Introduction to Part 5: Possibilities of Existence—Making and Changing Subjectivities and (Ancient) Worlds

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1 Introduction

This Part contains three chapters: (12) 'How the Ancient World Learned to Sin'; (13) 'Anchoring Religious Innovation: the social psychology of deification in Athens 307 BCE'; and (14) 'Cyrus' Learning Curve: views of adolescent psychology in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*'. The three illuminate our understanding of the ancient world by taking us through very different time-scopes and textual ranges. Yet, despite these differences, they share a common concern with two central social-psychological concepts: those of *anchoring*, essential for the first two chapters, and *cognitive dissonance*; in addition, an interest in neuropsychological research becomes prominent in the third chapter. In this introduction I will highlight, first, how anchoring is predominantly employed as a *how* concept, both in these chapters and in social psychology in general, used with what we can call an *ambition of processual comprehension*. Then I will show how cognitive dissonance tends instead to be employed as a *why* process, or with the *ambition of explanation for prediction*. However, I will defend here the position that the concept of *cognitive dissonance* can also powerfully illuminate the psychosocial dimension when used for *processual comprehension* in tackling *how* processes. In what follows, I will briefly highlight some notable differences between the three chapters, while simultaneously substantiating this social-psychological argument.

In social-psychological research four different levels of analysis can be identified that are relevant to the (different) approaches of each chapter. According to Doise's (1982) classical formulation, the levels are those of (1) individual processes, (2) inter-individual relations/group processes, (3) inter-group processes and (4) societal/socio-cultural processes. Each of these levels—and their processes—can be independently addressed in psycho-social research. However, the ways in which the various levels interact can be—and often are—the main object of psycho-social interest. For a constructionist social-psychological approach, in fact, the interaction of processes at different levels is *the* object of interest (Jodelet 2012; Castro 2019a; Castro 2019b; Negura 2020; Rizzolli et al. 2019).

This connects directly to an expression used in the third chapter of this Part, that of 'looking both ways', with which Luuk Huitink and Eveline Crone highlight the need to take seriously both the 'biological basis of being young and the historically and socio-culturally specific conceptualization of what it means to be young' (p. 359). In the context of the 'levels of analysis' I am using here, the idea of looking 'both ways' implies looking both at individual processes *and* at processes happening in the relations which individuals maintain with each other and with socio-cultural institutions. Yet, and importantly, a constructionist approach also involves another conceptual step when (and indeed *for*) 'looking both ways': the step of assuming that these 'ways' are mutually constitutive. This entails assuming that individuals construct relations and relations construct individuals; that people devise certain shared meaning systems for making sense of the world and constructing certain collective institutions—and that these in turn enable certain potentialities of the individual, or certain subjectivities, and make others harder to maintain (Castro 2019b; Reicher 2004; Batel and Castro 2018). The result of this step is that the main analytical interest is shifted towards the processes happening in the interaction of the two 'ways' at several levels, and to the question of how these interactions construct the person in the situation. In this sense, social psychology is, in sum, about how meaning and action are constructed in the *interactions* amongst subjects (and thus subjectivities), relations, and institutions (Castro, 2019b). Let me now read each of the chapters with these premises.

Konstan's chapter develops the concept of *anchoring*: it shows how it was possible for early Christian values to find an anchor in the traditional Greek lexicon, which subsequently served in turn as a suitable host for new shifts in meaning, making (old) common words assume new meanings. For this, various texts from different periods—Christian texts, but also texts from classical Greece, the Roman empire, and early Christianity—are scrutinized in search of the changes in the meanings of certain words through extended time. Konstan pays particular attention to words such as Greek *hamartia* and Latin *peccatum*, which ceased to signify simply 'error' or 'fault' and acquired the loaded sense of 'sin' in early Christianity. He follows the alterations in the meanings of these terms in two major stages: first, in the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, where these words retained much of their classical Greek meaning; second, when the emergence of the ascetic and monastic forms of Christian practice changed their meaning. Both stages reveal the process of 'anchoring' at work, showing the multifarious ways in which 'relevant social groups connect what they perceive as new to what they feel is already familiar' (Sluiter 2017).

Furthermore, reaching across the centuries in search of how meanings are anchored, the chapter gives concrete examples of a fundamental psychosocial reality: how the way we make sense of the world and of ourselves is dependent upon both language and context, with context here referring both to the discursive proximal context in which words are employed and to the distal cultural context in which Discourses exist. Or another way of putting this: the chapter illustrates how meaning is dependent upon the interaction between what the literature calls small 'd' and big 'D', that is between 'D'iscourse' as the socio-cultural-historical embeddedness of (situated, concrete) 'd'iscourse' (Batel and Castro 2018). And the chapter also shows how new 'd'iscourses' and 'D'iscourses' are constructed and reconstructed from old ones, adopting pre-existent words, but linking them to different practices and/or institutions and/or meaning-systems and relations—and how in this way they acquire new meanings.

