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978-0-521-03100-4 - Critical Psychology: Contributions to an Historical Science of the Subject

Edited by Charles W. Tolman and Wolfgang Maiers

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1 Critical Psychology: An Overview

Charles W. Tolman

To one degree or another a state of crisis has existed in psychology from the beginning of its existence as a separate scientific discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century. The result has been a fairly continuous flow of “crisis literature,” sometimes ebbing, sometimes flooding, but always there.

For reasons that are not hard to understand, the crisis has always been of such a nature as to reflect the *relevance* of psychological theory and/or practice. This is a consequence of the historical character of the discipline. No original formulation of the psychological object of investigation or of methodology can be expected to have been utterly correct and unproblematic. The problem remains the same today as in 1918 when R. S. Woodworth observed the “curious fact” about psychology, that “it is uncertain, or seems so, as to its proper line of study” (Woodworth, 1918: 20). It is certainly a sign of immaturity but, Woodworth maintained, is less serious than it at first appears. Such is the way sciences develop. Their history is one of ever more precisely identifying and approximating their “proper line of study,” including its appropriate methods.

Relevance comes into the picture as a criterion for recognizing that a “line of study” or its methods have ceased to move us ahead or are moving us in the wrong direction. It serves the same function as “satisfaction” in William James’s theory of truth. The ordinary correspondence theory of truth was abstract. It described only part of the picture if it did not inform us about how we recognize correspondence or its absence or why it ought to be important to us.

The experimental method was introduced into psychology by Fechner, Wundt, and others because the more traditional speculative methods of the philosophers were not yielding the reliable knowledge that was relevant to the felt intellectual and practical needs of the time. The behaviorist revolt was even more obviously focused on relevance. Knowledge of mental contents was, for Watson and his followers, simply not relevant to the practical needs “both for general social control and growth and for individual happiness”

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(Watson, 1924: 8). Gestalt psychology, too, came upon the scene as a protest against the stagnant and false “lines of study” associated with both “structuralism” and behaviorism. The focus of their attack was the irrelevance of the elemental analysis, whether it was of mental contents or of stimulus and response. These analyses did not, as they should, begin and end in the “world as we find it” (Köhler, 1947: 3).

The list of examples is a long and familiar one. The lesson to be extracted is clear: Psychology makes historical progress, that is, expands its command of relevant knowledge, through periodic protests aimed at some aspect of residual irrelevance in the mainstream “line of study” and its methods. These protests almost always begin outside the mainstream. Insofar as a fair and scientific spirit guides their reception, they become tested and, it is hoped, to the extent they actually put us back on course, become absorbed in time into the mainstream to become themselves the object of future protest and correction.

Of course, not every protest is “on track.” Many come to nothing for reasons that are clearer in the cooler aftermath than in the heat of debate. Those that do make an impact vary considerably in their profundity. Gestalt psychology eventually but effectively put an end to the more simplistic forms of associationism that had dominated psychological thought for at least two centuries. Behaviorism was quicker in putting an end to an exclusive emphasis on mental contents and introspective methods. The ecological theory of perception (Gibson, 1979) will take much longer time to supplant the traditional representational theories inherited from ancient Greece, but, if successful, its effects will be pervasive. Less profound, but successful, protests are harder to identify because they appear to belong to the everyday existence of science. Failures, the grander ones at least, are easier to identify. After a considerable flurry of radical claims, humanistic psychology has left little discernible impact on mainstream subject matter or methods in psychology.

Critical Psychology as Protest

The scientific activity that has become known in Europe as Critical Psychology began as a protest against mainstream “bourgeois” psychology. Its complaints originated in the ideological critique of a psychology that had aligned itself with one segment of the population against another (as exemplified in the well-known Hawthorne experiments). It emerged as the pro-scientific psychology branch of the critique, opposed to those who claimed that a scientific psychology could do nothing other than serve dominant interests and thus could never, in principle, be relevant to the interests of ordinary people. Those who were to become known as Critical Psychologists argued that although psychological knowledge and practice would always be tied to interests, these

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interests were not necessarily those of the ruling classes. It was possible, they maintained, to organize scientifically, theoretically, and politically a psychology that served the genuine interests of working people.

