Review Essay

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German Holism Revisited: Really?

Harrington, Anne, *Reenchanted Science: Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996. 312 pp. ISBN 0–691–02142–2

Anne Harrington, Professor of the History of Science at Harvard University, has written a so far very well-received book on the history of holism in Germany. The biographies of four men are at its center: Jakob von Uexküll, Constantin von Monakow, Max Wertheimer and Kurt Goldstein—although Christian von Ehrenfels, Wolfgang Köhler, Hans Driesch and others receive considerable treatment as well. It is not clear on which basis the four main characters were selected. To a good extent, the book parallels Mitchell G. Ash's *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture, 1890–1967* (1995).

Reenchanted Science belongs to the American 'Science Wars' framework, in which Harrington is a bridge-builder between the hard-nosed natural scientists and those theoreticians who seem to threaten the absolute truth-claim of the former. Commendable as this is, in order to locate the development of science in the social-political context of its time, one needs some working knowledge about this context. Harrington's knowledge of Nazi Germany, however, is but slight; that of the German Empire and World War I, slighter still and mainly based on 25-year-old textbook-style accounts, rehashing outdated clichés (see pp. 19–21, 24, 31, 58).

While one cannot expect original research on every subject in a book like this, there are by far too many secondary and even tertiary

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references; citations 'quoted in' abound. This is particularly problematic in the cases of Kant and Goethe, in whose work Harrington (correctly) locates the original concepts, or styles of thought, that are at the basis of much of German 'holist' thought, without ever referring directly to one of their works, not even to a translation (see pp. 282, 286; an exception is an illustration from a book not mentioned in the bibliography on p. 7).

Methodologically, there are equally serious problems. The narrative occasionally lapses into a kitchen-Hegelian notion of (linear) progress (see, e.g., p. 174) and into a crypto-Marxian view that 'being determines consciousness'. Monakow is said to be looking 'backward rather than forward', which is labeled reactionary (p. 76). Indeed, the book is very judgmental, and there is but scant attempt at actually understanding its protagonists.

In spite of repeated claims to the contrary (see p. xxiii), Harrington comes more down on the side of the 'lab-coats' and 'true scientists', of 'reductionism' and 'The Machine'. In fact, this is old-fashioned history of science, not really much disturbed by the developments after 1960, and Monakow's (p. 99) and Wertheimer's (pp. 133–134) approaches to 'truth' and to 'facts' are more sophisticated than Harrington's (see, e.g., pp. 208–209)—very surprising for someone of her standing. There is not even a hint at such key concepts as Hans-Georg Gadamer's refutation of the truth-claim of 'natural' science and its dependence of language in the now 39-year-old *Truth and Method* (1990, esp. pp. 455–457).

The chapter on Monakow (pp. 72–102) is perhaps the most intriguing, because comparatively little is known of this highly interesting scientist these days. Alas, neither he nor Uexküll enters the general narrative much after they have been dealt with in their own chapters—one thus gets the impression that the book originated in essays that were patched together.

And as far as Monakow is concerned, this is also the chapter which in regard to factual matters is perhaps the most problematic. It is, for example, very unlikely that Monakow, as Harrington implies, learned about John Hughlings Jackson's ideas of brain functioning by being exposed to 'Freudian thinking within the society in Zürich' (p. 81). Ernest Jones, a devoted biographer of Freud's, remembers attending one of the first meetings of the Freudian Society of Physicians in Zurich in November 1907,

> . . .when the famous neurologist C. von Monakow was present. I don't know what he made of it, but I fancied that after scaling the mountain he must

> have feared he had got to a witches' sabbath. He maintained, however, that he had been practicing psychoanalysis for twenty-five years, so that Freud had nothing new to teach him. (Jones, 1955, p. 39)

At the Winter Meeting of Swiss Psychiatrists held in November 1909, Auguste Forel and Carl Gustav Jung attacked Monakow because of his strong opposition to psychoanalysis. After the meeting, Jung, the 'crown prince', wrote jubilantly to Freud: 'Monakow & Co. lay on the floor totally isolated' (McGuire, 1974, p. 268).