With respect to the levels of analysis, Konstan's chapter directly tackles the broadest one, the societal/socio-cultural level, and in a really wide sense, as it looks at the Roman empire while it is surprisingly fast becoming a Christian world, and then focuses on that Christian world. When we read the chapter, always present is an underlying sense that these analyses matter not just because they illustrate the big 'Discourses' of these cultures, but also because they offer a glimpse of the interactions happening between big D and small d, opening a window on processes involved in the mutual constitution of culture and person. In my view, this is because the chapter is implicitly propelled by questions such as the following: 'Can there be a sense of *sin* without the institutions and the worldviews that define a place for sin, making sin come into existence as a reality for the person?'. Through such implicit questions, the chapter invites us to stop for a moment—in order to wonder about the different everyday experiences of being a person at the different points in time and context it examines. It incites us to reach across time and seek to grasp, for instance, how the experience of being a person who risks being a 'sinner' or risks 'sinning' may be different from the experience of being a person who risks making an 'error'. Or, in other words, the chapter contributes to our understanding of how different cultural worlds and big 'Ds' create different possibilities for little 'ds'—and different possibilities for existing, as in Rilke's formulation of the unicorn ('They fed it no corn, only the possibility that it might exist').[1]

1 'Sie nährten es mit keinem Korn, / nur immer mit der Möglichkeit, es sei' (*Sonnets to Orpheus II* 4).

In the second chapter of this Part (13), by Thomas Martin, a few texts from a more narrowly demarcated period are investigated in order to contextualize and understand a specific time-bound and momentous collective decision: in 307 BCE, the democratic legislative assembly of the citizens of the city-state of Athens voted to deify Demetrius, a military commander from Macedonia, proclaiming him a 'saviour god'. That decision involved the need to make room—in their institutions, meaning systems, subjectivities and practices—for sharing their lives with a living god.

This chapter in my view tackles the intersection of the societal/socio-cultural level and the group level, since its focus is a (societal) decision taken by the (group of) citizens of Athens. The chapter shows how these citizens, facing a world where previous gods could be seen has having failed them, collectively agreed to make a new world—one where at least one god (Demetrius) had not failed them. They made that new world out of the materials offered by the old one, of course. This included, for instance, their views on what an Athenian god should and could do, or the examples of similar practices by their neighbours. And they fed this new world with a collectively held belief in the possibility that it might come to exist, thus bringing it into existence, like Rilke's unicorn. But belief was not enough, new practices and institutions also had to be constructed to accommodate the innovation, and they were anchored to old ones, as the chapter shows—for example, they associated a festival for Demetrius with the pre-existent festival in honour of Dionysus. In this way, by making a new world with new institutions, Athenians enabled new practices, new relations and new possibilities for being and subjectivities to emerge—which in turn created space for new possibilities to appear in the distant future. At least, that is how I read Martin's assertion that '[e]ventually, the process of communities learning to live with this perplexing kind of human/divine being while continuing the worship of traditional gods led to the institutionalization of what is now labelled 'ruler cult', in which deified human beings ruled as kings' (p. 347). In sum, in this second chapter about *how* Athenians accommodated the innovation of a human 'deity', the concept of anchoring is used for extending our comprehension of certain processes—how old meanings anchored new ones, old practices anchored new ones, old institutions anchored new ones, and also how meanings, practices and institutions created in that period became anchors for future ones.

Anchoring, therefore, is also central in this chapter and again comes about as a *how* process, one with the *ambition of processual comprehension*. In addition, cognitive dissonance is also central in this chapter. The concept is here mobilized to explain *why* the deification decision was taken, namely with the *ambition of explanation for prediction*. As Martin puts it: 'Cognitive dissonance

helps explain the psychological process that led to this new policy, in contrast to the explanation offered by some scholars that the decision to deify Demetrius was motivated by hypocrisy, with the voters simply wanting to flatter Demetrius for their own advantage without genuinely believing in his divinity' (p. 337).

