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Marxist Psychology: possible, desirable?

1.

Our symposium is putting the question, whether Marxist Psychology is possible or desirable.

To come straight to the point, I think, a Marxist approach to Psychology is not only possible and desirable, but even necessary - though depending on our understanding of it. It is necessary in the sense of the German word "not-wendig" - meaning something like overcoming need or emergency. Marxist Psychology, as Critical Psychology understands it, primarily focusses on suppression and its effects on people. This includes the exposure of the many ways of obscuring and justifying suppression as well as the disclosure of the suffering from it and the revealing of the various forms of resistance behind people's seemingly irrational behaviour.

Suppression always substantiates itself in suffering. Without suffering there is no suppression, and where allegedly no suppression exists, resistance becomes apparantly unfounded. Thus, all emancipatory approaches remain tied to traditional ideology and the ruling interests as long as they do not proceed from people's suffering from their suppression. The idea will, as Marx stated, only materialize, that is grow to an effective force, if it moves the masses, and it will move the masses only if it is radical; to be radical means, however, as Marx points

out, to proceed from people's problems instead of viewing them themselves as the problem which has to be kept under control.

II

Rethinking psychology on the basis of Marxist theory requires above all critical analysis and opposition to any naturalizing and normalizing of individuals' restrictions; this entails the disclosure of the scientific untenability and one-sidedness of traditional psychology. The one-sidedness of mainstream psychology results from its focus on the shaping and controlling of individuals and from its systematic disregard of the subjective meaning of being submitted to such shaping and controlling.

The narrow-mindedness of mainstream psychology is only conceivable from a more elaborated basis of knowledge, that is, by reconstructing the complexity of the problems and by voicing the other side which systematically has been overlooked, neglected, suppressed, dismissed, etc. in all traditional social science and especially in Psychology. Only if there is a notion of the "other" side, is its suppression and the suffering from it recognizable. Or the other way round: a proven instrument of "normalizing" suppressive conditions and with it of withdrawing them from any criticism consists in silencing any distress caused by them.

Much of the initial work of Critical Psychology, therefore, was engaged in defining and providing in large-scale functional-historical analyses the terms and concepts which allow us to

comprehend and describe the natural and societal dimensions of human existence not as opposed to each other but as an unity which yet can be torn apart under suppressive circumstances.

The specific characteristic of human beings, however, is, as Critical Psychology emphasizes as a consequence of its ethological researches, individual's ability and subjective necessity to consciously create and control the conditions of their lives - conditions by which they themselves are at the same time determined. Consciously acting means in this connection acting in correspondence with one's own needs and desires, which in turn increasingly are becoming differentiated and refined within this process of expanding possibilities to determine the circumstances of one's life.

In class-societies, however, the possibilities of consciously exerting such an influence are unequally distributed and systematically hampered by the fact that those who control the means for satisfying other's needs can force their will on them and at the same time - supported by the prevailing ideology - make this act of violence appear as an act of benevolence and support.

III.

The mechanisms of suppression work all the more efficiently, the less they are articulated or, even better, the less there exists a language at all to name and thus to objectify the "inappropriate" desires, making them this way incommunicable and inconceivable. One of those subjective realities kept veiled

under a general speechlessness, however, is individual's societability, that is their need to influence the conditions of their life in accordance with their desires and interests instead of only having to submit to circumstances determined by others. One of those instruments of concealing human societability among others is Freud's theory of human instincts and of individuals' natural asociality and irrationality. In proceeding from the individual's unconsciousness as the source of their irrationality Freud loses sight of the societal unconsciousness, that is, of the repression of all opposition to the prevailing "normality" and the established power structures as the origin of individuals' apparent irrationality.

