

MARXISM AND PSYCHOLOGY: A VIGNETTE

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There is so much to say about Marxism and psychology, and yet a discreet silence is required on this most unpalatable of topics. Ironically, part of the reason for a super-abundance of thoughts and ideas concerning Marxism and psychology, is because any discussion on this topic takes place in a context of almost complete silence with regard to these matters. Let me be blunt: there is no Marxist intellectual or political culture to talk of these days in South Africa, inside or outside of the universities. And given the shift to the centre and right in many spheres of our social, political and cultural life, many commentators would in any case applaud the “demise” of Marxism. Inside the universities the imperatives of contributing to social transformation (read neo-liberal reform), and the uncritical acceptance of globalisation prohibit any serious discussion of alternatives. Outside of the universities things are no better, even in arenas supposedly concerned with workers' rights and lives. For example, we have a Communist Party, which seems to regard Marxist critiques of the ANC's current anti-working class politics as a felony (cf the recently announced SACP “inquiry” of Dale McKinley's “misdemeanours”).

There are important arguments and reasons that could be offered for the silences, and in many cases downright repression, of Marxist thought, but that would require a separate paper on its own. In a substantive sense there isn't very much to say with regard to Marxism and psychology, as Marxism has been so absent from the theory and practice of Psychology. Psychology has insulated itself from social theory, in general, and in the particular case of Marxism, has been quite hostile to this “inappropriate” and “political” body of thought. Nevertheless, it would be a useful exercise to do an historical overview of “Marxism and psychology”, as a way of identifying what work has been done, and what ideas have been put forward. This clearly is a necessary task, especially if one wants to understand in what way(s) Marxism might contribute to a *critical* psychology. However, for the purposes of this paper I shall adopt a *theoretical* perspective, rather than an *historical* one, in addressing the question of: “What is critical in Critical Psychology?” So I shall make some suggestions, from the side of Marxism, that I think are worth considering as we try to elaborate the rubric *critical*, in Critical Psychology.

Being on the “critical list” these days seems to be another way of saying that one's work is (somewhat) influenced by Marxist thought. These associations with Marxism are not

necessarily affirmative as much critical theory is at pains to indicate its *distance*, or separateness from Marxism. The notion of "critical" denotes a theoretical link with the history of critical theory within the Marxist tradition. In much critical work these days there is a selective borrowing of concepts from critical theory, while at the same time engaging with non-Marxist thought (see for example, Morrow, 1994; Calhoun, 1996). The rationale for this "opening-up" of critical theory is at least two-fold. Firstly, social and material conditions have changed, and hence different notions are required to grasp the complexities of social life. Secondly, with Marxism's "discrediting" following the collapse of the totalitarian regimes of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the way is now open for different theories of the social.

Should critical psychology follow a similar route to that of critical social theory which has spread out from critical theory's origins in the Frankfurt School of the 1920s, and encompasses work as diverse as Giddens and Habermas on the one hand, and Baudrillard and Foucault on the other hand? A cursory glance at critical psychology shows that what it includes under the rubric "critical" is broader than that conceived by most critical social theory (see the edited collection **Critical psychology** by Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997). Furthermore, even in its Marxist and radical versions, critical psychology seems little influenced by the tradition of critical theory (see the edited collection **Psychology and society** by Parker and Spears, 1996). The challenge arising out of this state of affairs is that a critical psychology is still in the process of being formed. How does an emerging critical psychology understand what it means to be *critical*? Is critical to be understood in a Marxist sense, or in terms of the Frankfurt School's notion, or in the diverse range of meanings attributed to critical within current critical social theory? And what is the relationship between critical psychology and a Marxist psychology?

