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978-0-521-64627-7 - Gestalt Psychology in German Culture, 1890-1967: Holism and the Quest for Objectivity

Mitchell G. Ash

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This is the first full-length historical study of Gestalt psychology – an attempt to advance holistic thought *within* natural science. Holistic thought is often portrayed as a woolly minded revolt against reason and modern science, but this is not necessarily so. On the basis of rigorous experimental research and scientific argument as well as on philosophical grounds, the Gestalt theorists Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka opposed conceptions of science and mind that equated knowledge of nature with its effective manipulation and control. Instead, they attempted to establish dynamic principles of inherent, objective order and meaning – in current language, principles of self-organization – in human perception and thinking, in human and animal behavior, and in the physical world. The impact of their work ranged from cognitive science and theoretical biology to film theory.

Based on exhaustive research in primary sources, including archival material cited here for the first time, this study illuminates the multiple social and intellectual contexts of Gestalt theory and analyzes the emergence, development, and reception of its conceptual foundations and research programs in Germany from 1890 to 1967. The book challenges stereotypical dichotomies between modern and antimodern, rational and irrational, democratic and proto-Nazi thinking that have long dominated the history of German science and culture. It also contributes to the debate on continuity and change in German science after 1933 with a new look at Wolfgang Köhler's effort to resist Nazism, at the work of Gestalt theorists who remained in Nazi Germany after the founders emigrated, and at the impact of the Cold War and the professionalization of psychology in Germany on the reception of Gestalt theory after 1945.

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Preface

Holistic thought is often portrayed as a woolly minded revolt against reason, an attempt to escape the constraints on both thought and action imposed by modern science. This book is a historical study of an attempt to advance holistic thought *within* natural science, one that emerged in Germany at a time supposedly dominated by a widespread revolt against scientific categories in intellectual life. In the second decade of this century, Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka created what they believed to be both a new approach in psychology and the germ of a scientific worldview, which they called “Gestalt theory.” By the 1920s they, their students, and their co-workers had applied this version of Gestalt principles in fields ranging from experimental psychology and theoretical biology to film theory. The influence of their work is still evident today, both inside and outside academic psychology.

Despite growing interest in holistic thought in recent years, there has been no historical monograph on the so-called Berlin school of Gestalt theory. Beyond filling that gap, the overall aim of the book is to illuminate for one important case the complex social and cultural relations of experimental psychology, and thus contribute to the ongoing debate in the history and philosophy of science on the role of society and culture in the development of scientific thought and research. The book also considers the work of students of the Berlin school who remained in Germany and attempted to continue Gestalt-theoretical research after the Nazi takeover of power, even though their teachers had emigrated to the United States. It thus examines the issue of continuity and change in one segment of German science in greatly altered political and social circumstances.¹

The term “Gestalt psychology” has had multiple referents. It has been used as a designation for research on the experience of form or wholes in general, and hence also for the work of psychologists and philosophers on these topics who were not part of the Berlin school. Contemporaries sometimes employed the term when speaking of two other groups, the Graz or Austrian school of Alexius Meinong

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and Christian von Ehrenfels, and the Leipzig school headed by Felix Krueger, who called his doctrine “holistic psychology” (*Ganzheitspsychologie*). Both approaches will be discussed here briefly; so will the work of Kurt Lewin and his students, who worked closely with Wertheimer and Köhler in Berlin, as well as that of Fritz Heider, Adhemar Gelb, and Kurt Goldstein, who were associated more loosely with the Berlin school. The center of this text is nonetheless the work of Wertheimer, Köhler, Koffka, and their students. It was they who coined the term “Gestalt theory” for their ideas, and to whom others initially assigned the term. More important, they drew the most far-reaching and radical conclusions from their work on the Gestalt problem.

The group is called the Berlin school for several reasons. Though Wertheimer received his degree elsewhere, all three of Gestalt theory’s founders as well as Kurt Lewin and Adhemar Gelb learned to be experimenting psychologists by studying with the philosopher and psychologist Carl Stumpf at the University of Berlin. Köhler succeeded his teacher Stumpf as professor of philosophy and director of the Psychological Institute in Berlin from 1923 to 1935; Wertheimer taught there from 1916 to 1929. Wertheimer first elaborated the basic propositions of Gestalt theory in Frankfurt between 1910 and 1914; he was a full professor there from 1929 until his dismissal in 1933. But it was during the time that he and Köhler were in Berlin together, in the 1920s, that Gestalt theory became a school in the ordinary sense of the word, achieved international prominence, and first intersected publicly with broader trends in German culture.

