The Reordering of Knowledge

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In his newest book Religion and Critical Psychology (2007) Jeremy Carrette argues that knowledge is “reordered” through political and economic orientations and that this reordering often goes unexamined (p. 41). The “disciplinary regimes and concepts” that direct the production of knowledge are thus “ethical systems of framing the world and they require our philosophical scrutiny and moral evaluation” (p. 55).

In the first half of his book, Carrette provides evidence for the following claims: (a) that a knowledge economy exists, (b) that the knowledge economy promotes moral and philosophical “amnesia” (p. 57), (c) that scholars would recognize more fully the rules governing the production of knowledge if it weren’t for this “amnesia” caused by the knowledge economy, and (d) that there are sites from which a critical perspective on the knowledge economy might be established.

In the second half of the book Carrette deals with psychology of religion as a product of the knowledge economy. The work as a whole is “an attempt to end the political innocence of one field of inquiry” (p. 40). The result is a challenge that reaches beyond the psychology of religion, questioning the lines that divide the psychology of religion from other human sciences.

KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

The foundations of Carrette’s critique of psychology are what make his approach stand out. Although he cites Parker, Morss, Walkerdine, Henriques, and other familiar names in critical psychology, he goes beyond their work in order to show the knowledge economy in action, utilizing texts and thoughts that are considered to be on the margins of religion, economics, and psychology. As I see it, his selection of readings from across these disciplines makes available Carrette’s unique reading of the interdependence of the human sciences and shows that critiques from a variety of perspectives conspicuously lack treatment of the economic and political factors in knowledge production. Regardless of how Carrette selected his sources, what results is a rare exploration of categories that have been excluded from disciplinary questioning.
Carrette does not “work in” the views of various influential thinkers so much as he “works out” a critical position that he feels several unorthodox thinkers across different fields share: that there is “always a danger that a model of the cultural become the shorthand endorsement of the political reality” (p. 134, following Eagleton, 2003). To this Carrette adds, “The political domination of American corporate and military power also means that knowledge from within that economy requires a particular critical consciousness” (p. 134). Carrete builds his concept of the knowledge economy from the Foucauldian idea of mathesis, the preferred form of knowledge in late industrial cultures. He rejects Foucault’s hunch that such a servile positioning of language would have to give way to a fuller kind of knowing. He does so because he believes Foucault assumed governments to be the only forces strong enough to determine the validity of knowledge. However, as global finance and trade have captured the undivided attention of people all over the world, the “new mathesis” is calculated to suit its demands. The knowledge economy exerts power over governments and academic disciplines alike by governing what kinds of knowledge count (p. 38).

MORAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL DISCIPLINARY AMNESIA

The influence of Foucault’s work on Carrette can be seen in Carrette’s brilliant recapitulation of the historical development and divergence of psychology, economics, and religion as human sciences. Carrette argues that as disciplines “stabilize” (p. 39) the subject of their study, they artificially distinguish human scientific fields from one another, and thereby conceal “circular” reliance on one another. He writes, “The greatest veil of Western knowledge is to separate disciplinary knowledge as if it is self-contained” (p. 54). The knowledge economy produces “certified knowledge . . . institutionally legitimized knowledge through scientific peer review or other ritualized systems of verification” (p. 65).

Disciplinary separations and internally recurring debates work together to obscure the philosophical and moral implications of operational choices. Disciplinary debates and schisms make the discipline appear to have validity, due to the “seriousness” of the issues up for debate. The individual/social binary is Carrette’s best example. He uses this binary to demonstrate how perennial debates between disciplines make it easier to believe that these disciplines have validity as a discipline in and of themselves.

Carrette says that Bourdieu offers a helpful introduction to this line of thinking. Lamenting the commodification of everything, Bourdieu sarcastically reorders the noneconomic in economic terms. Everything has to find its meaning within a system of supply and demand, including networks of knowledge. Carrette extends the argument to say that knowledge, above all, is valued according to the possibilities that can be drawn from it based on contemporary economic terms.

In order to expose the reification of disciplinary boundaries in abeyance of political and economic ends, Carrette parses Adam Smith’s conception of the unity of religion, economics, and psychology; that is, he describes prosperity (economics) as possible when self-interest (psychology) is curbed by human passions (religion). Carrette is interested here in the Smith’s awareness of the interdependence of these three aspects of human life. William James, by contrast, chose only to talk about “individual” religious experience. He evokes religion as a private domain without economic significance. Carrette opposes Smith and James to point out a moment in the height of industrialism when it became advantageous to regard two fields as independent. Carrette’s
further point is that few, if any, have resisted this compartmentalization enough to ask how psychological models of religious experience serve market demands. This amnesia is indicative of the philosophical and moral implications of operationalizing dilemmatic issues such as the psychology of religion. Carrette contends that James’s move has been replicated a thousand times over, making it very common for a scholar to regard psychology, religion, and economics as being independent. However, for Carrette this is a mistake, for he feels that they are in fact very interdependent.