If we are serious about developing a critical psychology, then it seems to me that these are the types of questions that we need to address. Already there is a danger that critical psychology has become quite tame, or in the words of the announcement advertising the 6th Annual Qualitative Methods Conference ("QMC2K: What is critical in Critical Psychology?", 2000), "assimilated and domesticated into a broader and more stable articulation of the social order". There is a spectre haunting all domains of social thought, including critical psychology, and it is neo-liberalism. The subtlety and complexity with which current dominant modes of (political) thought are able to neutralise and seemingly incorporate critical ideas should not be underestimated. It is in this context that I would suggest that critical psychology needs to engage with and develop concepts that have the potential to transcend merely abstract or theoretical analysis, and point the way to practical and political engagement. The Marxist notion of *critique* has always contained this dual aspect of theoretical criticism and political engagement, and a critical psychology would at least be incomplete if it did not try to take on the injustices and inequities of the world that we find ourselves in. This would entail psychology being part of radical social movements, and / or becoming a radical social movement in the various spheres of its operation - sexuality, emotionality and HIV / AIDS; alienation and unemployment; social distress, psychopathology and homelessness; and many more. In keeping with the stated aims of this paper I shall not discuss the possibilities of the (political) practice of psychology, critical psychology, and social movements or activism, but rather I shall raise some important Marxist *concepts*

that would or might invigorate, radicalise, and hopefully politicise (in the practical sense of that word) critical psychology.

The three concepts that I want to discuss are: *dialectic*, *social totality*, and *experience*. The latter is not really a Marxist concept, but is made so by materialist commentary on the everyday contradictory lived-experience of our class lives. Clearly the notions of class and contradiction have been given very particular meaning by Marxism.

DIALECTICS.

The identification of Marxism as a system of theoretical critique hinges on the core methodological concept of dialectics (cf Ollman, 1993). In general dialectics refers to the fact that processes and relations are reciprocal, interwoven, and co-determining. Dialectics is a way (methodology) of looking at how things, ideas, and social relations are constituted, maintained, and changed. Dialectical thought is ruthlessly reflective, and self-reflective in its questioning of the conditions of possibility of its own categories. Dialectical thought is concerned with reversals, with contrary notions, with identity located in identity and non-identity, with being located in being, non-being and becoming, and with the fleeting affirmation of the negation of the negation. One of the more complex aspects of dialectical thought resides in an object's relation to the whole, or as Homer (1998:17) pertinently puts it: "Until a given object is situated in relation to the totality itself, it remains partial, fragmentary and incomplete. Herein lies the real difficulty of dialectical thinking and particularly of a dialectical style of writing, 'its holistic totalizing character'".

Precisely because dialectical thought is so difficult to grasp in its movement between the particular and the whole, there is a temptation to try and oversimplify the dialectic through *method* (rather than maintain its critical stature as *methodology*). Within Marxism this is evident in the dialectical materialism (diamat) of Stalinism, as well as in the crude reductionism of certain base and superstructure conceptions. Oversimplifications of the adventures of the dialectic also abound in non-Marxist social science, especially in the retreat to method, and sadly a lot of the promise of qualitative methods has succumbed to what might be called methodologism. The psychological realm seems to "scream out" for dialectical thought, and yet it is mostly absent in psychological writing, even within much of the new critical psychology.

SOCIAL TOTALITY.

A closely related concept to that of the dialectic is the controversial notion of totality, social totality. At this point it might be useful to point out a distinction between Marxism as ideas, system of thought, and the politics that have been carried out under, or in the name of Marxism. It has been noted that the " ... declining influence of Marxism within European radical and critical theory cannot be accounted for intrinsically ... in terms of the history of ideas, but must be seen in the context of politics and society at large." (Homer, 1998:5). This is not to suggest that Marxism bears no political responsibility. For instance, the collapse of the communist states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was not needed to tell us that there are some serious problems within Marxist theory. This is not to say that Eastern Europe and the USSR are incidental to a critique of Marxism. They tell us a great deal about the problems of Marxism, which we should heed, otherwise Marxism will become a less than useful theory of social life. The problem of "Marxism in power" points to a tendency of totalisation and determinism in its

theory and practice of social life. It is no good to say that there isn't really a problem here, as the problem is about Marxism-*Leninism* and not really about Marxism per se. We have to address the problems of the link between Marxism in power, Marxist governments, and the problems of totalitarianism. There *is* a tension in Marxist theory between its critical and explanatory capacity as a theory, and the bothersome tendency to theoretical totalisation and societal totalitarianism. A necessary vigilance with regard to the tendential problems of Marxist theory will begin to curtail the societal and political excesses committed in the name of a liberatory social theory.

