

## In Praise of Marginality (1992)

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When I was asked to contribute to these proceedings my first reaction was to decline. Celebration is not much my style. There are others who can speak with much greater authority on the subject of Cheiron-Europe and certainly on the subject of Psychology in the Netherlands. Besides, there is the uncomfortable question of what exactly it is that we are celebrating. Is it simply survival – the stark fact that after ten years Cheiron-Europe is still around, that after a hundred years Psychology in the Netherlands has a presence that cannot be ignored? That may well be, but surely a banquet, rather than a talkfest, would provide the most appropriate context for the celebration of survival. Of course, we don't simply want to celebrate survival as such; we want to celebrate a successful survival, one that is based on real achievements. But the celebration of achievements is a risky business. Either the achievements in question are unambiguous, something on which everyone agrees, in which case their celebration is likely to produce boredom, or the achievements are questionable, in which case one must wonder whether they ought to be celebrated at all.

But if we are to celebrate neither survival nor achievement, then what should we celebrate? Perhaps we can get closer to an answer to that question: Is the conjunction of Cheiron-Europe and Psychology in the Netherlands merely a matter of external convenience, or is there some meaningful link between the two? Do they have anything in common, apart from the *personal union* represented by our gracious host and several others present here? I think we can come up with a simple answer to that question without indulging in long speculation. Something that Cheiron-Europe and Psychology in the Netherlands have in common is that they are both relatively small. Cheiron-Europe is small in comparison to the professional associations of the disciplines with whose history it is concerned; Psychology in the Netherlands is small in comparison to Psychology in North America or even Germany. Perhaps then the most appropriate motto for these proceedings should be: Small is beautiful, a motto, incidentally, that used to be heard a lot more often a few years ago than it has been recently. Well, I do not believe that "Small is Beautiful" would have been such a bad choice, although taking pride in a matter of mere size is undoubtedly a bit superficial, if not to say juvenile. Let us see whether we can get beyond the simple fact of smallness to something more significant that may perhaps be associated with being small.

At first it seems that being small has certain disadvantages. If you are big and powerful you can afford to be self-sufficient and independent. For many years American Psychology has taken very little notice of psychological work done in other parts of the world. And in the heyday of German Psychology, during the early part of this century, very little notice was taken of work done in America, although there was already quite a lot of it. But psychologists in the Netherlands, and in other smaller countries, could never afford to be so self-centred. In the U.S. it is still possible to produce a literature review of a certain area, covering only studies published in the U.S., and pretend that you have covered the work in that area. In a country like the Netherlands you couldn't get away with that kind of pretence. But is that really a disadvantage? Well, only in the sense that being small you have to work a little harder and can't afford the

luxury of ethnocentrism. But in a much more important sense I would say it is quite an advantage to preserve your openness to information emanating from a variety of social and cultural contexts. It is not only a matter of having more information at your disposal, but of being accessible to a variety of information that differs in kind. For the production of psychological knowledge has never been independent of social and cultural conditions. Differences in these conditions have manifested themselves in significant variations of emphasis and perspective, and above all, in variations in what is taken for granted, in what is assumed and never questioned. Self-sufficient, inward looking, centres for the production of psychological knowledge can therefore function as cultural prisons that trap the understanding within a set of unyielding intellectual walls. It is much easier to escape such prisons if your location obliges you to become exposed to a variety of viewpoints.

Thus, at various times during its history Psychology in the Netherlands has had to come to terms with influences emanating from major centres like Germany and the US, not to speak of other significant centres, like France and the Soviet Union. This position at the crossroads did not inhibit creativity, quite the contrary, it seems to have stimulated it; and marginality has also entailed the extra bonus of a more flexible perspective and a critical sensitivity to fundamental issues. Of course, I am not suggesting that Dutch psychologists were complete strangers to dogmatism and superficiality, but when one looks at a century of Dutch Psychology as a whole it does seem that there was relatively more mobility of orientation, more openness of viewpoint, and more fruitful critical dialogue than in those centres of psychological inquiry that were culturally more parochial.

