

## **The Concept of Subjectivity in the Context of a Critical Political Psychology**

The title of my paper presents two categories: "The concept of subjectivity" and "Critical political Psychology". First, as the context or frame of my argumentation I will explain the approach of "critical political psychology". It was developed in the late sixties of the previous century by the sociologist Klaus Horn, director of the department of social psychology at the Sigmund Freud Institute in Frankfurt am Main. During those years there was a strong interest in combining Marxist thought with several assumptions of depth psychology. This was related to the crucial intention of critical theory to transgress the borders of positivistic, nomothetic, affirmative social and cultural sciences. The beginning of this tradition in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory dates back to about 1930. Names such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Fromm are prominent in this context. These authors, as Freudo-Marxists, asked themselves why the historical subject did not move further along the path of progress and emancipation from the capitalistic government existent at that time. They questioned why, on the contrary, people fell back into antidemocratic, nationalistic and destructive political patterns. This tradition was then reawakened and developed in Western Germany by scholars such as Horn, Lorenzer, Brückner, Dahmer and Reiche.

Critical Political Psychology in its narrow conceptual sense can be understood as a product of the alliance of critical political economy and psychology. Its object is neither labour, nor money, nor economy, but rather psyche or, in Freud's words, the economy of drives, of libido. The psyche, the inner structure of the subject is perceived as a result of life history, of socialization. What, however, does critical mean? As critical political economy criticizes conventional political economy, critical politi-

cal psychology criticizes conventional political psychology. Whereas criticism of economy deals with rational interests and intentions of people in the context of market, labour and capital, critical political psychology is concerned with the inner structure and motivation of the historical and political subject. Conventional political psychology aims at solving problems of government and advises politicians rather than citizens. In contrast to this, critical political psychology is interested in improving the capability of citizens to articulate needs and demands in the public sphere, to participate in political processes and efficaciously play their role in the democratic system. Which concept of subjectivity is crucial for this type of psychology? As in the above mentioned tradition of the Frankfurt School, social psychology is founded in the psychoanalytic theory of drives, of the unconscious and of personality and in Freud's theory of mass, culture and religion. With its wholistic approach to man, psychoanalysis was predestinated to be integrated in the social philosophical construction of the critical theory. The psychoanalytic perspective supported the effort to explore the irrational, destructive tendencies of modern capitalistic societies, culminating in the "smashing of civilization" by the national socialists. The historical subject could thus be understood in his unconscious motives as well as in his psychological suffering under the conditions of alienation. The development of the structure of subject could now be comprehended in terms of the psychoanalytic theory of personality. The members of the first generation of the Frankfurt School studied most particularly the circumstances of early childhood. The well known and influential result of their research was that an authoritarian style of family socialization, characterized by a non-liberal, historical tradition, especially like that found in Germany, had been decisive for the rise of the fascist subject. Furthermore, the current structure of the subject in late capitalism could be criticised as having been deformed by the impact of cultural industry and completely adjusted to the capitalistic society. Whereas Adorno diagnosed the death of the bourgeois subject in many of his publications in the fifties, Marcuse attempted to discover the elements of a new imagina-

tive revolting subject equipped with a “new sensibility” and creating a new progressive concept of the relation between libido and society.

Unlike Adorno, who declared that the marriage between psychoanalysis and sociology had failed, Marcuse initiated a new attempt to integrate Freudian thought into critical theory. This gave a strong impulse to a group of scholars of the second generation of the Frankfurt School. They were interested in disproving Adorno’s argumentation and renewing analytic social psychology. Their approach was based on a substantial reflection of psychoanalytic theory and praxis which was influenced by the insights of J. Habermas (1968). Habermas understood psychoanalysis as an emancipative, hermeneutic science, in opposition to Freud’s own “scientific self-misunderstanding”. A. Lorenzer in particular elaborated these ideas, thus developing “the critical theory of the subject”, the essence of which was to convert psychoanalysis into a theory of interaction, socialization and depth hermeneutics.<sup>1</sup> In accordance with the linguistic turn in philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and influenced by the interactionistic view of G. H. Mead, Lorenzer reformulated psychoanalysis as a method which reconstructs destroyed narratives through “scenic understanding”. Psychoanalytic therapy was thus observed as a social process, a form of emancipative dialogue in which the patient overcomes his neurotic symptoms and gains back his status as an autonomous subject. From the perspective of developmental psychology the inner structure of the child was produced by ‘socializatoric interactions’ (a term created by U. Oevermann).

