

Critical Psychology and Revolutionary Marxism

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ABSTRACT. This paper addresses the intersection between Marxism and psychology, focusing on ‘critical’ approaches that have emerged in the discipline in the last 15 years. The paper traces the way that elements of Marxism that are diametrically opposed, and in some cases dialectically opposed, to mainstream psychology are evaded, misrepresented or systematically distorted by ostensibly ‘critical’ psychologies in the English-speaking world. Elements of Marxist analysis—the human being as an ensemble of social relations, the materiality of the family, private property and the state, surplus value and cultural capital, alienation and exploitation and ideological mystification—are contrasted with the standard disciplinary notions of the psychological subject, society, utilitarian transparency, unhealthy experience and false beliefs. Specifications of the position of the researcher in Marxism—standpoint, reflexive location, class consciousness, institutional space and social revolution—are set against the dominant notions in mainstream psychology of neutrality, rationalism, individual enlightenment, scientific knowledge and adaptation and amelioration. Change in Marxism—as permanent change, an engagement with relatively enduring structures, theoretical practice, materialist dialectics and prefigurative politics—is pitted against the standard procedures of ratification, pragmatism, empiricism, positivism and the drawing up of blueprints. This analysis of the discipline and its ‘critical’ variants is designed to clear the way for revolutionary Marxist work in and against the domain of psychology.

KEY WORDS: anti-capitalism, capitalism, critical psychology, Marxism, neoliberalism

Marxists have had good cause to avoid psychology, but their well-founded suspicion of a discipline that focuses on the activities of individuals and internal mental states has posed particular difficult questions to Marxists working as psychologists (Hayes, 2004). The sheer variety of approaches inside the discipline that claim to address and advance psychology makes it difficult for those working in any particular political tradition to be able to credibly provide an alternative that solves every conceptual, methodological or ideological problem. At the

same time, the diverse and sometimes sectarian disputes that riddle Marxism mean that it is quite impossible to believe that there could be only one authentic Marxist voice, let alone one position that would alone be a legitimate pretender to be a 'Marxist psychology' (Parker & Spears, 1996). This paper does not make such a claim, and takes a different tack, arguing that revolutionary Marxism as a political tradition outside the discipline has something distinctive to say about contemporary debates, and that this must lead us to refuse to identify with any particular tendency inside the discipline, including new versions of a putative 'critical psychology' (Parker, 2007a).

By revolutionary Marxism I mean a political movement which combines a theoretical analysis of capitalist society—and the various ideological forms and disciplinary practices that serve it—with the practical task of overthrowing it; this engaged, explicitly partisan knowledge of forms of oppression under capitalism (racism, heterosexism and able-bodiedness, to name but three forms that have become necessary correlates of economic exploitation) is developed as a logic of inquiry that aims to articulate the refusal of capitalism that already appears among those who suffer in this society. The historical arc of this political movement runs from the failed insurrection of the Paris Commune in 1871 to the successful Russian revolution of 1917, and thence to the attempt to defend and keep alive the creative and democratic spirit of rebellion through the crushing bureaucratic counter-revolution under Stalin and to revive that spirit in the student and worker struggles of the 1960s in the capitalist world (Mandel, 1978, 1979). The historical materialist 'methodology' of revolutionary Marxism, then, is but a means by which the self-consciousness of a political movement which will change the world is warranted. Marxism is not a frozen corpus of knowledge, but has developed as capitalism and challenges to capitalism have mutated through the expansion of the service sector (Mandel, 1974), globalisation (Went, 2000) and new ideological forms through which it is interpreted by other 'critical' theorists (Bensaïd, 2002).

The contours of contemporary capitalism and revolutionary Marxist elements of present-day anti-capitalism are set out in Table 1, and the place of psychology in this matrix will be elaborated in the course of this paper. The only legitimate institutional bases for revolutionary Marxism for many years during the existence of the Soviet Union (in which it was severely repressed) were in the universities, and so one of the ironies of history is that this political tradition that is so antithetical to formalized academic modes of argumentation found itself meshed into modes of discourse that gave voice to intellectuals rather than to workers themselves; it is against that political-economic background that Marxism is often assumed to be, and is incorporated into academic institutions as, a kind of social-scientific 'critique' of capitalism (Therborn, 1976). There should already, then, be an antipathy among revolutionary Marxists to 'critical' traditions inside mainstream academic disciplines, but the grounds for the articulation of that antipathy need to be mapped out.

