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Critical Psychology and Cultural Psychology: Common Concerns – Divergences – Productive Linkages¹

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Abstract

Standing in the tradition of the Cultural-Historical School, which is unanimously recognised as an essential contribution to cultural psychology, German Critical Psychology is also repeatedly attributed to this field. Although commonalities undoubtedly exist between the subject-scientific perspective of the latter and cultural-psychological views, characteristic differences must also be highlighted – and this also concerns the reception of Vygotsky's and his collaborators' work: Both the Cultural-Historical and the Critical-Psychological approaches oppose any 'culturalist' dissolution of the materialist concept of societal relations/practice into either fuzzy or straightforwardly idealistic notions of culture as a system of linguistic-symbolic meanings, and any dichotomisation between the naturalness and the societality of human development of consciousness. Marxist Critical Psychology focuses on the capitalist mode of production and life with its class-specific, intersectional relations of inequality, oppression, and discrimination, which determine cultural processes and involve a contradictory interplay of possibilities and restrictions of personal agency – structural relationships that are easily ignored in idealistic (e.g. social constructivist or discourse-theoretical) conceptions of culture. When framed in a materialist way,

¹ Revised version of my presentation at the 20th Conference of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology (Belgrade, May 1-24, 2024). A longer treatise on the relationship between cultural psychology and Critical-Psychological subject science with an historical-critical excursus on the Cultural-Historical School and of Critical Psychology's roots in this tradition as well as an exemplification of subject-scientific theorisation and empiricism using various research projects is provided in Maiers & Reimer-Gordinskaya (2024).

the concept of culture can, in turn, enrich our concept of society with an action-relevant dimension by opening access to the actors' perspective on the diversity and mutability of socio-cultural codifications of life-worlds and subjectivities. In this respect, cultural theories refer to a level of research that is basically laid out, but not yet sufficiently differentiated in Critical Psychology. In order to achieve this concretisation, further elaboration of a Marxist concept of culture is needed, from which existing cultural theories can be reinterpreted and coherently integrated.

Keywords: culturalism, critical psychology as Marxist-based historical science of the subject, Cultural-historical school/theory, cultural psychology in a subject-scientific perspective

Critical psychology – Subject science – Cultural psychology: Conceptual localisations

In relevant treatises on *cultural psychology*, the *Cultural-Historical School* of Soviet psychology founded by Vygotsky and continued after his death in 1934 by his colleagues Leontyev, Luria, Galperin and others is consistently recognised as a contribution to the "profiling of an advanced cultural psychology" (Straub & Chakkarath, 2010, 195f.; see also Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1996). (German) *Critical Psychology*, which has developed from a radical critique of traditional psychology into the positive elaboration of an alternative *subject-scientific psychology* (more on this concept below; for a historical outline see Maiers, 1991; Reimer & Markard, 2014), stands in the tradition of Cultural-Historical theory. It is therefore sometimes also regarded as a *kind of cultural psychology* (e.g. Wikipedia, 2024, 3; Kölbl, 2022 [2024]), although it does not see itself as such.

Since the beginnings of ISTP, both Critical- and cultural-psychological positions have been involved in the meta-theoretical debate on the future direction of psychology (see the conference proceedings published over time and, most recently, the contributions by Valsiner and Maiers & Reimer-Gordinskaya, both 2025/in press), without explicitly comparing their critical perspectives. In this respect, it is also instructive for Theoretical Psychology to ascertain the extent to which the categorisation of Critical and cultural psychology as conceptually and methodologically related epistemic approaches is justified.

In the following, I shall address this question and in particular discuss where the benefits of a subject-scientific perspective for cultural-psychological research may lie and, conversely, how the latter can contribute to differentiating the Critical-Psychological understanding of subjectivity.

