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Radical Psychology Networks: a Review and Guide¹

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ABSTRACT

Movements of psychologists with a liberatory agenda have emerged in a number of countries. A guide and overview is offered here. These networks have not yet developed into a particularly strong movement. Some of the reasons for this will be discussed in relation to the contradictory role of mainstream psychology as both loyal critic and as resource for the ruling order.

RESUMEN

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Movimientos de psicólogos/as con una orientación libertadora se aparecieron en países distintos. Aquí se ofrece una guía y perspectiva general. Estas redes no se han desarrollado como movimiento tan fuerte. Se discute algunas de las causas de ésta situación con relación al papel contradictorio de la psicología como 'crítica leal' y fuente de recursos por el orden dominante.

INTRODUCTION

There are networks of critical and radical psychologists in various countries. However, these networks are relatively weak, both in terms of numbers of activists and in terms of their profile not only in society but also within psychology itself. Before analysing some of the reasons for this, it is worth describing the types of alternative network. The focus here is on the English speaking world, chiefly outside North America, and on some other European countries.

There are various types of network, and the following classification is only an aid to exploring their nature and diversity. There is also considerable overlap between some of the categories of networks and between the networks themselves. The Appendix provides contact details, mostly Internet based, for many of these and the reader is encouraged to explore them for more information.

Critical academic psychology

There are several dispersed networks consisting of university staff and students who concentrate primarily on the production of theoretical work. This has been well described by Parker (1999). The Critical Psychology Network, launched in 1999 can be seen as an international network of critically minded psychologists. It was, until early 2003, loosely co-ordinated from the University of Western Sydney in Australia

where there was a website and email discussion list (movement of staff seems for now to have ended this period of active networking). The linking concern is that mainstream psychology traditionally works within the philosophical and ideological frameworks originating in the dominant social institutions and rarely challenges them (crit-psych-net, 2002). While critical psychology is described as emerging from a broad range of interests, post-modern theory, psychoanalysis, social constructionism, post-structuralism and feminism perhaps overshadow the other strands. The influence of the French post Marxists (Derrida, Foucault, etc) seems particularly strong.

Other critical academic networks are centred on the Manchester Metropolitan University 'Discourse Unit', the German Kritische Psychologie group based around the Free University of Berlin and the similar and related Scandinavian group based at the University of Copenhagen. These are more Marxian in orientation with German critical theory and the work of Holzkamp being key influences. There are several critical groups in Spain too (see appendix).

One problem with much of this work is its frequent inaccessibility to other psychologists who are not familiar with critical frameworks in social theory - and sometimes to many of those who are. Moreover, a 'post-modern virus' seems to infect much but not all of this work. By this I mean a reluctance to make structural analyses, to make general statements, to confront social reality as reality, and an over use of the textual metaphor. This has proved alienating for some radicals who should be regarded as allies. To illustrate this problem, at an event organised by one of these networks I used the term 'a just society' as a way of identifying what we were all struggling for and was criticised for using a term that was 'totalising' and therefore oppressive. Other radicals have related similar negative experiences in these contexts. There are exceptions of course but perhaps the question needs to be

asked, how committed is academic critical psychology to two things? a) a politics of reconstruction: the construction of liberatory psychological practice, and b) a politics of engagement and inclusion: the formation of inclusive alliances with others struggling to find or create non-oppressive psychological praxis, which in turn implies the demystification of psychological ideology in terms that those outside its own narrow community can understand.

A central concern in British and Australian critical circles has been the so-called 'psy-complex', the term given to the ideological and administrative role of psychological knowledge, theory or ideology in the regulation of society. While some important insights and ground breaking work have come from this emphasis (e.g. Rose, 1985) an exclusive emphasis on this problem can mean a neglect of both the construction of alternative practice and of attention to the problems of under-served populations - for example refugees who have experienced physical and psychological trauma.

The North American networks, Psychologists for Social Responsibility, Rad Psy Net, and the newly formed Psychologists Acting with Conscience Together (PsyACT), although based chiefly in academia tend to be less theoretical and more action orientated (see Fox, 2002) than those elsewhere. They are broad coalitions reflecting the radical (left liberal) traditions of the USA.