While it is possible to admit that there are theoretical, and political problems with the notion of totality (in Marxism), it is nonsense to suggest, as many critics of Marxism do (and especially those from a postmodernist perspective), that the notion of totality (directly) gives rise to totalitarianism, and soviet-style societies. It is obvious to me at least that the *form* of this kind of critique of totality, never mind the content as well, is inherently ideological. It also fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between theory and practice, let alone *political* practice. The *will to totality* which Laclau (1990), and others, have laid at the feet of Marxism has had a number of negative effects, both theoretical and practical. The one effect of Marxism as a totalising theory of society has been to remove agency and subjectivity from any serious consideration of its critique of capitalism. The slippages inherent in human identities and subjectivity don't lend themselves to the closure implied in a totalising theory in search of *determinate objects* of analysis. A totalising, scientific, and structuralist Marxism only had place for human agency as the (passive) effect of social processes and relations. And this form of agency was mostly considered in its *collective* expression, rather than also incorporating its *individual* expression. So while Marxism has glossed agency / individuality at the expense of sociality, the social whole, the human sciences, and psychology in particular, have operated in the opposite direction.

This repression of the social whole, the social totality, in psychology, as well as the other human sciences for that matter, alerts us to the evasion and denial of moral considerations in much contemporary theoretical practice. The association of values with scientific practice is still anathema for many human science epistemologies. The notions of totality and representation take us unavoidably to the heart of the morality of current arrangements of social life, and our theories thereof. And while some social and psychological critics would be content to leave it at the level of a critique based on negative dialectics, they are less comfortable embracing the other strand of the Marxist hermeneutic, that is, the "positive or redemptive hermeneutic" (Homer, 1998:95). More simply put, Marxism is a theory of change, and a theory of the *politics* of societal transformation. Remembering Marx's famous comment that the philosophers had only *interpreted* the world in various ways, the point however, being to *change* our social world and lives, places an especial burden on us, morally, politically, and I would even add, aesthetically.

THE LIVED-EXPERIENCE OF EVERYDAY LIFE.

Marxist theory is correct to insist on the rather uncontroversial order of (material) determination as being the physical world, the natural world, the socio-economic world, the psychological world. To say that the material conditions of the natural world *precede* the production of works of art, is *not* to say that nature "causes" or determines culture. Acknowledging the material foundations of life, still leaves open the explanation of the

complexities of human life and social relations. Asserting the importance of human agency, is for Marxism a political decision, with implications at the level of epistemology and ontology. Equally, within psychological research and thought, the omission of thinking about the social totality within which the subjects that it studies live their lives, is also a political decision.

Marxism's characterisation of questions concerning human agency and individuality as inherently idealist, bourgeois, and individualist has had the consequence of rendering the theory of everyday life inadequate and incomplete. Psychological dimensions of people's lives are not intrinsically personalistic and insular! How could this be so? The personal and the private are social and historical constructs. We live our so-called "private lives" in *socially* circumscribed ways. The triumph of the cult of the self, the defence of personal choice, and the guarantee of privacy in the context of the interventions and intrusions of the state and the market under capitalism are a mockery of human freedom, not its celebration. A Marxism of everyday life is not achieved by surrendering questions and issues of human nature, human agency, and individuality to bourgeois thought. And psychology is (unquestioningly) bourgeois through and through, both in its historical origins, and in many of its substantive research efforts.