Before I do so, I should like to draw attention to just two problematic aspects of an unambiguous cultural-psychological localisation of the Cultural-Historical School (cf. Maiers & Reimer-Gordinskaya, 2024, pp.117f., for more details). Firstly, the compound term *cultural-historical* encourages a *culturalist* dissolution of the materialist concepts of societal relations and practice from which Vygotsky and his colleagues started, through fuzziest, if not straightforwardly idealistically biased, notions of culture qua system of linguistic-symbolic meanings. To speak of a *cultural* or *cultural-historical* determination of the human psychic can only refer to Vygotsky if one recognises that he always emphasised human *societality* as an essential (inner) determinant of development and explicitly regarded *culture* as something *derived*, as a "result of social life and the

communal activity of the human" (Sobr. soč., 3, 145; after Keiler, 2012, 119). On the other hand, the term *cultural*-historical obscures the fundamental concern of Vygotsky's approach to overcome the common dichotomisation between the naturalness and the sociality of human development and to theoretically grasp their mediation process (cf. e.g. Vygotskij, 2002; Keiler, 1999). To scientifically understand the concrete human being in their culturally specific individuality and subjectivity means – in a well-understood sense of *cultural-historical* – to explicate them in the unity of their *natural-, societal- and individual-historical having become* [*Gewordenheit*] from the objective necessities of the material life process. This principle of taking a comprehensive historical approach to the study of the human psyche becomes also particularly evident in Leontyev's *Activity Theory* (Leontjew, 1963), from which the discussion at the Psychological Institute at the Free University of Berlin in the early 1970s on a substantial transformation of bourgeois psychology (for this term see Maiers, 1991, pp. 29f.) drew essential guiding ideas (cf. Holzkamp & Schurig, [1973]/2015).

Following on from Marx, the Cultural-Historical Theory works out how historical development in its human specificity has emerged with the production of living conditions through collective labour and takes place in the accumulation of societal experience mediated by material, iconic and linguistic-symbolic objectifications. Through the practical process of its individual-historical appropriation, each individual person participates in this societal process and thus also unfolds their personal life. Accordingly, the structures and forms of human consciousness must themselves change with the various stages of objective production and the relations of production entered into in the process. The development of individual consciousness also proceeds in the course of the *objective activity* [*gegenständliche Tätigkeit*] of the human being. The historical-social forms of consciousness (mediated by psych[olog]ical tools) arise in each individual person from external activities that gradually transform into inner, psychic activities (*interiorisation*).

This *historical-genetic paradigm* has significantly inspired the methodological approach of Critical Psychology to reconstruct the emergence, differentiation and essential inner connections of mental functions such as cognition or emotion and to work out the natural and social-historical mediation processes that led to the special features of consciousness as the human-specific form of psychic reflection. Through the conceptual determinations of the object to be gained by means of such *historical-empirical categorial analysis* [*historisch-empirische Kategorialanalyse*] (cf. Holzkamp, 1983, 48ff., 185ff., Maiers, 1999; Markard, 2009, 106ff.), it attempts to arrive at a concrete-historical theory of human subjectivity that overcomes the ideological thought form of an "abstract – isolated – human individual" (Marx, [1845]/1969, 7) underlying bourgeois psychology and the associated mystifying construction of a timeless, universal-social mode of human existence (see also Maiers 1978, pp. 57ff.). By placing seemingly purely individual, private psychological phenomena in their overall societal context, Critical Psychologists are able to critically overcome traditional psychology with its personalising concepts and pacifying social technologies, which are caught up in bourgeois ideology, and make a practical-emancipatory contribution to strengthening self-determined individual conducts of life.

The term *subject science* was first used in the context of Critical Psychology in 1977 at its 1st International Congress in Marburg, when Klaus Holzkamp, in his opening speech, explained the necessity and possibility of an internal expansion of Marxism through an individual-scientific theory of human subjectivity. This was directed critically against

economistic-reductionist misinterpretations of Marxism, which consequently either regarded the political-economic analysis of capitalism as sufficient to derive statements about human subjectivity (as was the case with the *Project Class Analysis*: Bischoff 1973) or (as Lorenzer, 1974, in his *Critical Theory of the Subject*) deemed it necessary to supplement Marxist theory of society with an independent extra-Marxist (namely psychoanalytical) theory of subjectivity. In contrast, Holzkamp considered the historical materialist conception to be "the *general historical science of the subject* par excellence" because, as a revolutionary theory, it aims at the empowerment of collective human actors, and consequently named the development of the subjective-active component, i.e. self-determination, in individual life activity as the object and practical goal of a critical psychology to be developed within and with the means of scientific socialism as a "*special science of the subject*" (Holzkamp, [1977]/2015, p. 232f.).