It is equally doubtful that Freud's ideas of dissolution or regression of psychical functions directly influenced Monakow (pp. 238–239, n. 44). Parallels between Monakow's evolutionary impulses of degeneration and Freud's death instinct are likewise not very convincing. In his popular treatise *Études sur la nature humaine* (1903), Ilya (Élie) Metchnikov, who won the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1908, speculated that there might be a natural wish to die. The idea of the death instinct was introduced to psychoanalysis not by Freud, but by the Russian-Jewish scholar Sabina Spielrein, who studied and resided in Zurich (Kerr, 1993, p. 300). In general, neurological ideas of evolution and dissolution were derivative of the powerful evolutionary philosophy championed by Herbert Spencer, and it is almost impossible that they were unknown to Monakow.

As regards holism itself, Harrington concedes that 'holistic' scientists were concerned with finding alternatives to different theories they attempted to reproach, such as atomism and psycho-physical parallelism (p. xvii), but their uniting disposition, she says, was to challenge 'The Machine', both in society and in science. However, the book does not provide persuasive proof of this unity of holistic science. The best example is perhaps the vitalist Driesch, who attacked the Gestalt psychologists for their doctrine of 'physical Gestalts' (pp. 123–124). Although Driesch believed in the holistic nature of biological organisms, his solution of seeing 'wholeness' as a non-material 'added factor', the entelechy, is already not far from the reductionist agenda or some sort of *deus ex machina*. In any case, vitalism is not organically related to holism, although the belief in a living spirit may be helpful to accept holistic views.

It is also essential to distinguish methodological and metaphysical holism. This distinction between primary epistemology and scientific methodology has already proved its usefulness in the distinction between metaphysical and methodological behaviorism. Metaphysical behaviorism is a theory about the organism itself, and it argues that the essence of the organism is its behavior—the connection between stimuli and response. In its extreme form, it argues that there are no other things—such as perception, memory and consciousness—except behavior. The second form of behaviorism is the methodological one. It states that, although there may or may not be such things as cognition, images, dreams and other non-behavioral phenomena, in order to study these phenomena, the scientist has no other choice than to study the behavior of the organism, because that is the only means of communication between us scientists and the organisms we study.

Analogously, metaphysical holism states that there can be processes and phenomena which are, for those who implement them at least, unitary wholes, essentially non-analytical, and integral. At the same time, for a scientist, each of these holistic or unanalyzed phenomena is capable of being the object of the kind of careful and constructive analysis that allows us to come to understand the true nature of the phenomena being studied (Garner, 1981).

Gestalt psychology was initially, at least in its declarative part, a form of methodological or procedural holism. Wertheimer and his Berlin colleagues tried to demonstrate the existence of phenomena which are unanalyzable and not reducible to something more elementary. Only later, with the introduction of the idea of physical *Gestalten*, did they also make some metaphysical holistic commitments. This distinction, as well as other ones (such as that between 'true' holism and 'contextualism', the idea that everything is connected with everything and cannot be isolated from its 'context'), appears to escape Harrington's attention: Holism itself is for her a largely unanalyzed phenomenon.

But if we for a moment allow this lumping-together, is holism, or is Gestalt theory, potentially right-wing or not? Is Nazism a basically holist or mechanist ideology, or neither? This is the grand question of this book, and the answer it gives is: neither, or both. Harrington herself concedes this, although while reading the book, one occasionally gains the impression that she does feel that it is basically a right-wing approach which has also been adopted by some left-wing thinkers. It seems that conservative views (which are not the same as right-wing ones, anyway) imply at least leanings toward Nazism for Harrington, who appears to be unaware of her own bias: 'conservative' and 'bad' are synonyms for her.