TABLE 1. Mainstream psychology and critical psychology in relation to capitalism

(Anti)capitalism (retroactively separated into the three aspects)	Mainstream psychology (functional to capitalism)	'Critical' psychology (legitimation and struggle)	Contemporary capitalism (requirements)
A. Analysis (commodity location of subject)	'models' of the psychological individual	indigenous theory	identity
1. Ensemble of social relations	psychological subject	discursive subject and stake	stakeholders
2. Materiality (family, private property, state)	'social psychology' and 'society'	systemic and community	substitutability
3. Surplus value (and cultural capital)	utilitarian	conversational turns	rights
4. Alienation and exploitation	transparency	reframing	flexibility
5. Ideological mystification	unhealthy experience		
	false beliefs	commonsense	tolerance
B. Position (conditions of impossibility)	ethos of researcher	'ethics'	moral
1. Standpoint	neutrality	undecidability	balance
2. Reflexive location	rationalism	'reflexivity'	responsibility
3. Class consciousness	individual enlightenment	irony	cynicism
4. Institutional space	scientific knowledge	language games	viewpoints
5. Social transformation	adaptation and amelioration	verbal hygiene	multiculturalism
C. Change (producers of and as commodities)	liberal worldview	stance	political
1. Permanent change	ratification and universalization	descriptive inconclusion	globalization
2. Relatively enduring structures	pragmatism	restorying	openness
3. Theoretical practice	empiricism	textual empiricism	resignification
4. Materialist dialectics	positivism	deconstruction	suspicion
5. Prefigurative politics	blueprints	relativization	refusal of past

This paper explores and elaborates in some detail current guises of critical psychology in the English-speaking world. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed study of the emergence of critical psychology, and the very diversity of approaches that have now been accumulated under this heading in different parts of the world precludes such a synthesis (Dafermos, Marvakis, & Triliva, 2006). Suffice to say that the appearance of 'critical' arguments in the discipline have always been a function of actual political struggles outside it, and this has been the case whether critical psychology has been explicitly political (e.g. Teo, 1998) or has refracted political debates into conceptual or methodological disputes (e.g. Rose, 1985). Just as psychology is a historical phenomenon (Parker, 2007a), so is any form of 'critical psychology' (Teo, 2005), and so, for that matter, is Marxism (Mandel, 1971).

In the 1960s and 1970s, under pressure from the student movements, there were attempts to develop a 'radical psychology' (e.g. Brown, 1973), but those conceptual struggles against reductionism and essentialism in the discipline have not always been closely tied to radical politics. 'New paradigm' complaints against mechanistic laboratory-experimental methods that have endured to the present day in qualitative research were not necessarily Marxist, but they did produce a critique of positivism without lapsing into simple humanism.¹ This trend of work, the study of accounts that are given of action and of 'discourse' (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984; Jones, 2004), has been the setting for the emergence in the English-speaking world of a broad range of methods and theories that are now often grouped together under the rubric 'critical psychology'. This has been the place where Marxists in psychology, always a beleaguered minority in the discipline, have found a voice, and the existence of critical psychology is an important space for us to debate with colleagues who are willing to think about the connection between the individual and the social and who may even be willing to connect their work with political practice. However, this new movement has serious limitations, and we need to understand the nature of the discipline and how it is located if we are to grasp what the problems and possibilities are.

The 'critical psychology' I focus on in this paper is that kind that is emerging in the northern hemisphere (even if it has had outposts in the South) and it is located mainly in the West (even if it has found some adherents elsewhere). There are four parts to my argument, and some of the points of reference are going to seem a mite parochial to critical psychologists from other cultural traditions.² Colleagues from these different contexts will be quick to notice that, not only because the political context for doing radical work is so different from that in the imperialist heartlands, but also because, despite the attempts to radicalize 'community' interventions in the name of 'critical' work (e.g. Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2004), what is called 'critical psychology' in the English-speaking world is already starting to colonize and sanitize what they have been doing.³

The one explicitly Marxist intervention in the discipline in Germany has come to grief. *Kritische Psychologie* was one attempt to develop a 'science of the subject' that drew upon elements of Soviet activity theory (Tolman & Maiers, 1991). The problem was that when it elaborated an argument around the 'object' of psychology and attempted to specify what that object should be it was drawn into the gravitational field of a peculiarly bourgeois construct even at the very same moment that it aimed to dismantle it. At best it ended up leading to something approaching good psychology rather than good Marxist practice, but still too closely identified with Marxist politics for the German educational establishment. German *Kritische Psychologie* collapsed after the death of its founder (Holzkamp, 1992) and the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is beyond the scope of this paper to undertake a detailed assessment of that particular tradition, though work that has emerged from it on the nature of subjectivity under neoliberalism anticipates the arguments in this paper (Papadopoulos, 2002, 2003).

This paper traces the way that elements of Marxism that are diametrically opposed, and in some cases dialectically opposed, to mainstream psychology are evaded, misrepresented or systematically distorted by ostensibly critical alternative approaches inside the discipline.⁴ This analysis of the discipline and its 'critical' variants is designed to clear the way for revolutionary Marxist work in and against the domain of psychology.

Why Is There Critical Psychology?

First, we need to put on the agenda the question as to why there is this new 'critical psychology'.

Presumably we would not be tempted to answer this by saying that we owe it to the hard work of a few bright individuals who have carved out a name for themselves. If we were to focus on that aspect, there would have to be some careful analysis of the individualization of academic careers under capitalism; analysis of how voices for apparently new ideas become embodied in certain locations so that theories are attributed to particular individuals such that the speakers themselves may also come to believe they were personally responsible for them.