What makes the Critical Psychological protest different from those of behaviorism, Gestalt psychology, and most others that are familiar to us is its strongly political nature. Its protest was first and foremost a political one and might well have evaporated into the ether as far as organized psychology was concerned if this political protest had not been soon translated into one that was scientific, that is, theoretical and methodological. That the proponents of Critical Psychology did this, and successfully it appears, makes it historically unique in Western psychology, which has experienced many purely political protests, as well as the numerous and well known purely theoretical and methodological ones. It is the successful combination of these forms of protest that is new and interesting. I have called the combination successful for two reasons. First, it has succeeded in sustaining its political point in psychological discussions in West Germany and elsewhere in Europe. That is, its opponents have had difficulty rejecting its position out of hand as being “merely” political, so even those who have rejected the position have been forced to do so for other reasons. Second, and related to the first, it has succeeded in showing how the political concerns are translated into recognizable theoretical and methodological terms. Critics have found it difficult to avoid the recognition that even “purely” theoretical and methodological matters are in the last analysis also political (without implying any simple relativism at all).

Irrelevance and Indeterminacy in Bourgeois Psychology

In the theoretical and methodological debates of English-language psychologists the prevailing position against which protests are made is normally characterized as “mainstream.” The Critical Psychologists insist that although their target may very well be mainstream, the label tends to hide its political nature. During the protest-filled sixties the position was often politicized by calling it the “establishment.” Critical Psychologists would be sympathetic to this but would object that it does not go far enough. The mainstream is guided by the interests of the establishment, but the nature of the latter must be specified. In a capitalist society the establishment is capital. In Western “democracies” this is manifested in the nearly invariable sacrifice of individual freedoms for the freedom of capital. Consider the fish-processing plant on the coast that is to be closed because it is unprofitable. It is being shut down not because there are no more fish or because people no longer eat fish or because the workers in the plant no longer need work. No, the plant is closed because the capital that owns it has found a more profitable outlet, perhaps by moving

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its operations to the Third World, where labor is cheaper. Such a movement by capital is, of course, facilitated by provincial, federal, and international laws that are promulgated by people who are themselves capitalists or who have unimpeachable records as supporters of the interests of capital. Why do we have such strict laws regulating strikes by workers, when strikes by capital are openly and devoutly supported by our governments? There is no need here for a lesson in capitalist political economy. The point is simply to remind ourselves that the establishment is not simply those in power; it is specifically the power of capital.

Now if the establishment is the power of capital and the mainstreams of the social sciences are guided and influenced by it, then we are fully justified in distinguishing these mainstreams as bourgeois. There is ample evidence, again, of the bourgeois nature of social scientific theory and method. One particularly well-known study of this was the book *The Servants of Power* by Loren Baritz (1960). Baritz concluded his study with the following paragraph:

Over the years, through hundreds and hundreds of experiments, social scientists have come close to a true science of behavior. They are now beginning to learn how to control conduct. Put this power – genuine, stark, irrevocable power – into the hands of America’s managers, and the work that social scientists have done, and will do, assumes implications vaster and more fearful than anything previously hinted. (p. 210)

It must not be concluded that the problem is simply one of an essentially neutral social science being misused by unscrupulous individuals. The science, both theoretically and methodologically, is pervaded by the bourgeois attitude. It is not hard, for instance, to read the work of John B. Watson and be led to the conclusion that his whole scheme was from the start intended to respond to Veblen’s advice:

It is not a question of what ought to be done, but of what is the course laid out by business principles; the discretion rests with the business men, not with the moralists, and the business men’s discretion is bounded by the exigencies of business enterprise. (1904, quoted in Baritz, 1960: xiii)

It was, of course, the “exigencies of business enterprise” that demanded a view of the worker as a nonthinking, nonfeeling machine that could be selected and trained solely according to the interests of the employer. The same exigencies urged the definition of psychology’s mission as “prediction and control,” with engineering efficiency, which included the understanding of psychological subject matter in terms of independent and dependent variables.

The point should not be belabored. It will be dealt with again in the chapters that follow. When Critical Psychologists speak of bourgeois psychology, they are pointing to a very real phenomenon, one that practicing psychologists should be aware of. It is an insistence on the recognition of the societal embeddedness of social science, that is, that the “ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (Marx & Engels, 1846/1970a: 64). Without con-

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scious acknowledgment, and resistance where necessary, the priorities contained in these ideas will necessarily be blindly reproduced in the ideas of organized science, that is, in theory and method. Critical Psychologists insist, however, that psychology need not be bourgeois in this way; there is also a possibility of its being critical.