Community Psychology

Community psychology developed later in Europe, Australasia and South Africa in comparison to both North America and Latin America. In Britain it has been particularly slow to develop outside a handful of isolated sites, and (outside Stirling and Manchester) it has been based chiefly among clinical psychologists, although the last few years have seen more development (Orford, 1998; Burton and Kagan,

2003). Nevertheless, there are now a number of community psychology networks, which to varying degrees present an alternative to mainstream individualistic practice and include radical and critical practitioners.

In all these countries, as in Latin America (Montero, 1996), community psychologists are keen to distinguish their orientation from that which has developed in North America. The emphasis varies, with Australasian and South African community psychologists emphasising the indigenous perspective and the complicity of mainstream psychology in racial injustice (Bishop et al., 2001; Seedat et al., 2001). European community psychology is diverse, and the linguistic differences make co-operation relatively difficult. However, the attempt to set out and practice a distinctively European community psychology is a common feature with emphasis on structural social system analysis, on collective social forms and struggle, on cultural diversity, and on methodologies that emphasise phenomenological understandings of social psychological experience (e.g. Francescato and Tomai (2001), Fryer, 2003, Kagan, 2002). Not everyone within the networks would adhere to such a critical orientation, however.

Despite the achievements and enthusiasm of the activists, the numbers actively involved are small. For instance, only some 100 people attended the November 2002 European Community Psychology conference in Barcelona. So far the British and European networks have met little more than biannually.

Mental health specific networks

There are, on the other hand, strong and innovative networks in the mental health field. I will concentrate on the British context here. There are two main strands: a) movements of people who use, or have survived mental health services; and b)

networks of practitioners who seek to develop non-oppressive forms of work with people who experience the various kinds of mental distress.

There is considerable co-operation between these two strands. Professionals who want to practice in non-oppressive ways are keen to understand the experience of those who have been subject to the mental health service system, indeed some professionals are themselves survivors of the system. One, a clinical psychologist, Rufus May recently described his experience of psychosis - 'coming out' as a survivor, something that still has a real stigma (May, 2000).

Among the user / survivor networks are the following. *The Hearing Voices Network* has worked to explore, re-interpret and normalise the experience of hearing voices. *Mad Pride*, and *Survivors' United Network* are further networks of mental health system survivors.

The Critical Psychiatry Group consists of psychiatrists who take a more social approach and who seek to develop a critique of the psychiatric establishment and the influence of the pharmaceutical industry and the neuroscience lobby. More psychotherapeutically orientated workers have what was called *Changes*, and is now the *Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy*.

The network of activists connected with *Asylum*, the magazine for democratic psychiatry, consists of survivors and users as well as professionals and activists based in universities or outside the formal service system. *Asylum* appears approximately annually and makes an explicit connection with the political sphere, which is seen as intimately connected with the mental health system. The magazine is closely linked with a key alternative UK network, *Psychology, Politics Resistance* (PPR).

PPR was launched at a conference in 1994 attended by some 100 people from inside and outside the official boundary of psychology. Since then four conferences have been held. The content of these events is fairly typical of the work of *PPR*. It is chiefly concerned with opposition to the orthodox psychiatric system, with particular emphases on electroconvulsive treatment, the domination of practice by the drug companies and the powers of the State over people with mental health problems. This has been the emphasis from the first meeting, when the orientation of the grouping became defined very much in relation to mental health issues (and implicitly medical psychiatry) and not to the other ideological and abusive roles of psychology in other fields.

Although the above networks are perhaps stronger and more oppositional than the critical and community psychological ones, they are nevertheless small, and probably unknown to the majority who use or work in the mental health services.

Alternative networks in context

The nature of alternative networks can only be understood in relation to characteristics of the society in which they are found. Here I will sketch out some key characteristics of advanced capitalist societies.