But how does all this relate to the historiography of psychology and therefore to Cheiron-Europe? I link the two because in practice Cheiron-Europe has always been dominated by the historiography of psychology. Now, we only need to contrast the hundred year span of Psychology in the Netherlands with the ten year span of Cheiron-Europe to realize that we are dealing with different orders of time. Although there were some significant individual contributions to the history of psychology even in the nineteenth century, the field has existed as a recognizable sub-discipline, with its own journals, associations and scholarly networks, for less than a generation. In other words, it is a field that has emerged during a particular period in the history of psychology as a discipline, a period that is now drawing to a close. This was a time during which the discipline of Psychology was dominated by developments in a single country, the USA, and inevitably, the historiography of Psychology reflected that dominance. Not only were American historians of psychology the first to organize themselves, but the predominance of American textbooks ensured that the history of American psychology would occupy a privileged position within the field.

For a time, at any rate, twentieth century psychology seemed to have a well defined geographical centre. One could still produce histories of what had happened at the periphery, but such histories were clearly identified as purely local in significance, histories of British, German, Dutch, etc., psychology. Only American histories could dispense with this qualification and make a serious, though usually implicit, claim to represent the history of psychology as such.

This state of affairs was particularly favourable to certain tendencies that afflicted purely disciplinary histories in any case. It made it easier to structure the history of the discipline in

terms of a continuous subject, a normative core development, in relation to which dissonant elements could be treated as special cases subject to unique local influences. It made it particularly easy to complete the marginalization of many trends that did not fit in with the perspectives of mainstream American psychology. It made it possible to play down the pervasiveness and the significance of fundamental disagreements and therefore to represent the core history of the discipline as the product of an immanent and progressive evolution. For example, the more recent emphasis on cognition can be represented as progress in relation to the behaviourist phase that preceded it, but only if one adopts an American rather than a European focus.

In recent years the *relative* decline of American influence within the discipline has become increasingly evident, a decline that is of course not unconnected with similar developments taking place on other levels. The emergence of significant loci of disciplinary growth, not only in Europe, but also in certain developing countries, has led to the appearance of a historical consciousness that represents a break with the historiography of the immediately preceding period. What has been abandoned is the implicit model that organized disciplinary development around what was simultaneously a geographical and a conceptual centre. The metaphor of centre and periphery is being replaced by a polycentric one.

At the same time, the study of international cross-currents has replaced older unidirectional accounts and has given a special significance to locations, such as the Netherlands, which were at the centre of such cross-currents.

The shift to a polycentric understanding of the history of the discipline has proved to be highly compatible with a second major development, namely, the increasing social contextualization of historical accounts. Although the sources of this development lie outside the area of disciplinary history, it was bound to be favoured by the declining credibility of accounts that privileged one historical line over others. As long as the model of centre and periphery prevailed it was easy to see developments at the periphery as subject to local social influences, while the centre represented universal values or even rationality as such. As already noted, centre and periphery were as much conceptual as they were geographical, so that certain core areas of the discipline, usually involving particular methodological commitments, were left untouched by mundane social life. With the end of privilege, both on the geographical and the conceptual level, this position becomes untenable, and all parts of the subject come to be seen in terms of their social relationships.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that for most of the present century the path of European psychology was very different from that of North American psychology. But how are we to interpret this? By representing American psychology as the home of "science," while regretting that (continental) European psychology, in spite of its promising beginnings, succumbed to various extra-scientific, philosophical and ideological influences? That kind of interpretation has not lacked appeal, especially in reference to developments in Germany between the Wars, but it will no longer do. This is an interpretation that is based on a privileging of one understanding of "science," one that became dominant in American psychology at a very early stage. It therefore leads to an idealization of the history of that understanding and a complementary tendency to demonize some of its alternatives by linking them to totalitarian and antiscientific ideologies.

The more recent polycentric, historiography of psychology has helped to reveal the cultural bias inherent into this approach. As long as disciplinary histories are in the business of privileging certain approaches or certain locations they tend to elevate their subject matter above its context and to favour immanent principles of development, be they of the rational-technical or cultural variety. More recently, however, there has been a tendency to see all disciplinary developments, including the formerly privileged ones, as first of all local developments, embedded in local situations.

