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The Place of a Positive Critique in Contemporary Critical Psychology

Summary

The essay attempts to contextualize the German-Scandinavian tradition of Critical Psychology that bases on Cultural-Historical Activity Theory in today's critical psychologies. It is argued that adding to a psychology and ideology critique the positive dimension of "foundational" theory is important to counteract the currently prevailing "negative" ideology of liberalism. It is also claimed that an "instrumental" version of critical psychology, which takes up elements from psychology for tactical purposes will remain dependent on the given discipline of psychology and unable to reflect on its own subject position. GSCP is then rendered as developing the Marxist ontology of social practice (rather than its utopianism) toward a concept of a subjectivity constituted in social practice but with the criteria of action potency and productive needs on the part of the individual. It is suggested that this approach solves important problems in contemporary critical psychology. Finally, it is described how GSCP, too, might grow from the encounter, by developing a theory of collective subjectivity to include – us.

Recontextualizing Critical Psychology

In June 2005, the International Critical Psychology Conference convened in Durban under the title "Beyond the Pale". The present essay was originally drafted as a contribution to that conference, and thus, to today's community of critical psychologists. In par-ticular, my aim was – and is, here – to argue for the conception of psychology critique that was first developed in German-Scandinavian Critical Psychology (GSCP) in the 1970's and which, drawing on Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), added a *positive*, theoretically constructive dimension to the critique of, and with, psychology.

Whilst my purpose here is not a "review", it may still be useful to take off with some idea about what I refer to as "today's community of critical psychologists". This is far from a simple notion, partly since the criticality of critical psychology makes it reflect on itself even more than is given with traditional academic reflection. Our ideas about what constitutes criticality importantly co-constitute the communities *we* are, as writers and readers of a text such as this. Thus, we must first reflect on the communities implied or addressed by the text itself. So: Who exactly are "we"? True to its theme, the indexical "we" of this text is designed to shift irregularly, and perhaps disturbingly, between different "we's" as different dimensions of implied or proposed identity between its author, its readers, and the social practices and communities it refers to. Of course, the academic readership of *Critical Social Studies,* whom I sometimes address as editor, is and remains wider than that of "critical psycholo-

gy" whom I discuss, and whom I discuss with, here as author. But we shall also witness the "we" of this text move between the traditional academic incorporation of the reader into the majestic representation of an ultimate community of scholars, the Modernist-utopian appeal to a universal Humanity, and the perhaps more activistic, grass-roots collectivity of some politically critical community[1]. The whole issue of the "we" of critical psychology will itself be the focus of the final part of the essay.

But aside from this (textually mediated) subjective side, we might approach the community of "today's critical psychology" by looking at some of its (perhaps prototypically) objectified manifestations. Thus, apart from, obviously, the websites[2] and the journals[3], one can get a good impression of that community by consulting a recent textbook titled "Critical Psychology" issued in Cape Town (Hook, 2004). It is an edited volume; quite diverse in character, themes, and approaches. Mindful of the pitfalls of a Euro- / Anglo-centric, false scientific universalism, the book's section on theoretical resources includes African perspectives and it takes on the task of introducing a global critical psychology to a local audience into a local context.

What is contemporary critical psychology, then, here? First of all, it is *psychology applied as a progressive resource,* in political and cultural *critique* – e.g. addressing the issues of racism or sexism with the help of psychoanalytic or (more recent) poststructuralist conceptualizations of identity – or engaging with progressive social *movements*, community projects etc. – e.g. combining political or pedagogical theorizing of the processes of change (e.g. Paulo Freire) with notions of psychological mechanisms derived from community psychology (e.g. empowerment), or, again, psychoanalysis (e.g. projection, repression). Secondly, it is *critique of psychology*: exposition of the ways in which psychology is and has been *ideological*, that is, complicit in social exploitation and oppression by producing and distributing one-sided or false images of humans, by providing tools for social regulation, and as a form of subjectifying power. Not surprisingly, this aspect of criticality is much influenced by Foucault, although the essentially political impetus gives it a flavor that is often closer to ideology critique than to any pure genealogy. Finally, it is the *positive proposition of theoretical alternatives* to such ideological psychology[4].

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1 My inspiration for this style is Bertolt Brecht's idea of "alienation" [Verfremdung] (Brecht, 1982): To deliberately break with any immediate identification so that the audience may come to question what is taken for granted. Since nowadays one cannot, like Brecht, urge the audience to lean back and smoke, at least I can recommend that the reader reflect the ways s/he does or does not think s/he belongs to the communities circumscribed by my "we's" as we go along.

2 As of April 2008, places to start may be http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_psychology, http://critpsy.blogspot.com/, http://radpsynet.org/, or http://www.critical-psychology.de/

3 Probably the most important journal in this field (by 2008) is *Subjectivity* (formerly *International Journal of Critical Psychology*; main editor: Valerie Walkerdine; city of issue: Cardiff, UK). Other directly critical psychology journals are *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* (main editor: Ian Parker; city of issue: Manchester, UK), *Psychology In Society* (main editor: Grahame Hayes; city of issue: Durban, SA), and of course this journal. Closely related are journals such as those that address activity theory (e.g. *Mind, Culture and Activity*), theoretical psychology (e.g. *Theory & Psychology*), qualitative research (e.g. *Forum Qualitative Social Research*), discourse analysis (e.g. *Discourse Analysis Online*), as well as themes such as feminist psychology, community psychology, cultural psychology etc.

