

Postmodern challenges to the conservative anchoring of critical psychology

Mattes, Peter

Postprint / Postprint

Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Mattes, P. (1999). Postmodern challenges to the conservative anchoring of critical psychology. In W. Maiers, B. Bayer, B. Esgalhado, R. Jorna, & E. Schraube (Eds.), *Challenges to theoretical psychology : selected/ edited proceedings of the seventh biennial conference of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology, Berlin, 27 April - 2 May 1997* (pp. 434-440). North York: Captus Univ. Publ. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-13076>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Mattes, Peter (1999). Postmodern challenges to the conservative anchoring of critical psychology. In: Maiers, W. u.a. (Hg.). *Challenges to theoretical psychology*. North York: Captus. 434-440

Peter Mattes

Freie Universität Berlin / Germany Institut für Kritische Psychologie

Postmodern Challenges to the Conservative Anchoring of Critical Psychology

Summary

As an outcome of the West German students movement critical psychologies in German-speaking countries have developed as marxist critiques of society and science. Above all, Holzkamp used Marx' and Engels' doctrines of natural and societal progression as foundations of a unifying categorical and closed epistemological system. Part of a political movement, psychologists were forced to link with discourses originating in the late twenties and early thirties, then cut off by National Socialism and postwar ideologies in Germany and Austria. They were forced to make up for a lag. They were to reify Marx' ghosts . For a long time they ignored the experiences of left critics in other western cultures, especially France, where critiques had been differentiated in a post-marxist manner. Up to the late eighties, this critical-psychological ignorance happened even to feminism, poststructuralism and constructivism. With the breakdown of so-called 'real socialism' Critical psychology after all had lost the last social and communitarian foundations as a reference. It had left trends of historic progression and had become conservative in a paradox way. Finally, the defeat has opened actual chances of critique, potentially in fragmented postmodern discourses.

There has been something like a critical psychological movement since the early seventies when in some German-language regions, students, junior academics and some professors teamed up in the sphere of universities and research centres for psychology. Their objective was to draw up a radical critique of bourgeois psychology which also meant a critique of existing society (*Psychologie & Gesellschaftskritik*, 1977, p.1).

Although often subject to bitterly falling out the movement showed all the signs of a scientific and political community: They shared a basic paradigmatic consensus about the 'How', 'Why' and 'What for' of a critique of psychology and society. They built up structures which could be described in the terminology of traditional group dynamics (norms and leadership, in-group/out-group, differentiation of 'we' and 'the others'). They organised communications such as meetings and congresses (an estimated 3,000 participants gathered at the first congress 'Critical Psychology' in Marburg in 1976). They had standard publications and journals: the outstanding 'Forum Kritische Psychologie' and 'Psychologie & Gesellschaftskritik' have been published continuously for more than twenty years now. At least at one large university institute (the Psychological Institute of the Freie Universität Berlin) the diploma curriculum was centered on critical psychology.

This scenario is in the process of dissolving. In 1996 one of the associated journals ceased publication. It was the now late 'Psychologische LiteraturUmschau', a sort of critical-psychological review. Publishers and editors justified that step with a 'decline of sociocritical psychology" (*Psychologische LiteraturUmschau* 1996, p.3). This they diagnosed on symptoms such as "the to a large extent deconstructive self-image of feminist psychology" and "the transformation of the journal *Psychologie & Gesellschaftskritik* into a journal for postmodernism (op.cit.,p.3f.). Note, the concepts: 'deconstructionism'

and 'postmodernism' are negatively connotated. They have been declared as the new enemies and the new winners in alternative psychological discourses. According to this message of struggle and defeat, the somewhat tragic hero should be Critical Psychology: "The only one supposed to be resistant to the usually vehemently carried out postmodern update is Holzkampian Critical Psychology which is bound to its subject-scientific categorial system. In contrast psychology turned postmodern aims to deconstruct especially the realism of Critical Psychology. The reality of the real and globally existing capitalism and the individual lose their objective existence to a mere intersubjectively effective construction..." (Zygowski 1996, p.13).

Now, we may accept this diagnosis. In my view the selected quotations approximately describe the current state (not considering the disappointment, anger and aggression that are accompanying the text). But I disagree with the evaluating tendency of the authors' declaration. I would like to contrast an optimistic perspective: a perspective where deconstructionist and postmodern thinking is seen as a chance for revising some assumptions of Critical Psychology and for its repositioning in contemporary discourses. My proposal is to see it as it was expressed in a statement, that appeared at about the same time as the above mentioned in 'Psychologie und Gesellschaftskritik': "We do not intend to take the same line as the usual complaints related to the pessimistic view about civilisation, theories about alienation and a general critique of capitalism. ...Psychologie & Gesellschaftskritik wants to spare its readership a prolongation of this discourse and instead to open up a theme probably relevant to psychology in the future (which includes a critique of psychology as well). The new technologies could promote practices of discourse in which subjectivity constitutes itself in a different manner corresponding to technical modalities. The borders are going to blur. Critique ... not meant as a bringing back of the new to something previous - something supposed to be known - but as an attempt to let appear what is not definite yet. It is then that discontinuities of current discourses would come into play" (Psychologie & Gesellschaftskritik, 1996, p.3f).

