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The analectic turn: critical psychology and the new political context

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Mots-clés :

In this article I explore the limitations of academic critical psychology, suggesting that it is a spent force, largely irrelevant to real problems of oppression and liberation. An alternative approach which I characterise as ‘analectic critical psychology’ can be seen in the Latin American traditions of liberation psychology and community social psychology as well as in some developments in other regions.

Critical psychology's different paths

Critical psychology attempts to correct the errors of dominant psychology, but the ways different critical psychologies have construed and attempted that task have differed greatly between different workers and different places. To make a first approximation to an overview, I will distinguish between the European and Latin American traditions of critical psychology, but please bear in mind that this involves creating an image of 'ideal types' which will need disrupting later in order to provide a more subtle understanding.

Critical psychology arose in large part from what has been called the 'crisis in social psychology' dating from the late 1960s well into the 1970s. The criticisms of dominant, North American, largely experimental, social psychology were that it was irrelevant to real human needs and contexts, and that it wrongly assumed that its methods enabled the discovery of fundamental principles, processes and even laws of human behaviour, that could be generalised to all situations. To this critique, largely from within social psychology, were added related concerns, for example about the abuses of psychology and of the medicalisation of distress in the mental health system (anon, 1970s n.d.).

But from that point a number of paths were followed (Armistead, 1974; Parker, 1989, 1999). Some emphasised the dramaturgical metaphor for understanding human action (Harré & Secord, 1972), others emphasised the study of experience using phenomenological concepts and methods. Some assimilated Marxist and Marxian thinking (Ingleby, 1970; Parker & Spears, 1996)and others emphasised social commitment and action. Others still focussed on the oppressive roles and uses of psychological concepts and knowledge(D. Ingleby, 1985; Rose, 1985) while others focussed on the development of new methods (Reason & Rowan, 1981).

By the 1980s, it was possible to identify some dominant trends. In Europe (predominantly) the 'discursive turn', in the context of a post-structuralist and post-modernist movement away from the structuralism and Marxism of previous generations, was particularly influential (An early statement of this approach was the opening article of the short-lived journal Ideology and Consciousness: Adlam et al., 1977; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Just as the pretensions of empiricism in revealing general principles and theories had been rejected, so now were the so called 'grand theories' of social systems. Instead there emerged a highly parochial focus on the particularities of social situations and above all of the use of language. In some variants all psychological and social phenomena were reduced to texts (and the term 'reduced' is used here consciously to suggest that this was not unlike the reductionism so criticised in previous psychologies). In some variants the relativism of postmodernism meant a rejection of ethical judgements and also it seemed of methodological standards - 'say what you like' seemed to be the norm. At its worst this meant an individualistic rendering of 'critical' rather than critical as the questioning of a body of theory and practice by reference to another, sharper and more penetrating theoretical framework (such as the analysis of class or patriarchal relations). Indeed the hyper-valorization of personal experience and the emphasis on the construction of reality through the use of language now seems like a retreat from a “really social” understanding of people in society since it involves a new dualism - that between an “unknowable” social reality and the social psychology of language. Concepts of social construction and cognitive representation seem to maintain the bourgeois distinction between individual and society, or at best they fail to theorise the processes by which concrete individuals (Sève, 1978) are formed in contexts of social reproduction, socialisation and social transformation (Bhaskar, 1979).

However it would be churlish to suggest that the discursive and poststructuralist turn brought no advances in understanding: to name but three, there was Silverman's use of discursive analysis to show how social discrimination in the medical consulting room reduced the life expectancy of children with Down syndrome (Silverman, 1981), or Figlio's use of a Foucauldian framework to explore what he called the 'social constitution' (at once the causation and the ideological construction) of chronic disease (Figlio, 1978), and finally Rose's analysis of the development of the 'psy complex' through the involvement of psychological testing in the segregative and eugenic social policies on disability in early C20 Britain (Rose, 1985).

However, such innovations were few and European critical psychology came to be characterised by a hyper-development of 'ungrounded theory', typically impenetrable to the outsider, with little apparent applicability to the harshening social reality outside the academy. This tendency we will call ‘academic’ in the ‘ivory tower’ sense of the word: the problem is not the development of theory but the alienation of theory from social causes, experience and struggles.

In Latin America, another path was being followed- not exclusively since the post-modern virus was contagious (Lacerda, 2010) - but by enough people to demonstrate that another critical psychology was possible. Here the background 'meta-praxis'

present in fields such as theology and philosophy of liberation, the Theatre of the Oppressed and in popular pedagogy, as well as in some of the region's social movements, provided an alternative and more socially engaged model. In the two originally separate but now linked areas of community social psychology and psychology of liberation, the 'preferential option for the oppressed majorities' was taken, constructing critical psychologies that dealt with social reality, as reality and not as some linguistic chimera. That reality had to be clarified and in the words of Martín-Baró 'de-ideologised' so it could be seen for what it was, in order that it could be changed (Martín-Baró, 1996a).