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4 In the book, these latter can be distinguished roughly in five groups: a) indigenous / African thinking emphasizing cultural continuity and collectivity; b) general philosophical or social theories such as those of Foucault, Freire, Bourdieu, Hegel, and, of course, Marx; c) socio-linguistic theories, from Lacan and Bakhtin to more recent poststructuralist and discursive psychologies; d) interactionist theories from Goffman and Garfinkel to contemporary social constructionism; e) Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, meaning here primarily the American reception of Vygotsky

Characteristically, while it is the two first-mentioned aspects – social and ideological critique, with or of psychology – that *define* critical psychology, the status of the proposed theoretical alternatives is a very open question. It is primarily to this question that the present remarks are addressed. In my view, the most pressing issue is the question of so-called "foundationalism" in critical psychology, that is, the question of the possibility and desirability of a relatively consistent positive system of general theoretical concepts, often regarded spatially as "foundational", "fundamental" or "basic"[5].

To be more precise, there are two related issues: 1) The general problem of negativity or positivity – in brief, should any explicit and elaborate theoretical structure be attempted at all, or is it better to concentrate on destabilizing hegemonic ideas and strive for an open-minded, tactical relation to more loosely coupled concepts? 2) The problem of the relation between critical social theory and psychology – even if it may be admitted that a positive theoretical system (such as that of Marxism) is viable and useful, the question

remains whether such is possible or desirable *in psychology*, or, rather, the direction of any positive critique is a transformation from psychological ideology to social theory[6]. Let me first address these questions in turn. Subsequently, my conclusion will allow me to present GSCP in a way that is designed for the context thus sketched.

Positive or negative – or, the ideological positivity of pure negativity[7]

First, then: is it a good idea to propose a theory? My claim is that an open horizon of debate requires distinct, positively crafted theoretical positions. Clearly, conferences, and, at least to some extent, comprehensive textbooks and journals that seek to provide venues for debate, must operate on the wide horizon that is circumscribed by the social practices of political struggles and of the therapeutic, educational, community etc. applications of psychology. This is the broader context within which any distinct theoretical approach can be suggested to be relevant, and with an eye to which its consistency can be sharpened. Thus, the diversity sketched above is necessary, even vital, to the project of critical psychology as a whole. However, this does *not* mean that such negative ideals as diversity, openness – let

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and Engeström's activity system model and methodology. Absent from the book, but very much present in the wider critical psychology community (including the above-mentioned Durban 2005 conference), are two other semiotically inclined positions that draw on the epistemology of natural sciences (but in off-mainstream versions), namely the systemic/narrative approach and (post-) actor-network theory.

5   The metaphor of a "foundation" is really quite misleading. As I have discussed in Nissen (2004a) and especially in Nissen (2000), the understanding of GSCP (in e.g. Holzkamp, 1983; Tolman, Maiers, et.al. 1991) as a given paradigmatic foundation, rather than a set of artefacts relevant in certain social practices, has been very problematic to that collective project. Sciences are social practices. If theories are like brick walls, one must view them with the eyes of a mason. If theories are "frames", they should be viewed more in a Goffmanian sense as the continuously revised (although materially objectified) common premises of activity than as Kantian categories that remain fixed for as long as they are presupposed.

6   It should be mentioned, perhaps, that these problems were discussed extensively in Berlin already in the early 1970s. See, e.g. Holzkamp (1977), or Tolman, Maiers, et.al. (1991).

7   I should perhaps mention that the issue at hand is a basic philosophical problem. "Negative philosophy", with such names as Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Latour (and many others) is a strong current in contemporary continental philosophy, and as such also criticized in the philosophical literature (e.g. Badiou, 2002; Zizek, 1999). Taking up the problem here is one example that psychological theory is a way of practicing philosophy, even if, obviously, I cannot address it in its entire scope.

alone heterogeneity and tactical eclecticism – must rule as paradigmatic standards for *each,* nor for *any* of the critical psychologies. Far from it; it seems more reasonable to assume the opposite: theoretical debate (heterogeneity, openness, diversity) *presupposes* that each theoretical position is presented positively and consistently, so that arguments for or against it can be made sense of. This idea of theoretical positivity is far from dogmatism: Every truth must be challenged, and all truths should be validated in terms of their social relevance rather than their intrinsic properties in a "truth game"; but it is also the case that a theory can only be challenged if it claims to be right; and only practically relevant if / as it somehow enters the game of truth.

These dialectical points are not so much pure academic speculations as they are crucially relevant in practice, at a time when neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism are so dominant that it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between liberal and socialist kinds of liberation from the given socio-cultural structures, conventions and "values" endorsed by the neo-conservatives. Socialist transformation requires strategy, reflexive collectivity and coherent visions about alternative organizations of community; liberal emancipation involves nothing more than the dissolution of established social constraints. But in the negative moment, the moment of "change", the two are hard to tell apart.

In order to understand these social implications of pure negativity, allow me to attempt a brief historization. The liberal heritage of the purely negative, non-foundationalist critique goes far back. In fact, it is in some ways a continuation of the enlightenment critique that has underpinned the relentless social transformations in recent centuries we sometimes call Modernity or capitalism. The contemporary neo-liberal – and the not-quite-so-modern Modern – versions of a ruling ideology are of a kind which does not simply rest on a sub-stantial foundation, a dogmatism or a unified truth to support a singular power structure.

In Marx' analysis, capitalism was anything but a conservative or monolithic social structure. Much like the more recent modernity theories, Marx saw it as a process of cultural deconstruction, disembedding and ever more rapid transformation (cf. Hobsbawm, 1998).

> The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

(Marx & Engels, 1998, 38-39)

Of course, this continuous destabilization of given socio-cultural forms, including state powers and subjectivities – except perhaps the very formal principles of that process itself, abstract value and the state power that lends itself as an instrument of the process – also includes a deconstruction of ideological forms, including science and theory. It is far from merely an economic process. Capitalism or modernity is a pool of acid that fragments the substantial world-views, the coherent ethical standards, the religious systems, and the elaborate theories that were built before modernity – and then the structures that are rebuilt from their rubble. Modernity, in Zygmund Bauman's analogous metaphor, has been a process of increasing dissolution and fluidity, and is now well into an utterly liquid

state where no new and improved solids are molded (Bauman, 2000).