My thesis is: The systematic conjunction of critical psychology and Marxist criticism represents a local and temporary characteristic which, despite being well grounded, has isolated German-language critical psychology against other powerful and potentially critical discourses. The Marxist psychology of the subject by Holzkamp with its outlines of grand interrelations can and should be deconstructed. Then it may prove its capacity to think in terms of actual topics as variety, dissent and parody. Postmodern discourses may give critical psychology an opportunity to overcome its crisis so that I will no longer be seen as in decline.

To discuss my thesis first, I would like to consider the circumstances of the coming about of critical psychology. It was in the Westgerman students movement that a need was articulated to make visible the conditions in which 'false life' emerged, conditions and prerequisites for radically changing these

conditions at their roots. It was embedded in the students revolt against what were seen to be repressive traditional ways of life and the political supremacy of imperialistic powers. After a rather unfortunate flirtation with the echoes of Critical Theory as well as with Marcuse's theory of 'false needs' the projects of the 1920s and 30s left-wing intellectuals were rediscovered which remained unfinished by the intervention of the Nazis. The consequence for psychologists was to again think through Max Horkheimer's dictum of psychology as an 'auxiliary science of history' (Horkheimer, 1968). For critical psychologists in the early seventies this was to mean: analysis of psychology as a 'bourgeois science', with options to turn it, marking its potentially progressive frictions (cf. Brückner, 1982, Rexilius, 1988). Encouraged by specific, institutionally favorable circumstances some of them proceeded by drawing up concepts of societal human beings in their natural and social history. This was the course adopted by Holzkamp and his fellow combatants in Berlin (cf. Tolman & Maiers, 1991). Despite many differences between Westgerman psychologists in their entirety a paradigmatic consent had emerged about a Marxist 'unity of social criticism and psychology'.

Critical Psychology's reference to the scientific and political writings of the pre-Nazi-era and the taking up of classical Marxist authors were due to the German history and represent a probably necessary movement to make up for lost time. Over the course of three decades, in West-German thinking, Marxism was prevented from emerging, it was excluded from proving its worth in a social and discursive manner. This made possible its idealistic recurrence, disregarding its respective specific contexts. I am tempted to say: a return of the repressed.

But again defence and exclusion occurred, this time carried out by the leftists themselves. The insights and experiences of intellectuals gathered by practicing Marxism in other countries within their political, cultural and scientific contexts in an often distressing way, were disregarded. Especially the changes in the thinking of Marxist sociologists and psychoanalysts following their forced emigration from middle Europe in the twenties and thirties were not considered, nor was structuralism and the development towards poststructuralism and deconstructionism in France in the late fifties. Most of the protagonists there had made their experiences with Marxist theoretical demands, political practices and revolutionary activities and had inscribed them onto their concepts.

Many intellectuals in the Seventies in West Germany, among them most critical psychologists, took note of this but not before the Marx-fixation wore off. By talking about Marx's disposals, Jacques Derrida (1995) points to the eerie traces of Marx, inscribed as such onto their history by intellectuals in France. The West German intellectuals could not gain such experiences from their past, later they reified Marx for a certain time. They constructed a totem.

Critical psychologists tend to claim material truth against any non-Marxist, sociological and philosophical contemporary diagnoses and against deconstructions of the societal subject. In most cases critique is posed

in an unfortunate familiar way: positioning oneself, fighting against a discursively constructed enemy, and so trying to strengthen one's own standpoint. In this attitude of persistence, in strange contrast to the impetus of change, what should emerge from critical theories? I dare to denote this attitude a left conservatism. Once it might have been valid on the grounds of a need to work through or develop theory. Today it closes itself to the zeitgeist and is at risk of being taken only as a master narrative of the past, held to avoid destabilisation in the intellectual conflicts of actually different critical discourses. Of course, it is a deplorable position that limits the ability to discuss and gives away the possibilities of a productive movement in discourse.

This attitude resulting from specific historical contexts, appears also in the key concepts of Critical Psychology. I will try to demonstrate this relating to one of Holzkamp's categories from his 'Grundlegung der Psychologie' (Holzkamp, 1983).