To grasp Gestalt theory’s aims, history, and significance in German culture, this book employs approaches taken from history and sociology of science, general intellectual history, history of philosophy, and history of psychology. I have tried to combine these varied styles of scholarship without letting any one of them dominate the book. Rather, the text is a theoretically informed but not theory-driven narrative. The parts of the book are divided roughly chronologically, whereas the discussions within each part are arranged thematically. This makes it possible to address individually a variety of specific issues – such as the development of Gestalt theory and research over time, or its interactions with changing cultural milieux – while still giving shape to the whole. A more practical problem of interdisciplinary writing is the use of technical terms. It has not been possible to avoid these completely. Many of the issues at stake were technical, and so was the language of the actors; one scholar’s jargon is another’s ordinary language. Technical terms are generally defined where they appear first in the text.

One consequence of limiting the book’s purview to Germany is that the opposition to behaviorism for which the Gestalt theorists were and are well known in North America is not central here. With the single exception of the German edition of Köhler’s *Gestalt Psychology*, which first appeared in the United States, that motif is largely absent from the Gestalt theorists’ German writings and those of their students until after 1945. Very few German psychologists took behavior-

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ism seriously until then in any case. Another consequence of the book's geographical focus is that there is no discussion of Gestalt therapy here. Gestalt therapy was founded in America in the 1950s, and had only tenuous connections with Gestalt theory.

This is a historian's, not a psychologist's, history. Psychologists may feel a certain tension brought about by a reluctance to weigh and measure the overall contribution of that theory by current standards. My aim, instead, is to place Gestalt theory in historical context – to discover how and why it developed as it did. In this respect I have learned from the Gestalt theorists themselves, who consistently argued that theories or other judgments about a state of affairs should be based on a thorough understanding of the structure of the situation at a given time. Nonetheless, it will be clear that I hold some of the criticisms that have been made of Gestalt theory to be cogent. It will also be clear that I think its creators asked important questions that still tug at the heart of psychological and philosophical thinking, and that they pursued their attempt to reconcile holism and science with brilliance, boldness, and engagement.

The first two of the book's four parts are condensed, considerably revised, and updated from my 1982 dissertation on the emergence of Gestalt theory. Parts III and IV, which treat the subsequent history of Gestalt theory in Weimar, Nazi, and postwar Germany, have been researched and written for this volume. Because this book has taken so long to prepare, I have incurred more than the usual number of debts. I can name here only some of those who have helped me along the way. Research and writing were supported by National Science Foundation grant SES 85-11230, as well as a summer fellowship, a developmental assignment, and a Faculty Scholar Award from the University of Iowa. The facilities, the delightful combination of solitude and interdisciplinary conversation, and the friendly professionalism of Jay Semel and Lorna Olson at the University of Iowa Center for Advanced Studies were indispensable. Mary Strottman and Rex Strottman helped with word processing and printing out the manuscript; a subvention from the office of the Vice President for Research of the University of Iowa helped to cover the costs of publishing it. Alex Holzman, Helen Wheeler, and Cynthia Benn of Cambridge University Press saw the book through the various stages of acquisition and production with extraordinary professionalism.

The staffs of the archives named in the list of unpublished sources at the end of the book all provided expert assistance. Special thanks also go to the staff at the City and University Library in Frankfurt am Main, to the staff of the Psychology Library at the Free University of Berlin, to Eckhardt Henning and his co-workers at the Library and Archive of the Max Planck Society in Berlin, and last but not least to the staffs of the Psychology Library and the Photo Service at the University of Iowa. Molly Harrower gave generously of her time and knowledge in discussions about Kurt Koffka. Michael Wertheimer allowed me to work with the papers of his father, Max Wertheimer, and helped in many other ways. Students of

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the Gestalt theorists, whose names appear in the list of unpublished sources, shared their memories with me.

Historians Fritz Ringer and Allan Megill, psychologists Kurt Danziger, David Leary, and Michael Wertheimer, and philosophers Evan Fales and Barry Smith read all or substantial portions of the manuscript. Berlin psychologists Ulfried Geuter, Siegfried Jaeger, Lothar Sprung, Helga Sprung, and Irmgard Staeuble have been discussion partners and friends. Carl-Friedrich Graumann and Wolf Lepenies helped put me in touch with historically interested psychologists and sociologists of science in Germany. My advisor and mentor, Donald Fleming, gave all manner of support to this project, and to me, long after it ceased to be a dissertation and I was no longer his student. These people, and others too numerous to name here, offered helpful suggestions and criticisms of many kinds, but responsibility for the text as it stands remains, of course, my own. Except where otherwise indicated, all translations from the German are also my own.

To Christiane Hartnack, my wife and most rigorous critic: thanks for patience, gentle but firm pressure, and loving support.

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