After the second world war, there was the 'post-war settlement' between capital and labour, which allowed the development of what has been called 'welfare capitalism', where the State intervened in the economy both to support capitalist development, and to ameliorate its effects, through universal education and health care, welfare benefits, and so on. This began to break down at the end of the 1960s. The election of the Thatcher conservative government in Britain in 1979 marked the advent of a selective neoliberal restructuring to reduce the ameliorative socially protective role of the State, to bring market mechanisms into the health, education

and welfare systems, and to reduce the power of organised labour. Similar policies were enacted in all the advanced capitalist economies to varying extents, by conservative, Christian democrat, social democrat, and socialist parties (sometimes even with the collaboration of communist or former communist coalition partners). The impact of these changes was sufficiently softened by two factors that rendered this radical change relatively invisible and for many, painless: 1) the maintenance of a high level of relative affluence (in large part because of the exportation of exploitation); 2) the continuation of a residual welfare system. In Britain and the rest of Western Europe, as well as in Australasia, expenditure on welfare was at a higher level than in the USA.

Some other characteristics of these societies are also important. The system of representative democracy has been in place from the end of the Second World War in most places, and from the mid 1970s in Spain and Portugal. It provides a cloak of legitimacy for the destructive social policies, in part sustained by the mixed nature of the State's policy complex, which generally includes some elements of positive reform. The manufacture of consent in ways broadly consistent with Gramsci's analysis (see Burton and Kagan; 1996, Burton, 2000), through the educational system, the abundance of the capitalist system itself, the media and the all permeating dominant discourses of affluence, progress, democracy, responsibility, yet always with the possibility of coercion in the background. With exceptions on our peripheries (e.g. Australia's treatment of indigenous Australians, British and Spanish treatment of insurgent nationalists, the victimisation of Roma, asylum seekers and refugees in most states) the populations of the core countries have experienced nothing like the savagery of the State in so many Latin American countries (Agger and Jensen, 1996; Hollander, 1997), and indeed our states often seem civilised

compared to the USA. Setting aside for a moment the distortion of humanity that capitalism imposes on everyone, our oppressed are minorities rather than majorities.

The experience of these regions then has been of the selective adoption of neo-liberal models, but with continuing 'no-go areas', the best example being the British National Health Service repeatedly altered, reformed, modernised, but despite the incursion of private finance and the contracting out of some services, it has not yet been fully submitted to the ravages of private capital. As a result the social welfare system is still large and contradictory - having both a benign, ameliorative, helpful side, as well as one that is all to do with reproducing the system and controlling the population (Gough, 1979). It is in that system that most psychologists work. Intellectuals and professionals in our societies therefore exist in a complex situation. They are integrated in complex ways with the system which they depend upon for their livelihoods. To the extent that they align themselves with critical traditions these will be feminist, left liberal and socialist, and Marxist (the latter more in continental Europe than in Britain). This would seem to contrast with the USA where the integration with the State and society is also strong, but there is so little of a socialist and Marxist tradition, and with Latin America, where there are strong socialist and radical traditions, but much weaker integration with the State and its agenda (Jiménez, 1990).

The nature of psychology in our countries reflects some of these differences. The development of psychology in the USA has had a historically formative involvement with the business interest (Danziger, 1990). The connection with the interests of State and business has continued throughout, and individualism was writ large as scientific ideology. In Europe (even in the UK) there were strong local traditions with different roots that have always held themselves in a dynamic relation with the hegemonic US forms. In Latin America the same tension also took place,

perhaps with both a greater direct influence of the US model, and a more explicitly problematised opposition to it.

So for critical or radical psychologists in the advanced capitalist economies the socio-political reality is not necessarily conducive to the development of a strong movement for an alternative psychology. The contradictory nature of the Welfare State (Gough, 1979) means that psychological work and psychological ideology are also contradictory, with an ameliorative improving agenda mixed with one that has more to do with social classification and control. The integration of psychologists and other intellectuals into the structures and processes of both governing and serving people means that, for example, most clinical psychologists can congratulate themselves on doing a good job, developing and implementing alternatives to medicalisation, for example. But this is done in ways that emphasise individual factors, not entirely de-contextualised, but without much in the way of an understanding of the twin processes of socialisation and societal reproduction which shape the identity, experience and functioning of persons. Psychologists in such roles can be seen as something of a 'loyal opposition' offering approaches that are more sophisticated, less categorical than those from psychiatry for instance, but rarely questioning the parameters within which such issues are debated.