There is a general problem, beyond psychology, of referencing conventions that draw attention to the work of particular individuals (even when there is multiple authorship of journal papers to signal that a team of researchers was responsible). Although this is a problem that occurs in academic work generally, there is a peculiar reflexive loop in the case of psychology, in which the academic form of the work (individual authorship and the presumption that ideas are cognitive accomplishments of single minds) is reiterated in the content of the material that is produced (in the pervasive individualism of psychological theories). The 'voices' in critical psychology have also tended to be heard as individual voices, with collective writing viewed as an oddity (e.g. Curt, 1994; Discourse Unit, 2000). The problem will not be solved now simply by encouraging people to produce their work in a more distributed or 'relational' way for, as we shall see, this kind of working that deemphasizes the role of the individual as such is one that is already required in sectors of contemporary capitalism (Soldevilla, 1999). 'Relationality', for example, is now one of the new liberal terms that replaces radical political analysis in psychology (Sampson, 2001).

The question as to why there is critical psychology could be tackled by looking at institutional processes, in which the formation of schools of thought is driven by the imperative to produce something novel. Institutional positions are increasingly governed by market segmentation and competition so that universities, for example, will look for a yield on their investment in terms of research ratings or more immediate funding. In the case of 'critical psychology', some of the newer universities in Britain (those that were polytechnics until 1992) have

been quicker to throw off traditional ideas about what constitutes psychology in order to take advantage of this market niche. The 'critical psychology' book series published by Routledge was one early manifestation of this attempt to key into an academic audience.⁵ Two critical psychology masters programmes were launched in the late 1990s (at the University of Western Sydney in Australia and at Bolton Institute in the UK), and while these particular courses have floundered partly due to lack of the huge numbers of students the host institutions had been banking on,⁶ critical psychology has filtered into many psychology departments as a new speciality that appears in the form of distinct course modules and various textbook 'introductions'.⁷ This poses a new different kind of problem to Marxists in psychology, not at all a solution.

However, paradoxically it is the wider context for this marketization and individualization of critical academic work that specifies in most detail what the proper domain of 'psychology' is today and why critical psychology has had some success in its bid to be taken seriously by more mainstream colleagues. Contemporary neoliberalism, endorsed and managed by the social democrats as well as the old free-marketeters, has this in common with nascent 19th-century capitalism: an eagerness to embrace change. Everything that is solid melts into air as capital wipes away all obstacles to production for profit, and the latest upgrade of late capitalism requires subjects who will make themselves at home in it, whether they work in factories or work from home (Cammack, 2003).

The specific elements of 'critical psychology' are mapped onto ideological requirements of contemporary capitalism in Table 1. The distinct enclosed sphere of individual identity is now a hindrance to the new fluid forms of subjectivity that are called into being. The subjects of neoliberalism must be ready to participate as stakeholders, with the terms of their engagement being that there is a necessary degree of substitutability and an assignment of rights to those who are accepted for inclusion. They must show flexibility in order to fit the different varieties of work that might be available to them, and also tolerance for the range of different other subjects they work alongside. In their participation as producers and consumers they should, ideally, be able to be relational not only in the way they think about others but also in the way they think about themselves (Anderson, 2000).

Here there are key elements of the often implicit, sometimes explicit, indigenous theory of self, versions of which critical psychology trades in. We are told, for example, that we should give up our fixation on cognitive or intentional deliberation in favour of an attention to the 'stake' speakers have in interaction (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1993), that a quasi-systemic view of selves in community does away with the division between the individual and the social (e.g. Gergen, 1991), that conversational turn-taking is the only relevant place where our rights to speak are formulated and deployed (e.g. Antaki, 1994), that we should stop harping on about 'problems' and reframe our lives more positively (e.g. Gergen, 1998), and that we should be alive to the richly textured varieties of commonsense (e.g. Billig, 1996).

Contemporary capitalism demands more than a simple abandonment of old models of the individual, however. There has been just as dramatic a transformation in the moral texture of neoliberal subjectivity, so that there is now a more positive value placed on the ability to balance standpoints and to hold them in suspension without opting finally for one or the other. A form of reflexivity is required that will enable the subjects to assume responsibility for their position without using their own viewpoint as an absolute moral standard to judge others, and there is a correlative expectation that they will not even hold themselves to this standard too firmly; better that there should be a degree of cynical distance and ability to negotiate different viewpoints (Weltman, 2004). The new moralizing tone that is required now takes its lead from a version of liberal multiculturalism in which there is respect for others in exchange for agreement that each category of person will refrain from criticizing practices of the other's group (Mitter, 1994).

It would indeed be a surprise if these moral demands were not echoed in different sectors of academic life, and 'critical psychology' has been one place where these demands have been taken up and sold to us as new virtues. Here, it is thought that the appropriate ethical attitude to adopt towards research is to aim for a point of undecidability (e.g. Hepburn, 2003), to elaborate some reflexive implication of the self in that inability to take a position (e.g. Ashmore, 1989), and to revel in irony as such (e.g. Curt, 1994). The different possible positions that are carefully teased apart so that they can all the more easily be kept at arm's length are treated as collections of language games, and the default moral position that is adopted is one that will clean away any derogation of any of them (e.g. Gergen, 1994). In this way a form of 'verbal hygiene' that strips out evaluative terms takes the place of moral evaluation (Cameron, 1995).