This development, together with the general growth of strong disciplinary centres outside the USA, has led to the formation of a number of nationally organized groups devoted to the study of the history of psychology, for example in Germany, France, Britain and Canada. This is a very welcome trend, but it has its limits. Although the historiography of psychology must reflect the polycentric nature of the discipline, there is always the danger that a conclave of scholars grouped around purely local interests will fall victim to parochialism. It would be disappointing if the upshot of these developments were merely the replacement of one big hegemonic, yet ultimately parochial, story by a number of little parochial stories. Often, the most significant features of a local situation only come into view when one compares it to other situations. A local perspective is good at dissecting and describing local variations, conflicts, and changes over time, but it often fails to notice the things that do not change, the things that everyone takes for granted. To get beyond these limitations we need a comparative perspective, one which uses insights gained in one situation to raise questions about another.

During the present period Cheiron-Europe provides a forum that is uniquely placed to support the development of such a perspective. By bringing together scholars representing a variety of local interests it creates conditions which favour both a deepening of local analysis and the emergence of insights that are of more than local significance. Its place lies at the margins of centres of local inquiry, but it is this very marginality that provides it with a unique and valuable role. In this respect there is an analogy between the position of Psychology in the Netherlands and the position of Cheiron-Europe, and perhaps it is because of this that Dutch psychologists have played such an important role in the relatively brief life of Cheiron-Europe. They are used to being at the intellectual crossroads, and of course that is exactly what Cheiron-Europe represents, an intellectual crossroads situated somewhere between various centres and marginal to all of them. But such a situation, as I have tried to indicate, has advantages as well as disadvantages. Those who meet other travelers at the crossroads and listen to their stories can expect to be relieved of some of the burden of parochial biases and to continue on their way, not only knowing a little more about the big wide world, but perhaps ready to see their local concerns through different spectacles.

Having praised the marginality of Psychology in the Netherlands and the marginality of Cheiron-Europe I would like to end my hymn by making brief reference to yet a third marginality, that of the modern historian of psychology, whether a member of Cheiron-Europe or not. The work of the historian is marginal to that of the modern psychologist because the latter thinks of himself as a scientist who looks for truth in the laboratory and not in history. From this point of view history can merely offer up stale truths that have been superseded by modern research. The scientific psychologist feels himself to be in a historically privileged position because he is

convinced that he is in possession of the one sure method for getting at the truth. History is tolerated only insofar as it celebrates the steps by which this pinnacle was reached.

By contrast, professional historians have their own criteria for judging historical significance, and they are unlikely to coincide with those of the scientist. Taking science as one's primary referent means accepting the moral authority of the scientific community and writing history in celebration of that authority. On the other hand, the professional historian, in the words of a prominent historian of science, Paul Forman, "understanding that scientific knowledge is socially constructed, partly within and partly outside the scientific discipline, must focus either on social problems of science or science as a social problem". Of course this means that the historian will not have much of an audience among practicing scientists, but his or her professional affiliations are not with them anyway.

The question is whether it is possible to bridge this gap, whether there is a space at the margins of science and history that can be usefully filled by historians whose professional affiliations are not with history but with a particular scientific discipline. Such persons would have the difficult task of persuading at least some of their scientific colleagues of the relevance of historical studies, while rejecting the progress-celebrating role that these colleagues would like to assign to them.

Of course, historians of psychology are not the only people who have ever faced such a task and solved it successfully. In fact, most disciplines provide us with examples of individuals whose critical historical studies gained widespread recognition within their own scientific community. To mention only the most eminent, we might think of Ernst Mach and Henri Poincaré in physics, or, if we want to be more contemporary, of Ernst Mayr and Stephen Jay Gould in biology. And of course, such figures have numerous counterparts in the social sciences, particularly in economics, which is the most mathematical of the social sciences.

Now, it is true that during the last half century the physical sciences have cut their ties with their own history and no longer recognize their own historicity. And we all know of psychologists who suffer from terminal physics envy, and who would like to imitate the physical sciences in this as in many other respects. But I do not think we should accept this kind of pathology as setting the norm for our discipline. At a time when the historicity of all knowledge is increasingly taken as a given in virtually all fields outside physical science psychologists need to be reminded that the historicity of their subject matter obliges them to pay their dues to history, whether this coincides with their dream of science or not. And who else will remind them, if not those marginal people who straddle the boundary between psychology and history?

#### NOTE

Talk at the celebration of one hundred years of Psychology in the Netherlands and ten years of Cheiron-Europe (the predecessor to ESHHS), Groning University, 27 August 1992.