The psychology, or everyday-ness of social life seems to have been most neglected and absent in Marxism. Not only has the inherent structuralism of Marxism sidelined human agency, but an opportunity has been lost to account for the contradictions of social life in contemporary societies (capitalist or socialist). For example, what does it mean to live and work as a black man in Germany with neo-nazi and neo-fascist groups on the rise?; what does it mean to be a Ghanaian woman trying to eke out a living on the streets of Accra?; or a South African shackdweller wanting a decent house? Of course Marxism can tell us a lot about these different social circumstances, but we need to add to these an account of the meaning and experience of these people's lives, and the possibilities for social change and action.

The historical antagonism between Marxism and Psychology has contributed to the lack of an adequate account of everyday life and experience. The irony and tragedy of "Marxism and Psychology" is that they are both potentially theories of the ordinary, the everyday, and yet have remained aloof from the promise of their theoretical possibilities. Psychology as the study of the individual has surprisingly little to tell us about how individuals live their lives, and how individuals try to make sense of their lives in ever-stressful circumstances. This is not a call for a return to phenomenological psychology which tends to eschew theory in the hope of understanding human experience through the uncontaminated, extended descriptions of human lives. The recent resurgence of interest in biography is in part an attempt to capture the openness, the contradictions, and lived reality of human lives. The problem of course with the focus on biography is that the accounts can end up highly descriptive, eulogising (in their individualism), and atheoretical. The argument for a (materialist) psychology of everyday life is not to suggest that this is achieved simply through the detailed account of the uniqueness of particular individuals. The concrete materiality of individuals' lives must be sought in the situatedness of lived experience, as well as in the dialectical development of a theoretical language able to explain the contradictions of everyday lived-experience.

There have, however, been some attempts to develop a psychology less removed from everyday experience. For example, phenomenological psychology, the work of Harré et al (1985) on the psychology of action, and the unfortunately disappointing work of Billig et al (1988) which had the promise of penetrating the psychology of everyday life with the notion of "lived ideology" had it not got caught up in a rather facile polemic of caricaturing Marxism. All these accounts take people's experiences seriously, as do they people's *ability to reflect* on their lives. This does not mean that people's accounts or reflections of their lives equals knowledge, but rather that we cannot have knowledge of people's lives *without* their accounts. It is indeed a strange psychology that has a disdain for ordinary people's attempts at making sense of their lives. The raw material of a psychology of everyday life surely resides in the richness of our "expressions" of our lives. However, a theory of the psychology of everyday life requires the development of theoretical conceptualisations which take us further than merely people's accounts of their lives. As Fay (1998) suggests there needs to be an interpretive tension between the narratives of everyday life, and a theory or theories that try to makes sense of these narratives, stories, accounts of social life.

CONCLUSION.

One of the theoretical tasks facing Marxism in Psychology, is to make sense of people's everyday experience, and develop an *explanation* of what it means to live in particular social formations in specific historical conjunctures. In a different, but related, register, Lacan (1977) once asked: what should the writing of a psychoanalyst be like? In other words, how do we write about the unconscious? Similarly, what should a psychology of everyday life, that is sensitive to the questions of Marxism, consist of? What terms, language, discourse should constitute this project? The difficulty in answering this points both to psychology's, and Marxism's, *distance* from ordinary working and unemployed peoples' experiences. How do people speak about their lives? Why does human and social knowledge have an inherent distrust of the potential articulateness of the ordinary language of social life? This is not to suggest that what we say as people trying to live and make sense of our lives translates into a coherent theory of ordinary experience. Yet theory is not only developed through the alienation of common discourse. Thinking theoretically entails saying something beyond the descriptions that people give us about their lives; thinking theoretically entails attempting to explain some of the quandaries which people face about their lives; thinking theoretically entails an understanding of the nuances, interstices, and contradictions of lived-reality; thinking theoretically entails penetrating beyond the appearances, beyond just what is said, beyond the inconsistencies; and thinking theoretically, *as Marxists*, entails developing some responses to the conditions, emotional and material, of people's lives which undermine and oppress them. This it seems to me is some of what it might mean to bring a rapprochement between Marxism and Psychology, and to begin to give expression to a *critical* Psychology.

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