Carette investigates the effects on and contribution to this process from psychoanalysis. He recounts how American psychoanalysis construed its ego-subject in a way that fit with American stability and prosperity, producing “economic potential” while also influencing psychoanalytical religion. He notes several pastoral theologians who salivated over the dawning of individualistic psychology and others who saw in the disciplinary incest the subordination of religion to psychoanalysis. This is because, Carrette says, these approaches to the study of human life are so intertwined with each other and the politico-economic plane that real separation is impossible. Yet he is not as concerned about their relationship as he is concerned about the reification of their separateness. When psychology “dawns” it is a dangerous time because with this dawn comes a new regime aiming to sculpt knowledge to suit its desired ends.

SEARCHING FOR THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

Carrette’s search for the characteristics of this critical consciousness leads him to engage with texts by Adam Smith, William James, Freud, Lacan, Reich, Fromm, the Frankfurt School, early feminism, Augustine, Hayek, and others. Because Carrette consulted a diverse group of sources, his book, in some ways, lays a fresh foundation for critical psychology (or at least, as Naomi Goldberg states, “lays the groundwork for revitalizing his specific field”). Carrette exposes some “silenced” voices from the discipline of psychology, demonstrating how disciplines quiet criticism of their underpinnings by not engaging with particular texts. Best of all, Carrette uses the most incisive critic of a particular position to show how even those considered to be “radical” have failed to identify the full significance of the knowledge economy. For instance, Carrette claims that early British feminists were some of the first to illuminate how the academy serves to reinforce cultural norms, and support government and state interests. He argues that many scholars who have been marginalized for their work have been so because their analyses approach a criticism of the knowledge economy.

CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

In his book, Carrette uses italics to highlight what he identifies as his most poignant statements. One of these italicized sections suggests a remedy in relation to the individual-social binary: “If you can maintain a division between the individual and the social you can maintain a division between the discipline of the individual and the socio-political process” (p. 75). This, for Carrette, provides hope that the knowledge economy can be resisted, for it is through meaningful philosophical and moral critique of the knowledge economy that the binaries through which the knowledge economy operates (e.g., individual/social) can be challenged and exposed as false.
Carette suggests that critical psychology, which he says should act like “salt and light” for the human sciences, runs the risk of acting as a vehicle for opening up disciplinary niches (p. xiv). He cites Parker, who feels that critical psychology should “back up and punt” before it completely fails its mission to not become a disciplinary thing in pretend dialogue with other disciplines.

The final lifeline that Carrette offers for critical psychology is his idea of an “ethics of un-knowing.” He explains this idea by comparing it to the “known-unknowns” of economics. Economic models create knowledge through a hidden and incestuous individualistic psychology, however, the unknowns are actually known (though limited to a psychology of the individual). Carrette pleads for an ethics built on the unknown-unknowns. This commitment to un-knowing is ethical in the sense that it rejects the molds into which knowledge is poured in late modernity. Carrette argues that this un-knowing creates a revolutionary type of knowledge. Here we see that Carrette does not naively suggest the annihilation of disciplines and the safety of a disciplinary niche. In fact he predicts changes in disciplinary boundaries as transnational corporations and financial entities increasingly absorb the power that industrial nations held when the current disciplines were formed. He suggests that the interdisciplinary possibilities available today tell of coming disciplines. These changes will be the result of the “new mathesis” that assesses and assigns value to knowledge according to its usefulness in a global market. An ethics of un-knowing takes very seriously the philosophical and moral shavings “swept under the rug” as knowledge is milled to transnational market specs. It is an “ethics” because it casts light on and resists otherwise invisible and inexorable reordering of knowledge according to economic terms.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

The second half of Carrette’s book addresses the effects of the knowledge economy on the psychology of religion in particular. Building upon the issues just discussed, Carrette claims that discourse in the study of religion, psychology of religion, and even religious experience is in favor of an “order of the same” (p. 168), that is, an uncritical orientation toward the political and economic knowledge economy. He writes,

The objects of religion, economy, and politics may appear to belong to such different orders of truth as to make little sense to those operating in each domain. . . . The investments in certain models of cognitive science—financial, personal and professional—are too great to think otherwise for some, and the intellectual entrenchment is such that systems of thought become more important than open inquiry. Obsession, power, money, and institutional orders all prevent dynamic complexity in thinking and it becomes easier for totalitarian short-cuts in any analysis to be entrenched. (p. 169)

What makes Carrette’s work especially valuable today is its potential to serve as a mediator between economic, political, and/or institutional expediencies. The quote above links the specific critique of the fate of psychology of religion, which he claims has been colonized by economic and political interests, with the common fate of all social institutions, in which totalitarianism need not come “from the top” but may come from within operational models of the individual, the concept, or development.