

12-19-1997

Postmodernism and Totalitarianism: Freedom not to be Free

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Recommended Citation

(1997) "Postmodernism and Totalitarianism: Freedom not to be Free," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 20 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol3/iss20/2>

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Author: Editor

Volume: 3

Issue: 20

Date: 1997-12-19

Keywords: Authoritarianism, Freedom, Postmodernism, Totalitarianism

Abstract. This article describes how postmodern psychologies may lead to very modern consequences.

Postmodern psychologies often have been described by its proponents as new venues of freedom. This freedom arises once one realizes that one is self-creating and self-interpreting; that one has a multitude of selves, identities, and natures; that there is no transhistorical or transcultural humaness; that there are no moral absolutes; that all values are social artifacts, linguistic constructions, and must be evaluated with regards to their cultural contexts. There is no truth through method--scientific or otherwise. In the place of truth, there is the successful explanatory narrative--depending on the induction of delight, irony, and a compelling sense. Free from the constraints of believing that one is a self-contained, decontextualized individual, one can be who one wants to be, perceive reality as one wishes, choose differing demarcations between fact and fiction--if at all--and be open to the joys of the social and linguistic constructions of being. On the other hand, modern psychologies--bound by the conflation of logical positivism and hypostatized traits, instincts, or processes--are venues of an escape from freedom.

Given the above, the compelling sense of an article in *The New Republic* by Jean Bethke Elshtain, who cites philosopher Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, is, well, ironic--even if not delightful. Here is Elshtain on authority and liberty citing Arendt: "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e. the standards of thought) no longer exist."

And the ironies abound. As perspicacious as Arendt might have been about totalitarianism, her passionate relationship with philosopher Martin Heidegger may have taken away her freedom to see the totalitarian proclivities of her lover. And other venues to freedom--such as representative democracies--may often be subverted by its constitutive processes to yield freedom's antithesis through the success, for example, of nonliberal mass movements, e.g., in contemporary Algeria.

And the irony of ironies: Is the freedom not to be free the freest of freedoms, much as a God who can be perfect and imperfect may be more powerful than a God who can only be perfect? Perhaps not. As with suicide, once the choice not to be free is made, the choice not to be free or to be free may no longer exist. (See Arendt, H. (1973). *The origins of totalitarianism*. Harcourt Brace; Davids, M.F. (1996). *Frantz Fanon: the struggle for inner freedom*. *Free Associations*, 6(38/2), 205-234; Elshtain, J.B. (December 22, 1997). *Authority figures*. *The New Republic*, 11-12; Ettinger, E. (1995). *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger*. Yale University Press; Gergen, K.J. (1985). *The social constructionist movement in modern psychology*. *American Psychologist*, 40, 266-275; Gergen, K.J. (1992). *Toward a postmodern psychology*. In S. Kvale (Ed.), *Psychology and postmodernism*. London: Sage, pp. 17-30; Sauvayre, P. (1995). *On the dialectics of agency*. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 15, 144-160.) (Keywords: Authoritarianism, Freedom, Postmodernism, Totalitarianism.)