It should also be noted that “bourgeois” cannot be reduced to “mainstream” for the simple reason that many positions in social science and particularly in psychology have been clearly bourgeois but never mainstream. Abraham Maslow’s theory of self-actualization is but one example.

Critical Psychology’s insistence on using the category “bourgeois” implies a critical stance toward it. In adopting this critical stance, which is now not critical merely of particular ways of thinking about and doing psychology, but also of the societal arrangements in which psychology is practiced, Critical Psychology openly embraces a kind of partisanship (*Parteilichkeit*) that has traditionally been considered inappropriate in science. Science is a societal practice and has to do with societal existence; as such, it cannot be value-free. Its very existence presupposes its societal value. The point of Critical Psychology’s partisanship is to make its societal value as conscious as possible. This partisanship can be expressed in class terms: It takes the side of the working classes. But more immediately important, it takes the side of the individual human subject.

Why should partisanship for the individual human subject be necessary? This question brings us back to the topic of *relevance*. The problem is not so much that psychology has been irrelevant in any absolute sense. Even the mechanistic stimulus–response behaviorism of Watson was relevant to somebody’s interests, namely those of capital and its managers. This, the Critical Psychologists maintain, proves to be the case for all of Western psychology’s nomothetic psychology. A psychology that deals with averages in the hopes of achieving generality through abstraction can never become relevant to the particular individual. But this is precisely what happens with our insistence on the measurement and statistical treatment of independent and dependent variables. This is altogether more suited to capital’s need to manipulate the masses than to shedding light on the experience or problems of individuals.

But what about that aspect of our psychological practice that concerns itself specifically with the measurement of individual differences? We need only reflect on whose interests have been served by all the attention to IQ to see that the answer is no different here.

The conclusion of Critical Psychology is that while mainstream bourgeois psychology may well have accumulated genuine knowledge about human psychological functioning, the depth of this knowledge and its relevance to real human needs will remain seriously limited as long as the experiences of

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historically and societally situated concrete individuals are ignored. It has, in short, not taken the standpoint of the subject into account, even in its more idiographic forms. Bourgeois psychology has, on the whole, tended in fact to deny subjectivity in the interest of an ostensible objectivity. Critical Psychology is concerned, then, with identifying the reasons for these and related deficiencies and developing strategies for overcoming them.

The irrelevancy of bourgeois psychological knowledge is linked to another problem, one that forms the second prong of the Critical Psychological critique. This is the indeterminacy of psychological theory. The difficulty is that any number of apparently different theories may be held by different people at any one time about what is presumed to be the same subject matter, and there appears to be no way of resolving the differences. On the one hand, a large number of psychologists seem to have accepted this as a natural state of affairs. It is rationalized in terms of the presumptuousness of overarching theory. "The age of grand theory is past," they say. "It was never anything but vain hope." As an alternative, these psychologists assign virtue to "pluralism" and rail against the "dogmatism" of those who still seek to overcome it.

Critical Psychologists, on the other hand, maintain that if psychology is to become truly relevant to the existence of concrete individuals, indeterminacy must be overcome, not in any dogmatic way, such as by forcing compliance to a uniform doctrine, but by identifying its causes and principled solutions. In short, the attitude is that indeterminacy is not a natural state of affairs, but the product of a particular constellation of historically conditioned approaches to the subject matter and methods of psychology, approaches that, once again, can be identified as bourgeois.

The project of Critical Psychology is thus a radical one: It seeks to get at the roots of irrelevancy and indeterminacy and to discover the scientifically principled methodological and theoretical means for producing a reformed psychology that is both relevant and determinate. The extent of what they have in mind is reflected in their claim to be developing an entirely new *paradigm* for scientific psychology.

Critical Psychology's Levels of Analysis

The Critical Psychological project is carried out on a broad front, embracing specifically four levels of analysis: the philosophical, the societal-theoretical, and two levels of strictly psychological inquiry, the categorial and the special theoretical.

At the *philosophical level*, Critical Psychology is dialectical materialist. The choice is not an arbitrary one. Consider determinacy. At the very least a realist epistemology is required to resolve this problem. All subjective idealisms and

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relativisms are themselves thoroughly indeterminate and thus can only undermine systematic efforts to solve the problem. The objective forms of idealism (for example, Platonism, Thomism) are more promising but depend in the last instance on a dogmatic acceptance of their fundamental abstraction (the “good,” divine will, and so forth). They therefore merely provide means of putting off indeterminacy, not of resolving it in any scientifically acceptable way. Traditional empiricism or positivism, while nominally realist, is made problematic by its sensationism. If taken seriously and consistently it leads necessarily to skepticism (vide Hume) and/or phenomenalism (vide Mach), which are better seen as varying forms or manifestations of the problem, rather than as its solution.