Furthermore, while there is a lot of psychological conceptualisation in everyday discourse, that again has contradictory aspects. At times a psychological approach plays a humanising role (when the alternative is to demonise child offenders as evil, for example), while at other times it plays the familiar individualising and victim-blaming role (for example in the current moves away from comprehensive education back to selection). At the same time, there is a high degree of insulation of psychology from politics as such. This is partly a result of the individualistic definition of the field itself, but also because the work context of psychologists is disengaged

from the plane of political debate - itself becoming increasingly commodified and de-politicised. Many psychologists engage in radical politics (in the peace movement, for example), while practising a conventional and uncritical psychology. This tends to mean that there is little natural opportunity to establish alternative networks, since people's networks are either political and non-psychological, or psychological and non-political. This means that there is probably a greater potential capacity for alternative psychological networks than is actually realised.

Radical impulses have been characterised by this contradictory context, and those psychologists who are radical politically tend to have chosen one of the following arenas of action.

Conventional welfare politics aimed at increasing state spending on health, education and welfare programmes. Often this politics is defensive, aiming to prevent the further erosion of the welfare state.

Work beside or for minorities chiefly been in the mental health field where as we have seen there is a strong critical / alternative psychiatry and user/survivor movement. In Britain at least, the psychologist activists in this movement tend not to be professional psychologists, although some clinical psychologists have allied themselves with this work. Others work beside or for other minorities such as people disabled through intellectual difficulty or physical impairment. In many areas there is now a broad societal recognition of the rights of these groups, with in the case of people with intellectual difficulty a new government requirement that the Partnership Boards in every local authority which oversee services and their development include representation of both intellectually disabled people and family carers. Therefore work beside or with these minorities can seem like pushing against an open door, but in fact the processes of exclusion, victim blaming, and oppression are never very far away. Work beside and for other minorities (e.g. travellers, children excluded from

school, prisoners, refugees, young homeless people) is less obvious on the part of psychologists.

Theoretical critique: some critical psychologists see their contribution as providing theoretical tools for the struggle. There is a role for such work, in analysing the causes and processes of oppression, and in developing alternatives. Yet it can often be very dislocated from practice, overemphasising the act of denunciation with much less effort expended on the articulation, or announcement, of alternatives, adequate praxis and policy. The critical psychologists too often seem to be engaged only in the theoretical task, where text replaces experience as the object of study, and impenetrable prose replaces action as its product.

The above distinctions are 'ideal types' and in practice there is crossing over both within and between the networks. PPR, for example is a hybrid in terms of the distinctions made above. Its main focus is mental health and the role of the psychologist members of the group could be regarded as 'work beside and with' the minority of people using or previously using mental health services. Its co-ordination relies to some extent on the resources and commitment of academically based psychologists, whose day-to-day work falls chiefly into the 'critical psychology' and 'theoretical work' categories. It therefore has some possibilities for overcoming the split between critical psychology and radical action, and going beyond the theoretical concerns of some of its academic members.

However, an exclusive emphasis on mental health is not unproblematic. Psychology is not coterminous with mental health. It extends into many other areas of life. In its contradictory way it is potentially both a tool of repression and of liberation in all the areas of life. Confining political action to the mental health sphere is to unnecessarily limit the contribution that a liberating psychology can make. Moreover, to the extent that the task of a radical psychology in this sphere becomes

one of 'oppose state and medical repression' and 'stand beside users and survivors', there is a risk neglect of the development, the construction, of an adequate socially literate psychological practice.

Conclusion

In the advanced capitalist countries there has been a development over the last twenty or more years of a set of networks for radical, critical and socially active psychologists and their allies. These networks are relatively weak, and the reasons for this can be found in the nature of psychology in these societies where it is both servant and loyal opposition of the dominant social interests. Radical and critical psychological networks need to find ways to link social activism with critical psychological analysis, in ways that are accessible and helpful to the various oppressed minorities in our society. They need to find a common ideology that unites theory and practice, psychological practice and social activism. There are helpful models within the Latin American attempts to practice psychology with a liberatory orientation (Burton and Kagan, in press; Martín-Baró, 1996), and with adaptation to our very different social context we could learn from them, but perhaps the discursive post-modern turn needs to wear itself out before something like this can happen.

