

## **The Birmingham Manifesto: Community Psychology in a Global Context.<sup>1</sup>**

### **What is this about?**

*Does community psychology have any relevance to the big questions of war, imperialism and dispossession, climate change? Does it have anything to say about the pressing problems of society in this country for that matter? Or is it a limited set of practices that do little more than distract us from real and pressing action priorities?*

*The following pages try to engage with this problematic, not offering definitive answers, but suggesting the beginnings of an analysis of the problem and identifying key areas for action.*

### **Introduction**

The planning for this event followed-on from a suggestion at the Great Yarmouth Community Psychology Conference in September 2006. At Great Yarmouth it had been proposed that there should be an interim event, between the 2006 conference and the 2007 conference in York. It was proposed that this event should aim to produce practical, meaningful outcomes. It was also proposed that these outcomes should address relevant issues such as “war” or “the environment”. The West Midlands Community and Critical Psychology Interest Group (WMCCPIG) agreed to organise the interim event in Birmingham in April 2007.

Between the September 2006 conference and the event in April 2007, two rounds of consultation took place with the members of the community psychology listserve. These consultations were facilitated by the WMCCPIG. This process clarified the topics to be addressed at the event and the manner in which the day was to be organised.

The topics identified were “War and torture” and “globalisation”. Two sets of speakers were identified to provide orientating statements on these themes at the beginning of the day. It was also decided that the participants at the event would then have the opportunity to work in groups towards practical outcomes to address the issues raised by the presentations and the subsequent discussions. Due to illness one set of speakers was forced to withdraw. Despite this, the event continued in the proposed format.

A summary of the day’s activities is given below under the heading **Summary of the Day**.

Following the event, the summary of the day and the statements on priority areas have been circulated to the attendees. Those attendees who have commented have endorsed the statements, while acknowledging the potential

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<sup>1</sup> Papers from the Community Psychology Practice Development Day 20<sup>th</sup> April 2007 at the Midlands Arts Centre in Birmingham

for useful changes. There have been some specific suggestions for changes but these have not been made as yet, pending the circulation of the statements to the wider community psychology listserve.

There is also a proposal for a workshop at the September 2007 York Conference to follow-up on the work carried out at the April Event.

## **The Birmingham Statements**

The day started with a paper presented by Mark Burton, giving a Marxist analysis of the current global issues facing community psychology (see [Appendix](#)). Following on from his paper, we gathered into small groups for discussion, and then gave feedback to the large group and identified a number of issues to focus on for the day:

### Roles/Identities

- Citizens
- 'Experts'
- Workers

### Priority Areas

1. War and Imperialism
2. Sites of counter-system resistance
3. Action on global warming/environment
4. Public services/Privatisation of the NHS

In the afternoon we worked in four groups, each focusing on one of the above priority areas, and producing a statement from a community psychological perspective.

We shared our statements with each other and had a discussion about what to do with them next. We agreed that we would initially send them round to the sub-group of UK Community Psychology Network members who attended the day for a final review before sending them to the wider network for consideration regarding how to use them. We agreed that we would release a press statement in the local area to give news of the meeting and our position statements regarding national and international issues.

We had a little time left, and began a fruitful discussion about how those present understand the core values and concerns of community psychology. These are summarised below the statements on the priority areas. We also briefly discussed the membership and relative exclusiveness/inclusiveness of a network as either made up of community psychologists or of a wider range

of people with an interest and involvement in community psychology. There were diverse perspectives on this and having run out of time, we seemed to agree that it would be helpful to consider this matter further at a later date.

## **Statements on the Priority Areas**

### **1) War and Imperialism**

We believe that the war and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq is immoral, illegal and irresponsible.

As community psychologists we have seen how these wars have created suspicion, fractured trust, intensified racism, and damaged community cohesion both within and between countries.

These wars and occupations are not about promoting democracy. Rather, they have restricted freedom of thought and freedom of movement.

There is a psychological cost both for civilians and soldiers, creating a rip in the global social fabric between individuals, families, communities and our social institutions.

Furthermore, we believe that these acts of war are based on the interests of Anglo-American capital and as such constitute an act of Imperial aggression.

