



Identity In Question

Combining Accounts

Peter Redman

The following area I want to discuss with you which relates to your essay 'Who Needs Identity?' which appears in 'The Reader', and in that essay you make a very strong case for combining an account of the unconscious with what we might call a Foucauldian account of discursive practices, and I guess what I'd like to ask you is why you think it's so important to actually hang on to an approach that combines those two?

Stuart Hall

Well the wonderful thing about Foucault's approach is that everything is in what he calls discourse and that is to say that the processes we've been discussing, by which meaning is not interior to the individual subject but is the result of the subject being located within a discursive framework, within a discourse, and the notion that these discourses are related to social practices, they're lodged in institutions and so on, so for instance Foucault would argue there's no such thing as the mad person. If you want to understand why a person is called mad in the 18th century you have to understand what madness means, you have to understand the psychology of the period, you have to understand how madness was treated, how mad people were imprisoned and so on, you have to understand the whole discursive structure in order to get at the identity and personality of the mad person. But Foucault would say that this is a relationship, as it were, within discourse. You don't have to go into the interior of the individual subject, and his or her internal psychological processes, you don't need the psychic dimension at all to explain how this happens, you simply need an understanding of what discourses are available and how individuals are, as it were, located within them in one historical moment or another. Now that's perfectly OK if you want to view the question from the point of view of the institutions, but if you think of it from the point of view of the individual subject it's not possible for the individual subject to have anything like a meaningful or consistent sense of life without actually investing psychologically in the position into which you have been called, now otherwise you know, individuality or identity is nothing but, you know a sort of, you know, breakfast menu, I mean I get up this morning, I feel like being a West Indian, I can eat West Indian food, etcetera, tomorrow I think I'll be Turkish and I can take on a Turkish identity. There's no location and we get into a kind of post-modern notion of identity as completely free-floating, but actually when we think about our own identity as though we know we don't remain the same as we were when we were one year old, we know that we are embodied, we occupy a body which begins and dies, we know we have powerful feelings about the things that we believe in, even feelings that we can't encounter for ourselves, and until you ask the question where does that investment in our identity positions come from, you can't really fill the whole picture. You get a very good picture, a sort of map of how subjects and identities and discourses work from Foucault but you don't get any sense of what holds an individual to a particular place in it, and at that point I think you do need not just a sort of a psychology of the individual, which at the end of his life Foucault actually did try to produce, but you need something deeper than that because these attachments are not things which are open to our rational consideration. We don't know why we are so, you know, profoundly disturbed by experiences which we've never been through before, but which somehow put us and our sense of ourselves at risk, or can make us vulnerable in ways which we can't rationally explain, and all of that does point towards what Lacan would call the unconscious processes which underlie the capacity of subjects to locate themselves in discourse at all, so one needs to combine Lacan's ability to talk about how we invest psychologically and psychoanalytically in subject positions, and Foucault's notion of how those subject positions are then attached to institutions and located historically and socially, so that's why I call for some kind of combination. I know that's not easy because Lacan doesn't talk about Foucault and Foucault doesn't like Freud and psychoanalysis, so you can't just jam the two paradigms together, but you do have to think about each in terms of the inadequacy of the other, I'll put it that way. Lacan is not sufficiently attentive to what happens

to the individual subject after about nine months old and Foucault is not sufficiently attentive to the depth of the attachment and investments which people have in the identity positions they're called upon to occupy, so we're not yet at the end of the sort of elaboration of the, what this theory of the subject and language has to offer us.

Peter Redman

That's an interesting point because one of the key commentators who actually begins to elaborate that position that you're outlining there is of course Judith Butler, and I wondered if you could say something about how successful you think her reworking of Notions of Gender Performativity actually are in bringing together an account of the unconscious with Foucault's Notion of Discursive Practices.

Stuart Hall

I think Judith Butler's work is extremely interesting in this respect but I would say more interesting so far because she's troubled about this question and less because she's successfully answered it. She, in her earlier work, she uses the Notion of Performativity, but better performance and performativity is much too intentional, it's as if the subject kind of sort of rationally, consciously choose what sort of performance of itself to give under different circumstances and later on when she realises that she's slipped too far towards the intention, she moves back to Foucauldian ground in the bodies that matter and there I think what you find is that she talks about the continual occupancy of opposition, or what she calls repetition or iteration of a position, as having to ground it, you know, to give it that consistency and long-lastingness that I was talking about and that is, all of these are interesting suggestions of a way through the problem, but it's not yet the definitive solution I think we're looking for.

Peter Redman

Stuart Hall – thank you very much.