Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

SHLOMO GIORA SHOHAM, *Society and the Absurd: A Sociology of Conflictual Encounters*. Second revised and expanded edition. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2006; vi +239 p.

A sort of culmination of his theoretical ideas from some 90 books and 2000 articles, Shoham's *Society and the Absurd* proposes a theory of personality and deviance. Instead of a Durkheimian or Mertonian approach that characterizes "society" as anomic, *Society and the Absurd* focuses on the breakdown of value-involvement and interaction at the level of personality. The author proposes the term "accidia" to refer to an individual's cessation in value integration. This breakdown is always a dynamic and phenomenological disengagement.

For Shoham, the quest for congruity generated by dyadic and triadic interaction has been a transhistorical and transcultural feature of humans and their relations. The congruity principle makes humans a *Homo Conveniens* seeking harmony. Incongruity is paralyzing. "The absurd," for Shoham, which he borrows from Camus' play *The Misunderstanding*, refers to value disengagement stemming from the distance between people's understandings and the set of norms common in a sphere of practice, or failed attempts by people to achieve congruity.

The greatest source of failed attempts to satisfy the congruity principle originates in disjunction between what Shoham calls the "apperceptive configuration" (the self image) and the "transmission configuration" (norm sending processes). The self, organized by ego, tends to think of its own image as ontologically unique and the center of creation. Pulled and pushed by dualistic core personality vectors of participation and separation, the self is motivated to bridge normative disjuncture, but upon failing is confronted by the absurd. Shoham offers a typology of sixteen value breakdowns that vary by direction of involvement and type of involvement.

Here, Shoham has interesting points on "punitiveness," which in the English language is a word used narrowly to refer to intentional forms of punishment by social organizations. Shoham distinguishes between active and passive forms of punitiveness that are constitutive of individual personalities. For instance, passive impunitiveness leads to a condoning of self and Others that goes unexpressed. For active forms of punitiveness, intropunitiveness is aimed at the self and extrapunitive reaction at Others.

Shoham describes these various forms of punitiveness as predictors for inner and outer participation and separation.

Ego is an organizing factor only as an ego-alter dyad, and the Others recognized by ego can be any sort of person-objects. A key point in Shoham's theoretical constellation is that he finds attempts by ego to achieve congruity are simultaneous with ego's attempts to achieve deep encounters with person-objects. Yet these attempts to make encounters with person-objects are bound to fail since they conflict with one's sense of choice and ontological uniqueness.

Ego's internalized norms tend to give way to newer, incoming norms, but complete congruity can never be achieved. As Shoham puts it, "consequently, the initial disposition of ego towards his relevant Others is for conflict, strife and disjuncture, and not for dialogue" (132). The point he tries to make is that intersubjective meaning can never be conveyed effectively by direct means. Here we see how heavily influenced Shoham is by Camus, as well as Sartre's line from

No Exit: "Hell is other people." A common result, Shoham argues, is petrification: the stultification of the attributes of cognitive processes due to impossible intersubjectivity.

Shoham's book integrates classical philosophy, phenomenology and literary movements of the early and mid twentieth century. This book would be exciting for sociologists, social psychologists as well as theoretically-oriented criminologists interested in transdisciplinary theories of the human subject. Yet, some aspects of it are cause for concern.

Shoham does have important things to say about the instability of norm signifiers between the apperceptive and the transmission configurations. However, evincing the importation of some heavy Freudian baggage, Shoham assumes norms from childhood socialization have a stay-power status over and above so-called "new, incoming norms." The primacy of human adaptability and meaning-making capability is marred by this fixed nature of the Freudian categories of complex (i.e., Oedipus complex, Electra complex, Castration complex, etc.). Put otherwise, Shoham is too focused on barriers of communication and the desolateness of the human subject. The role of shared tacit knowledges of people in fully- and semi-familiar settings, for instance, is not explored. Such a detour in argumentation would have tempered Shoham's claims about the impossibility of intersubjectivity. It is possible to focus on the ambiguity of signifiers without concluding meaning is non-transferable.

Shoham also offers a strange position on emotions. He argues that the greatest correlation between normative knowledge and norm internalization is between emotions and moral-orientation. In order to make this postulate he must argue that emotions and cognitions are separate entities. Ego organizes these. Yet because congruity cannot be achieved, "the more emotionally involved ego is with alter, the more dependant he is

on him, and the more vulnerable to be petrified by alter" (217). Not only does this seem to preclude the possibility of moral-orientation, but it sets up a problematic dichotomy between emotions and cognitions, and also a problematic division in which ego is conceived as an emotionless self instead of emotions being immanent in ego and cognition.

There are other problems with Shoham's theory of personality. He does not sufficiently explore the role of biography, so his subject appears without personal history. He does not delve into the role of spatial situatedness on personality, so his subject seems to exist in an immaterial void. Related to both of these, Shoham veers close to biological essentialism in his comments on stimulus and response during communication in his chapter on the cognitions of dialogue. This is a problem in his overall conception of "norms" and "norm sending." Since Shoham never clearly defines what a norm is, the reader is left to assume it resembles the stimulus side of the stimulus-response model. Finally, the historical emergence of the category "personality" is not investigated, so the category is taken for granted. Connections between "personality" as a category and the power to intervene in the subject are explored over only a few pages on the labeling of mental illness.

Overall, a stimulating read.

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