Psychology from the generalised subject point of view

In the prevailing mainstream of nomological-functionalist variable psychology, using experimental-statistical methods to investigate human behaviour and experience as correlates or consequences of situational conditions conceived as causal, the historically situated subjective perspective of individuals in their specific life contexts is inevitably missed in a naturalistic, reifying way. If the critique of this reductionist "elimination of the subject" (Graumann & Métraux, 1977, 22) seeks not only to establish the everyday experience of human intentionality and reflexivity as the inescapable thematic starting point for psychological research, but also to develop a methodologically coherent alternative research approach, it requires first and foremost adequate categories of human subjectivity. Critical Psychology's (above outlined) *historical-empirical analysis*, which precedes *actual-empirical* research methodology, fulfils precisely this function by deriving, in a specialisation of Marx's dialectical method, core concepts of psychological theory building in a methodically systematic and empirically testable manner (Holzkamp, 1983, 48ff., 207ff., 249ff.; Maiers, 1999; Markard, 2009, 106ff.).

In this regard, *categorical determinations of the object* [*kategoriale Gegenstandsbestimmungen*] are relevant, in which human subjectivity is understood in concretisation of the *scientific humanism* inherent in Marxism and for the purpose of overcoming both the naturalistic objectivism of the predominant *subjectless* psychology and the abstract opposition of natural and societal determinations of the human condition found in its various subject-oriented critiques (cf. Maiers, 1993; 2019). This essentially includes a scientific concept of human nature gained in the historical-empirical reconstruction of psycho-phylogenesis/anthropogenesis and concretised in the determinations of a species-specific human ability to learn and develop, which, as *societal nature*, constitutes the "*human potentiality*" [*Menschenmöglichkeit*] (Tomberg, 1978, 76) of individual societalisation under concrete-historical social conditions; furthermore, a *decentred materialist concept of the subject*, which grasps the individuals, experiencing their world and themselves, in their "real, sensuous activity" (Marx, [1845]/1969, 5) as objectively and personal-biographically *situated corporeal subjects* (cf. Holzkamp, 1983, 336ff.). The relationship of people to reality associated with the historical implementation of the societal production of their lives is characterised by a *gnostic distance* and *intentionality* that must not be missed in the psychological conceptual system: Human action and experience are directed in their specificity towards a world of *object meanings*

[*Gegenstandsbedeutungen*] and societal forms of practice (cf. Holzkamp, op. cit, 207ff.). From the viewpoint of the individuals, these meaningful structures represent *generalised possibilities for action* [*verallgemeinerte Handlungsmöglichkeiten*] to which they relate as *centres of intentionality* [Intentionalitätszentren] in a *subjectively grounded* [*subjektiv begründet*] manner (ibid., 237ff.)

Cancelling both the traditional naturalistic reduction of individual subjectivity to its mere conditionality by the life circumstances and the idealistic exaltation of the subject's autonomy in this respect, the aim is to depict in the psychological categories the relationship between *objective determinacy* [*objektive Bestimmtheit*] and *subjective determination* [*subjektive Bestimmung*] of human action in the mediation process between individual and society. The practical *possibility relationship* [*Möglichkeitsbeziehung*] of individuals to the societal structures of meaning is explained in more detail in subject science as a *double possibility* of action in the direction of securing *restrictive* or gaining *generalised agency*. This analytical pair of terms refers, from a *generalised standpoint of the subject* [*verallgemeinerter Subjektstandpunkt*] to contradictory constellations of 'good reasons' that lie in concrete problems and conflicts of action to strive for individual capacity to act within the framework of existing restrictive conditions and power relations, or, to enhance it by (collectively) expanding control over one's own living conditions.