In this non-biological understanding, drives are transformed into “forms of interaction”, elements of the personality structure similar to Freud’s “memory traces”. However, personality is not merely formed by socialization. From the very beginning, the individual is the subject of his own socialization process. The concept of psychoanalysis as a critical theory of the subject implies historical and natural rela-

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<sup>1</sup> Klaus Horn adapted the approach of his friend and colleague A. Lorenzer to political psychology.

tions. The individual is seen as a product of social and historical conditions influenced in turn by his "inner nature". This idea is in accordance with Marx's "outer nature". Human praxis in this historical-materialistic view is the acquisition of nature. Whereas work deals with outer nature, socialization deals with inner nature. Inner nature can not be completely abolished by society. There is an independent residue consisting of genetic, physiological factors such as those found in the process of growth (for example, those observed in sexual development and in biological development in general) and death. These factors establish forces which constitute subjectivity from the moment of birth. To put it more clearly, inner nature does not emerge solely as a result of social interaction. What we encounter has from the very beginning been socialized nature. This mediated nature comes to light in the autonomy and transitoriness of our bodies and in the complexity of psychosomatic symptoms. There is only one point in life history at which we find pure inner nature. It is the moment of intrauterine fusion of semen and egg-cell. From that moment on physiological exchange between the growing foetus and the mother begins. This can be understood as the commencement of a prenatal socialization process. The function of the category "inner nature" replaces Freud's biological concept of drive. Drives are socialized nature. On the one hand, inner nature conceived as a historical materialistic term is compatible with social process. On the other hand, it constitutes resistance on the part of the subject. Thus, the critical theory of the subject is able to meet a crucial demand presented but not satisfied by the classical critical theory.

In the process of socialization the subject generates his forms of interaction most specifically in the "mother-child-dyade" and in family socialization in general. According to its affective and cognitive development, forms of interaction obtain new qualities. Three forms of interaction can be distinguished: sensual-direct, sensual-symbolic and linguistic-symbolic forms of interaction. The stage of linguistic-symbolic forms of interaction is most important for the main psychic conflict of the modern subject. By the introduction to language in early childhood the subject is confronted with the

system of values and norms of a given society.<sup>2</sup> Positive or negative functions are expressed verbally; the principal task of verbal expression is the shaping of the identity. In the case of neurosis, forms of interaction become de-symbolized as a result of unsolved conflicts of early childhood. Occasionally, in his praxis the subject loses the connection between his verbal expressions and the sensual-direct forms of interaction. In other words, he is not able to read his inner scenic drafts and to articulate his needs and feelings adequately. Wrong signs replace the right symbols and turn communication into confusion.

The advantage of this new view of symbolic interaction for analytic social psychology is to present an opportunity to connect sociology and psychology terminologically. The structure of the subject can be grasped through his participation in interaction, communication, culture, and society. The subject can be comprehended as a result of socialization and as a more or less independent participant of interaction processes in the family, in institutions and, last but not least, in politics. Conversely, social systems and subsystems can be analyzed in accordance with their manner of presenting forms of interaction to their members and of allowing them to carry them out on their own. Cultural industry with its restrictions, and the consequences of these restrictions, for example, repression through the destruction of symbolic forms of interaction, present possibilities for future research.

The critical theory of the subject claims to carry on crucial assumptions of Freud's psychoanalysis and of the first generation of the Frankfurt School. These assumptions are related to the concept of drives and nature. In difference to the old Frankfurt School, the drive theory is transformed into a fundamentally new theory of interaction and socialisation. Contrary, for example, to Parson's theory of socialization, this perspective maintains the idea of biological drive, but mediates it to social science. A central innovation of this theory is the introduction of the category of inner

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<sup>2</sup> So language is, as A. Lorenzer formulated, a "Danaergeschenk".