Human beings, however, are not generally driven by their instincts or needs and merely geared towards getting rid of them, as Freud states. Rather it is the case that their desires only take on the appearance of instincts or of drives as a terrorizing force as long as they cannot be satisfied. Desires are generally a source of vitality and fulfillment when their satisfaction is beyond doubt, but they are a cause of individuals' humiliation and manipulability if others control the means for satisfying their needs. Dependence on the benevolence of others, however, turns desires into a hostile power, lurking in us and endangering our self-preservation from within. This situation is something Freud depicts as an inescapable human fate in naturalizing the prevailing power relations. Being deprived of the means of consciously influencing the conditions of their life turns people, as Marx puts it, into slaves of their instincts, blindly driven by them and generally unable to consider the consequences of their

actions, thus confirming the ideology of their irresponsibility and irrationality and of the necessity of control. People's apparent "instinctiveness" and irrationality, however, is not at all human but, on the contrary, proof of the inhumanity of societal conditions which is reflected in the lack of influence people have on the circumstances of their lives and thus over themselves.

IV.

Individuals' societability and with it its suppression also remains effectively withdrawn from view by the widespread dualism of individual and society according to which the societal conditions appear as an unquestionable frame-work within which individuals have to demonstrate their usefulness and their conformity to the norm. This dualism again is inevitably connected with the ideology of an asocial human nature and the consequent necessity of imposing civilization on people; it embodies a range of further dualisms, above all the dichotomy of rationality and irrationality with its implicit message that it is sensible to do what is demanded and irrational to risk one's own acceptance by deviating from the prevailing expectations. The derogation of all "deviant" tendencies appears ~~usually~~ all the more justified since suppression usually brings about just the effects on people it allegedly tries to prevent or, at least, to keep under control.

As suppression generally is justified by its effects on people's behaviour, any psychology with emancipatory pretensions will have to turn back the common reversal of the causes and

consequences of suppression. This includes besides questioning "normal" thinking also the task of making visible the rationality of individuals' apparent senseless behaviour. This, however, is only possible if one reveals the resistance behind people's seemingly unfounded actions, that is, if one succeeds in exposing the real background of individuals' conduct systematically kept veiled not only in everyday thinking and politics but also in established sciences. If, however, the discontent with the conceded life conditions cannot be directly voiced, it usually is expressed in a way which turns back against the dissenting individuals and puts them in the wrong.

Instead, for example, of justifying suppression by insinuating an asocial human nature the table have to be turned, that is, it has to be shown that the asociality is imposed on people who are, at the same time, blamed for it. This double-bind-situation is not only an unintended spin-off of general suppression, but also a most effective means of individuals' subjugation: According to Freud individuals' aggressions against suppressive structures paradoxically ensure their loyalty - as long these obstructive tendencies are successfully turned back on them. This consolidation of loyalty, in turn, is achieved by transforming aggressions into feelings of guilt because of one's own inability to live up to the expectations of those one is dependent on. The awareness of one's personal "deficits" generally heightens people's concern for their acceptability and widely purges them of every rebelliousness and inclination to criticism in order to avoid being themselves criticized and deprived of their privileges over others. At the same time, many ways are offered by the prevailing ideology and Psychology

project aggressions on to the next weaker ones and thus to become an active part of the suppressive structures.

v.

A critical psychology, if it takes on the task of exposing the effects and mechanisms of suppression seriously, has to go beyond traditional thinking also in so far as it does not view subjects as passive objects of societal shaping or scientific research; it has, instead, to be engaged, as Klaus Holzkamp points out, in the development of a social science from the standpoint of the subjects. This entails a radical change not only of views but also of sides: Instead of "civilizing" people, that is of forcing the prevailing norms on them and instead of perfecting the silencing of "inappropriate" desires and claims, there is the need to voice the manifold restraints and curtailments of persons' desires and interests exceeding the permitted limits. Thus, questioning the one-sidedness of traditional thinking is much more than just adding a missing part to a puzzle. It necessarily involves re-revolutionizing "normal" thinking, that is, it requires the de-naturalization and de-normalization of any suppression by unveiling the particular interests behind it.