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APPENDIX

Critical and radical psychology Internet links³

1. More general critical and radical psychology - mostly academic, but some more social action focussed.

(Note - italicised text is quoted from the sites themselves: other text is the author's comments).

The Radical Psychology Network

<http://www.radpsynet.org/>

Seeks like-minded psychologists and others to help create a society better able to meet human needs and bring about social justice. We want to change society's unacceptable status quo and bring about a better world. And we want to change the status quo of psychology, too. We challenge psychology's traditional focus on minor reform, because enhancing human welfare demands fundamental social

³ Thanks to Ian Parker for supplying some of these links

change instead. Moreover, psychology itself has too often oppressed people rather than liberated them. It maintains a useful set of links at: <http://www.radpsynet.org/rpnlinks.html>

Critical Psychology Network

<http://groups.yahoo.com/subscribe/crit-psych-net>

This email list is envisaged as a collaborative venture to draw together critical psychologists and researchers from around the globe, and people working in associated disciplines in the humanities and social sciences who have similar interests.

Associated with the **International Journal of Critical Psychology**

http://www.l-w-bks.co.uk/journals/critpsychology/crit_psy_frameset.htm

Manchester Discourse Unit

http://www.psychology.mmu.ac.uk/research/research_discourse.htm

The Discourse Unit at Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK supports a variety of qualitative and theoretical research projects contributing to the development of discourse theory in psychology, with the term 'discourse' used primarily in its critical foucauldian and hermeneutic senses to include inquiries influenced by feminism and psychoanalysis. Also the home of Psychology, Politics, Resistance

Proyecto de Psicología Crítica

<http://www.cop.es/colegiados/>

Based in Spain and based on collectives in four cities. Fairly eclectic with influences from European and Latin American traditions. A good variety of links to other Spanish and English sites.<http://www.cop.es/colegiados/O-00763/enlaces.htm>

The Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy

<http://www.pccs-books.co.uk/books/journals.htm#1>

*Brings together all that was best in *Changes: An International Journal of Psychology and Psychotherapy* with a new, stronger focus on a compassionate critique of the counselling world.*

Kritische Psychologie (German Critical Psychology site in German)

<http://www.kritische-psychologie.de/>

German critical psychology was established at the Free University Berlin at the beginning of the seventies. It was the result of a wider critical movement that countered a bourgeois psychology in the image of power and adaptation science, with an emancipatory alternative to psychology from the standpoint of the subject.

Outlines (Danish Critical Psychology)

<http://www.psy.ku.dk/forskning/Udgivelser/Outlines/Outlines.html>

The ambitions of Outlines is to be a contemporary organ of critical social studies and action research in the sense of "connecting critique of knowledge, of practice and of society in order to establish counter-discourses and -publics against and within various institutional fields"

Psychology and Marxism

<http://www.marxists.org/subject/psychology/>

Psychology is in need of its own Das Kapital - its own concepts of class, basis, value etc. - in which it might express, describe, and study its object. A Marxist Internet Archive.

Annual Review of Critical Psychology [contact I.A.Parker@mmu.ac.uk]

There are 3 issues of *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* currently available. Number 1 is the 1999 special issue on 'Foundations'. Number 2 is the 2000 special issue on 'Action Research'. Number 3 (2003) is on the theme of 'anticapitalism'. These cost £10 each for individual subscribers, and cheques should now be made payable to 'Manchester Metropolitan University'.

Issue one has a useful review by Ian Parker of the varieties of critical psychology.

Psychologists for Social Responsibility

<http://www.psyr.org/>

Established in 1982, PsySR uses psychological knowledge and skills to promote peace with social justice at the community, national and international levels.

It works to: apply the growing body of knowledge about conflict resolution and violence prevention; facilitate positive changes for victims and survivors of personal, community, and civil violence; advocate for basic human needs - including actions which decrease poverty, ensure ethnic and gender equality, increase work opportunity, promote healthy and sustainable environments, and achieve a wiser balance between human needs and military budgets; ensure that relevant information from psychology is used in local, national, and international public policy.