Only materialisms have claimed to be consistently realist, which undoubtedly accounts for their having been the philosophies of scientific choice from the time of Bacon onward, but, here again, problems arise. Traditional materialism carries with it an enormous amount of metaphysical baggage, such as elementalism, associationism, identity of essence and appearance, and mechanical determinism, to name only a few of its problematic contents that may create more serious difficulties than the one its realism promises to solve.

Dialectical materialism retains the realist epistemology and dumps most of the troublesome metaphysical baggage. Its weak ontological position, which leaves the details of reality to discoveries by science, has led some to suggest that it should not be called materialism at all, but given a more neutral label less identified with its rigid ancestors. For better or for worse, however, it has become known as materialism, and any attempt to change that here and now would only create more confusion than already exists. Cornforth described the “teachings” of materialism as follows:

1. The world is by its very nature material; everything which exists comes into being on the basis of material causes, arises and develops in accordance with the laws of the motion of matter.
2. Matter is objective reality existing outside and independent of the mind; far from the mental existing in separation from the material, everything mental or spiritual is a product of material processes.
3. The world and its laws are knowable, and while much in the material world may not be known there is no unknowable sphere of reality which lies outside the material world. (Cornforth, 1975: 25, altered slightly but not substantively.)

An important aspect of dialectical materialist epistemology that is often overlooked in discussions like this is its rejection of the traditional indirect realist or representationalist theory of perception. The replacement theory is not a naive but a direct realism. Implicit in the writings of Marx and Engels, this theory was first articulated by Lenin (Goldstick, 1980) and anticipates, at least in broad outline, the version that is current in psychology, namely the

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ecological theory of perception (Gibson, 1979). The adoption of this theory by itself overcomes one important source of theoretical indeterminacy, the presumed lack of access to objects in themselves. Direct realism is a theory that specifically accounts for that access, rather than denying it outright. Furthermore, unlike naive realism, this theory does not imply a neglect of the specifically human capacity for meaning in perception. Rather, it attempts to give a more adequate account of meaning based on the direct access to or reflection of objects (for example, Leontyev, 1971: 180–185).

The dialectical side of dialectical materialism is also important. Dialectics is essentially a movement away from a static and toward a dynamic worldview, from an additive and accretive model of reality to one that is processual and developmental. Hegel's intent was to bring our thinking about the world into closer agreement with it. It is less a set of ontological assumptions about reality than a method for grasping it, as it were, on the run. The most important features of materialist dialectics were summarized by Lenin:

In the first place, in order really to know an object we must embrace, study, all its sides, all connections and "mediations." We shall never achieve this completely, but the demand for all-sidedness is a safeguard against mistakes and rigidity. Secondly, dialectical logic demands that we take an object in its development, its "self-movement" (as Hegel sometimes put it), in its changes. . . . Thirdly, the whole of human experience should enter the full "definition" of an object as a criterion of the truth and as a practical index of the object's connection with what man requires. Fourthly, dialectical logic teaches that "there is no abstract truth, truth is always concrete," as the late Plekhanov was fond of saying after Hegel. . . . (Quoted in Selsam and Martel, 1963: 116)

The bearing of this on the problems of indeterminacy and irrelevance will become clear in what follows. As we shall see, an important source of both is psychology's customary method of forming concepts (categories) through a static procedure of definition whose results can only be abstract. A dialectical approach to the matter, following a more developmental method yields concepts (categories) that are both more concrete, thus more relevant to individual cases, and more determinate.

At the *societal theoretical level*, Critical Psychology adopts the Marxist position of historical materialism. This, too, is not an arbitrary choice. Once dialectical materialism is adopted on such principles as I have tried to indicate and attention is turned to human phenomena, it follows that these phenomena must be viewed historically as the outcome of a material process of development. This means much more than simply taking history and society somehow into account. The phenomena of psychological interest must be seen as being inherently historical-societal. Some implications of this will be presented in later sections. Two implications of general importance can be mentioned, however, at this point.