Even this is not enough if the discipline of psychology really is going to play the game of contemporary capitalism, for there are more explicit political demands that are made on individual subjects so they will be able to rework themselves within certain limits. These political imperatives are governed by globalization as the expansion of practices from the centre to the periphery and the incorporation of useful local practices on condition that they do not challenge the process of globalization itself. An openness to change then goes alongside a willingness to accept the resignification of the self in such things as 'mission statements' and a suspicion of anything that would seem to stand in the way of that rewriting of corporate identity. A thorough relativization of political identities thus opens the way for an endorsement of change unfettered by the past, the sense that history is unimportant or that it is the site of suspect 'bottom-line' arguments (Edwards, Ashmore, & Potter, 1995).

Once again, some of those claiming the label 'critical psychology' take this political logic all the way to a thorough anti-politics in which the problem of what to do with what they find in their redescription of the world is solved by advertising descriptive inconclusion as a goal in itself (e.g. Potter, 1996). The technical

apparatus of formal redescription, empty of content, is thus the perfect vehicle of globalization, for it can be exported and used anywhere without entailing any difficult political questions (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992). Openness to the restorying of reality is all that is required. In some cases this means that limits need to be drawn tightly, sometimes taking the form of deliberate textual empiricism in which there is an assertion that there really is nothing of value outside the texts being examined (e.g. Potter, 1997). One guiding motif of this carefully rehearsed suspicion of politics is 'deconstruction', which becomes a stance that will all the better enable its adherents to juggle opposing concepts to warrant an utter refusal of the historical embeddedness of their reading (e.g. Hepburn, 1999).

To their credit, I suppose, not all of the advocates of these things always call themselves 'critical psychologists'. At the same time, those who do eagerly champion these things are 'critical' of psychologists, in the sense that old psychology is now no longer as functional to capitalism as it used to be and it does need some fairly radical restructuring if it is to survive. The reduction of explanation to the level of the bourgeois individual in mainstream psychology no longer delivers the goods, and 'critical psychology' does have the edge on the old approaches. Perhaps it is because there are clearly some new techniques that can be put to work that psychology will tolerate the formation of a new 'critical' sub-discipline inside it. But we can be sure that the discipline will demand something in return

What Is Institutional Recuperation?

It is the demand for something in return that I want to turn to next, the second part of the argument. The uncannily close concordance between the requirements of contemporary capitalism and some of the nostrums of critical psychology legitimizes, reproduces and strengthens the actual practices of capitalist production and consumption. It would not be possible for neoliberalism to triumph without the very ideological practices that sustain it being endorsed by those who service its institutions. We need to include academic institutions here, for it is at the level of institutional processes that we face a real problem, the problem of recuperation.

Ideological recuperation is the process by which radical ideas become neutralized and absorbed; they become part of the machinery that they attempted to challenge (Debord, 1977). It is a characteristic feature of capitalism that it is hungry for challenge so that it may all the better find new sources of innovation and new markets (Went, 2000). There is, however, a degree of institutional recuperation that is also necessary to neutralize and absorb new personnel who might want to disturb academic settings, to disturb the boundaries between academic and professional psychology, and to disturb the separation between the psychologists and those who are subjected to psychology. There are activists and groups that challenge this recuperation: it has been the aim of the radical grouping Psychology

Politics Resistance (PPR) since 1994, for example, to build disturbing new alliances between academics, professionals and users of services (Reicher & Parker, 1993). PPR was founded in 1994 as a group of academic and professional psychologists working with those who use psychology services (Parker, 1994). This is a site for identifying and resisting institutional recuperation, with lessons for critical psychology.

There have been important debates in *Asylum*, the magazine for democratic psychiatry incorporating the newsletter of Psychology Politics Resistance.⁸ *Asylum* was founded in 1986, inspired by the events in Trieste which saw the closure of the San Giovanni mental hospital after mobilizations by a mass movement, *Psichiatria Democratica*, which included sections of the far left and some Communist Party members (Ramon & Giannichedda, 1989). There have been links between the *Asylum* collective and campaigns to defend asylum seekers, broadening the remit of the collective and connecting it more directly with its radical history in the Trieste struggles (McLaughlin, 2003).

The new mental health movements do not necessarily serve as a Marxist alternative to psychology, and they are not necessarily more radical than so-called 'post-structuralist' theories, of which there are many now around in academic 'critical psychology', even though some of these approaches mobilize 'deconstruction' tactically to introduce more radical ideas (Parker, Georgaca, Harper, McLaughlin, & Stowell-Smith, 1995). Like the notions that cluster around 'critical psychology', they function to expose and challenge the complicity of psychology with the state precisely only insofar as they connect with other social movements. These radical mental health movements have most often been formed and led by psychiatrists, and the movements have been most radical when they have gone beyond that psychiatric frame, for example in the case of *Psichiatria Democratica* under the leadership of Franco Basaglia (1981), in alliance with the far left in the north of Italy.

