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German Political Psychology

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Introduction

German political psychology emerged in Germany in the 1950s as a critical psychoanalytically oriented psychology in the tradition of Freud-Maxism and the social psychology of critical theory. Its inception happened against the backdrop of the defeat of Nazi Germany in the Second World War and the exposure of its crimes and in view of the economic boom, which was accompanied by conservatism and reverberations of national socialist ideologies. German political psychology belongs to the major strands of critical psychologies that

developed in the German-speaking countries from the 1950s and 1960s onwards, but despite its relevance in the German-speaking countries, it is hardly known to an international audience as of yet. It tackles many questions that are still of relevance for any critical psychology today.

Definition

The term *German Political Psychology* refers to West German debates between the 1950s and 1980s that followed up on the social psychological studies and reflections of critical theory. First, political psychologists analyzed pressing questions of their respective times and critically interrogated diverse aspects of late capitalist and post-fascist West German society. Second, they conducted systematic reflections on the relation between psychoanalysis and social theory. Third, they inquired how psychoanalytic knowledge may aid in political activism. Significant proponents were Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, Alfred Lorenzer, Helmut Dahmer, Klaus Horn, and Peter Brückner. Later, feminist authors critically took up these debates.

Keywords

Psychoanalysis; critical theory; social psychology; Marx; Freud; feminism

History

Two different strands bred this kind of psychoanalytically oriented political psychology in West German postwar society:

First, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer remigrated from the American exile they had been driven into by the National Socialist rise to power. Horkheimer directed the *Frankfurt Institute of Social Research* (IfS) in the late 1920s when Adorno was a member there, too. Already then, the institute had started to seize psychoanalytic insights for critical social research with significant contributions by Erich

Fromm and in the context of the Freudo-Marxist debates of the time. During Horkheimer's and Adorno's stay in the USA, these efforts gave way to their major study on authoritarianism "authoritarian personality." Once returned to Germany, they started another large-scale research project "group experiment" which analyzed the post-fascist mentality of the German population of the early 1950s in more than a hundred group interviews. The group experiment would be the last empirical social psychological research project of the early critical theory. Herbert Marcuse, a former member of the IfS who had not returned to Germany after the war but was much read there, would prove to be significant for the following theoretical discussion in Germany.

Second, psychoanalytic social psychology in Germany developed in close alignment to clinical practice. Psychoanalysis had been integrated into the National Socialist health care system under the name of "deutsche Seelenkunde" ("German study of the soul"). The heteronomous determination of therapeutic goals such as "combat capability" led to a "moral de-contextualization" and to the loss of the socio-critical potential of psychoanalysis (Schneider, 1993, p. 761): Thus, it became necessary to establish psychoanalysis with a special focus on its political and moral dimensions. It was Alexander Mitscherlich who promoted a political re-contextualization of psychoanalysis. The IfS kept a close dialogue with the "Sigmund Freud Institute" (SFI), founded at Adorno's and Horkheimer's suggestion, among others, and directed by Mitscherlich.

In the context of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, both roots of political psychology were read widely and brought to bear fruit for the analysis of political conflicts.

Traditional Debates

The research themes and questions of political psychology were truly innovative in their time as they were not tackled at all by traditional psychology. Academic psychology in the former

Federal Republic of Germany was dominated by a kind of holistic psychology that was succeeded by the mathematically and experimentally oriented empirical psychology predominant in the USA during the 1960s. Psychoanalysis was included neither in mainstream academic psychology of the time nor in most critical approaches in psychology that developed somewhat later. The major discussions in political psychology did not aim at psychology, however. The majority of political psychologists were philosophers, social scientists, or psychoanalysts, which usually had received medical training. Traditional debates relevant to political psychology were on the one hand the humanities in the Federal Republic of Germany which had retreated to some sort of intellectual inwardness after the Second World War. On the other hand, political psychologists took issue with the psychoanalysis that had been integrated into the National Socialist health system and was discredited and theoretically tame since then.

Critical Debates

Alexander Mitscherlich continuously took a moral and political stand on social changes in (West) Germany from 1945 until the 1970s, drawing both from his *clinical* psychoanalytic work and from psychoanalytic theories. This already shows in his early works that were not even thoroughly psychoanalytic (Mitscherlich, 1946; Mitscherlich & Mielke, 1948/1960; Mitscherlich & Weber, 1946). In 1948 he founded the journal *Psyche*, dedicated to keep up with the Freudian tradition of cultural and social critique. *Psyche* would become one of the most significant publication organs of political psychology. In his major writings *On the Way to a Fatherless Society* (1963), *The Inhospitableness of Our Cities* (1965), and *The Inability to Mourn* (1967, together with Margarete Mitscherlich), Mitscherlich offers social psychological diagnoses of West German postwar society in which he – not unlike the critical theorists of the IfS – draws a dreadful picture of an anonymous, de-individualized mass society.

Mitscherlich diagnosed an “ego-depletion in our society” (A. Mitscherlich & M. Mitscherlich, 1967, p. 20) which becomes apparent as an impaired ability to act upon social institutions actively and willfully. His major contribution to psychoanalytic social psychology lies in the fact that he always analyzed the conditions of this ego-depletion against the backdrop of the clinical study of individual life histories.