How should we judge this process of a generalized emancipation from all given sociocultural forms? The Marxist heritage is optimistic. In Marx and Engels' utopian vision, at the end of the above quote, when all the ideologies of past and present class societies have deteriorated, what is left are human beings at last facing the real world, and each other, just as they are, "with sober senses".

A century later, a very different prophecy was rendered by critical theorists Adorno and Horkheimer who – having fled Nazi Germany and repatriated in the USA of fast food, popular culture, and naïve but proliferating social science – approached the dialectics of Enlightenment as something that had begun already with the ancient Greeks. The adventures of Homer's Ulysses are interpreted as one of the first renderings of humans' separation from nature. Since then, the collective symbolic unity of experience is broken up into inconsequential beauty, blind production, and increasingly formal reasoning. With 20th century Positivism, the separation is completed, as any positive ideational contents have been drained from language:

> Being thus a confirmation of the social power of language, ideas became ever more superfluous as this power grew, and the language of science dealt them their final blow. The mesmerism which still retained something of the terror of the fetish was not dependent on conscious justification. Rather, the unity of collectivity and domination reveals itself in the General, which must adopt the bad contents into language, be it metaphysical or scientific. At least the metaphysical apology betrays the injustice of status quo by the incongruence of concept and reality. In the impartiality of scientific language the powerless has finally lost all powers of expression, so that only the given finds its neutral signifier. Such neutrality is more metaphysical than metaphysics. Ultimately, Enlightenment devoured not only the symbols, but even their successors, the general concepts, and spared nothing of metaphys-

ics but the abstract fear of the collectivity from which it emerged. Concepts are to Enlightenment as stockholders to industrial trusts: nobody can rest assured.

(Horkheimer & Adorno, 1969, 29, translated from the German by MN)[8]

The fragmentation of knowledge into masses of isolated facts and formal rules is another side of the atomization of human wealth into commodities and abstract values. But this does not, in the eyes of the critical theorists, unveil false religions and theories and leave us with "sober senses". Rather, it is what reduces our senses to the banalities of consumerism. Indeed, it is even this process which paves the way to the completely arbitrary power of a fascism that is no longer answerable to any cosmology beyond the mock versions that fit its whims. From a certain point, we might say, the conservative flip side of liberalism turns into a cynical or pathological parody that is hardly to be threatened by irony. If mindless traditionalism is one side of contemporary ideology, inconsequential irony and meta-reflexivity is the other; and often enough, the two join forces.

After yet another half century, Zygmund Bauman (2000) reframes Critical Theory into Modernity Theory. Here, the dystopian implications of Horkheimer & Adorno's dialectics are brought to their conclusion in a traditionally academic descriptivism. And so, the task of critical theory can be identified as constructive – as "any true liberation calls today for more, not less, of the 'public sphere' and 'public power'" (ibid., p. 51) – but the subject of that identification appears to exempt himself, as he leaves us with no clue as to the forces that might contribute to such construction.

Still, with Critical or Modernity Theory,

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8 The corresponding reference in English is Adorno & Horkheimer (1979; 22-23), but I find that the translation from the German is slightly imprecise

we can suggest that the current non-founda-tionalist, purely processual and negative ver-sion of criticality is really the imprint of an increasingly hegemonic neo-liberal formal-ism. Paradoxically then, non-foundationalism, just as much as uncritical foundationalism, is itself positive, a confirmation of ideological hegemony: the abolishment of metaphysics, whether as neutrality or as negativity, is really the most hegemonic of all metaphysics since it prohibits all other metaphysics than itself – or in Horkheimer & Adorno's terms, it is "more metaphysical than metaphysics"[9].

Thus, if we are critical of Marx' & Engels' utopian modernist metaphysics – as an abstract universalist humanism, as the dubious belief in a necessary evolution of History toward a naturalistic essence negatively embodied in a universal proletariat of human individuals (the "Gattung"), compelled to truth since deprived of any stable possessions – it will do us no good to repeat the attempts in positivism and analytical philosophy to eradicate metaphysics altogether.

Instead, we must develop the other side of Marxist ontology, the part that took the cultur-ally productive human collective as its starting point, and identified the constructive side, the "socialization" implied even in capitalism. It is only by doing so that we will be able to find an alternative to liberalist instrumental-ism and fragmentation; an alternative which does not depend on a transcendent foundation that cannot anyway withstand a thoroughgoing critique.

Inside or outside of psychology

We shall return to this idea of a dynamic Marx-ian ontology. But first, turning to our second question, should that theoretical ontology be developed inside or outside of psychol-ogy? I will argue that the question is itself problematic.

It was argued already by Klaus Holzkamp that psychology was marred by, on the one hand, an ongoing purification of methodologi-cal formalism and fetishism to superficially organize the proliferating bits of instrumental knowledge, and, on the other hand, a con-tinual resurfacing of arbitrary foundational theoretical constructs (Holzkamp, 1983; Tol-man, Maiers, et.al, 1991). I see no signs that this perpetual crisis has been overcome since then[10]. In this situation, methodologically ar-gued interventions (e.g. under the heading of a "qualitative research") appear to be just as frustratingly affirmative as the proposition of yet another Grand Theory.

It seems more reasonable and feasible, then, to oppose the process by moving the subject-position of critique out of the field altogether. To view psychology from the outside and judge it in purely tactical terms by what it does for whom. This even promises one the freedom to reengage in psychology, say, in terms of a psychoanalysis that one knows well to be of limited validity and with ideological implica-tions, but keeping it at arm's length, reserving a space of critical reflection that is defined and sustained within a political struggle.

