

## COMMENT ON JOHN SHOTTER'S PAPER

JERZY ZUBRZYCKI

The late call from the Academy to act as commentator for John Shotter's paper and my personal circumstances have forced me to offer my remarks in a summary form. I propose to speak to the following points during the afternoon session on Friday, 18 November.

### 1. GENERAL ASSESSMENT

The paper, written from the perspective of a social psychologist, is a welcome addition to the XI Session in which we explore the concepts of personhood that inform the various social sciences. Shotter's aim is to explore the concept of the person 'as it arises in a sea of living interactions' – a challenging task rooted primarily in the writings of the philosopher-linguist Ludwig Wittgenstein, the philosopher G.H. Mead and the psychologist and philosopher William James. Shotter also refers to the philosophical and theoretical writings of other scholars, especially Merleau-Ponty and H-G Godamer, whose thinking has informed his own substantial scholarship. (At this point I have to confess to my ignorance of these authors. JZ)

At the centre of Shotter's 'social-ecological' interest is an inquiry into the dynamics of inter-personal relationships in which people 'characterized by their possession of a particular set of properties' are immersed in spontaneous actions in response to the activities of other people. Initially he characterizes the essence of this activity or its 'point of condensation' as dialogical; the person involved in the dynamics of interaction with the other person.

Within the 'sea of living interaction' that people experience, the person is seen by Shotter as 'a prospective concept': standing as witness to the surrounding society the person is ready to respond to 'others and otherness' in adapting his or her behaviour. But the resulting mode of behaviour of actors involved in such an interaction is not just of a dialogical nature but

is, of necessity, chiasmic (from Greek *khiasmos* – crosswise arrangement. JZ), i.e. involving what Shotter calls ‘intertwined relations’. Initially people experience an impact on one another and then ‘begin to expressively respond to each other’. Thus the ‘living actions of others around us can enter into our actions [and consequently] enrich our abilities to relate ourselves to our circumstances in such a way as to help us to increase ... the *depth* of our relations to our surroundings’.

[A remarkable coincidence, as I am trying today to summarize what Shotter calls the *presence of depth* in our looking, is the newspaper report (Associated Press, London, October 14, 2005) of the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to the British playwright Harold Pinter. The agency gives the following summary of Pinter’s unique dramatic idiom ‘as it evolved gradually into an acute observation of social and linguistic tics, in which small talk, hesitations and disjointed conversational gambits served to express his characters’ inner turmoil and contradictions’.

Professor Shotter: is the above akin to your paradigms of ‘chiasmic relations’ and ‘witness-being’?]

## 2. SOME METHODOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS AND QUESTIONS

(i) Does the ‘prospective concept’ of the person leave out of account introspection and its theoretical point of reference? An early Wittgenstein quote: ‘inner processes stand in need of outer criteria’.

(ii) Shotter’s largely philosophical argument provides – as I read it – a heuristic point of reference to the person as an actor in society. But does it also serve as a point of departure for further investigations outside the narrowly conceived ‘points of condensation’? Do social structures and social processes influence the attitudes, beliefs, decisions, etc, of individuals (methodological holism) or are all such influences to be explained simply in terms of person-to-person interaction (methodological individualism)?

## 3. FROM INTER-PERSONAL RELATIONS TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF SOCIABILITY

The very mention of methodological holism changes the focus of this commentary. Instead of dealing with the self, the individual, the ‘prospective concept’ of the person, etc, we shift to such conceptual ‘wholes’ as social structure, social organization, society – indeed all types of collectivities characterized by notions such as the obligations of giving and receiv-

ing, reciprocity (e.g. Marcel Mauss in *The Gift*) and social bond. I addressed those ideas in the paper distributed at XI Session:

Sociology sees the human person as a beneficiary of the advantages and a victim of the disadvantages of membership of a collectivity. The simple truth is that we cannot live without society. Thus sociological analysis is a systematic attempt to understand the human person as a collective and not a biological entity. ... The human person's existence in a collective entity obliges him to use moral and rational judgements. Hence sociological analysis is also humanistic because it attempts to understand whatever the human person does in all categories that affect his humanity: his need for cognitive orientation, his capacity for rational judgement, for affectual attachment and moral decision.

The theorist who conceptualized the human person in all the dimensions of the individual's humanity was Georg Simmel when he wrote about sociation – an awkward translation of an equally awkward German compound noun *die Vergesellschaftung*.

Simmel asked about society and the human actor therein as Kant had asked about knowledge: how is it possible? Simmel's response focussed on the human actor: 'the individuals in their directly perceptible existence [become] the bearers of the process of sociation which one calls society'. Society is possible, according to Simmel, because of the presence of one key element that is present in all forms of interaction – the relations of sociability (*die Geselligkeit*). Such forms – these conscious and unconscious relationships of the social order – loyalty, friendship, love, gratitude, dependency, solidarity, power, but also grief and secrecy – are the constituent elements of social bond or 'sociation'. Thus in a negative response to Simmel's leading question, we could say that society would not be possible without sociability.

For the sake of acting as an *advocatus diaboli*, I wish to argue that Simmel's sociological conceptualization of the human person as an actor in all forms of sociability might provide a logical extension – or should I say framework? – within which we might analyze Shotter's idea of the person as a 'prospective concept' immersed in his or her diagonal and chiasmic relationships in 'a sea of living interactions'.