It would, however, be wrong to claim that there was no socially engaged critical psychology in Europe (or the other 'developed' regions) (Burton, 2004b). Some psychologists worked in community psychology (Reich, Riemer, Prilleltensky, & Montero, 2007), becoming increasingly critical of the systems of domination and oppression that affected the oppressed minorities of the core countries. Others worked closely with movements of disabled people (even in some cases engaging in civil disobedience over segregated provision) and survivors of the mental health system, developing new theories, knowledge and practices in partnership. And there was some overlap with the academic world of theoretical critical psychology, for example in the British mental health orientated network, Psychology, Politics, Resistance and collaboration with the Hearing Voices Network. Nevertheless, the overall tendency towards academic (as opposed to intellectual) hypertrophy was clear.

Academic critical psychology and its discontents in context

Why did European academic critical psychology have this characteristic tendency towards abstract theory and an increasingly exclusive emphasis on discourse, text, and language? Some of the explanation will lie in the intellectual climate beyond psychology: it wasn't just critical psychology that joined the post-modern panic, the rejection of generative theorisation that attempted to explain rather than describe social phenomena with reference to structure, social forces, social interests and contradictions. Fetishisation of the text and the description of local particularities was rife in all the social sciences, at least where positivism did not hold sway. But the discursive and post-modern turn was not simply a fashion, like any social phenomenon it requires an explanation in terms of social forces and relations.

The period from the late 1970s until the early years of the 21st century were characterised by a retreat of progressive ideology and politics in the face of the exhaustion of both the soviet and social democratic models, and the neoliberal onslaught. Despite these retreats, psychologists (whether in universities or the various arms of the welfare state) were fairly well insulated from the attacks on the organised working class and the most excluded. This maybe led to a cosy academic practice, relatively divorced from social struggles, social needs and social movements, in a

context where the dominant rhetoric was one of a defeat of socialism and Marxism. In such an environment a kind of intellectual dilettantism prospers and indeed is appreciated as a distraction and rationalisation for the existential loss of meaning. Maybe the platform shoes and floral ties had gone but the intellectual style still had something of the dandy about it.

We can test this idea by comparison with the Latin American experience, noting in passing the negation of a fundamental part of that experience in the post-modern world view: "In vain we could search for a mention of imperialism in books such as "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge" [by J-F Lyotard]" (Retamar, 1993 / 2004: 130).

Social commitment and critical psychology: solidarity and social action

Latin America has had its share of post-modern and hyper-theoretical critical psychology and indeed this is perhaps no more than another manifestation of an inferiority complex that leads to the imitation of work from the core countries (de la Torre, 1995). However, other developments can be identified (Gonzalez Rey, in press), including that of a socially committed psychology characterised by the reconstruction of psychology in dynamic relationship with social issues, social action and social movements. This was exactly the approach taken by Martín Baró in his programmatic articles and his texts of social psychology (Burton, 2004a, 2004c; Burton & Kagan, 2005; Martín-Baró, 1983, 1986, 1989, 1996c, 1998). It also characterises the best of Latin American community psychology (for example, Góis, 2005; Montero, 1996; some chapters in Montero & Serrano Garcia, 2011; Ximenes, Amaral, & Rebouças, 2008) and related work within the framework of Liberation Psychology (for example: Barrero & Salas, 2010; Dobles & Baltodano, 2010; Dobles, Baltodano, & Leandro, 2007; Guzzo & Lacerda, 2011).

It is worth quoting from Martín-Baró (Martín-Baró, 1996b) at some length to illustrate this approach:

- "1) Latin American psychology must switch focus from itself, stop being preoccupied with its scientific and social status and self-define as an effective service for the needs of the numerous majority …. which should constitute the primary object of its work…

- 2) The objective of serving the need for liberation … requires a new form of seeking knowledge: the truth of the Latin American people is not to be found in its oppressed present, but in its tomorrow of freedom; the truth of the numerous majority is not to be found but to be made. … The new perspective has to be from below, from the numerous oppressed majority… Assuming a new perspective

does not suppose, obviously, throwing out all of our knowledge; what it does suppose is its being made relative and critically revised from the perspective of the numerous majority. Only from there will the theories and models demonstrate their validity or deficiency, their usefulness or uselessness, their universality or provincialism: only from there will the techniques that have been learned demonstrate their potential for liberation or subjugation. ..

- 3) All human knowledge is conditioned by the limits imposed by reality itself. In many respects reality is opaque, and only by acting upon it, only by transforming it, is it possible for the human being to gain knowledge of it. What we see and how we see it is certainly conditioned by our perspective, by the place from which we look at history; but it is conditioned also by reality itself. So to acquire new psychological knowledge it is not enough that we base ourselves in the perspective of the people; it is necessary to involve ourselves in a new praxis, an activity that transforms reality, allowing us to know it not just in what it is but in what it is not, so thereby we can try to shift it towards what it should be1."