Thus, Derek Hook, in his introductory chapter to the above-mentioned textbook, asserts:

> Critical psychology does not wish to do away with all of psychology, or with all psychological forms of analysis. As ideologically unsound as much – even the majority – of psychology might be, we should still look to the critical potentials of certain forms of psychology, like that of psychoanalysis for example, as a way of trying to understand, grapple with, and ultimately intervene in, the working of power. Here we might suggest that one important

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9   See, for a good discussion of how metaphysics are un-avoidable, Wartofsky (1979)

10   More recent examples of such arbitrary theoretical con-structs might be "positive psychology" or "evolutionary psychology".

task of critical psychology is not to dispense with psychological types of analysis but rather to reconnect them to political levels of description and/or analysis. (Hook, 2004, 20).

Similarly, Ian Parker, consultant editor of the book, suggests:

> Despite what has been said (…) about the dangers of essentialism, it is possible to work with a 'strategic essentialism', precisely to take seriously how forms of identity have been historically linked to certain forms of oppression. The strategy here is to speak from a position (of being a woman, of being black, for example) because *that is the way one is already positioned by others*. It is a 'strategy' because it refuses to take for granted the categories used by others, and it plays with those categories in order to free the subject from those categories as fixed (Ibid., 152)[11].

We might refer to this as the *instrumental* version of critical psychology, since it makes use of pieces of the discipline without committing itself to the project of a better psychology.

In my view, however, this approach runs into trouble when the reflexivity of critical thinking is taken just a few steps further. While it is clear that establishing a subject-position outside of the discipline provides a way to escape the entanglement in the paradoxes of foundationalism and non-foundationalism within it, it is equally obvious that this presupposes precisely that the boundaries of the discipline are kept intact. The instrumental version of critical psychology remains deeply dependent on the given discipline of psychology, precisely insofar as it defines itself outside of it. And it does so in a way that keeps it from going on to reflect the subject-position of critique itself.

For, whether we call it psychology or not, such reflection must include ourselves as *engaging* in the practices that we cannot help but frame and construe positively as not only political, but also therapeutic, educational etc., and thus, inevitably, psychological. Otherwise, we have fallen into the somewhat familiar trap of defining the political and the psychological as two intrinsically separate spaces and practices. Without that separation, how can we be sure that our use of psychological fragments is really "strategic"? And further, for whom and for what exactly might the drawing of that boundary really be "strategic"?[12]

At first sight, a clear demarcation of the field of psychology as itself ideological appears conducive to a re-articulation of issues in terms of social theory. This is not necessarily the case, however, if the overall frame is still – however critical – psychology. With that frame as given, it is the use of social theory which remains ad hoc rather than obliging. Any instrumentality of the relation to other disciplines goes unnoticed so long as it is still psychology that defines the field. Given the real existence and power of the discipline as the social institution in which we make our living – and given that the relevance of psychological issues is by no means limited to the institutions of Academia – this is a problem, of course, which we cannot overcome even with the best of theoretical approaches.

Contemporary critical psychology shares this problem with that of the 1970's, including the German-Scandinavian version, where quite sketchy general notions of the "societal formation" of "bourgeois society" were sometimes considered sufficient to historicize psychological analyses. But then the problem was at least clearly visible because the ambition to develop a positive theory was considered primary to –

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11 See also, for a more unfolded argument for a "strategic" use of psychoanalysis, Parker (1997).

12 As when, for instance, Ian Parker, practising psychoanalyst and member of the London Society of the New Lacanian School, defines Jacques Lacan as a "barred psychologist" (Parker, 2003), safely outside of the discipline.

and provided an approach to criticizing – the given disciplinary boundaries (as was quite clearly expressed in Holzkamp's suggestion of a "Subject-Science" as defining term). Today, perhaps, the cultural-historical over-simplicity of "societal formations" has been replaced by a simplicity of "epistèmes". While Foucault's (and other foucauldians') overall theories and specific genealogical analyses are certainly of great value, the almost complete dominance of foucauldian approaches to supplement critical psychology with social theory shows a tendency to "empty" its socio-historical orientation. It often appears as if a quite rigid grid of social "categories" – which even, once proclaimed historical, typically remain fixed or only vary insignificantly throughout the analyses – exhaust the socio-cultural field taken into consideration, to the exclusion of economy, state and military power, organizational structures, technologies etc. etc.

But the more important difference is that in today's critical psychologies, the subject-position of critique mostly appears to (believe itself to) be external to *both* psychology *and* the (other) disciplines of social theory. In effect, the reintegration of social theory remains largely tactical and external, precisely since it is not facilitated by the way critical psychology is itself established and crafted[13]. In other words, *so long as critical psychologists refrain from suggesting positive alternative theories, it is still the empty shell of the discipline that structures the field, even if its contents have*

been dissolved. If we want to really break away from the objects and approaches that define today's psychology, an anti-psychology just won't do the job!

Suggesting theoretical categories for a critical psychology

But what will? Must we build a new post-psychological theory all over – or should we merely return to one that exists already, such as GSCP? Neither. The positive theorizing that we need is neither to be built from scratch nor to be arrived at by simply translating and teaching theoretical categories from GSCP or other kinds of CHAT (nor from any other substantial theoretical tradition). Both options would rest on the problematic self-conception of an Enlightenment scientism, according to which a virgin natural and social world can be approached unmediated by tradition, and / or theoretical structures ("categorial frameworks") can persist independently of history and social practice[14].