Taking the standpoint of the subjects does, therefore, neither imply, as many suspect, the "spontaneous" tendency to put one's own interests above all others, nor a subjectivism with arbitrariness and irresponsibility of individual behaviour; it rather reveals the fact of the "normal" siding with the prevailing interests and of the costs involved: namely the

who are threatening to curtail my share of the available resources will automatically be perceived as a danger. The realization of the perspective of overcoming suppression, however, always includes the recognition of my own dependency of others in achieving this aim. Under such preconditions I will perceive ~~others~~ ^{them} not as a threat to my privileges within a conceded area of personal autonomy, but as an indispensable part in expanding the possibilities I have of influencing the conditions of my life and, therefore, as an important part of my subjectivity, too.

Subjectivity in Critical Psychology, thus, does not refer to a more or less solipsistic internal state of identity but manifests itself in its access to the world which both presupposes and intensifies interrelations with others. Whether I take the one or the other stand does not depend on my personal strength, but on many factors, not at least on the degree to which psychology as a scientific discipline discusses or conceals such alternatives and their subjective meaning.

In the view of Critical Psychology, therefore, the problem to be explored is not as much the incomprehensibility and unaccountability of peoples behaviour but rather the widespread tendency to protect oneself from such an understanding by irrationalizing the other's conduct as soon as it does not meet the prevailing expectations or one's own possibilities to cope with it.

Any irrationalizing of others' conduct, however, means breaking off the relations to them, that is, to exclude them from the

range of one's own responsibility.

The systematic de-realisation of emotions in severing their relatedness to reality, was for example, as Peter Stearns depicts, an essential technique in the "anger-control"-strategies of the human-relation-movement, where workers were allowed to vent their anger as long as its actual causes remained undiscussed. The message was: Working conditions themselves do not generate anger, but rather serve as a target for emotion from other sources, particularly from domestic situations and an unhappy childhood. The "anger-control" has moved nowadays, as Stearns points out, from the workers to the managers and their "sensitivity training" to avoid conflicts by keeping friendly in the face of the expressed anger of the others.

The notion of intersubjective responsibility as part of individuals' subjectivity seems reminiscent of Zygmunt Bauman's notion of a socially grounded moral. Bauman, however, reduces responsibility to an immediate social neighbourhood and to a caring for persons closely connected to it. Such a restricted notion of human sociability reduces morality yet again to a dualism, this time the question of altruism versus egotism confirming the prevailing ideology according to which the potentialities of one person presupposes the impairment of the other. It also ignores social constraints within a close group where relations are frequently poisoned by the threat of exclusion if one goes beyond the set limits of "tolerance".

In contrast to Bauman, Critical Psychology stresses the fact that responsibility for others presupposes the realisation of

human
~~individuals'~~ sociability. This implies the insight that people can act responsibly toward others only if they have the necessary power and influence to overcome the expressed problems and their preconditions. This dilemma, for example, emerged quite clearly in our investigations of the living- and working-conditions in refugee-camps, where social workers' sympathy with the refugees fades either totally or reduces to merely compensation and a moral alibi for leaving their clientele in the lurch if they, that is the social workers, view the officially imposed restrictions on their possibilities to help as unchangeable and hence to be accepted. And if the clientele is not satisfied with the mere demonstration of good will and compassion but actually expects something to be done, sympathy ususally ceases altogether and is replaced by indignation at the lack of gratitude shown. Powerlessness, thus, serves also as a pretext for accepting untenable circumstances; this defense mechanism is generally given a positive association by making powerlessness appear as a virtue and proof of innocence. Powerlessness, however, has, as easily can be shown, not at all a positive but rather a desensibilizing and corrupting effect on individuals' behaviour. The assertion of one's innocence has, as research about fascism has shown, rather a self-soothing function and enables the continuation of actions which social consequences otherwise would make me aware of the need for change.

VI.