A crucial debate in *Asylum* was over whether to engage the UK government in discussion as to how to implement its new Mental Health Bill (Kinderman & May, 2003). The Mental Health Bill included provision for Community Treatment Orders to ensure that psychiatric drug treatment will be enforced by designated 'clinical supervisors' for patients who are not in hospital. Even the British Psychological Society (BPS) opposed versions of the Mental Health Bill, but an article appeared in the BPS journal in which one of the psychologists from the *Asylum* debate defended his decision to 'engage' with the government over implementation of the Bill. This article, called 'How to Win Friends and Influence Politicians' (Kinderman, 2003), triggered a heated debate in *Asylum*, for this strategy of 'engagement' with the government weakens the opposition alliance, which so far has mobilized a broad range of organizations in public demonstrations against the Bill.

There is a temptation here, for if the strategy of engagement were to work, then there could be a shift in the balance of power between psychiatry and psychology. The designated 'clinical supervisors' could be psychologists,

who, some think, are bound to be nicer people. But the idea that nicer people might influence those in power and ameliorate the worst aspects of the Mental Health Bill is also a warrant for institutional recuperation of the opposition; this has pernicious consequences well beyond the 'engagement' by the individual who wrote the article advocating this strategy in the BPS journal. In fact, it is the reduction to the activities of individuals that is part of the problem which compounds it as it psychologizes it, whether we are talking about dangerous psychotic individuals who menace the general public if they don't take their medication, whether we are talking about the kinds of people who will give them medication, or whether we are talking about people who choose to engage with the government.

Furthermore, insofar as the designation makes sense in clinical psychology, the debate in *Asylum* is actually between 'critical psychologists'. One of them, now engaging with government on behalf of the BPS, has publicly called for such things as electroshock and psychosurgery to be prohibited by law, and the other, opposing this engagement, is a mental health system survivor who managed to keep that history secret long enough to complete a clinical psychology training (May, 2000). It is crucial here that we do not make a hard-and-fast distinction between the bad opportunist betrayer and the good steadfast militant. What is at issue here is how a decision to participate in the apparatus of government weakens and demobilizes collective protest. It is that collective protest and debate that is a space that needs to be kept open, and it needs to be kept open in 'critical psychology'. The particular constellation of concepts are still 'formal' and still limited, and the practice of contemporary challenges to psychiatry and clinical psychology needs to be articulated with Marxist practice to move beyond the sedimented categories of 'psychologist', 'patient' or 'user of services'.

I will turn now more directly to processes of institutional recuperation that we need to notice and challenge if we are to stay 'critical' in psychology. The concern with recuperation that often animates revolutionary Marxists, particularly when the analysis of ideology is connected with the more anarchist 'situationist' political tendencies even further to the left of Marxism (as in the concept itself supplied by Debord, 1977), does tend to cast all institutions in a negative light. Such a negative starting point is, however, necessary if there is to be any dialectical understanding of the relationship between political struggle and the way that struggle is refracted through academic debate. It is understandable in each case that individuals make a decision to 'engage' with the government of academic knowledge, but critical psychology will mean nothing at all if it is not a space for us to find alternative forms of collective practice. There are at least three problems that those doing critical work in psychology need to tackle.

First, articles in psychology journals follow a pattern of citation that mysteriously reproduces the frequency of certain names, and those names are often the names of the editors and reviewers for the journal (Peters & Ceci, 1982).

Book proposals for publishers follow the same trend, though if the author is well known they may have a wide enough network of friends for them to be able to suggest sympathetic reviewers. Psychologists doing critical work outside Britain, for example, change their citation choices when they submit articles to journals; because there are more outlets in Britain for 'critical' work that are known to be sympathetic, the choice of whom to reference is often a deliberate tactical decision. This follows an institutional pattern that has been well described elsewhere in critical studies of the reproduction of orthodoxy in psychology (Lubek, 1976, 1980).

Second, there is a momentum for the formulation of standards for critical work, of criteria that will persuade more mainstream colleagues that what we do counts as good research. Those in traditional psychology departments know that the only way to defend their work and the work of students is to appeal to versions of the criteria that psychologists already adhere to, but there have been many recent attempts to draw up guidelines that will identify good and bad work. These debates over criteria are often refracted through the war between advocates of quantitative methodologies—mainstream laboratory-experimental positivist research exemplifies this side of the debate—and qualitative approaches, in which it is often supposed that researchers are more likely to be 'critical' (Willig, 2001). Each set of criteria, of course, is deliberately designed to warrant a particular understanding of what counts as critical, and in psychology that includes a clear idea of what the domain of the psychological should be (Morgan, 1996).

Third, there is a pattern of recruitment that guarantees that certain voices are heard in departments, seminars and conferences to be saying certain kinds of things in certain ways. This ranges from the selection of like-minded individuals from other places that will confirm the idea that a particular approach is universally accepted, to the organization of meetings in the format of a talk, usually in English, by a single individual followed by discussion. Again, this is also a more general problem in British academic work, though some critical groupings—'Beryl Curt' being exemplary in this respect—have explicitly tackled this aspect of academic production in psychology in the past 10 years and tried to do something different with independent newsletters and support for Spanish-speaking critical psychologists to publish their work (Curt, 1994, 1999).⁹

Feminist perspectives within and alongside critical psychology have drawn attention to this 'personal-political' aspect of the reproduction of power relations in forms of discourse (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995),¹⁰ and in interaction in academic institutions, which is not to say that the recuperation of these perspectives in the emergence of career-oriented 'femocrats' in higher education is not also a problem for critical work (Burman, 1990; Walkerdine, 1990). My only comfort is the thought that it would indeed be a performative contradiction if a single individual was able to spell out exactly how it could all be solved. It is a matter for collective deliberation and activity around what the institutions we work in want from us in return for allowing us to do 'critical' psychology.