Thus, when, in the following, I proceed to attempt a concretization of the above general considerations by rendering some of the theoretical concepts from Ute Osterkamp's *Motivation Research* [Motivationsforschung] (Osterkamp, 1975, 1976) – to my mind one of the key works that took GSCP beyond what had been proposed already in CHAT – it will be nothing like the structured argument that one finds in the original text or in most of the secondary renderings that have been printed in journals such as *Forum Kritische Psychologie, Nordiske Udkast*, and elsewhere. Apart

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13 Interestingly, this is not altogether characteristic of the above-mentioned Hook (2004) volume. In part, this may be because of the way in which the book itself is situated at an obvious socio-historical watershed, in the context of a palpable economic inequality, and as part of debates in a strong progressive movement. Perhaps it takes the continuity and the stronghold of a democratic and socialist movement such as the South African to make it feasible to suggest, as in the chapters by Mkhize (ch. 2) and Foster (ch. 22), the building of a new paradigm for dealing with the issues that are currently discussed as psychology.

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14 Even in the tradition of an historical "epistemology of practice" such as that of CHAT, this theory of knowledge has been influential enough to underlie the methodologies of such great theorists as Klaus Holzkamp and Vasily Davydov

from, of course, the mutilations inescapably resulting from brevity, the presentation must be designed to address the *concerns of the present field,* and it must be *dialogic* in the deep Bakhtinian sense as utterances whose meanings reside at the intersections with other utterances from other voices.

This leads me to suggest the following three arguments as pivotal to a dynamic positive ontology:

1. The kind of positive metaphysics which has been developed from the Marxian origins in CHAT[15] is a kind of *theory of human practice*, as the participants of which we can understand ourselves as persons, as humans who collectively produce our life conditions and thereby ourselves. The important point about it, in relation to the above sketched problem of foundationalism, is that even as a general theory of human practice it is not an a-historical and fixed point of reference, but, rather, it is making explicit and debatable the presuppositions of dynamic cultural historicity itself. The anti-essentialist thrust, then, lies not merely in the evocation of the scientific spirit of an ongoing critical revision of categories on the basis of (historical-) empirical "evidence" (as was sometimes argued by Holzkamp and others), but in *viewing the "foundation" in principle as the self-reflection of socio-historical practices*.

2. It is sometimes argued that a completely historicized psychology will lack an account of embodied sensuous subjectivity, which is then sought in psychoanalysis (e.g. Butler, 1997), phenomenology (e.g. Keller, 2007), neuro-psychology (e.g. Cromby, 2004), or elsewhere. But the problem in the relations between history and the body, Ute Osterkamp would reply, is not too much, but too little historicity. As already highlighted by Leontiev (1985), but largely eclipsed both in CHAT and in other critical psychologies[16], the body itself has a history. Homo sapiens did not emerge as a tabula rasa. Life processes, the psychological principle of activity mediated by a relation between sense and metabolism, emotion, learning, anxiety, and many other qualities developed in a natural history that *predates but also includes* the becoming of human cultural production. This means that human individuals are born to develop into participants and transformers of ever-changing cultures. Thus, in contrast to psychoanalysis[17], needs and motives are seen as basically neither private nor anti-social or destructive.

3. Yet it also means that we are not made to fit just any culture. In cultures of oppression, life can be inhuman for some or for all. The very ideas of oppression and inhumanity presuppose a concept of human needs. While it is true, given the first point

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15 Perhaps it should be noted that here, consistent with the GSCP tradition (and with the ISCAR organization), cultural-historical activity theory is considered a quite diverse landscape of theories that have in common some reception of the works of Lev Vygotsky and some notion that the human psyche is developed and culturally mediated in activities under specific historical conditions. In GSCP, the legacy of A.N. Leontiev is of particular importance since it was he who first stated and demonstrated the generalized historical approach to the psyche. See also Langemeier & Nissen (2004)

16 Ian Burkitt, with his general discussion of "Bodies of Thought", is one of the very few exceptions to this rule (Burkitt, 1999).

17 Although with this general theory of motivation, exactly since it departed from psychoanalysis on the most basic points, Ute Osterkamp was able to critically approach and integrate Freud's theory of repression and conflict. Not as a tactical use of unchallenged elements of knowledge, but as a productive critique that was done both from without and from within, and which transformed those elements at the core.

above, that human needs and motives are tuned towards cultural objects, there is certainly more to be said, and more that *can* be said on the background of a historicity of the body. Already mammals are not driven only by the immediate needs of metabolism and procreation; play and explorative behavior presuppose an emotional regulation of curiosity versus anxiety, and of social relations of various qualities and kinds. In the emergence of humans, these needs have been sublated – that is, developed and integrated in a new totality – into what Ute Osterkamp termed *"productive needs"*, a generalized need to develop *action potence* [Handlungsfähigkeit], one's participation in the collective provision of conditions of life.

This conception usually provokes a reaction: Does this not amount to the essentialist idea that subjectivity is a pre-given beneficial natural entity, rather than developed in a cultural process of subjectification or interpellation? But no, it means nothing of the kind. "Human nature" is nowhere to be found on its own. Rather, the suggestion is that in every production of subjectivity, in every subjectification and interpellation, humans retain the *criterion* of action potence and productive needs; we must ideologically see ourselves as developing participation – or perceive a threat to lose it that will force us to repress and thwart our human desires.

The idea of "productive needs" as "criterion" does not mean, either, that it is left to a thing called "human nature" to provide a dynamic and "diachronic" dimension to a social theory otherwise only modeling the "synchronic" reproduction of a static social structure. The theory is precisely designed to attack that dichotomy, not by providing a psychological counterweight, but by reading the Marxian *general* ontology itself as dynamic. Thus, since productive collectivity is *inher-*

ently transformative, participation is neither adaptation nor subjection, nor must an a priori stipulated agency effect social practice from the outside. In the words of Marx' third Thesis on Feuerbach:

> The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. Hence this doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change [Selbstveränderung] can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice. (Marx, 2003)

Accordingly, the human need for action potence is paradoxical in the sense that it pushes toward enhancing participation in social practices that exist in certain cultural forms, but at the same time this inherently means appropriating and taking part in *transforming* and *developing* those cultural forms. We might say it's a *critical need*; this theory of needs places human motivation on the same side, as it were, as the subject-position of a productive critique.