### **2) Sites of counter-system resistance**

The community psychology network will support any individuals, groups, organisations or movements, at area, national or international level, which are working to oppose inequality and disempowerment. Amongst allies we would therefore expect to offer our support to some of the following: professionals and professional groups dedicated to the provision of public services based on the principle of equity and those campaigning to preserve and extend such services; campaigns, such as feminist, lesbian, gay and bisexual, and anti-racist campaigns, which support the rights of groups who may be disempowered because of prejudice and discrimination; campaigns of support for countries and peoples affected by past and current forms of imperialism; those promoting open access, non-capitalistic, forms of communication such as the internet, use of open access software, and development of non-commercial forms of publication; and any faith group, political party, trade union, or individual writer or broadcaster which/who represents a 'site of resistance' to inequality or disempowerment. At the same time we recognise the need, in parallel, to develop the CP network itself as an effective site of resistance; by providing mutual support, building on the start made at the Birmingham meeting, and by combating the isolation of a group largely composed of psychologists.

### **3) Action on global warming/environment**

We believe that as psychologists we have a responsibility to contribute to government and community action to protect the environment.

Ecological damage and climate change currently threaten continuing life on the planet. The immediate consequences of global warming particularly threaten the poorest and least resourced people in the world (and those least responsible for the problem).

As psychologists, we should be contributing our knowledge and skills to support and help to progress the work of environmental scientists, campaigners and activists in areas such as energy stewardship, investment in public transport and encouraging sustainable consumption.

Psychological theory and practice can help to:

- Understand and counter processes of denial
- Expose and critique powerful vested interests
- Understand processes of participation, persuasion and decision-making
- Encourage and enable people to work together toward sustainable futures.

If we are to survive and thrive, people and societies need to make change happen: as psychologists, we must play our part.

### **4) Public services/Privatisation of the NHS**

It is the duty of government to govern in the interests of its citizens, promoting their well being through positive policies and by ensuring protection from threats. This includes a duty to address inequalities through a coherent policy framework that includes effective public services.

The UK network of community psychologists commends important aspects of the track record of the Labour government 1997-2007 in promoting the health and well being of the population. In particular there have been significant advances on child poverty and early intervention, the increased real expenditure on the NHS and joined up strategies to improve local population health and well being, for example through Local Strategic Partnerships.

However, we believe that these developments are lacking in ambition for social justice and they are compromised and threatened by other government policies that favour the private sector and especially big business. Examples of this inadequacy are:

1. Failure to reintroduce progressive redistributive taxation of incomes and to reduce indirect taxation that hits the poor.
2. The creeping privatisation of the NHS that is leading to fragmentation, demoralisation and inefficiency - this last being inevitable since private enterprise has to make a return to shareholders.
3. The failure to effectively manage and constrain those business interests that threaten community health and well-being, including
  - 5 the drinks and gambling industries
  - 5 industries targeting children
  - 5 the car and airline industries
  - 5 speculative finance capital whose impacts on job security and community life can be devastating
  - 5 large retail concerns that are driving small local enterprises out of business and threatening institutions (such as the milk delivery and corner shop) that are critical to a neighbourhood based community.

We believe psychologists are well placed to comment on the impacts on health and well being of the current policy mix and we will contribute to the development of a positive alternative people-oriented policy framework, contributing experience, skills, knowledge and evidence to the efforts of groups campaigning for an effective, adequate public policy framework that places people ahead of profit, recognises the value of publicly owned resources and services and that fearlessly tackles vested interest for a better society.

### **Core values and concerns of Community Psychology**

We are people with an interest in community psychology, who try to:

- Consider 'in whose interests it is that this should be believed', which emphasises the importance of critical thinking
- Take action to promote the interests of those who are oppressed by inequalities of power and economics, including those oppressed by capitalist economic systems and globalisation
- Believe in the power of the oppressed to overturn oppression
- Recognise, appreciate and draw on individuals' and communities' strengths, resources and resilience
- Be non-pathologising
- Promote social and economic justice
- Understand and take account of context
- Celebrate, value and respect diversity and multi-culturalism, and strive for a society that does so