The concept of cognitive dissonance is part of a theoretical tradition in social psychology that finds some of its roots in Festinger's and colleagues' study based on the method of *observant participation*, in which they integrated the meetings and daily life of a small collective organized around an *end of the world* prophecy (Festinger et al. 1956). In this study, the researchers were looking at how a group of people with a shared worldview comprising beliefs highly dissonant from those shared by basically everybody else in society was able to maintain their shared meaning-world even after one of its central components—the prophecy—was disconfirmed. And at how they were even capable of actively seeking to convert others after disconfirmation of the prophecy. They were thus studying a rather interesting phenomenon, one that in my view clearly warrants more research about the *interaction of the group and individual levels*. Instead, however, research on cognitive dissonance soon took a different direction: it turned to assuming an individual motivation for consistency in order to explain why people change ideas or behaviours. In Festinger's words in the presentation of his 1957 book: 'Cognitive dissonance can be seen as an antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction just as hunger leads to activity oriented toward hunger reduction'.[2] The comparison with hunger clearly sets the level of analysis that Festinger is considering here: an internal process manifesting at the individual level. Groups or societies do not feel hunger, only individuals do. Further definitions go in the same direction: 'If a person is induced to do or say something which is contrary to his [sic] private opinion, there will be a tendency for him to change his opinion so as to bring it into correspondence with what he has done or said' (Festinger and Carlsmith, 1959: 209). Again, it is clear that the focus is the individual. Moreover, a few years later it was hypothesized that self-concept and self-esteem were the individual structures relevant for dissonance—'if dissonance exists it is because the individual's behaviour is inconsistent with his self-concept' (Aronson 1968: 23). This further introjected the concept, establishing it as a phenomenon of people looking at themselves, a concept placed 'inside the head' of isolated individuals, not one distributed, in the expression used by Glaveanu (2014), *in-between* people, relations,

2 Festinger 1957: 3.

institutions and worldviews. However, explanations of 'inside the head' processes risk becoming 'thought-stoppers' when it comes to understanding meaning-making and relational processes. They frame change, action, and decision-making solely in terms of internal motivation (e.g., an uncomfortable state of dissonance), leaving no room for broader social or contextual influences—end of story.

Interestingly, Martin's chapter takes the concept of cognitive dissonance back to the group level where it originated. But then, when taken to a group level, explanations that assume a generic and similar distribution of mutually exclusive and 'inside the head' processes (like motivations for consistency) at once become less interesting. They even risk distracting us from the many interesting processes involved in *how* the individual level interacts with the group level (here the voting citizens in the assembly) to impact the whole society. Let me develop this point. If we take cognitive dissonance as a *why* process at the individual level and oriented towards *explanation for prediction*, we are led to imagine a whole assembly of Athenian citizens sitting there on the Pnyx, all more or less alike, following an internal motivation for consistency that predicts that they will vote for the deification. However, if we take cognitive dissonance as a *how* process we are led along a different path. In this case, moved by an *ambition of processual comprehension*, we imagine an assembly where fierce 'battles of ideas' (Moscovici and Markova 2000) and arguments took place between citizens with different ways of making sense of the predicament of the city and of the potential deification. And an assembly where battles of ideas occurred in the internal dialogues of individual participants, too, when they were attempting to make up their minds, or assessing if they should change them, or trying to make sense of their conflicting, contradictory, beliefs. In other words, we are led to imagine two types of psycho-social battles. On the one hand, relational, *out-in-the world* discursive battles of arguments between citizens. And on the other hand, *internal* battles involving ambivalence and the re-evaluation of meanings and feelings—in interaction with those they heard of others. Both battles could have involved not just cognitive dissonance *but also* 'cognitive polyphasia' (Moscovici 1976)—i.e., the capacity of individuals to mobilize a plurality of modes of reflection, types of knowledge and meaning-systems in different contexts, weighing different arguments and sometimes achieving their hybridization—even when they initially seemed contradictory (Jovchelovitch and Priego-Hernandez 2015; Caillaud et al. 2020; Mouro and Castro 2012).

When we focus on these *battles*, we see that there is analytical power in viewing cognitive dissonance as a *how* process. For when we do, we can locate two main types of *hows* in the internal and external debates on the Pnyx: one about content, another about process/format. Regarding content, we can

then wonder to what extent and how the idea of an inconsistency or a dissonance between what they expected and had received from the gods entered the debates, how arguments for and against deification were built (e.g., in which meaning categories, values and goals they were anchored), and how they sought legitimacy. Regarding format, we can wonder if the debates were polarized, with radically different and dichotomic and rigid arguments on each side, or whether argumentation instead sought common ground in values and meanings that were highly shared and useful in helping some individuals change their minds; we can ask ourselves how capable of fashioning hybrid solutions to diverging beliefs and positions the assembly was, and to what extent the different power capacities and social roles of the protagonists influenced the outcome. In sum, we can imagine the Pnyx as a space for deliberation and relation enabled by the Athenian democratic institutions—and wonder about the extent to which relation allowed deliberation to be a more or a less open-ended process.