The idea of a "critical" need as subjective criterion of participation in historical social practice is important as an argument in today's critical psychology for at least two reasons.

First, it addresses a simple but very difficult question in a Foucauldian approach: When and why do people accept or reject possibilities of subjectification given in discourses? This is a question that keeps reappearing because each of the answers usually given are insufficient: a) that the question is irrelevant because the theoretical concept of power already presupposes resistance (to which one might reply: yes, but does that mean we shouldn't analyze the concrete dilemmas of acceptance or resistance?); b) that since we do not stipulate any unity of

the subject, we are only interested *insofar as* subjectification occurs (but why must it remain an isolated aspect, why are we not allowed to reflect its relevance in the concrete?); c) that the very plurality of discourses provides cracks, gaps, and contradictions that constitute the subject as against power (perhaps, but we still have no idea what that subject wants, and so long as the subject is only constituted negatively, it must remain an abstract possibility); d) or that we must then return to the blank contingencies of unique biography or, again, psychoanalysis (but that only confirms the subject as powerless). Those answers are really so many versions of the rejection of a positive theory of subjectivity, either as a pure epistemological nominalism or as the disguise of negativity itself in seemingly positive concepts. Alternatively, with the theory of productive needs, we can embrace the issue of the subject's criteria as a generalizing positivity.

Second, it points a way beyond the futile concern, so pervasive in post-structuralist critique, with social categories taken as abstractions. It so easily becomes an aim in itself to achieve, as in the Ian Parker quote above, emancipation from *any* (tactically designated) fixity of identity. Or, in Foucault's famous words, to "refuse what we are". In the appearance it is more radical, e.g., to question the designation of "women" than to oppose the oppression of women. But what for? Surely, abstract destabilizations of social categories must be substantialized by considerations of importance and priorities, and this calls for an integral theory of needs. Otherwise, not only is social critique made arbitrary[18], but it gets stuck in a formal-academistic phase that ends up reproducing a liberalist conception of au-

tonomous action for which empty choices are the ultimate ideal.

Again, this problem was not invented by the poststructuralists. It already marred symbolic interactionism and forced it into ever more formal and detailed microstudies, even if the analytical focus on socio-cultural categories as performed, objectified and handled at first was quite fruitful. In fact, it is already inherent to Marx' and Engels' utopianism mentioned above. In the *German Ideology* (Marx & Engels, 1981), the alienation in class-societies of activities into fixed identities, classes, is criticized, and an abstract multiplicity is proposed in its place: the image of the person who hunts in the morning and criticizes after dinner without ever becoming a hunter or a critic (etc.). This is utopian in the sense that it works negatively, as a critique of alienated labour rather than really as a positive conception of human and humane life. The subject of such critique is clearly "liberated"; but what does s/he want? S/he remains emancipated precisely for as long as s/he is free of needs; in Marx' communism, "society", by definition, takes care of everything. In other words, the dichotomy of freedom and necessity, otherwise so importantly overcome by Hegel and Marx, is here fully re-established: freedom requires the absence of needs. As Ute Osterkamp demonstrated (Osterkamp, 1976, ch. 4), this utopianism is connected with Marx' insufficient conceptualization of needs as socio-culturally developed, but still purely consumptive. The same theory of needs, and the same problem, reoccurs in CHAT. In Leontiev, either the creative development of personality must go beyond needs (driven by what?), as in "Activity, Consciousness, and Personality" (Leontiev, 1978, ch. 5.4.), or that drive is referred to as a system of "higher needs" that cannot but match social demands, as in "Problems of the Development of Mind" (Leontiev, 1981) – making quite obvious the return of dualism and functionalism (see Axel & Nissen, 1993).

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18 One can think of many absurd examples: as a Dane, I may miss possibilities in life that are available to Swedes; so long as I spend my limited leisure time as a footballer I never get a chance to flourish as cricket player, etc. etc.

With a conception of "productive needs", the ideal will not be the fading, nor the transcendence into social harmony, of needs, but their ever richer but perpetually contradictory development.

The collective subject of critical psychology

Even if one is convinced by arguments such as these that translating and referencing Osterkamp's *Motivationsforschung* would be useful in today's critical psychology, it is of course neither possible nor relevant to develop a positive theory of subjectivity only through a, however targeted, reintroduction of GSCP. One must also attend to the opposite movement where this tradition is itself developed dialogically, among other things by engaging in exchange with other positions in critical psychology.

Therefore, it seems justified for me, in the final part of this essay, to introduce some current attempts at theoretical development on a dimension that is closely connected with the recommended "foundational reflexivity" of a positive critique: its subject positions. As mentioned above, if it is important to reflect *what* our critique presupposes (ontology, metaphysics), it is equally vital to ask: *who* does our critique presuppose? In fact, we might say that any theoretical critique that develops ontology at the same time repositions its subject (Nissen, 2004a).

As GSCP moved beyond the CHAT of Leontiev and others, it was primarily to facilitate a more explicit ideology critique, in connection with a questioning of subjectivity and subject-positions, including those of ourselves, at a deeper level. In its early conceptions, as I have partly sketched, the focus was mostly on individual subjectivity as understood in terms of participation in social practices. This emphasis still characterizes the situated turn in more recent Danish critical psychology

(Dreier, 2008). But in addition to this, I and others have proposed to understand subjectivity also in terms of specific communities or collectives as local and situated practices. This is important because, in the end, the only way to overcome a dichotomy of "subject versus structure" in a theory of participation is to unfold the idea of the collective as itself a subject, a "we" (I cannot unfold the argument in the space of this essay, but see (Mørck, 2000; Nissen, 2004a; Nissen, 2005).