- Emphasise relationships and connections between people above individualism
- Take a stance against overvaluing competitive individualism
- Encourage the value of shared and collective achievement
- Recognise and appreciate the inter-dependence that allows individuals and communities to flourish
- Emphasise the importance of compassion
- Work in ways that are non-hierarchical

31.5.07

## Appendix

### A global context for psychology

In this talk I am going to take a very wide look at the question of psychology and global issues. I'll be making a broadly Marxist analysis<sup>2</sup> of what is happening globally (and locally) and at various points will relate that to the enterprise of psychology – that is to say the conjunction of its ideology, knowledge, method, practice, and organisational embodiments. Inevitably this will be no more than a sketch. It is for you to help fill in the details and to test the outline presented here.

#### Psychology and its origins – community psychology as an alternative approach?

Psychology is itself a product of a particular set of social systems – first industrial capitalism, then welfare capitalism, and now maybe neoliberal capitalism. I suggest that it bears the marks of its origins and its memberships of these social systems, in ways that are complicated. It isn't just a matter of a reflection of the system: the successive and contradictory ideologies of these systems co-exist within psychology as ideology, method, knowledge and values.

Community psychology (and critical psychology) purport to varying degrees to offer an alternative approach, characterised by an opposition to that most fundamental stain of capitalism, individualism, and the search for a more adequate approach, that is cogniscent of the broader contexts in which people live their lives. But I suggest, without a well grounded understanding of the overall, global, systemic, context, these attempts are doomed to be at best ameliorative only and at worst a waste of everyone's time.

#### What has been happening for the last 100 years

So what is this overall, wider, systemic global context? To answer that it is necessary to ask the question 'what is capitalism?'

#### Capitalism – what it is, what it does.

Capitalism is first and foremost a system that reproduces capital, that is to say it accumulates capital. To do this every social process is commodified: exchange, production, distribution, investment – previously conducted through media other than markets. And no social transaction is exempt from this process of commodification. To endlessly accumulate capital it is necessary to extract profit. This is done at various points in the system, and most obviously in the theft of surplus value from workers and the unequal exchange between the core areas of the system and the primary resource producing areas. Without unequal exchange capitalism cannot work.

Capitalism establishes institutions to support itself, the State with its legal and governmental system, the educational system, the welfare systems, and the armed forces. When unequal exchange is threatened, the legal and military systems are brought into action.

Capitalism as a system that reproduces capital must ever expand, finding new markets, new cheaper workforces, and new sources of raw materials, new products and new means of production. As I understand it this is because the reproduction of capital means that there is always an oversupply. This means that new investment opportunities are continually sought. The oversupply problem led to the historical cycles in the world economy. Currently this is compounded by excess productive capacity. Capitalism tends toward crisis.

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<sup>2</sup> In none of what follows is there to be taken as implied a denial of other axes of oppression and domination (sex/gender, ability-disability, race/ethnicity). However the view is that capitalist relations of domination both encapsulate and fortify these other relations which nevertheless are not reducible to a class analysis.

The emergence of a strong challenging labour movement. Capture of territory by an alternative system. Impact on capitalism and emergence of the welfare capitalism models.

We have been living through some turning points in the history of capitalism. Taking a long view we can point to the creation of resistance by the system. Resistance is produced both by its direct effects on people (e.g. their impoverishment through exploitation and by the flight of industry to more profitable operating areas) and by the contradictions it produces: capitalism brought workers together, and increasingly required that they were educated – as a result consciousness of their situation grew in conjunction with a working class movement that began to win concessions, and created alternative social relations (in TUs, co-ops, welfare systems), that threatened both a peaceful take-over through elections and that also won territory after 1917. To combat the spectre of communism further concessions were granted; witness the welfare capitalist system of the post war period in Europe.

In any case after 1918 the owners of the system realised that increased State involvement was necessary to smooth out the business cycle and to ensure that essential elements of the system were not vulnerable to the vagaries of the free market.

Here a compromise was reached between capital and labour, a trade off between the continuation of the system and the earmarking of significant collective resources for social need (and prevention of rebellion). This Statism also had the effect of reducing certain areas of risk for capital (for example in the nationalised coal, steel and transport industries). While this approach was most fully established after 1945, important elements were already in place in the inter-war period.