Recognising the human trait of being able in principle to behave consciously – and that means, within historically objective limits, with alternatives – towards the outer world and oneself does not mean giving up any idea of determination: While individual action is not simply caused by circumstances, it is grounded in them. The given societal conditions of life, as they are *experienced in their significance* as objective prerequisites for action at the respective location of an individual and in accordance with their current needs and interests, provide the essential *premises* for someone's grounds to act here and now in such a way and not otherwise. For third parties, other persons' subjective grounds for action are generally comprehensible in that people cannot consciously act contrary to what they experience in the respective ways as their own interests in life. This is the *material a priori* of human self-consciousness and interpersonal understanding – and thus also of subjective scientific knowledge.

Grounds for action are *first person* and can only be negotiated from *my respective* [*je mein*] *point of view*. From this follows the imperative to epistemologically bring the subject standpoint to bear. In other words, turning away from the *discourse of conditionality* [*Bedingtheitsdiskurs*] about cause-effect relationships, a corresponding *discourse of groundedness* [*Begründungsdiskurs*] *specified* by the nexus between meanings, grounds, intentions for and realisations of action must be observed as a form of discourse of intersubjective interaction (Holzkamp, [1996]/2013, 294). This is true both in terms of theoretical language and practical research: Wanting to psychologically understand the world- and self-experience of individual subjects without relativising methodological rigour, but rather with the claim to theoretical explanation and objective generalisation, is incompatible with any *psychology from a third party point of view researching (other) subjects from a distanced observer's perspective*. Given that subject-scientific psychology is concerned with the subjective experience of objective, contradictory societal possibilities for and constraints on action within the historically specific conditions of present-day capitalism, those who embody these experiences must not be degraded to passive objects of study, but need to be placed, as active *co-researchers*, on the side of the subjects of knowledge. (Cf. on the above explanations

Holzkamp, 1983, 342ff.; [1988]/2013; Markard, 2009, 157ff., 180ff.; 2020, 167ff.; Reimer & Markard, 2014, 786ff.; Maiers & Reimer, 2025/in press.)

I will skip over the methodological research principles and objectification criteria applied here, some of which also apply, in certain respects, to other subject-focused positions, while others represent specifics of a Critical-Psychological *emancipatory action research* (cf. Holzkamp, 1983, 509ff.; Markard, 2009, 263ff.; 2020, 174ff.).

In summary, *subject science/subject-scientific* in the Critical-Psychological sense means a radical subject orientation in the form of a consistent transition of research from a supposedly uninvolved external standpoint and its third-person observation perspective to the generalised standpoint of the subject and its first-person perspective – and this *change of epistemological position* forms a unique feature of (German) Critical Psychology. In the following, the framework is outlined in which its subject-scientific perspective can be combined with the concerns and concepts of cultural psychology.

Connections to cultural psychology

There are two contrasting basic directions in the field of *culture-inclusive psychology*: So-called *cross-cultural psychology* – as a sub-discipline of established nomological psychology – assumes that the phenomena of psychological interest are universal bio-psychological facts whose inter-culturally observable differentiations are attributed to the moderating influences of specific socio-cultural environments in a kind of culture-sensitive contextualisation (cf. e.g. Berry et al., 1997). *Cultural psychology* in the narrower sense breaks with this naturalistic ontology and the variable-analytical methodology of operationalising culture as a set of antecedent (independent or moderator) variables of behaviour and experience.