If things were so unremittingly grim, it would not even be worth rehearsing this argument. But things are not as bad as it would seem from the foregoing account, and that has got something to do with the nature of capitalism too. So I want to explore in more detail why, when power is of this kind, there is resistance. This brings us to part three of the argument.

Why Is There Resistance?

Many of those drawn to critical psychology do not really believe with all their heart the neoliberal notions I described as pervasive in critical psychology, and some have a radical political agenda (e.g. Billig, 1978). Even when those doing 'discursive' research have to frame things in an acceptable way for supervisors, conference organizers and journal editors, it is often clear that they already know at some level that the limits of a particular 'research question' provide a bit of security which keeps what they are doing in the academic frame (e.g. Weltman, 2004). None of us could be critical enough if we were to take seriously the economic political context of work in psychology. But critical psychology can be a space for turning back and reflecting on how we are held in frame, and for thinking through why some of us refused mainstream psychology in the first place (Sloan, 2000).

It would be so much easier, too easy, if mainstream psychology today did conform to the rather ridiculous culturally specific representations of human beings we still find in most US textbooks. However, while mainstream psychologists may on occasion resort to the old certainties that were functional to capitalism 50 years ago, they are often able to supplement that old psychology with some more nuanced hermeneutic or social constructionist arguments (e.g. Greenwood, 1994). The risk is that the 'critical psychologists' find that reassuring, for they seem to be getting the hang of the new relational rhetoric, and they are then caught off-guard.

For this reason it is still worth recalling why critical psychologists refused to buy components of the old 'model' of the psychological individual. The question now is how to refuse that old model without getting lured by the appeal of the new improved version. The embellishments on old-style psychology simply serve to make it work better, and even the old psychology required a degree of evasion, misrepresentation and systematic distortion of what our lives are like. When I say 'our lives', I mean the elaborate network of responsibilities we have to each other and the ways these commitments are sabotaged and frustrated as we sell our time to some institution which wants to make a profit from our labour and tell us lies about what a great contribution we are making to humanity (Drury, 2003). I will briefly set this mainstream psychology that many of us reject against some of the assumptions that we often identify as operating in the discipline for that rejection to make sense.

The self-contained psychological subject is a miserable reduced element of what we are as an ensemble of social relations, and to add in a 'social

psychological' dimension adds insult to injury (e.g. Hewstone, Stroebe, Codol, & Stephenson, 1988). The family, private property and the state as material structures that condition how we come to function as a particular ensemble of social relations are not domains of 'social psychology' (Adorno, 1967). Furthermore, the utilitarian transparency evoked by psychological descriptions of relationships obscures the way surplus value is extracted from us and the way we academics accumulate cultural capital at the very moment we seem to be merely doing good in the world (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). And to treat ill-health and distress in a way that ignores the pervasive alienation and exploitation that structure work and leisure is to perform the same kind of victim-blaming that goes on when our false beliefs are targeted without examining pervasive ideological mystification (Parker et al., 1995).

Faced with these conditions of life, it is amazing to expect anyone but a psychologist to really believe that we can examine our lives in a neutral manner, rationally evaluating phenomena and expecting our work to bring about enlightenment to each individual one at a time (e.g. Ingleby, 1972). The idea that the researcher should simply be accumulating scientific knowledge and enabling people to adapt themselves better to the world is advanced with the hope of ameliorating distress, but it is so limited to the very conditions that make us sick that it often functions as little more than a sick joke. Against this, we cannot but adopt a standpoint to what we study, and bring our own reflexive location in the research into the equation; research is thus conceived as the production of different kinds of consciousness that go beyond the level of each separate individual. We then start to ask how scientific knowledge of different kinds operates in different institutional spaces, and this takes us beyond adaptation to the question of social transformation (Walkerdine, 2002).

The question that psychology has traditionally asked about the world is how things stay the same, almost as if there is a wilful attempt by those in the discipline to avoid the process of change. At the same time many possibilities of changing our selves are opened up; this on condition that we stay within the discipline's carefully circumscribed limits and as long as we do not address relatively enduring structures that set the parameters for the realm of the psychological. Psychologists are told during their training that as long as they stick to what they can directly observe, and adhere to an empiricist worldview, then they should be satisfied; simply adding in 'theory' is not going to be enough to go beyond this unless we combine it with practice.¹¹ This means that we need to turn from the basic accumulation of knowledge toward an attention to the way knowledge changes depending on social relations. If we examine the various blueprints that psychology offers us, we find that they always seem to confirm assumptions about the way the world is now. The last thing we need is to leave the drawing up of the blueprints to experts. There is an alternative to this. Prefigurative politics is the kind of political action that anticipates in its very process social arrangements that are better than those in which we live today. Feminist arguments inside the left have reasserted this essential prerequisite for revolutionary change, that the way

the change itself is structured will determine the form that arises from it (Rowbotham et al., 1979).