From this perspective, we are led to an impossible longing, of course: a wish to get hold of recorded versions of the speeches made in the Athenian assembly by the voting citizens on the occasion of the decision that made Demetrius a god! We will never have them, alas. However, it seems to me—and to Thomas Martin—that even without them we can still be confident that battles there would have been. It is their contents and formats that are harder to imagine. Furthermore, how wonderful would it be, too, to also have records of any kind (diaries or letters, for example) of what the non-voting residents, slaves and women, told each other and the citizens on the same occasion: did they indeed concentrate on blaming the gods, on expressing the need to make a world without contradiction and unexpected results? Or did they perhaps blame the citizens and their war-related decisions and worldviews? Who knows? But knowing would be relevant, for as Martin states, '[t]he views of the adult male citizens who constituted the assembly were influenced by dialogue with the women in their lives, who were concerned with politics and public policy despite their not being allowed direct political participation.' In this context, these informal everyday conversations could indeed have illuminated the arguments used in internal and external 'battles' in the assembly. They could also illuminate the types of person, or subjectivities, that could cross a deified human being's path in the streets of Athens, and the emotions experienced in the encounter.

The third chapter in this Part (14), by Luuk Huitink and Eveline Crone, concentrates basically on only one text—Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus*. The chapter inspects Xenophon's text to investigate how a character (based on a real person)—Cyrus, later King Cyrus II (ca. 600–530 BCE), the founder of the first Persian Empire—is constructed. It studies in particular Xenophon's

account of Cyrus' prolonged stay at his grandfather Astyages' court between the ages of twelve and sixteen—the most detailed literary portrait by a classical Greek author of what we today would call an adolescent, as the authors indicate. The way I view it, this chapter concentrates on the intersection of the individual (Cyrus) and the societal levels (the two societies in which Cyrus grows up, as read from the perspective of a Greek).

Regarding this depiction of one individual, the authors are clear: 'To be sure, we should not assume that it was Xenophon's aim to paint a portrait of Cyrus which was in every respect "realistic". Rather, he singles out aspects of adolescent development, such as an acute sense of reciprocity and an emerging sense of autonomy, which he deems crucial for the sort of leader Cyrus will become' (pp. 371–372). In other words, the depiction of the individual is in interaction with the societal level, the level where the definitions of the societal characteristics desirable for a future king are available and constructed (and re-constructed). The norms and values that he should uphold and embody are constantly made clear by Xenophon, and this chapter, in turn, makes it very clear how Cyrus' maturing years are oriented towards producing a person responsive to these norms and values—through a host of relations, experiences, and forms of interpreting those experiences provided by those relations.

These processes, through which the malleable material that humans are is guided in a certain direction, are well illustrated where Cyrus is concerned. So well-illustrated that here, too, we are led to wonder about what we do not have. In other words, here, too, we are led by the *ambition for processual comprehension* to long for what more we could have learned about the interaction of individual processes and societal ones than we already did through Xenophon. What if he had also given us detailed descriptions of the servants in Astyages' court that were going through adolescence at the same time as Cyrus? If we had been given a picture of how future servants were guided towards the norms and values befitting *their* future roles at court, we would have had a comparative perspective for grasping how different subjectivities of the time were being shaped, and maybe also how they were resisting that shaping. If Xenophon had given us such comparative material, we could have learned a lot in terms of our processual comprehension of the interaction between individual processes and societal ones. No doubt the potentialities of adolescence were channelled differently for adolescent future servants and kings at Astyages' court. But how? We have to make do with the interaction of the individual and the societal on the level of the king only. The point of this interaction between the potentialities of the human and society, an interaction that makes the potential become actual, is clearly made by Huitink and Crone. They write: 'whereas modern psychologists investigate the extent to which, for

instance, varying degrees of self-control in children are predictive of future education levels, wealth and physical and mental health, the desired outcome of Xenophon's "Persian" education system is first and foremost the creation of an obedient citizen body and disciplined soldiers' (pp. 365–366). This is why I wonder what the servants in the same age group as Cyrus—who never come into the foreground in Xenophon's depictions—would have to teach us about the plasticity of the human mind immersed in culture.

In sum, in this introduction I have adopted a socio-psychology perspective that views social worlds as constructed from various types of *building blocks*—from meanings and meaning-making processes, from individuals and relations to practices and institutions, and especially from the *interactions* between these building blocks. I used this perspective to pleasantly perambulate through the ancient world as offered by these three chapters, and argued that they help illuminate how the social worlds we make, make us too, how we come to exist together through mutual constitution, and change together. Concomitantly, I defended the importance of developing comparative analysis guided by *how* concepts for advancing the *ambition of processual comprehension*. Taking us to the ancient social worlds to illustrate how anchoring works, how cognitive dissonance is expressed and may help understand momentous change, how the plasticity of the human mind is directed in different directions by culture, these three chapters offer invaluable insights about our building blocks and their interactions, advancing our comprehension ambitions.

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