rose, links it to the establishment of liberal democracy in that country in recent years.

It is true that most of the world’s psychologists live in Northwestern Europe and North America under liberal democratic regimes. If we were to include the psychologists in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania who live under similar regimes, it would account for the vast majority of psychologists in the world.

In spite of this, I remain unconvinced. The basic problem, as I see it, is

the one that is explained to first-year psychology students in their statistics class: correlation does not imply causation. This point has already been made by Louw and Kurt Danziger (undated manuscript) in relation to Rose's work:

The problem here is the classical one of correlation. If all one's examples are taken from a category of cases in which two features coincide one can never be sure that there really is a direct link between them and that their association is not caused by some underlying, unexamined, factor. No matter how intelligible the link between psychological practices and certain forms of social regulation can be made to appear there is always the possibility that this link is merely the fortuitous outcome of their common dependence on circumstances that have escaped scrutiny (p. 5).²

Just because the majority of the world's psychologists live under liberal democratic regimes, it does not automatically follow that there is a significant relationship between psychology and liberal democracy.

I could similarly point out that the majority of the world's psychologists live in temperate climates. This would include North America, Europe, and Japan. There are fewer psychologists in the southern hemisphere, but this can be explained by the fact that the continents of the southern hemisphere have much smaller temperate zones. However, it is surely no coincidence that southern hemisphere countries with temperate climates, like Argentina, South Africa, and Australia, have more psychologists than the countries with tropical climates to the north. As with the liberal democracy theory, I can happily acknowledge that some psychology exists in these countries, but this does not alter the basic fact that most of world's psychologists live in temperate zones.

I do not want to seriously suggest that temperate climates encourage the spread of psychology, in spite of the strong association between the two. I simply wish to show how the argument works. It might be argued that a link between psychology and liberal democracy has more plausibility than a link between psychology and temperate climates, and this is undoubtedly true. Perhaps a more convincing way of casting doubt on the claim is to look at situations where psychology and liberal democracy do not co-exist. There are many countries with liberal democratic systems of government where psychology does not exist to any significant degree. Some examples are India, Turkey, the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan. The number of psychologists per million of population in these countries

in the late 1980s was tiny compared with the number of psychologists per million of population in the Soviet bloc countries, such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the aforementioned GDR (Sexton and Hogan, 1992).

While it would be possible to look at an example of a country with a liberal democratic government where psychology hardly exists, this would not be particularly interesting to an audience of historians of psychology. I am therefore going to focus on an example of a country without a liberal democratic government where psychology not only has prospered and grown but also has permeated the whole of society. If it can be shown that such a country exists, it would cast serious doubt on the claim that there is a significant relationship between psychology and liberal democracy. Such a country does exist, and it is called "Cuba." I take it that no one would seriously suggest that Cuba has a liberal democratic government, not even the government itself.

I would like to stress that it is not my intention to make propaganda for or against the Cuban government. I make this point because a previous attempt to address these issues at a conference led to some audience members assuming that I was telling them how wonderful life in Cuba was and they were getting very irate (Brock, 2003). That is not my intention at all. My aim is simply to use the empirical evidence that the history of psychology in Cuba provides. I would also like to point out that I have not conducted any original research on the subject, though I made two trips to Cuba and spoke with several psychologists in Havana and Santiago while I was there. I also acquired a large collection of books, journals, and unpublished manuscripts that are difficult to obtain outside the country.³ However, most of the information discussed here has been available in the English-language literature for many years (e.g., Bernal, 1985; Marín, 1987; Bernal and Rodriguez, 1992).

One of the most striking things about psychology in Cuba is its size. According to the well-known book by V. S. Sexton and J. D. Hogan (1992) on international psychology, Cuba had 186 psychologists per million of population. This is not far behind the United Kingdom which had 244, but it was ahead of Austria with 178, Ireland with 157, Greece with 60, and Japan with 36. I make these comparisons because Cuba is a poor, third-world country that has had to contend with an economic and information blockade for many years. All of the other countries are richer, first-world countries with liberal democratic governments.