Actually, despite what I claimed above about some notions from critical psychology being entirely compatible with contemporary capitalism, the real trick lies in the way those notions function in relation to each other and clustered together as a particular 'new' approach in psychology, rather than in what they assert about human relationships. None of those notions—of discursive subjects and stake in arguments, of systemic and community identity, of turns in conversation, of reframing and the role of commonsense—is formally incorrect (e.g. Middleton & Edwards, 1991). The reason they are so attractive is precisely because they speak to the desire for critique of ideology (e.g. Wetherell & Potter, 1992), and for something that will go beyond capitalism, and an attention to such desires combined with political practice is precisely the stuff of prefigurative politics. The different aspects of the ethical attitude that one might adopt towards research—undecidability, reflexivity, irony, an attention to language and what the consequences are of articulating representations of ourselves in certain ways—are indispensable if we are to be able to think beyond what is given to us at the present time (e.g. Billig, Condor, Gane, Middleton, & Radley, 1988).

The stance we adopt should draw us beyond this ruinous economic order. Descriptive inconclusion, restorying of ourselves, the immersion in texts of our own creation, deconstruction and some way of letting go of the past which haunts us are positive utopian possibilities; they are ways of imagining a future without tying into the shapes of the present (Holzman & Morss, 2000). The point, of course, is that we are not yet in this pleasure dome, and, if we imagine that we are, we have forgotten some fairly serious historical lessons about the role of practice in negotiating the contradictory reality of global capitalism. This is probably why the 'critical' perspectives that have succeeded in getting a voice in US psychology have been those most explicitly tied to pragmatism, in which they function inside psychology as the mirror of Rorty (e.g. Gergen, 1999).

Capitalism throws all of the certainties we learnt about old psychology into question, and the contradictory fast-mutating world of contemporary neoliberalism will quickly come to throw any new psychology we develop into question too. It is capitalism itself that ensures that where there is power there is resistance, but that process always opens a question as to whether the resistance will really challenge capitalism or be used by it (Burman et al., 1996). Critical psychology needs to provide resources to address that transformation of psychology without getting stuck in any particular model, ethos or worldview.

What Is the Political Economy of Psychology?

The fourth part of the argument includes some proposals for what we need to do not only to tackle psychology but also to tackle the causes of psychology.

This debate about concepts we use and how they operate is relevant to what we do because capitalism is ideologically textured; there is no strict separation between the economic base and the ideas floating around above it. Certain notions of identity, moral orientation and politics are necessary components of the material functioning of capitalism (Richards, 1996). The argument so far in this paper is schematically reviewed in Table 1, and it is possible to trace how the 'critical' take on mainstream psychology brings the discipline closer to the requirements of contemporary capitalism. The task now is to loop back from the nature of contemporary neoliberal capitalism to develop forms of analysis, research position and change that would redeem the promise to connect critical work with anti-capitalism.

A genuine anti-capitalist 'critical psychology' comprises four interconnected elements, and these elements of critical psychology can be put to work to answer a deeper, even more pressing question than why there is critical psychology. The most important analytic task that faces critical psychologists who want to go beyond the historically limited frame of neoliberalism—a task that involves taking a position in relation to what we are analysing, a position that necessarily impels us to change what we analyse in the very process of understanding and explaining it—is: Why is there psychology (Canguilhem, 1980)? Why is there psychology as such as a domain of abstract intellectual activity that appears to us, to each of us one by one, as if it could be studied within this particular disciplinary frame and which would reveal to us the reasons for human action? These four elements of critical analysis could, perhaps, bring us closer to a Marxist approach to this object of study (Parker, 1999, 2002).

First, it would be a close analysis of the way dominant forms of psychology operate ideologically and in the service of power. Such analysis needs to focus not only on psychological 'models' but also on the methodologies it uses (Parker, 2005). This is where we get to the heart of the issue: the abstraction of the individual subject from social relations and the abstraction of the researcher. Psychology re-presents to us elements of our second nature under capitalism that psychologists imagine to be the real cause of our activity. This analysis would lead us to a political economy of psychology as itself operating within the wider circulation of commodities in capitalism (Newman & Holzman, 1993).

Second, it would be the study of how alternative psychologies come to be historically constituted so that they confirm ideological representations of relations or subvert them. Here is a reminder that each and every framework we use is conditioned by the imperative of capitalism to open up new markets, and the ideological texture of this constantly mutating capitalism is composed of different contradictory reflections of the way commodities are produced and consumed (Gordo López & Parker, 1999). As we have seen in the case of neoliberalism, the study of alternative psychologies should include study of the political-economic conditions that bear them (Gordo López & Cleminson, 2004).

Third, it would be the exploration of how psychological notions operate in everyday life to produce contemporary psychological culture. Alongside the historical theoretical analysis of psychology as a discipline we need detailed cultural analysis of the way we reproduce capitalist social relations as if they were mental processes, and the attempt to connect with those processes provides the basis for the different varieties of popular psychological false consciousness (Gordo López, 2000). These are new forms of necessary false consciousness that accurately condense and reproduce certain conditions of 'mental' life (Sohn-Rethel, 1978).