Again here, we share with other strands of CHAT the fundamental notion of collective activity mediated by artifacts, objectifying practice in cultural forms, and understood as structures of participation. But the emphasis on subjectivity makes us critical of any functionalist tendencies, that is, the abstraction from the inter-subjectivity of social practice and of theory and research. This is particularly important since today, in many parts of the world – including, again, the above-mentioned Hook (2004) volume on critical psychology – "activity theory" is seen as more or less identical with Yrjö Engeström's theory of "activity systems" (Engeström, 1987) which precisely achieves the level of collectivity by bracketing the subject of research and effectively stripping the subjects in the "system" of any criteria outside of the "object-outcome" of activity (see also Langemeier & Roth, 2006).

To understand collectivity in terms of particular we's begins with seeing that we are ourselves as critical psychologists not outside of the society which we describe or criticize. Thus we must reflect the *standpoint* of our analyses and critiques. "The standpoint", Marx stated in his tenth Thesis on Feuerbach, "of the old materialism is civil society [bürgerliche Gesellschaft]; the standpoint of the new materialism is human society or social humanity" (Marx, 2003). As the moving foundation / framework of all knowledge, including psychology, even critical psychology, the revolutionary practice of social humanity is not

something ethereal, outside of the society we criticize, only to be embodied as a future or distant idealized utopia. It is really all about identifying with the revolutionary, productive and collective *aspect* of *real* social practices (Jensen, 1999).

But we must take reflection yet a step further: As *particular* collectives, we do not constitute ourselves in the abstract as a mere "aspect" of social practice. So how do we conceive and constitute ourselves as collectives, as *particular* "we's"?

This question is relevant also because we must seek to get beyond Ferdinand Tönnies' original sociological concepts of Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft, society and community, in which we can only choose between a naturalistic, pre-modern substantial community, and a liberal society based on social contract between "free" individuals – an ideological dichotomy which, on the basis of a purely stipulated psychology of "wills" (Tönnies' term) that are pre-given either as natural or rational, works to conceal the real collective processes that we are engaged in every day.(Tönnies, 1970). It may appear that both terms in that contradiction are immediately apparent as ideology; but it is not enough to merely denounce both terms in the dichotomy, if it means that they are really maintained as repressed or seen-but-unnoticed critical identities. Thus, for instance, why do critical psychologists often immediately react against any ideas of a particular collective subjectivity with the argument that there is conflict, contradiction, transformation (as e.g. in the insightful discussion of the collectivity of memory work in Stephenson & Papadopoulos, 2006)? Why would a particularization of collectivity imply its idealized and harmonized rendering? One hypothesis could be that this is because it is already inherent in the utopian shadow side of critical psychology as particular community: the utopian Gemeinschaft is the repressed collective subject-position of negativity, dichot-

omized from its individual subject-position which is the free-floating, autonomous citizen; in other words, the standpoint of civil society which Marx criticized in his 10th Thesis on Feuerbach. Tönnies' old dichotomy remains in place to structure reflection, splitting it up in a "system world" of abstract exchange, and perhaps abstract collectivity, "out there", and a "life world" of repressed (*or* hideously explicit) concrete communitarianism, "in here with us" – a dichotomy that matches well with the above-sketched oscillation between liberal and conservative ethics.

Instead, we must begin from the way objectification is dialectically related to subjectification. This is where the more recent inspiration from various forms of discursive psychology adds to the classical CHAT theme of cultural mediation. The constitution of subjects is the flip side of objectification also in the sense of power, discipline and recognition. Even critical inter-subjectivity is mediated. It is vital that we resist the temptation to think of ourselves as "the good guys" who are not exerting power, or of our own critical practices as beyond discipline. We, as critical collectives and participants, are forged in a struggle for recognition as much as in creative development and exchange of artifacts.

Further, since practice is transformative, we constitute ourselves prescriptively rather than descriptively. What we are is crucially defined by what we strive to be. We cannot, for instance, "refuse what we are" – as Foucault recommends us – without at the same time defining ourselves as aspiring to be "refusers", which might be re-described as the wannabe academic avant-garde of Enlightenment, occupying a standpoint that hides to itself how far really it is from being "outside" the processes of producing society and subjectivity that it seeks to understand. If we are to understand ourselves as collectives, we must scrutinize and debate our ideals, the models with which we regulate ourselves ethically and thus connect

what we do into wider political projects.

One materialist way of approaching that process is to view our critical research as engaged in the production not simply of representations, but of *prototypes* – prototypes here defined, using the works of Uffe Juul Jensen, as the interrelations of a) situated prototypical practices, b) the model artifacts or inscription devices in which they are objectified, and c) their contested, and temporally as well as spatially distributed, social relevances (Jensen, 1987, 1999)[19].

Thus, to provide a brief example, the abstract-general concept of a "cannabis dependent" is currently being institutionalized in Danish social work, in the shape of specialized diagnoses and counseling procedures (in fact, in the process, the number of "addicts" treated in Denmark has almost tripled from 1996 to 2004). A critical analysis of this concept should not only focus on the socio-cultural contextuality of this "behavior" to provide an alternative approach to dependency; nor should it (as in Dreier, 2008) settle for a de-centering of the practice of counseling itself, encircling the real space of action possibilities in the everyday lives of clients or therapists in which the idea of "dependency" reveals itself as an abstraction. It should also track the ways in which that abstraction is alive as material reality, objectified in institutional structures and knowledges, and in turn forms collectivities (of "counseling", "self-help" etc.) and disciplines subjectivities (of "experts", "users", "dependents" etc.) (see Nissen, 2006).