Relevant accounts (e.g. Shweder, 1990; Boesch, 1991; Cole, 1996; Billmann-Mahecha, 2003; Straub & Chakkarath, 2010; Valsiner, 2025/in press – for a broad, multifaceted overview see also the current introduction by Wolfradt et al, 2024) identify as its unifying (meta-) theoretical and methodological basic understanding an interdisciplinary general perspective in which psychological phenomena (structures, processes, functions) are considered in their *constitutive relationship* to the meanings handed down in a historically specific socio-cultural environment. As systems of signs, knowledge, rules and symbols, cultures fulfil orientation functions by allowing bodily subjects capable of speech, feeling and action to lend meaning and significance to their world and self. The systems of action-guiding discourses, practices and ways of life form dynamic spaces of experience and horizons of expectation that are perceived differently from each individual standpoint. Members of respective cultural collectives share perspectives on the reality of their lives, whereby multiple – potentially conflictual – cultural affiliations are to be expected in complex and culturally differentiated societies. Insofar as the relationship of the individual subjects of a cultural group to culture – including their own – is not harmonistically assumed (as in the traditional structural-functionalist understanding of *enculturation*) as an unproblematic appropriation of and adaptation to cultural meanings and means, power and domination relationships can be thematised.

Cultural knowledge, which on the one hand opens and limits people's spaces of experience and action and on the other hand is (re-)constructed and modified in the course of individual life and social exchange, is multifaceted. It appears in explicit form as articulated and reflected knowledge or remains implicit, can be embodied physically and

staged performatively, materialised in non-linguistic things, institutions, spaces and places, objectified in symbolic representations such as club badges, or present in traces – for example in narrative abbreviations (such as *8 March* as International Women's Day) that refer to stories creating and passing on identities.

This is where the cultural-psychological interpretation of behaviour comes in. "Socio-cultural worlds are understood as intentional worlds that are factual and effective only through people who draw action-guiding meanings from them: 'no sociocultural environment exists or has identity independent of the way human beings seize meanings and resources from it, while every human being has her or his subjectivity and mental life altered through the process of seizing meanings and resources from some sociocultural environment and using them' (Shweder 1990, 2)." (Staeuble, 2002, 100)

The methodological rationale of cultural-psychological research programmes thus conceptually assumes that people are socially situated, reflexive and intentional actors who pursue concrete goals and broader life orientations with their actions and attribute meaning and significance to everything they are experiencing and doing, as well as to what is happening to them in life. Cultural knowledge is not seen here as a causal condition of human action, but rather as a pool of diverse, systematically distinguishable types of *determining reasons*, to which the always *polyvalent* structure of meaning and significance of actions is owed (Boesch, 1991). Actions (such as the ritual of a baptism) refer to cultural (in the example case: religious) representations of the world and to practices that make their occurrence comprehensible in the first place. Accordingly, they cannot be conceptualised as logically independent discrete variables in purely empirical-contingent relationships to them, nor can their relationships be described, according to the causalistic model, as time-independent regularities based on natural constants – neither in the strict deductive-deterministic sense nor in the weakened inductive-statistical version, in which strict natural laws are replaced by probabilistic statements. Since the formation of meaning and significance can only become accessible by way of reconstruction and interpretation, the *hermeneutic problem of understanding* is at the centre of the methodological reflections of cultural psychology proper.

In general, its empiricism follows the maxim of connecting to the experiences and practices of meaning-making lived in everyday life and adapting its methodological instruments to the respective research topic of interest, or even developing them in the course of the investigation. The concept of culture as an intentional world, as a *processed experience* of events, practices and artefacts, includes recognising and acknowledging the plurality of cultures "as their creation, not ours" (Schwartz, 1992, op. cit., 345). In this respect, cultural psychology shares the pronounced *criticism of the epistemological ethnocentrism* of the prevailing (culture-blind and thus all the more culture-bound) psychology put forward by the so-called *indigenous psychologies*, and accordingly endeavours to include the so-called others and strangers as research partners and subjects who contribute their own cultural (psychological) knowledge.

In the above quintessence of the cultural-psychological epistemic approach, there are clearly various echoes of the Critical-Psychological definitions of the subject-scientific perspective, which make their connection with cultural psychology plausible – provided certain criteria are observed.

This reservation clause is no coincidence, considering that the concept of culture has tended to displace the concept of society in the course of its boom in the social sciences:

"As comprehensible as the societal constitution of subjectivity and action once appeared in the concepts of the mode of production and social structure, it sometimes appears blurred in terms of cultural life-worlds and practices." (Staeuble, 2002, 97). Marxist individual science is, however, essentially bound to the prior analysis of the societal process in its historical specificity which overarches individual life processes.