An important element in silencing people's experience of suppression is, furthermore, the fact, that ~~individuals~~^{we} are not

only exposed to it but always actively participating in the disciplining, controlling and discouraging of others. This experience, however, usually remains excluded from view not only in psychological theory which tends to eliminate the issue of societal suppression totally from discussion, but also in practice where one can hardly avoid noticing it: Complaints about suppression are here usually reduced to a personalisation of my own constraints, combined with a denial of one's own involvement in the restriction of others. Thus, corresponding reproaches are usually rejected as groundless and merely offensive. Such warding off of others complaints about my suppressive behaviour, however, is not primarily of a psychological nature, but more or less directly imposed by all sides. From "above", admitting one's own involvement in the disciplining and controlling of other's - and thus exposing the suppressive character of the measures one has to carry out - is generally viewed as a proof of disloyalty or, at least, as a lack of personal capability and authority to push through the necessary measures, and it always carries with it the risk of being replaced by less scrupulous colleagues. From "below" or from the standpoint of those who are submitted to such measures, the admission of their suppressive character and of one's own involvement in them is usually seen as a confession of personal guilt; it is linked with the expectation of making a stand against the suppressive arrangements and directives instead of merely coping with them at the costs of others. The lessons from the experience that oneself, too, can hardly live up to such expectations is conveniently forgotten.

Even Marxists - in spite of their maxim that material conditions

necessarily affect people's consciousness - often view themselves as beyond any active entanglement in suppressive structures and hence reject complaints corresponding to it as unjustified, politically naive, diversive and undermining collective strength against the repressive societal structures. The ideology of the necessity of political unity is, as Susan Bordo points out, especially upheld by those in positions of greater influence and thus with greater freedom to define the allegedly common interests others have to submit to.

The admittance of one's own involvement in the suppressive structures, however, requires above all a breaking with the widespread tendency to limit the recognition of an individual's involvement in the suppressive structures on others and to view oneself either as a mere victim or else as a convinced and uncorruptable opponent of suppression. And, overmore, it has to overcome the generally held notion that participation in the suppression of others is a palliative for one's own suppression; this illusion again remains tied to the ideology of people's natural asociality and ignores an essential dimension of human distress: namely the suffering from the imposed asociality and immorality on one's own behaviour which can only be borne in ignoring its consequences or in blaming those whose interests it violates. As long as the articulation of one's own participation in the suppression of others, however, remains a tabooed topic, knowledge about class-reality and the mechanisms supporting it remains limited and resistance will always be in danger of becoming a stabilizing force for the structures it tries to overcome.

VII.

Emphasizing the necessity of analyzing people's concrete involvement in the suppressive reality is in certain ways comparable to postmodern references to the particular, local, marginal etc.. Contrary to such approaches, however, a Marxist Psychology in the understanding of Critical Psychology points out that as soon as one tries to understand the seemingly local problems instead of only dealing with them in accordance with the prevailing expectations, the societal restrictions and with them the particular interests behind them, will soon become visible. Thus, restricting one's view to the local is not an inherent part of human sociability but, on the contrary, it requires an active repression of humanity, that is of recognizing the societal dimensions of the local problems as well an active blocking off of the consequences of one's own behaviour for others. The illusion of individuals' autonomy can, as Freud already stated, only be upheld if one voluntarily reduces one's own efforts to one's personal self-preservation and self-justification and systematically keeps back all sympathy with others.

Thus, from the standpoint of the subject the dichotomy between the particular and the universal, the local and the global etc. is just as misleading as similar dualisms, and unreflectively naturalizes suppression: The universality of knowledge and values is not dependent on its dissemination, but is only shown through the integration of all particular knowledge and values. Universal knowledge imparts, moreover as Klaus Holzkamp points out, not a knowledge about individuals, but for them. It does

not focus on disciplining and standardizing others but on civilizing and democratizing their life conditions - by understanding the subjects from the subjects' point of view.

As such, universal knowledge can never be completed since its completion would imply a final stasis whereas it describes in fact a process. It embodies, as for example MacIntyre puts it, the permanent search for a good life which will subtilize our ideas about what we are seeking and thus refine and enhance our selfknowledge.