

Clinical Sociology Review

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 21

1-1-1985

Changing the Subject

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Recommended Citation

Atwood, Joan D. and Atwood, William R. () "Changing the Subject," *Clinical Sociology Review*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 21.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/csr/vol3/iss1/21>

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Changing the Subject, by J. Henriques, W. Hollway, C. Urwin, C. Venn, and V. Walkerdine. New York: Methuen, 1984, 360 pp., \$37.50 hardcover, \$15.95 paperback.

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"We now have tools for examining the relations between the social processes which regulate us and the psychic functioning of individuals. In contrast to what psychoanalysis can offer, these processes are in principle ones to which we can all gain access. They are the stuff of our daily lives; they are material for struggle" (p. 322). These sentences end *Changing the Subject* an extensive book written by five British psychologists who charge themselves with the task of rewriting some basic tenets of the social sciences. The book includes three sections, each consisting of two essays. These are: (Part I) "Psychological Assessment in Organizations" (Industrial Psychology) and "Social Psychology and the Politics of Racism"; (Part II) "The Subject of Psychology" and "Developmental Psychology and the Child Centered Pedagogy: Insertion of Piaget into Early Education"; (Part III) "Gender Differences and the Production of Subjectivity" and "Power Relations and the Emergence of Language."

The main thesis of the book is basically to argue for "the theoretical inadequacy of the concepts of a pre-social individual and a preformed social world" (p. 8). The authors first critique the "individual-society dualism and its effects upon psychological theory and practices." Second, they develop what they term "alternative perspectives which show psychology's part in the practices of social

regulation and administration,” attempting to show how the “very notion of individual is a product of discourses which have been developed through these practices.” Their third goal is “retheorizing subjectivity on the foundations of the first two.”

One of the main issues they grapple with is the notion of dualism. For these authors, the psychological concept of dualism is theoretically inadequate because it fails to theorize sufficiently about the social component in psychological functioning. Although they consider dualism to be theoretically inadequate, the authors believe that it is still used as an apparatus to legitimate social control. They eventually solve this dualism dilemma by referring to literature that concludes that the individual and the social were created together: “the processes whereby meaning is produced at the same time as subjects are fabricated and positioned in social relations” (p. 98).

Another issue explored is the humanist-antihumanist debate. “A clearer understanding of what was at stake in the polemics surrounding the humanism-anti-humanism debate should help establish what it is we are trying to move away from” (p. 93). Dethroning the humanist position, they also disagree with the concept of the rational view of man. They want to move the subject away from positing a “unitary, essentially non-contradictory and above all rational entity.” Nor are they comfortable with a classical “mechanistic Marxism,” mainly because of the Marxist attempt to explain all of human misery, alienation and exploitation as effects of the capitalist mode of production. The approach with which they do feel comfortable is one “which stresses the primacy of signification as opposed to representation, the main difference being that signification as the process of making sense does not represent anything, rather it is a production” (p. 97). In other words, representation theory assumes that reality exists and that individuals simply reflect that reality. Signification, on the other hand, implies that reality is created via interaction. Individuals do not merely reflect the preexisting reality but have an effect via interaction on shaping, producing that reality.

Changing the Subject attempts to examine and analyze certain basic epistemological issues. The attempt is to enable the reader to rethink these issues by exploring a variety of “applied areas.” It is a challenging endeavor. However, in the process the reader is often lost. The language is cumbersome; the wordiness is tedious. While the book is potentially an important one and the issues explored are relevant to the social sciences, it is difficult to read more than a few pages at a sitting. “Tools for understanding” are often promised but hardly ever delivered, and if at rare times the reader is given insight into the “answer,” it is always guised in obscure, convoluted terminology.