The other significant point about psychology in Cuba is that it scarcely existed before the revolution of 1959. Following a visit to Cuba in the

1940s, the Harvard psychologist, W. H. D. Vernon wrote: "Psychology in Cuba, like psychology in other Latin American countries, has a history very different from psychology in the United States. It has no status as a separate discipline, and there is no journal given over to the publication of psychological data. Psychology is seen as a part of philosophy, sociology and education" (1944, p. 73). Some psychology was taught in the universities, and there were a few foreign-trained psychotherapists who catered to the rich. But the foundations of Cuban psychology as an independent discipline and as a profession were established in the years immediately after the revolution of 1959. Thus the first school of psychology in Cuba was established at the University of Las Villas in 1961, and the school of psychology at the University of Havana was established in 1962. The first group of students from the latter graduated only in 1966. However, by 1980 the Ministry of Public Health alone employed 310 psychologists and 350 psychometricians (Marín, 1987).

It is no secret why psychology was established in the immediate aftermath of the revolution or why it experienced such rapid growth:

The shift from capitalism to socialism transformed all aspects of everyday life. Technology and science were now viewed as tools created to improve life and as having tremendous social value. Thus, psychology, as both a science and a profession, experienced a surge of development. This view is contrary to the attitude held before 1959, when psychology was seen as an esoteric field limited to the elite. (Bernal and Rodriguez, 1992, p. 86)

It will be recalled that Rose (1996) predicted that the demise of socialism would lead to the growth of psychology in the former socialist countries. Here we can see that it was socialism that led to the establishment of psychology and its subsequent development and growth.

The third point I wish to make is that, as the above quotation indicates, psychology is not something that exists apart from the rest of society in Cuba. Whatever other failings it might have, the Cuban revolution has delivered health care and education to the people in a way that no other government had done before. The fact that psychologists were involved in the provision of these services helped to ensure the establishment of the profession and its expansion and growth (Sommers, 1969). One of the areas in which Cuban psychology is particularly strong is community psychology, so much so that the *American Journal of Community Psychology* devoted a special issue of the journal to Cuba in 1985 (e.g., Bernal, 1985;

Garcia Averasturi, 1985; Marín, 1985). Cuba was seen, in many respects, as leading the way.

Since the revolution, psychologists have become involved in many aspects of Cuban society: "Psychologists may be found in non-traditional settings such as day-care centers, factories, schools, and political, cultural, and recreational organizations, as well as more traditional sites such as psychiatric institutions, hospitals, community health centers, universities, and research institutes" (Bernal and Rodriguez, 1992, p. 91). It is also clear that psychologists in Cuba are heavily involved in the regulation of everyday life: "Psychologists provide consultation, conduct research, and develop preventative programs in factories, cultural and recreational organizations, sport organizations and centers for the study of labor relations. . . . Psychologists in these centers aim to promote productivity, discipline and motivation" (Ibid., p. 90). There is also evidence of psychologists "engineering the human soul," in the way that Rose (1996, p. 100) uses the term, as well as the use of "technologies of the self."

In an article titled "The social function of the psychologist in Cuba," A. Mitjans Martínez and M. Febles Elejade write that a major role of the psychologist is "the formation and development of the personality as part of the process of installing socialism in Cuba" (1983, p. 12). It may be recalled that Ernesto "Che" Guevara wrote a famous essay, "Socialism and man in Cuba," in which he argued that socialism would need a different kind of person (Guevara, 2001). When I discussed this essay with psychologists in Cuba, I was told that, although it was rarely cited, it formed the ideological background for much of their work.

Two of the main areas of research in Cuba since the revolution have been personality and moral development (see also Bernal, 1985). A major figure in this research was Fernando González Rey, who now lives in Brazil. One of his more interesting books is titled, *Moral motivation in adolescents and young people*. It ends, of course, with a chapter titled "The formation of moral ideals" (González Rey, 1982, p. 112). A work by the same author on the education and development of the personality contains chapters such as "Moral education of the personality," "Vocational and professional education," and "Education for health" (González Rey and Mitjans Martínez, 1999). Psychologists in Cuba have been transforming people, and encouraging people to transform themselves, in socially desirable ways. There is nothing unique about liberal democracy in this regard.