A (Marxist-based) subject-scientific perspective within cultural psychology can only be maintained on a twofold precondition: Firstly, culture should not be viewed as an external boundary condition of individual actions and experiences, but rather as their medium (Cole, 1996) containing both the objects and the means of psychological development to which individuals enter into an active relationship of appropriation. Secondly, this historical socio-cultural world is not idealistically reduced to a system of linguistic-symbolic meanings whose intersubjective meaning is generated and secured in communicative negotiation processes. Instead, it is understood materialistically as a totality of objectified meanings that are generated in the historical process of societal labour, which includes the differentiation of the level of language-based symbols. In contrast to the theoretical isolation of the cultural from other societal practices and interdependencies, it must be recognised that the societal totality forms a complex structure with a dominant: The mode of production and production relations of a societal formation determine cultural processes and forms, while recognising their relative autonomy and their own logic.

In this vein, as early as the late 1950s, the cultural theoretical writings of Hoggart, Williams and Thompson and the subsequent work of the *Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* led by Hall, Willis and others (cf. Ampuja & Koivisto, 2012) showed that culture is not an *omnibus concept* for everything societal and that cultural imprinting does not have to be an indeterminate conceptual substitute for the societal determinacy of human subjectivity. Understood as "the actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific historical society" (Hall, 1986, cited in Nelson, Treichler & Grossberg 1992, 5), the concept of culture can in turn *expand the concept of society to include a dimension relevant to action* by opening up access to the perspective of the actors, the world- and self-understanding of social groups. The social-theoretical insight (eminently important in view of the naturalistic reductionism prevalent in psychology) that viable constructions of the psychological ought to reflect on societally and historically specific forms of individuality/subjectivity would thus be supplemented by the cultural-theoretical idea of a diversity and changeability of *socio-cultural codings of life-worlds and subjectivities* (cf. also Staeuble, op. cit., 97).

However, today's social sciences are only suitable to a limited extent for the foundation of psychological theorising through critical social theory. Particularly since their postmodern distancing from Marx, they have lacked a concept for understanding the class societies of the 21st century. The scientific and political progress in class analysis that was achieved in the wake of the 1968 movement has often been forgotten and replaced by interpretations of society that merely duplicate in their descriptive terminology what is taking place on a global scale on the societal surface of capitalist relations as a result of the development of productive forces and the permanent reorganisation of class relations: the erosion of old social milieus and the emergence of new ones, the mass increase in precarious living conditions with the intensification of class antagonism and horizontal class-specific inequalities, the formation of multiple, often fragmented identities, the development of altered subjectivities or mentalities associated with the change in forms of individuality

and subjectification, the consumerist lifestyle staging of the so-called ‘high achievers’ of high-tech capitalism (see on this e.g. Haug, 2005), but also the public articulation of new emancipatory claims of the subjects, etc.

The social-scientific penetration of such rapidly advancing transformation processes requires in particular the (re)appropriation, critical further development and integration of various Marxist-inspired (socio-structural, praxeological, feminist etc.) class analyses and theories (cf. Candeias, 2021). Only on their conceptual foundation and material basis do I see us sufficiently equipped to understand the processes of interpretation and practical appropriation in which people give meaning to their lives in shifting socio-cultural constellations characterised by intersectional structural relations of inequality, oppression and discrimination (with regard to class, gender, or categories such as ethnicity, sexuality, age, etc.).