Continued counter-systemic victories – decolonisation, Vietnam, Algeria, Cuba, miners etc.

But things were beginning to get out of hand. Counter-systemic victories were increasing, there was now China and the socialist countries of central and eastern Europe. Newly independent third world countries were going that way. There was a strong secular socialist movement in the Arab world. Cuba freed itself from US imperialism, and the US was defeated in South East Asia. Trade Union membership reached its peak in the 1970s. At the same time, the limits of Keynesian demand management were becoming apparent; indeed the post war boom was less a result of this than a combination of the effects of redistribution and technological innovation together stimulating demand. This was also going to be time limited and so led to a crisis of profitability – the relentless accumulation of capital was slowing down.

The fight back of capital. Ideology, economics. Chile. Thatcher-Reagan and TINA. Rolling back the state and destruction of the alternative.

I don't want to give the impression that capital and its servants were somehow dormant between 1945 and 70s. Already a series of lessons had been taught to those who tried to take matters into their own hands and experiment with a socio-economic system that prioritised human need over profit: in Greece, Italy, Guatemala, Iran, The Congo, Indonesia, Guyana, the Dominican republic, the British and US machines had overthrown popular governments and installed systems sympathetic to capitalist interests. But now a new faction took began to become more influential within the governing classes of the core countries.

As things reached a head in the 1970s, the ideas of a network of right wing economists and philosophers began to be taken up by political leaders. A web of societies, pressure groups and think tanks supported this (as they still do). The Pinochet dictatorship in Chile provided a test bed for the free marketeers. This new doctrine, now known most commonly as neoliberalism, aimed to end the role of the state in managing the economy – the Keynesian model was replaced with the monetarist one, and unemployment was used to discipline organised labour. Privatisations were unleashed to return areas of the economy to traditional capitalist relations. But beyond this, there was the opening up of and more areas for capital to



operate, and of course make a profit. The nature of the economies of the core countries changed rapidly shifting from industry to finance and services, as manufacturing moved to areas with cheaper workforces, even fewer regulations, and new markets, as capital controls were lifted in country after country. As the new model became dominant, and the unions were contained, the left became demoralised in the face of this relentless process, and with an ineffective opposition the claim that There Is No Alternative took on the semblance of truth.

The Washington consensus, and the post-modern panic. The capitulation of left parties and ideologues to Capital.

But the idea that the State would not intervene was of course an obfuscatory simplification. The State in the rich countries continued to protect capital – the kind of capital it protected changed (with the change in emphasis from national industrial capital to roaming finance capital), and the way it did so changed too. The new strategy can be summarised as follows:

- Removal of controls on the movement of capital.
- Legislation to restrict the rights of labour.
- Privatisation of public enterprises.
- Privatisation of public services.
- Imposition of the capitalist regime on all areas of the world, through economic, political and military might.
- Undermining of competing capitals.
- Driving down of primary commodity prices.
- Harnessing of education to meet the needs of capital.
- Subverting the law in the interests of capital.
- Turning new things into commodities.
- Turning whole new areas into commodities (water, knowledge, agricultural and human gene pools).
- Controlling the movement of people.
- Establishing Free Trade agreements and areas to aid the penetration of capital and the destruction of small local capital and subsistence modes of life.

Intellectually the new order (actually no more than the resurgence of capital under the Washington consensus) led to both an obscuring of the reality and a weakening of counter-systemic left ideology. Many left intellectuals defected to the side of capital, some becoming enthusiasts for the new truth. Others got sidetracked into postmodernist, relativist frivolity. In the third world whole social sectors responded to the destruction of their leadership (often by State Terror) by a turn to obscurantist ideologies of blood and God, although in some cases ( Hamas, some of the protestant churches in Latin America) they had their socially progressive and socially ameliorative side. New language emerged to describe while obscuring what was happening: 'globalisation' instead of 'imperialism', 'reform' instead of 'reaction', 'modernisation' instead of 'pro-capitalist restructuring'.

The expansion of Capitalism to new markets, new zones of production, new sources of raw materials.