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The first has to do with the way in which the subject of psychological functioning is viewed. Bourgeois mainstream psychology has tended to treat the subject abstractly, as “human being in general,” or even as “organism in general.” It has been understood as desirable to achieve the broadest possible generality of laws, and this has usually been achieved through abstraction. Watson’s laws of recency and frequency in the acquisition of habits, for example, or Thorndike’s “law of effect” were intended to apply to virtually all organisms at all times. They contain no recognition that important qualitative differences might attach to the subject’s being human as opposed to animal, working class as opposed to bourgeois, hunter-gatherer as opposed to factory worker, and so forth. One prominent expression of this focus on the abstract “organism in general” is found in the well-known 1956 paper by Skinner in which he displays three cumulative records in graph. They all look the same. He tells the reader that one was from a pigeon, one from a rat, and one from a monkey: “[W]hich is which? It doesn’t matter” (Skinner, 1956). Given his experimental conditions, humans produce identical curves; that also appears not to matter. Skinner here is virtually confessing that his theory is blind to differences that most of us would regard as very important. The end result is a psychological theory that pertains to the abstract organism. It cannot be expected to make much sense of the concrete individual human experience.

This abstract ahistorical-asocietal approach to psychology, which typifies mainstream bourgeois psychology, is linked by Critical Psychologists to its methodological concentration on “variables” (for which reason they speak of it as variable psychology). On the one hand, to treat every psychological problem as one of identifying variables and their relations is to commit oneself from the start to an abstract understanding of the subject matter. Beginning thus with an abstraction, the variable, it is little wonder that psychology has relevance problems. On the other hand, even those more “contextualist” theories that insist on the importance of culture treat it as a collection of variables that can, where necessary or just convenient, be held or rendered constant. The essentially historical and societal nature of psychological phenomena cannot be grasped in this way.

A second general implication of historical materialism is that a recognition of the historical and societal embeddedness, not just of the subject matter, but of scientific theory and practice, is a minimal requirement for overcoming the blind reproduction of dominant societal priorities. The earlier discussion of the use of the term *bourgeois* was one such result of taking historical materialism seriously.

The *categorical level* of analysis is the one that has recently occupied Critical Psychologists the most. Indeed, they often claim that their most important contributions to psychology in general have, until now, been at this level.

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Although as a result of this work they have provided psychology with a number of new and reworked categories (basic concepts), some of which we shall examine presently, it is most important that they have devised a new *method* for generating or forming categories. And the most important feature of this new method is that it provides means of verifying or falsifying categories, which have a status similar to that of theories. This is the basis for their solution to the problem of indeterminacy. The method follows from historical materialism. Most simply put, it derives from the maxim that a thing is best understood as to what it is by examining how it got that way. Thus the categories of the psychical (psychological phenomena) are best identified and defined by an examination of their phylogeny, history, and ontogeny. The method is called historical-empirical: “empirical” to emphasize its scientific (as opposed to speculative) nature; “historical” to distinguish its reconstructive character from the “actual-empirical” methods of ordinary scientific practice (observation, experimentation, measurement, and so forth). The method necessarily turns to other historical sciences for its material – anthropology, history, paleontology, ethology, and so on.

To appreciate this new approach to categories correctly, some results of which will be the focus of the next section of this chapter, we need to be reminded of where our traditional categories come from. These have mostly been taken over as labels from everyday language (learning, motivation, emotion, cognition, intelligence, and so forth) and then assigned definitions motivated largely by the need to arrive at some kind of working consensus among scientists. It is seldom clear where these definitions come from, frequently lending them a rather obvious arbitrariness. It is therefore common that many often incompatible definitions exist side by side in the discipline, leaving the newcomer with the task of choosing the one that seems to suit momentary needs. Operational definitions and construct validity provide fully institutionalized and sanctified examples of this procedure.

It should be noted that psychologists have been satisfied with categories derived in this manner because of the widespread belief – the heritage of our positivist and phenomenalist origins – that concepts like motivation cannot be specified in any other way. There appears to be no way of finally resolving just *what* motivation really is. The concept is taken as one of convenience only. Scientists who have agreed to agree that it is *x* cannot go “wrong,” because there is, in the last instance, no “right.” Such a view of things is, of course, plainly relativistic and leads necessarily to conceptual and theoretical indeterminacy in psychology.

Critical Psychologists do not maintain a priori that the categories of mainstream bourgeois psychology must, owing to their origin, be false. It is unquestionably the case that much of what we say about emotion, learning,