Anchoring a subject-scientific perspective in cultural psychology therefore also means introducing the current *class-theoretical and political concepts* into its discourse, with which differentiated empirically underpinned theoretical explanations of the diversity of cultural references to life can be gained. At the same time, this serves to sharpen the subject-scientific perspective on the active moment of human subjectivity: grounded action, insofar as the *analysis of grounds* [*Begründungsanalyse*] of human action can thus be linked to more concrete *meaning-analytical* [*bedeutungsanalytisch*] insights. As integral cognitive tasks in the actual-empirical research process of Critical-Psychological subject science, *analyses of conditions, meanings and grounds* [*Bedingungs-, Bedeutungs- und Begründungsanalysen*] aim to understand the subjective functionality of restrictive coping strategies by determining the historical-concrete constellation of economic, political, legal, ideological and cultural conditions in their significance for individuals as given possibilities and limits of action in their different life-world locations and then recording how and under what premises and on which subjective grounds these objective spaces of possibility are individually realised (i.e., utilised, missed or rejected) and how agency and the subjective state of mind are shaped (cf. Holzkamp, 1983, 349ff; Markard, 2009, 160ff, 180ff.)

Conclusion

With their concepts and methodological principles (*discourse of groundedness, meta-subjective scientific framework of understanding, co-researcher principle, unity of comprehension and practical change*, etc.), subject-scientific theory formation and empirical research prove to be fundamentally compatible with cultural-psychological programmes of knowledge that examine objective socio-historical structures of meaning as results and frames of grounding human action, and therefore take people as agents as their starting point and involve the so-called ‘others’ as active knowledge producers in their research settings.

Of the subject-scientific determinations of the object of knowledge, I emphasised the concept of societal nature as it overcomes the dichotomisation of the natural and the soci(et)al or cultural, not only characteristic of naturalistic-subjectless mainstream psychology, but also, with the opposite sign, widespread in its cultural-theoretical subject-

oriented critiques.² It is linked to a materialist concept of the subject, which understands human individuals as nature-bound bodily actors situated in their material circumstances and influenced by their life trajectories. On the one hand, this safeguards psychological theorising against the subjectivism of emphatic notions of the omnipotence of the ego over external and internal reality. On the other hand, such a practice-orientated notion of the subject shatters any form of objectivism, which in its idealistic form degrades individuals to passive appendages or mere functions of (immaterially conceived) cultural systems (of ideas, norms and the like). The aim is to understand human behaviour in its objective determinacy by material (natural and societal) conditions and the subjects' determining these conditions, i.e. the reality of people as practice.

By recognising cultural processes and forms as determined through the mode of production – the productive forces and production relations – of a societal formation, a subject-scientific orientation of cultural psychology based on Marxist theory of society can counterbalance tendencies in certain social science and humanities discourses (e.g. of post-structuralist provenance) to use culture and socio-cultural imprinting as vague substitute terms for everything societal and the societal determination of human subjectivity. As a product of human practice, and thus changeable on a historical scale, societal structural conditions determine the scope for personal agency – a fact that is easily glossed over in idealistic social constructivist conceptions of culture. The anchoring of class-analytically sharpened political concepts into the cultural-psychological discussion enables a more profound understanding of subjectively grounded actions in the ambiguous and contradictory life situations that are systematically associated with diversity of socio-cultural constellations.

Materialistically substantiated in this way, the concept of culture as an intentional world can in turn enrich the concept of society by enabling access to the world- and self-understanding of individual actors and social groups and to the manifold socio-cultural coding of life-worlds and subjectivity. In this respect, cultural theories refer to a level of research that has a firm place in Critical Psychology through its methodological concept of *meaning analysis*, but is not sufficiently differentiated. To achieve this differentiation requires, however, the systematic further elaboration of a *historical-materialist concept of culture*, from which existing cultural theories can be reinterpreted. In the subject-scientific sense it would then be a matter of elucidating culture as contradictory everyday practical patterns of meaning of the societal mode of production and way of life for individuals – in such a way that, in contrast to the objective restrictions on action and self-imposed impediments, extended spaces of possibility for self-determined individual and collective action open up for them.

² Against this background, Katrin Reimer-Gordinskaya, for example, uses the example of psycho-ontogenesis to discuss the contradictions and limits of certain cultural-theoretically based, namely constructivist and discourse-analytically oriented, childhood-sociological alternatives to the naturalisation and universalisation of childhood in traditional developmental thinking and outlines the implementation of a resulting programme of materialistic-cultural-theoretical research on the relationship between children and society (Maiers & Reimer-Gordinskaya, 2024, 132-135).

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