The expansion and renewed dominance of capital meant expansion to new areas, displacing peasant farmers and small producers, turning them into cash crop, maquiladora and service industry proletariat and reserve army, melting down whole economies. As new raw materials and hydrocarbons are exploited, more populations are militarised, turned off the land, increasing social instability and fuelling the flood of refugees. In 2006 there were 25 million displaced people<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Norwegian council for refugees report. Source:  
<http://www.insurgente.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=9471>

### International diplomacy, a War of terror.

This whole process has come to a head at the turn of the century with the coming to power of the extreme right in the USA. The Project for a New American Century is being implemented with the UK in a supporting role. As peak oil approaches the geopolitical strategy of the dominant sectors of capital are aimed at occupation and expropriation of the oil of the Middle East and Central Asia, coldly contemplating war against Iran, Russia and China. All this is masked by the myth of Islamic terrorism and the control of the mass media so lies and illusions are propagated with impunity. International diplomacy, economic and military pressure is brought to bear on recalcitrant governments, not because of supposed or actual democratic and human rights deficits, but because they stand in the way of the theft of wealth.

### **Psychology: loyal servant of capital or source of alternative vision.**

The above is the overall big picture (with detail, evidence and subsidiary consequences omitted for reasons of time and to maintain the flow). It forms the context for psychology and psychologists.

The first point to note is that psychology often has a contradictory position. It has to varying degrees and in different places and times hitched itself to the interests of capital and dominant power. It has also at times articulated a different morality, based on respectful human relations and human needs, and at its best it has exposed the impact of the dominant system on people. It can therefore be both a loyal servant and a source of alternatives. In the latter it can function as a reasonably loyal critic within the system and at times it can make common cause with the oppressed. Because the system itself is not monolithic, and still includes elements (like a public NHS) that are the result of victories over the capitalist rationality, there is no one right way to be a critic. I want to focus on three reasonably well known areas of psychological engagement with the neoliberal world we find ourselves in – a neoliberal world that has continuities and discontinuities with what went before.

### Psychology and the war on terror. Psychology and Capitalism. Psychology and public services.

### **Psychology and State Security.**

This constitutes a particularly worrisome aspect of the present conjuncture. The organisations of state security employ psychologists. As the APA Division 19 (Military Psychology) proudly proclaims, the US Department of Defence is the largest employer of psychologists world-wide. It uses psychological expertise in a variety of ways, from propaganda to human factors to interrogation. In this last area US psychologists and their professional association the APA stand alone among health workers in justifying the participation of psychologists in coercive interrogation. The whole scandal is becoming clearer (see our forthcoming article in the Psychologist, or Stephen Soldz's excellent articles on the Counterpunch website) and points to the systemic collusion of US organised psychology in the activity of the security apparatus, a source of lucrative funding for psychology.

Psychological research has been used in the design of mainstream psychological operations, paramilitary counterinsurgency campaigns (including for example the scorched earth policies in Central America and Vietnam), and interrogation techniques. Much mainstream psychological research has been funded by the military and intelligence services.

Much of this work has in effect been in collusion with capital's support systems, providing technologies of manipulation and control with contributions to at least the following:-

- ◆ Propaganda and persuasion
- ◆ Pacification of populations
- ◆ Interrogation and torture
- ◆ Man-machine interactions
- ◆ Assessment and treatment of battle stress
- ◆ Profiling of militants

### **Psychology and business.**

Psychology has also hitched itself to the interests of Capital itself. Psychologists work specifically in the service of capitalism's accumulation strategies through research on how better to exploit workers, how better to sell products, and how better to promote the virtues of the system.

### **Psychology and public services.**

Psychologists work in public services in a variety of roles, some of them explicitly concerned with the regulation and management of inconvenient people, and others more clearly concerned with humanitarian aid. It is important that the contradictory nature of these public service roles are understood. Psychologists can be simultaneously working to help people with significant social and health needs, while systemically being part of a system that manages the consequences of capitalist exploitation and alienation. Just as capitalism itself is not located in individual owners of capital, but is a system that is self sustaining and self serving, so psychology is part of the wider system of capitalist social relations, where good and ill are integrated.