Yet, as the book makes clear, 'the basic cultural trope that saw Wholeness locked in combat with the Machine would continue to be an algebraic system that could be used to good effect by both defenders and opponents of the new [Nazi] government' (p. 189). The Nazi movement indeed had both a romantic and a technocratic side (see pp. 210–211), and, as Harrington tells the story, within the Nazi party science policy set, there was a holistic wing and a mechanistic one, and the latter (for extra-scientific reasons) won the struggle for dominance (pp. 193–199). On the other side, Wertheimer and Goldstein were liberal German Jews who had to flee the Nazis, and the non-Jewish Köhler and Driesch can be counted among the very few scientists who showed considerable civil courage in resisting the Nazis.

Harrington does not seem to realize that holism, understood—in her sense—as a *Weltanschauung*, cannot by itself be 'good' or 'bad', and that it does not lead directly to the correct understanding of the world or, if regarding it unfavorably, to an obscure 'true' understanding because of political or other biases inherent in it. Perhaps a good illustration of this point is the controversy between Golgi and Ramón y Cajal, who shared the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1906. Golgi was an ardent defender of the holistic theory of the nervous system, according to which it anatomically forms one unbroken nerve net in which there are so many 'paths' that the same path will never be taken twice. As a consequence, he believed, there are no specific areas in the cortex and psychological functions are coordinated processes of the brain as a whole. Contrary to this, Cajal believed that all psychological functions can be localized and that not only cortical areas but even single cells have a specific function. These functions correspond to simple sensations or 'ideas' which are united into more complex ideas via associations. As nicely formulated by Køppe (1983):

> The irony in the relationship between Cajal and Golgi was that Cajal defended the correct neuroanatomical theory, but used unscientific [associationistic] psychology, while Golgi did the opposite: Golgi's neuronatomical theory was incorrect . . . but his psychology was right in principle. (p. 6)

But even if one concedes, for the sake of argument, that there is a ('bad') 'political accent of holism' (Harrington, p. xx), it would not be clear how much of it pertains to the specific ideology of National Socialism, or even fascism, and how much to totalitarian theory and practice in general. At this point Harrington loses a good, perhaps even an inevitable, opportunity to compare Nazi Germany with Communist Soviet Russia, because there was an immense similarity between these two systems in attempts to distinguish between 'right' and 'wrong' science (to say nothing about other similarities that totalitarianism theory implies, never mind possible qualitative differences).

At the same time as Erich Jaensch and Felix Krueger so warmly welcomed the Nazis' rise to power, two other distinguished psychologists of this century, Lev Vygotsky and Aleksander Luria, were enthusiastically building a new Marxist psychology which was perceived as part of the construction of a new society. In contrast to Jaensch, who assembled his psychological anthropology mainly from 'blood and race', the Marxists developed an environmentalist program: All attributes which are specific to humans are originally a form of interaction with other people and only afterwards become internal psychological functions.

But aside from emphasizing the social origins of all intimate psychological functions, Vygotsky always stressed the holistic nature of human mind, a notion he adopted directly from the works of Gestalt psychologists. And although this comparison may seem crude, the infamous Trofim Lyssenko was also promoting an environmental doctrine according to which even individual plants can during their lifetime acquire new features in response to environmental (e.g. climatic) changes and pass these on to future generation. Although environmentalism was a popular concept among both biologists and psychologists in the Soviet Union, it would be absurd to claim that Lamarckism in general is potentially a left-wing movement which inevitably leads to a totalitarian political system.

It is, unfortunately, not made clear when the book was finished. Judging from the contents, it seems that the manuscript was completed over half a decade ago. In this case, some blame must rest with Princeton University Press, which is indeed known for its occasionally overly long publication times. Moreover, there are too many mistakes in this book, especially in the German passages. (The title of the book from which Viktor von Weizsäcker's portrait is taken [p. 201] has not less than four spelling mistakes in it.)