Fourth, it would include a searching out and reclaiming of the way practices of everyday life may form the basis of resistance to psychology (McLaughlin, 1996). The abstraction and circulation of commodities make it possible to engage in intellectual work, but they do not give us direct access to anything, which is why empiricism is such an ideological dead-end. It is collective practice that forms the basis of resistance, and some theoretical work is always necessary to make that resistance present to us and effective as part of collective revolutionary projects (Melancholic Troglodytes, 2003).

Conclusion

There is already a space for 'critical psychology' as a sub-discipline in contemporary neoliberal capitalism and there is a degree of institutional recuperation that demands obedience to the academic institutions. Nevertheless, the very conditions of possibility for all of this are also potentially its undoing, and that poses a choice for us that we need to argue through again and again to make it possible to realize that potential. Critical psychology could itself become another commodity in the academic marketplace or it could make those conditions its own object of study so that it analyses them from a position that will also change them. Elements of analysis—the human being as an ensemble of social relations; the materiality of the family, private property and the state; surplus value and cultural capital; alienation and exploitation; and ideological mystification—would then be contrasted with the standard disciplinary notions of the psychological subject, society, utilitarian transparency, unhealthy experience and false beliefs. Specifications of the position of the researcher in Marxism—standpoint, reflexive location, class consciousness, institutional space and social revolution—would be set against the notions of neutrality, rationalism, individual enlightenment, scientific knowledge and adaptation and amelioration. Change in Marxism—as permanent change, an engagement with relatively enduring structures, theoretical practice, materialist dialectics and prefigurative politics—can be pitted against the standard procedures of ratification, pragmatism, empiricism, positivism and the drawing up of blueprints. 'Critical psychologists' need to assess and challenge the process of recuperation, a recuperation that is so efficient that only

one theoretical resource—revolutionary Marxism—is left that can tackle the problem and reassert once again a properly radical stance toward academic, professional and cultural aspects of the discipline.

Notes

1. The slogan ‘for scientific purposes treat people as if they were human beings’ (Harré & Secord, 1972, p. 84) was conceptually linked by Rom Harré to semiological approaches outside psychology and then to the realism of Roy Bhaskar (1978), one of Harré’s former students.
2. Indicative examples are the German tradition of *Kritische Psychologie* after the Marxist Klaus Holzkamp (Teo, 1998; Tolman & Maiers, 1991), Latin American *psicología de la liberación* and *psicología crítica* after the Jesuit priest Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994), and post-Apartheid critical psychology in South Africa, which connects with work by Frantz Fanon after the black phenomenologist Chabani Manganyi (1973). The new wave of ‘critical psychology’ which emanates from Great Britain is profoundly disappointing to many radicals from within and outwith those other critical traditions of work, and in this paper I have aimed to provide an analysis of English-speaking critical psychology that connects with the spirit of those more radical traditions.
3. South African critical psychology, for example, has always sought links with critical psychologists in Britain (e.g. Hook, 2004), and Latin American critical psychology has been heavily influenced by its institutional links with Barcelona, which has operated as a relay for post-structuralist ideas (e.g. Montero & Fernández Christlieb, 2003).
4. Although there have been attempts to bring psychoanalytic ideas into critical psychology, the radical potential of psychoanalysis lies in the fact that it is not psychology at all, and operates as ‘the repressed other of psychology’ (Burman, 1994, p. 104). Psychoanalysis is adapted and psychologized, recuperated so that it no longer functions as an alternative to psychology. In its place the developmental psychological schemas of Erikson and Horney are presented as if psychoanalysis always wanted to be a new psychology (Parker, 2004). Non-psychological traditions in psychoanalysis have invited connections with Marxism, but usually on their own terms (Parker, 2007b).
5. The first three books in the Routledge series were on social psychology (Parker, 1989) and feminist research (Squire, 1989; Ussher, 1989). There were later outlines of German *Kritische Psychologie* (Tolman, 1994) and the particular take on Vygotsky from within US ‘social therapy’ (Newman & Holzman, 1993).
6. The courses were the staging grounds for two journals that have survived: *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* and *International Journal of Critical Psychology*.
7. Fox and Prilleltensky (1997) focused on different aspects of psychology. Later texts have focused on social psychology: for example, Gough and McFadden (2001), Hepburn (2003).
8. See <http://www.asylumonline.net>.
9. I confess that I do not know how these practices could be refused or how alternatives could be developed. I take decisions myself that conform to the processes I have been describing: I sometimes submit articles to journals with misleading

citations so that the editors and referees will be flattered and the reviewers perhaps not realize who the author is; I examine academic work and produce an evaluation that will be accepted by my colleagues and sometimes the work fails; I speak too much when I have been allowed to by virtue of my institutional position and imagine that it is fine because at least I am saying something radical, and when I am organizing a meeting I am happy to let someone else speak if I think they are also going to say something radical, in the way I understand the meaning of the term, of course.

10. The usual time-lag between political debates outside the discipline and their reappearance inside it applies here: socialist feminists made the argument about the personal and the political in the 1970s (Rowbotham, Segal, & Wainwright, 1979).
11. This may be precisely why the journal *Theory & Psychology* has been one of the sites for critical work. It simultaneously gives voice to critical theory in psychology and contains the theory, separating it from political practice.

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