But further, the im- or explicit *alternative* ideas of "human beings", "whole persons", "social problems", "street-level work", "community" etc. – the critically positive concepts – must be reflected as theoretically obliging and prototypically realized in practices as well. It then becomes visible, for instance, how, concretely, the distinction between a humanist psychology and a socialist/Marxist conception is realized in the organizational forms, ideologies, and social policy implications of different practices (Nissen, 2004b); how the (quasi-) religious transcendence staged in Narcotics Anonymous can work as an alienated form of a collectivity which could be articulated more forcefully in terms of democratized welfare services (Nissen, 2002), or how the distribution of inside / outside institutional spaces co-constitute the meaning of not only dependence, but also of "everyday life" (Nissen, 2004c; Vinum & Nissen, 2006).

It is important to notice how this "self-critical" approach to aspects of what we are, do, and make, is, again, more than a refusal or a purely formal, pragmatic manipulation. Thus, to take up the latter theme from our example, when we refuse to subscribe to naïvely communitarian ideas about "everyday life" as revolutionarily innocent of the alienations of institutionalized drug treatment, we do not only critically reflect the ways in which such ideas could work to constitute ourselves along the lines of a utopian-sectarian collective – taking Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" as an inspiration (Foucault, 1986). We also strive to *articulate the alternative* values of a community working to advance political projects that extend a commitment across institutional boundaries and thus may engage with how "substance use" is (more or less problematically) present in our own lives in the same overall terms as with how "dependence" and other social problems might be better addressed

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19 The concept of prototype is developed from a Wittgensteinian and Marxist theory of knowledge (e.g. Ruben, 1978; Wartofsky, 1979) and shaped to engage in dialogue with pragmatist (e.g Bowker & Star, 1999; Suchman, Trigg, & Blomberg, 2002) and constructionist (e.g.Latour, 1987; Stengers, 1999) science studies, but it can also be viewed as developing the implications of Klaus Holzkamp's concept of "generalization of action possibilities" [Möglichkeitsverallgemeinerung] by emphasizing the ways in which (even abstract) concepts are objectified as artifacts in and of concrete collectives and social practices, rather than primarily mental constructs in processes of communication.

and reworked in current local welfare state services. Such values include that of an academically accountable / reflexive social work practice for which it makes a difference how human needs are conceived because they are more than preferences on a (pseudo-)market.

In general, we, as critical psychologists, together with all the various co-participants in the social practices we engage with in more or less direct – but always mediated – ways, are in the business of *prototyping forms of collectivity and social practice*. This is really what all kinds of psychology are about – in the words of Kurt Danziger: we are "constructing the subject" (Danziger, 1994) – but we critical psychologists should perhaps claim the advantage of knowing this to be the case; and embrace it! We can only know that because we define ourselves toward the horizons of transforming the ideological kinds of participation that mainstream psychology idealizes and inculcates – which is why our critique is from the outside – and at the same time realize that, in doing so, we are ourselves inside, taking part in the practices of psychology, and working toward a psychology that is more consistent, more substantial, and socially relevant in more democratic and egalitarian ways.

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And finally, there is the interplay of this text itself with "us". It may appear provocative or innovative to suggest and invite the kind of reflexivity which that theme displays. But like most everything else, it already has a long tradition in social theory from which it is perhaps useful to take off.

In Erving Goffman's wonderful reflexive introduction to his Frame Analysis, he asserts:

I can only suggest that he who would combat false consciousness and awaken people to their true interests has much to do, because the sleep is very deep. And I do not intend here to provide a lul-

laby but merely to sneak in and watch the way the people snore (Goffman, 1986, 14).

Yet, as he then takes us into the false infinity of endless meta-reflections on the textual framings he has made – culminating in a set of comments on the lines of asterixes that divide his paragraphs (like those above here) – all the while pretending to assume a standpoint outside, we should begin to wonder if we are not in fact still dreaming and snoring when we think we are sneaking and watching.

The reflexive highlighting of the "we" of this text, by contrast, is intended as a wake-up call. I urge you to question the ways in which this text presupposes and co-constitutes an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991)[20]. I seek to interpellate you as critical participants of a continuously self-re-constituting community for which this journal retains or regains a particular relevance.

It is obvious that this imagined community can be seen as a "mere artifact" and "function of the text". But that is just what it's for; and I hope it is no small or "mere" thing. If the text is worth its effort, it is because it makes a, however small, contribution to something that matters: A community imagined is not confined to its text, nor independent of it. It is neither nature nor spirit, and no more is it hard-wired structure than disembedded reflexivity. It is a living social practice that intervenes in the real world and re-/creates and re-/defines itself in the process. It must struggle for recognition from those who imagine it, critically, from the inside and from the outside, individually and collectively. The community imagined as a function of this text is perhaps not as stable, one-layered and clearly delimited as one indexed by, e.g., an organizational document or

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20 Anderson's concept precisely addresses the way textual genres co-constitutes community – in particular, how the press and the novel was part of the emergence of the modern nation state.

a love letter would appear to be. But still, it is a singular situated community participating in social practice, and as such, recognized and self-reflexive. This metaphysics of collective subjectivity leads to tougher questions than those regarding the relations of the text with itself and its grammatical, graphic or rhetorical functions.

Do we still, in the times of a devastating neoliberal / neo-conservative assault on the idea of science critique as the ongoing revision of substantial theories and obliging epistemologies, believe in ourselves as critical psychology, or as critical psychologists, or as readers and writers of critical social studies? If so, do these suggestions about collective subjectivity in any way contribute to those projects? Do they contribute to redefining them?

Or have I lost you somewhere along the way, so that the "we" is in fact now purely formal? Is it that you read from the standpoint of an opposing community, or one with a language so different it would not be worth the effort to trace my meanings? Or have you simply better things to do?

Such questions imply the kind of inquiry to which a positive theory of collective subjectivity may be relevant.

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