From about 1979 onwards Klaus Holzkamp conceived a psychology which was focussed on the subject. According to Holzkamp the subject grounds his or her actions corresponding to the opportunities provided by his or her immediate experienced world with its mostly fractured, 'wrong' references. This discourse of subjective grounds which can only be spoken of by the subject, is inescapable. In our society subjects tend to refer to and get entangled in a web of restrictions. They are practising varieties of self-suppression. The so-called 'subjective discourse', as Holzkamp puts it, reproduces the exclusion from the possibilities of control within the scope of the societal life process. A step-by-step re-establishment of that larger context throughout the contradictions and references of structures of meaning is possible by means of joined action. It also means eventually enlarging action potency up to a sharing in the control over societal preconditions of subjective actions. This basic assumption of Holzkamp's 'Critical science of the subject' intends to interrelate subjective actions with historical movements, including the possibilities of evolution and emancipation.

The question arises: Who leads the way? In psychological practice, be it as counselor, therapist, researcher, professor or author of treatises, it is with an omniscient attitude the Critical Psychologist himself who claims this knowledge, making him/her able to mark the contradictions in the nexus of meanings and potentially to overcome them in joined action. Simply speaking: he/she knows it better. The task of the Critical Psychologist is knowing. Knowing the interrelations of societal structure and individual existence beyond the immediate and restricted experience of subjective conditions, knowing the societal synthesis of the nexus of meaning. It is the option for a discourse of the grand contextual interrelations, of the knowledge of truth. It resembles a knowing-it-all-attitude.

It is especially these forms of discourse however that encourage exclusion and suppression. These potentials are also inscribed onto Holzkamp's Critical Psychology as a sharp paradox to its recognition of the principal justification of subjective grounds. Knowing the truth has to be, in German, 'verbindlich'

(binding, coercive). Here we find a strong opposition to any kind of the postmodern acceptance of epistemological and pragmatic contingencies. The standard argument against this, frequently repeated by Critical Psychologists is that knowledge should be committed, critique should be located in a rigorous rational system, as it is constructed in Holzkamp's categorical foundation of psychology [kategoriale Grundlegung der Psychologie] (Holzkamp, 1983). The Holzkampian critical psychology shows those features in a cognitive as well as in a practical sense. Cognitively it is a system of hermetic logical consistency, it is free of contradictions. It claims universality. It provides a fixed nomenclature, a category system which enables it to express the production and reproduction of society by societal mediated subjects. Practically, Holzkamp defines norms of scientific action which should shape the form of subjective actions in everyday life.

Holzkamp's concept of an acting subject, reaching his or her objectives by surmounting the restricting societal conditions of his or her action is strictly related to a categorically fixed system, in which the structures of society are seen as a logically and historically systematic totality. So, his Critical Psychology comes along as a closed epistemological system. It is founded upon the traditions of German scholarship and specifically upon the ideas of academic youth in 1968 in revolt, who claimed an interrupted discourse of a traditionally scientifically-constituted reason. This is what I call its conservative anchoring, 'conservative' in a literal sense: handing down and preserving a once socially and intellectually embedded position against the flow of discourse, context and time. By the way: Foucault in his posthumous published lecture 'What is critique?' (Foucault 1990) gives a hint that arguing like this has a specific German tradition: Striking the bad and oppressive through a better, generalized system of reason - a movement of discourse where the web of heteronomous power is kept lasting.

There are also other versions of German-language critical psychology. Let us mention just two of such variants: The reflexive social psychology founded by Keupp and the variant of critical psychology which is to be named by its journal *Psychologie & Gesellschaftskritik*. Reflexive social psychology (cf. Keupp, 1994) has developed out of experiences in community psychology. Criticising the therapeutic, clinical-psychological view for its standardisation of the disturbed as well as the healthy, reflexive social psychology opposed it with the professional strategies of communitarian empowerment. In several fieldworks but mostly by intensive discussions of scientific and extra-university practice these social and community psychologists had to meet with the variety and heterogeneity of forms of life in our cities. Several attempts to bring them into an order, be it in the manner of symbol-interactionist or Marxist socio-psychological systems, could not do justice to them. Since the middle of the eighties views of philosophical postmodernism have suggested themselves. First and foremost the thinking of the Polish/English social philosopher Zygmunt Bauman gained influence. With him, the impositions of fragmented situated life have been realised as inescapable in theory and practice. The narratives of the