Psychologists Acting with Conscience Together (PsyACT)

<http://www.psyact.org>

Founded in 2003, the main objective of the coalition is to take collective and effective global action to promote social justice and well-being for all, but especially for those groups, communities, and nations that experience oppression and exploitation.

We aim to increase the network of psychologists and psychology students who are politically involved, through: providing a mechanism for taking action on social justice, and the sharing of ideas and resources, which help encourage dialogue on issues of social justice in the classroom and workplace.

2. Community Psychology

Community Psychology has long presented a less individualistic and more social alternative orientated to social action for liberatory social change. Here are some of the main sites.

European Community Psychology Network

<http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~cpbergol/>

To be replaced by European Association for Community Psychology in mid 2004.

Community Psychology Network (USA based, very comprehensive)

<http://www.cmmtypsych.net/>

Society for Community Research and Action (USA)

<http://www.apa.org/divisions/div27/>

Although this is Division 27 of the American (sic) Psychological Association, it also maintains the interdisciplinary mandate of community psychology insofar as it 'serves many different disciplines that focus on community research and action'.

Community Psychology UK

<http://www.compsy.org.uk/>

Unofficial UK site, based in Manchester with a social psychological emphasis, linked to the Community and Organisational Psychology Research Group at Manchester Metropolitan University. Has links to a variety of sites in Britain and around the world.

Email discussion list for UK Community Psychology

<http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/COMMUNITYPSYCHUK.HTML>

...a way to all keep informed about what is happening in community psychology in the UK, as well as provide a forum for discussing issues in our work.

3. Mental Health system / Survivors movement links:

Hearing Voices Network

<http://www.hearing-voices.org.uk/>

The first UK Hearing Voices group was formed in Manchester in 1988. It was inspired by the work of Marius Romme and Sondra Escher and the Dutch self help group Foundation Resonance. Hearing voices has been regarded by psychiatry as an auditory hallucination and in many cases a symptom of schizophrenia. However not everyone who hears voices has a diagnosis of schizophrenia. There are conflicting theories about why people hear do voices from psychiatrists, psychologists and voice hearers. Although the network is open to many diverse opinions and we accept all and respect the individual explanation of the person who hears voices.

Criticalminded at Psychminded

<http://www.psychminded.co.uk/critical.htm>

A section of psychminded devoted to critical perspectives on the psychology, psychiatry and mental health disciplines. *Whether you are a professional, user or charity Psychminded would value contributions to this page - particularly journal articles, conference papers, documents, press releases, personal perspectives and experiences.*

Critical Psychiatry Group

<http://www.critpsynet.freeuk.com/critpsynet.htm>

The 'Bradford Group' of psychiatrists first met in Bradford in January 1999. The group provides a network to develop a critique of the contemporary psychiatric system.

Asylum

<http://www.asylumonline.net>

The magazine for democratic psychiatry has for over a decade provided a unique forum for democratic debate. It has covered the issues and competing forms of knowledge which underpin the practices of psychiatry and mental health at the end of the 20th century, with a special emphasis on the political and social dimensions of life. It has served as an antidote to the oppressive certainties promoted by biological psychiatry and professional discourse.

Learning from Psychosis

<http://www.learningfrompsychosis.com/>

To promote a deeper understanding of the subject to enable participants to reflect upon and improve their practice. To explore the meanings around psychosis. To enhance participants' skills and ideas for developing psychological approaches with people experiencing psychosis. To learn about the emotional aspects of mental health distress. To look at the implications of being labelled. To explore the possibility of recovery and how that can be facilitated. To illustrate that there are individual differences and to encourage participants to look at users as individuals.

Mad Pride

<http://www.madpride.net/>

Mental Health System Survivors overcoming discrimination in the UK and all over the world.

Mental Magazine

<http://www.mentalmagazine.co.uk/>

An open forum that deals with every aspect of health and social care and allows free discussion and information sharing between people with different perspectives and experience.

Support Coalition International

<http://www.mindfreedom.org/>

For human rights in the mental health system with Support Coalition International, an international campaigning and network organisation, publishers of 'Mind Freedom'.