I can illustrate the approach by referring to the work of community psychologists from the Federal University of Ceará, Brazil (the Góis and Ximenes et al. texts cited above are examples of their output) which has a history of some 30 years. Here psychologists work within the context of community social movements, under their leadership, contributing their expertise and contributing to the production of new knowledge for social action. Here for example a radically different approach to intervention with mental distress can be witnessed, it was not designed by psychologists but emerged from the practice of community based social movements, drawing on but transcending the community therapy movement so that people are integrated in social groups and participate in social action, finding new roles capacities and meaning, or to use the term employed by the equally impressive ILAS team in Chile (Lira & Weinstein, 2000), rediscovering an existential life project.

An analectic turn? Remaking psychology with the affected

Is it possible to see this style of critical psychology gaining strength in Europe and the other core countries? Possibly this is beginning to happen and will continue, as social conditions worsen, and with them the privileged positions of psychological workers. Criticisms of the academic / post-modern / discursive style of critical psychology have been voiced for some time (Burton, 2004b; de la Corte Ibañez, 2000, 2011 / 1999; González Rey, 2002), and this has more recently included at least one of those whose work has been within the discursive mould (Parker, 2006). Perhaps more significantly there has been increasing interest in a more explicit social commitment by psychologists (Afuape, 2011; Collective of authors, 2007; Duckett, 2005; Fryer &

McCormack, 2012; Moane, 2011; Roberts, 2007; Walker, Johnson, & Cunningham, 2012; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Moreover *Critical* Community Psychology (Frizelle, 2011; Kagan, Burton, Duckett, Lawthom, & Siddiquee, 2011) is now an increasingly widespread phenomenon.

However, what the philosopher Enrique Dussel has termed 'analectics' (or ana-dialectics) (Burton & Flores, 2011; Dussel, 1985, 1998a, 1998b) offers a fundamental challenge to conventional psychology and also to academic critical psychology. Dussel systematizes the approach that is common to all the variants of "Latin American praxis" (Flores, 2009, 2011), the engagement with Martín-Baró's 'new interlocutor", the poor, the oppressed, as a response to both the false universalism of Eurocentrism and to the post-modern, relativist, anti-foundational 'false solution' that rejects the idea of ethical or theoretical universals. As Dussel notes in an interview,

> "... I find myself suddenly with a new ethics articulated around principles that make universal claims. I read postcolonial theory, I read the work of subaltern studies, I read Laclau, and everyone is talking the talk of antifoundationalism and postmodern antiuniversalism. I ask myself, 'Well, what's going on with you, Enrique?' What's wrong with me? What is really happening is that what I am talking about is 'post' all this. Mine is an antidogmatic universalism. It is a claim to universality that cannot be the 'old' Eurocentric universalism." (Gómez & Dussel, 2001)

Dussel attempts the re-founding of a philosophy of ethics and a philosophy of politics on universal principles tested by the critical challenge, 'from below', by the oppressed 'other'. An analectic critical psychology does the same thing, testing and renovating the conceptual and practical tools of psychology through its close engagement in social action with that same oppressed other – whether that is marginalised and excluded communities of migrants, disabled people, survivors of the mental health system, victims of domestic abuse (and the categories overlap and shift dynamically as capital rampages and restructures), or a host of other possible colleagues and comrades. The point here is that psychology (and social science in general) needs an ethical point of reference against which to check its content but more than that, it is not enough to rely on internal self correction within the discipline; the challenge needs to come from those affected or potentially affected (positively or negatively) by the discipline's conceptual and practical constructions and actions.

So an analectical critical psychology has three characteristics:

- 1) This commitment to interrogation from the affected – from below, from outside the totality of the dominant system. This embracing of alterity (of social class, family, ethnicity, generation, gender, ability, body type, sexuality, etc) is the "ana-lectic" or ana-dia-lectic". "… a criticism and a surmounting of the merely negative

dialectical method. It does not deny it, just as dialectic does not deny science but simply assumes it, completes it, and gives it its just and real value. The negative dialectical method of Marcuse, Adorno, or even Bloch is naive with respect to the positive criticism of the utopia of the political exteriority offered by the peripheral peoples, the working-class woman, the oppressed youth, and the dependent societies." (Dussel, 1985: 159-160).

- 2) A social realist ontology (for the question of oppression, struggle, liberation is an ontological rather than epistemological question): while reality can be structured or masked by ideology and language, it is not reducible to that and suggesting so is an insult to people at the sharp end of exploitation, colonisation and rejection.

- 3) The social definition of the human subject – that is to say the societal constitution (causal and ideological construction): a critique of individualism means taking seriously the idea that "the human essence is the ensemble of social relations" - Marx – 6th Thesis on Feuerbach (Leonard, 1984; Sève, 1975). People are created in and through social relations: society is in us, it is part of us, and we also bear it as we strive to transform it, while also reproducing it .(Bhaskar, 1979, 1998) Academic critical psychology has singularly failed to recognize the profundity of this re-conceptualisation, indeed dissolution, of the individual-society relationship, in effect perpetuating the split between psyche and the social with its privileging of the particular and eschewal of the elucidation of general processes that we humans share.

1 The translation is my own, departing in places from the Harvard version.

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