proteic subject, unable to assure itself in the manifold change, have been taken as the hermeneutic condition of our times. Those critical psychologists have detached themselves from systemic thinking not through epistemological discussions but by following the experiences and reflections of their professional work. Although being a critique of science too their work finds its impulses primarily in a professionally mediated everyday-ness. In this way no general concepts emerge but it offers an understanding of the temporal, local and disjunctive. The authors of the journal 'Psychologie & Gesellschaftskritik' went on further and are now that much more diversified making it impossible to focus on one name except that of their journal. Since the beginning of its publication the editorial working method favoured an openness that avoided a commitment either to a political line or to a scientific school. Authors are requested to submit texts that are a critical reflection with their living and working conditions. Decisions about publishing are made at editorial conferences held by a heterogeneous committee. In the course of time a journal has developed whose main topics sensitively trace, accompany or actively influence the movements of intellectual discourses in and around psychology. In the beginning, the critique of academic and professional psychology were in the foreground, including the first reappraisals of the NS-past of German psychology. Left-wing debates followed around the living worlds of psycho-socially and financially disadvantaged people. In the middle of the eighties the theme of identity and subjectivity dominated. Later poststructuralism and Foucault's discourse analysis gained more and more influence. Finally Psychologie & Gesellschaftskritik opened up the discussion about postmodernism in German-language psychology. Criticism along this line understood itself as denunciation and deconstruction of heteronomous power. Utopian dreams developed here and there along the fractures of discourses but the reference to society as a fundamental relation was lost. A Marxist theory of society was no longer fitting as a unifying fundament. This did not take place programmatically, as a conscious abandonment, but followed the rather empirical discursive movements that authors and editors saw themselves brought into, often with much scepticism and insecurity. The critical impetus has been realised as a 'venture to bring into play fragments of current discourses, as an attempt to let appear what is not definite yet' (Psychologie & Gesellschaftskritik, 1996, p.4f). This is not a systematically bound or directed critique but a form of distrust of the discursively determined. In its best examples there is a 'de - subordination' [in German: Ent-Unterwerfung], described by Foucault (1990) as the core of critical attitude. In my view it is exactly here that we should look for the possibilities and prospects of critical psychologies.

Is Holzkamp's Critical Psychology out? I don't intend to argue into this direction. I think that even Holzkamp's categorical system bears within it deconstructive forces, namely in the category of the so-called 'restricted potency of action'. That category refers to subjects incapable of finding the viability of the systematically supposed grand social and historical interrelations. Perhaps their texts of life are manifestations of the local, the not systematic, the different and the paralogical options of the postmodern condition. There, I can imagine, also Holzkampian Critical Psychologists will be guided to traces and

ruptures of their categorical system. In the category of 'restricted potency of action' is subordinated the non-restricted - but not via generalization. Deconstructing the discourses bound to a prepositional systematic meaning, may show ways of undoing Holzkamp's categorical system and, perhaps, will give his Critical Psychology a chance to move into matters of current interest, led by fragmentation and multiplicity, namely la condition postmoderne (Lyotard). Let me finish by paraphrasing that option with a statement by Ludwig Wittgenstein in the 'Notions for a Philosophy of Psychology': "We judge an action according to its background within human life ...The background is the bustle of life. And our concept points to something within this bustle..." (Wittgenstein, 1980, 624f).

References

- Brückner, P. (1982). *Psychologie und Geschichte*. Berlin: Wagenbach.
- Derrida, J. (1995). *Marx' Gespenster*. Frankfurt/M: Fischer.
- Foucault, M. (1990). Qu'est-ce que la critique [critique et *Aufklärung*]. *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie*, LXXXIV. (German: (1992). *Was ist Kritik?* Berlin: Merve).
- Holzkamp, K. (1983). *Grundlegung der Psychologie*. Frankfurt/M: Campus. □ Horkheimer, M. (1968). *Geschichte und Psychologie* [1932]. In: *Kritische Theorie*. Frankfurt/M: Fischer. p. 15-30.
- Keupp, H. (ed) (1994). *Zugänge zum Subjekt. Perspektiven einer reflexiven Sozialpsychologie*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.
- Psychologie & Gesellschaftskritik* (1977), 1, vol. 1 *Psychologie & Gesellschaftskritik* (1996), 20, vol. 3 *Psychologische Literaturumschau* (1996), 6, vol. 2
- Rexilius, G. (ed) (1988). *Psychologie als Gesellschaftswissenschaft. Geschichte, Theorie und Praxis kritischer Psychologie*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Tolman, C.W. & Maier, W. (ed) (1991). *Critical Psychology. Contributions to an Historical Science of the Subject*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1980). *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*. vol. II. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Zygowski, H. (1996). Die Verwandlung der Zeitschrift 'Psychologie und Gesellschaftskritik' in ein 'Journal für Postmoderne'. *Psychologische Literaturumschau* 6, vol. 2, 13-14.