However on balance the contribution of psychologists in public services is a good one, and one that at its best can indicate better ways of conducting human relations founded not on exploitation, commodification and exclusion, but on fairness and reciprocity. In this phase of neoliberal capitalist attack on public systems of health, education and welfare, it is important to defend the achievements of the welfare state and the social movements that fought for it. And a number one strategic priority for psychologists in the UK today is to join in defending the NHS against the creeping privatisation that faces it.

### Community psychology as an irrelevancy?

In this context, community psychology can seem irrelevant. If it is ameliorative in its pretensions then it makes some situations created by the system a little better. If it has transformative pretensions it is going to be cruelly disappointed since its intervention falls several orders of magnitude below the required therapeutic dose! But its value is not as a transformational strategy as such, but as a laboratory of social relations. Community psychology, if focussed on the right things and connected to the relevant struggles and movements could help point the way to a better way of organising society, just as the various labour movement organisations pointed the way to a society founded on the meeting of human needs in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

### **So what should our priorities be?**

In this global context I would suggest four clear priorities. They combine defensive and assertive elements. I have tried to suggest a focus for psychologists in each.

1. Opposing war and imperialism through campaigns against the British presence in Iraq, solidarity with the Palestinians, opposition to the Trident replacement and making known US/British plans for an attack on Iran. Use psychological research to expose the impact of war and weapons proliferation. Work to expose the effects of psychological terror whether as the terrorisation of populations (especially women and children) or the torture of individuals.

2. Support alternative systems that stand against US, British and European imperialism, by solidarity with Cuba and Venezuela and opposing the US's plans to defeat their social models. Support psychologists and other professionals from those countries to help build an understanding of the successes and challenges in these sites of resistance.
3. Work for government planning to curb global warming by unprecedented investment in public transport, tidal, solar and geothermal power, with energy stewardship, and for the control of the capitalist interests that are literally burning up the planet. Use psychological research on persuasion to help build effective campaigns.
4. Work to defend public services, with campaigning against the creeping privatisation of the NHS absolutely key to this. Defend psychological services from privatisation and unite with other public service workers in their struggle to defend and improve their services.

There are other areas of work and activism that are also important, and which may or may not fit into these four areas - an example is work in solidarity with displaced people whether through war, economic terrorism, or the human trafficking industry.

We need to act in a variety of ways to oppose the power and the depredations of capitalism, seeking to protect what is good and develop alternative ways of conducting social relations, through struggle, living and imagination. Some thoughts on this follow:-

#### We are citizens

We are not just psychologists but also citizens and it is fundamentally in this role that we should be organising and participating in counter-systemic struggles, whether on burning excessive hydrocarbons, opposing more wars, solidarity with progressive social movements and so on.

#### We have some limited legitimacy

But as psychologists we have some legitimacy and expertise. After years of diffidence I'm definite that we should make use of this. We know and can say with authority that commercialisation is poisoning childhood. We know and can say with authority that restrictions on abortion harm women. We know and can say with authority that Britain's asylum laws destroy family life. We don't have to be pompous about it, just claim the expertise we can for the good of the cause.

#### We are workers

We are workers who sell our labour power, often only one or more pay cheques away from destitution. We should defend the interests of ourselves and of other workers world-wide using the vehicle developed for this, the trade unions.

#### The preferential option for the oppressed

We can take a leaf out of the book of Liberation Psychology and articulate a preferential option for the oppressed: that is to say we should be putting time, effort and resources into work for those who are oppressed by the various acts of theft and violence of the system at the expense of other priorities.

#### Alliances

Whether as citizens, psychologists or workers, we can't do anything alone. We need to work closely with others who are striving for the same things. These alliances can be made and unmade as the political priorities themselves change, but we should always be aiming for a common project that of holding back capital and developing alternative social relations.

Maybe this begins to answer the question of how to contextualise the really social psychology that is community psychology and indicates, if not the actual priorities that need to be adopted, then a means of figuring out what they are, of seeing the

wood for the trees, and setting a direction of travel. But the fact is that time is short. We can't afford to mess about.

### A note on sources

I have not referenced this piece in the usual academic way since that would interrupt the flow and introduce a spurious objectivity where every assertion has its name and date. But key texts that I've used as background or sources of ideas are listed together with some of my own works where some of the ideas are treated at greater length.

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