I hope that by now the view that psychology has a special affinity with liberal democracy is untenable, or at least in serious doubt. How could it

have been taken so seriously? Part of the problem is that historians of psychology have traditionally concerned themselves only with Northwestern Europe and North America. Rose's own work is heavily focused on Britain and the United States. It is perhaps unsurprising that people can be led astray with such a narrow data base. This is one reason that an "internationalization" of the history of psychology is so desperately needed. In particular, there is a need for comparative studies of different societies (e.g., Dumont and Louw, 2001). It is only through comparative studies that we can find out what different societies have in common and what makes them unique.

Another problem seems to be the popular Western stereotypes of socialism that have their origins in the propaganda of the Cold War (e.g., Hayek, 2001). The people of Cuba are not like medieval serfs who simply do what they are told. They almost certainly have less freedom than people in liberal democratic societies, but this does not mean that they have no freedom at all. It also does not mean that the Cuban government is not concerned about what the Cuban people think. Like all governments, it has means of forcing people to comply with its wishes, but, like liberal democratic governments, it prefers to use them only as a last resort.

It is similarly absurd to suggest that rationality and the existence of a "private" sphere are not features of Cuban social life. We are not talking here about Europe under the "ancien regime," as Foucault was wont to do (e.g., Foucault, 1991). Cuba is a modern and a modernizing society. To that extent, it has much in common with modern liberal democratic regimes. A further possibility is that these problems are the result of a misapplication of Foucault's ideas. There is a world of difference between the ancien regime in Europe and modern nonliberal democratic regimes.

Having put one spurious connection aside, I am reluctant to suggest another. However, it seems to me that psychology is frequently associated with that constellation of beliefs that we call "modernity." Here I am referring to a belief in the value of economic development, industrialization, rationality, science, and technology. Where these beliefs exist, "modern" psychology is likely to appear, regardless of whether or not the government is liberal democratic.

This view must be tempered with the knowledge that local circumstances can make the situation different in each case. For example, psychology did not have a major role in Nazi Germany, even though Germany was a highly industrialized country and its science and technology were among the most advanced in the world. It had nothing to do with

liberal democracy. Although experimental psychology appeared in Germany at an early stage in the history of psychology, German psychology continued to be a branch of philosophy until World War II. Danziger (chapter 11 in this volume) writes: "The spread of applied psychology encountered many obstacles in Germany. . . . As late as 1929 the German Psychological Society published a protest against the tendency to reduce the number of academic positions in psychology in favor of philosophy. But it defended psychology in terms of its philosophical, not its practical, value." Psychology as a discipline and as a profession made enormous strides under the Nazis, but the point from which it started was not particularly well advanced. German psychologists had not penetrated society in the way that their American counterparts had done, and this was equally true of the Weimar Republic as it was of the Nazi regime.

Local conditions vary from place to place. Even psychology can vary from place to place, and it seems plausible to suggest that the conditions of its establishment, as well as its growth, can also vary from place to place. In this situation, it is unwise to make sweeping generalizations of the kind that "psychology goes with x." I also hope that the above example will show the importance of looking at psychology in a variety of social contexts. Without that, we will fall prey to spurious connections of the kind that I have outlined.

NOTES

1. See also Busse (2004) and my review of this work (Brock, in press).
2. Unfortunately, these words were edited out of the published version of the manuscript (Louw and Danziger, 2000; Danziger, personal communication). I am very grateful to Kurt Danziger for the fruitful discussions that I have had with him on this subject. I am, of course, solely responsible for the opinions expressed.
3. The author who has written most extensively on the history of psychology in Cuba is Carolina de la Torre Molina (e.g., Torre, 1995; Torre Molina, 1991; Torre Molina and Calviño Valdés-Fauly, 2000). I am especially grateful to her for taking the time to talk with me and for helping me to obtain copies of her publications. See also the articles by Fernando González Rey (1995, 2000) and by Eduardo Cairo Valcárcel (1998).

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