

Article

# THE NEXT STEP FOR APCS: ORGANIZING SOCIAL ACTION TASK FORCES

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## Abstract

*Academic organizations, including APCS, run the risk of functioning as little more than sources of recognition for their members. APCS members need to beware of this narcissistic trap and take steps to assure that the knowledge we construct and disseminate contributes to the APCS mission of social change and transformation.*

## Keywords

social justice; social change; identity; recognition; academic organizations

*Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (2008) 13, 67–70.

doi:10.1057/palgrave.pcs.2100144

**A**cademic organizations often function primarily to provide support for their members' identities, or sense of self, rather than to facilitate the production and dissemination of knowledge or practices that enhance human flourishing or reduce suffering and injustice. Even an organization such as APCS, which trades in knowledge that has proven to be of great benefit to countless individuals and which aims to promote beneficial social change and transformation, can be diverted from its mission and the achievement of its full potential when its members content themselves with the identity support that its mere existence, structure, and activities provide for them.

The primary means by which such an organization supports its members' identities is by providing various sorts of recognition. Such recognition



comes in several forms, including the provision of venues (such as conferences and learned journals) for the presentation of members' research and the circulation of their identity-bearing discourse. These venues provide individuals with recognition for activities (papers, books, articles) and identity contents (master signifiers, scripts, systems of knowledge) that the larger world ignores, often justifiably, because the activities really do not make any difference in the lives of most people. Providing such opportunities to engage in and be recognized for inconsequential activities is precisely how strategies of containment operate: while we are engaged in inconsequential activities, we are not doing work that makes a difference and that desperately needs to be done.

The major reason much academic research – especially in the humanities – is inconsequential is that academic identities, defined and organized in terms of knowledge rather than human welfare, can be maintained whether or not their activities benefit others. These identities are enacted and recognition (interpersonal, structural, institutional, cultural) is received simply for producing more knowledge within the parameters constituting the discipline, whether or not this knowledge is substantial or trivial, and whether or not it provides any significant benefits for anyone. As a consequence, many scholars, in their pursuit of their academic research, are largely indifferent to other individuals and groups. They can get adequate identity-supporting recognition simply by presenting and publishing their papers, whether or not these papers have the slightest chance of helping just one of the 20,000 people who die from poverty every day or improving the life of just one of the billions of people who live their lives in misery and desperation.

The example of resource-consuming, inconsequential scholarship that is most evident to me is that of my own primary discipline, literary study, a field in which tens of thousands of scholars have expended millions of hours of labor, with no evidence that the articles and books of interpretation and analysis of literary works have made a significant contribution to human welfare. This is not a new revelation; the question, “Does the world really need another article [or book] on \_\_\_\_?” has been circulating through literature departments for decades. Like true fetishists, literary scholars know very well at some level that most of the knowledge they produce and collect is of no real benefit to anyone, yet they continue to act as though it is a crucial – even salvific – component of the human enterprise. The reason for this conviction is the identity support that producing, possessing, inhabiting, and exchanging such knowledge provides for them. One powerful way in which this knowledge supports the identities of its producers and possessors is through the recognition it brings them from others in the field who have based their own identities on this knowledge. This knowledge, like many other forms of cultural capital, is the paper currency that in this case possesses substantial exchange value while having very little use value – that is, contributing very little to human well being. As such, it serves the same function as more popular forms of knowledge, such as knowledge of sports statistics or of trivia

from the world of entertainment. While such a function is apparently innocuous and may provide a means of social interaction for members of the small, elite group in which it circulates, it nonetheless constitutes a significant problem insofar as it involves a large waste of human resources.

On the face of it, APCS would seem to be different, since our activity is focused on the production, dissemination, and application of psychoanalytic knowledge, which has proven to be of great benefit to a great many people. What we often fail to realize, however, is that while psychoanalytic knowledge may be necessary to the mission of APCS, it is not by itself sufficient to accomplish that mission, which – we need to remind ourselves – is to promote beneficial social change. The interpretations of literary and cultural texts, analyses of social phenomena, discussions of clinical strategies and techniques, and elaborations of psychoanalytic theories that populate our conference sessions and the pages of this journal may, though eagerly produced and avidly consumed by our members, do little or nothing to meet the crying needs of the world at large, while consuming resources – including our own time and intellectual efforts – that could be used in ways that would actually relieve some of the misery that surrounds us.

To accomplish the APCS mission of using psychoanalysis to promote social transformation, we need first to recognize the manner in which (and the degree to which) much of our current activity actually diverts us from this mission. Specifically, we need to realize that:

1. Not all psychoanalytic knowledge and understanding is useful for our purposes. What kinds of psychoanalytic theory, knowledge, and analyses are most valuable for promoting social change and transformation? The answer is: those that illuminate the psychological factors that motivate the various social behaviors that constitute, on the one hand, social problems (crime, violence, poverty, inequality, etc.) and on the other hand their solutions (e.g., support for greater economic equality and social justice). We need to realize that knowledge of esoteric theories, interpretations of literary texts, and analyses of clinical cases may not be of much use here. The knowledge and understanding we need is that of the psychological causes of social problems and of ways these causes can be removed or counteracted.
2. Even such knowledge and understanding is not in and of itself sufficient for achieving the purpose of APCS, which is to promote beneficial social change. We can produce all the psychoanalytic theory, cultural analysis, and clinical understanding in the world, but if this knowledge does not get translated into action, it is worthless – or worse, insofar as it functions as a means of containment, consuming time and resources that might be used to combat injustices or relieve other forms of human suffering.
3. In addition to identifying and acquiring the relevant psychoanalytic knowledge and understanding, we need to formulate strategies for translating this

knowledge and understanding into social action. How can this be done? How can we translate our psychoanalytic understanding of the psychological causes and potential remedies of social problems into social action that will help ameliorate these problems? This question entails a number of more specific questions:

- (a) What kinds of social problems might we address? Possibilities include war, crime, violence, poverty, inequality, capitalism, prejudice/discrimination, and religion.
- (b) What are the major venues for intervention? Educational institutions, traditional media, the Internet, government entities, businesses, and NGOs, are some obvious possibilities.
- (c) What types of intervention are feasible in each venue? To answer this question, we need to begin by identifying successful psychoanalytic work that is already being done, in activities such as educating, organizational consulting, peacemaking, and so on.
- (d) What organizational structures would be most effective for these social action groups?

Addressing these issues should be a top priority for APCS, and organizing social action task forces to do so is an important first step.

### **About the author**

Mark Bracher is Professor of English and Director of the Center for Literature and Psychoanalysis at Kent State University. He is the Founding Editor of *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*. His most recent book, *Radical Pedagogy: Identity, Generativity, and Social Transformation*, is the inaugural volume of the Palgrave Series on Education, Psychoanalysis, and Social Transformation, which he is codirecting with Jan Jagodzinski.