nature. Inner nature reflects human history and social evolution as a praxis of arrangement with natural conditions. Inner nature can be influenced by socialization, but it can not be completely changed. Genetic and hormonal factors are as invariable as age and death. Forms of interaction are always compromises between inner nature and society. Physiological impulses are as strong as the impact of society. The tragic error of enlightenment lies in the practice of dominating nature. We should learn from the smashing of civilization and the destructiveness of capitalist society that we must develop a new relation to nature in the sense of a reconciliation with nature. Today this need is more acute than ever before, for example, with respect to ecology. With respect to inner nature we must accept physiological boundaries as well as destructive tendencies in our natural equipment. To accept is not to resign. The task of (political) socialization is to confront people with their own destructiveness and to help them to cope with it. Destructiveness, in Freud's view, should be bound to Eros. In real interaction, as Freud pointed out, there is principally a mixture of both sexual and destructive drives. Thus, one can hold that aggression in a mild, benign manner is necessary for a subject who is well capable of social action.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas the critical theory of the subject attaches importance to the aspects of interaction and language and integrates them as well as J. Habermas' reform of the theory does, there is a significant difference concerning the estimation of the category of the critical subject. Habermas had proclaimed the end of the philosophy of consciousness, holding it as an obsolete and monological argument. He maintains that intersubjectivity is prior to subjectivity. This decision has consequences for the architecture of his theory in general and his understanding of Freudian theory in particular. He rejects the assumption of the first generation of the Frankfurt School that civilization violates inner nature and that the human individual suffers from the social repression of drives. Drives, from his point of view, constitute a part of society and its

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<sup>3</sup> A. Mitscherlich (1977, p. 223) calls this capability „perfected aggression“.

interaction systems. They emerge as motives that are being constantly interpreted, as verbal representations.

Correspondingly, there is a change of direction toward inter-subjectivity in psychoanalytic theory itself. Drives no longer determine psychic development but rather object relations. Axel Honneth, scholar and successor of Habermas at the University of Frankfurt refers to these new impulses to psychoanalytic thought by continuing Habermas' inter-subjectivistic approach. At the beginning of this decade there was a dispute between Honneth and his colleague Joel Whitebook, a New York psychoanalyst and philosopher, in the German journal "Psyche". I took part in this discussion with an article of my own and will now repeat some of the pertinent arguments.

In Honneth's view "the struggle for recognition" is fundamental for human social interaction. This assumption determines his reception of psychoanalysis. The adequate "candidate" (as he expresses it) for his intentions is not the Freudian concept of drives but the later concept of object relations. He supposes that motives for human interaction are formed by primary-narcistic desires of fusion awakened by symbiotic experiences of earliest childhood. The underlying thought is that interaction is caused by interaction. In my opinion this is a circular argument. I agree with Whitebook who maintains a primary negative, antisocial human energy as essential to psychoanalytic social psychology. Whereas Whitebook himself remains in this position, the critical theory of the subject offers a solution for this contradiction. Although the interactionist or the object related perspective of personality development is indispensable, there is still no reason for ignoring the natural, bodily moments that are at least partly residual to society. The category of inner nature and the conception of sensual direct and sensual symbolic forms of interaction allow for non-social impulses and extra-linguistic expressions. We have to accept the fact that destructiveness is more than a result of failed socialization. The question is: Why do people have to "struggle for recognition"? The answer can be found in the fact that there are

strong forces against recognition. Moreover, the manifold tendencies to deny the other rights or identity in social interaction are obvious. Otherwise there would be no necessity for struggle. Honneth's one-sided inter-subjective approach outlines the perspective of the victim and ignores guilt. It can not comprehend the evident phenomenon of destructiveness. Thus, the struggle for recognition is merely a light struggle. However, historical experience provides no reason to underestimate the impact of destructive forces as Freud pointed out in 1930. The struggle he dealt with occurred between Eros und Destruo.

My supposition consists in a reconciliation of the perspectives of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. In previous texts I called it an alliance between Marcuse and Habermas. Morality, understanding, and recognition have to be mediated with the resisting and motivating forces of inner nature. Socialization theory has to take into consideration the reality of libidinal and destructive energy. Successful sublimation may in the long run be able to effect a substantial change in the "psychosomatic structure" of subject, as Marcuse formulated. In summary the critical theory of the subject is an adequate approach to integrate inter-subjectivity within the frame of an autonomous, spontaneous, and vigorous subjectivity. This is all the more important in an age of individualization with concomitant phenomena such as the weariness of self and depression (Ehrenberg 1998) Thus, I am convinced that critical political psychology is well equipped to meet the requirements of late modern society towards the individual.

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