More importantly, an early completion date would also explain why Harrington is so unknowledgable about one of the central theoretical issues of her book, namely the life–work connection of scholars and scientists who got entangled with Nazism, such as Heidegger, de Man and Lorenz, whom she mentions (p. 206), as well as Jaensch, Jung, von Stackelberg, Schmitt and Sombart, to name but a few others. (Something similar could be said about Communism, but in that case it is simply not so much of an issue.) Not only has this topic direct bearing on her question about the connection of science and social context, it has also been discussed at length, especially during the last half-decade.

And here, in spite of Derrida's point that if someone's ideas are misappropriated by the Nazis, there must be something to be misappropriated, Leo Strauss's famous dictum comes to mind: 'A view is not refuted by the fact that it happens to have been shared by Hitler' (Strauss, 1953, pp. 42–43). Hitler did not smoke: Is non-smoking therefore fascist? If there is really a direct road leading from Bayreuth to Auschwitz, to what extent does that exculpate the Nazis? Is there just a 'thin veneer of civilization' which makes 'normal' people in the context of Nazism *generally* act as they did? Is there a 'banality of evil'? These questions should at least be addressed—especially as the theories of three of the book's main protagonists bring them to fore—but they never are.

The question is really whether National Socialism, however defined, or any comparable ideology, is a consequence—however indirect—of someone's thought. If not, one should at least deal with the position expressed by George Stigler (1982):

> When we are told that we must study a man's life to understand what he really meant, we are being invited to abandon science. (p. 91)

and by Schumpeter (1954):

> I have no intention of neglecting any analytical work that has been done or is being done in 'totalitarian' countries, and the mere fact that such work is presented in the wrappings of a 'totalitarian' philosophy *or even intended to serve and to implement it* is no . . . reason for me to neglect it. (p. 1153)

But not only are these questions not addressed; conversely, life–work connections, and Nazi ties, are constructed and claimed in a most cavalier, often indirect, fashion. Altogether, there are a lot of hypothetical suppositions in the book, but in no context is this more problematic than this. An example is the claim that in 1937 Uexküll wanted to gain politically by an attempt to associate his ideas with Martin Heidegger's (p. 54). By that time, however, nothing was to be gained any more by that at all, as Heidegger had already fallen from Nazi grace, and connections with him were in fact detrimental to one's own advancement (see Gadamer, 1997, p. 458; Heidegger, 1990, pp. 33, 41–43; Safranski, 1994, pp. 372–376).

Harrington comes to full form in this vague kind of accusing when addressing the possible Nazi links of Weizsäcker, who is only indirectly connected to the main thesis of the book but who, apparently because of these links, gets a segment anyway (pp. 200–206). This is all the more amazing because her case against Weizsäcker is actually fairly strong and does not need this kind of 'informer's' tone at all.

However, the insinuation that a liberal, internationalist pacifist like Monakow just *might* have become a Nazi (p. 102)—he died before the dawn of the Third Reich—tops it all. It makes one wonder whether, with some effort, one could not also have found reasons to just maybe hint at the possibility of potential Nazi leanings in the thought of Janusz Korczak, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maximilian Kolbe.

The problem with this approach is, of course, that if one goes about and in a wholesale manner constructs Nazi ties, such as for all those critical of the Weimar Republic, one inflates the term and thus does not only an injustice to those who were actually opposed to Nazism but also relativizes the true guilt of the genuine Nazis. One also obscures the view of what actually happened, why it happened, and how it can be understood now.

In sum, *Reenchanted Science* addresses an important chapter in the history of culture and psychology, but the flaws in method and scholarship are so serious that it is to be hoped that this book will not become a standard reference. For that purpose, Ash (1995) is much better suited. If, however, Harrington's book stimulates a renewed interest in the German tradition of holism and Gestalt theory, as well as further discussion of the life–work connection, then it will have served a good purpose.

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Biographies

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