Together with *Margarete Mitscherlich*, he traced the ego-depletion in society back to the defense mechanisms against guilt and against remembering the atrocities of the National Socialists that prevailed in many Germans (A. Mitscherlich, & M. Mitscherlich, 1967). Almost at the same time, Mitscherlich (1963) proposed another explanation focusing on the consequences of the historic changes in work conditions on family and political structures: Social structures and relations that are handed down to children by their parents are hardly concrete and imaginable. By contrast, they are “inaccessible and erratic” (*ibid.*, p. 200) to the individual. For Mitscherlich, this impression grew even stronger in the face of political transformation processes that confront the dominated with “faceless systems,” bureaucracies and functional machineries of domination, which produce anxiety, aggression, and prejudice (see Mitscherlich, 1953, 1962/1963; 1969; 1977). Despite this dark picture that reminds of Marcuse’s and Adorno’s analyses of a “one-dimensional” world, his work is remarkably optimistic. Again and again, he intervened in social debates with concrete suggestions for change. He demanded the development of a *constructive disobedience* and stood up for “the *obligation* for dissent or even resistance” (Mitscherlich, 1963, p. 356).

Mitscherlich was always at pains to be up to date and to provide critical cultural diagnoses of his time and political engagement. However, he does not draw on the social theories that distinguished the works of the Freudo-Marxists and critical theory. For a critical social psychology, this is not only a deficit: His efforts “to reconstruct the imprints of society on the biographies of individuals” contain a “political

as well as specifically psychological quality” (Krovoza & Schneider, 1988, pp. 135f.) that were missing from the grand social theoretical reflections of his successors. This characteristic of Mitscherlich’s work complies with the socio-critical re-contextualization of psychoanalysis mentioned above.

It was younger scholars from Mitscherlich’s circles who took up the debate on the relation between social theory and psychoanalysis on this basis and against the backdrop of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Helmut Dahmer, Klaus Horn, and Alfred Lorenzer coined the notion *critical theory of the subject* to account for these debates. Klaus Horn and Peter Brückner would later use the term *political psychology* for their theoretical and practical efforts.

Helmut Dahmer (1973, 1975), editor of *Psyche* from 1968 until 1992, analyzed psychoanalysis as to its potential for a critique of ideology. Furthermore, he has conducted valuable work in rediscovering Freudo-Marxism and critically unveiling Freudo-Marxists’ reductive readings of both Marx and Freud. Critically taking up the so-called *culturalism* or *revisionism debate* of the 1950s, Alfred Lorenzer (1973) reformulated psychoanalysis as a materialist socialization theory. This argument between Adorno and Marcuse on the one hand and Fromm and Karen Horney on the other hand had targeted drive theory. Fromm and Horney called it biologicistic and reactionary, while their opponents saw in it the critical impulse of Freudian theory. The proponents of drive theory maintained that Fromm’s social characterology, too, made recourse to the ontologizing idea of a sort of “true essence” of the “unalienated human being” in order to make room for the concept of subjective resistance against social demands and forces. Lorenzer, by contrast, tried to capture the development of drive structure as an ambivalent and interactive process instead of plainly biologizing or otherwise ontologizing it. His concept starts from the level of drive development: According to Lorenzer, drive structures develop as inner reflections of the satisfying relationship between the child and its bodily needs (so-called “first nature”) on the one hand and the

caregiver, representing sociocultural practices, on the other hand. Lorenzer calls these reflections of real interactions *specific interaction forms*. They structure the expression of the infant’s bodily needs, that is, human inner nature only appears in socially mediated form. Without losing sight of the embodiedness of psychological processes, Lorenzer conceptualizes drive structures as social and historic factors.

Specific interaction forms are related to linguistic and nonlinguistic (e.g., pictorial) cultural symbols (Lorenzer, 1970b, 1972, 1981). It is only with these symbolization processes that consciousness and the unconscious are made possible – albeit in a historically specific social form. Lorenzer considers language to be more than an ensemble of words (Lorenzer, 1970a, 1974): According to Lorenzer, language is conceptualized as “a unified whole of language use, life practices, and understanding of the world” (Morgenroth, 2010, p. 50). Social discourse infiltrates the child via symbolizations and (co)determines his or her consciousness. Socially tabooed interaction forms are deprived of consciousness by non- or de-symbolization; this, however, does not always succeed entirely. Lorenzer continues from here with two ideas: *First*, the subject’s resistance is tied to the de-symbolized or that which is not yet symbolized and constitutes the dark side of social discourse. It is only by the conflictuous friction between individuals and discourse that subjectivity emerges (see Lorenzer, 1972). *Second*, Lorenzer accounts a particular relevance to ideologies in the socialization process (see Lorenzer, 1981). As linguistic and nonlinguistic templates, ideologies offer a symbolic framework for the recurrence of suppressed contents which cover up the de-symbolized and at the same time make it accessible to consciousness and to action, albeit dressed up in false symbols (re-symbolization). Ideologies literally lead to false consciousness and substitute clinical symptoms: They even contribute to the prevention of pathologies. Even if Lorenzer’s approach has remained fragmented, it remains a productive re-conceptualization of psychoanalytic social psychology which has sparked rather little attention until now.

Klaus Horn struggles to find a psychoanalytic answer to the question regarding the social significance of subjectivity (Horn, 1972, 1973). He analyzes remains of suffering and resistance within the subject under conditions of late bourgeois society. Both theoretically and content-wise, he mostly summarizes the insights gained by Mitscherlich and critical theory. He deepens these earlier reflections with the help of a theory of narcissism but hardly offers innovative results. Nevertheless, his methodical reflections on psychoanalytic social research are of vital significance: It was Horn who first devoted systematic attention to psychoanalytically oriented methods of data analysis and collection (“scenic interview”) (Horn, Beier, & Wolf, 1983; Horn, Beier, & Kraft-Krumm, 1984).

Peter Brückner’s political psychology reaches way beyond the mere analysis of the subjective factor of social processes: Brückner radicalizes Mitscherlich’s strategy of reconstructing social encroachments in individual life histories by conceiving of political psychology as both a scientific and a political activity. The core idea is that there is a “relationship between the life histories of individuals and the historic harms they inflict on one another” (Brückner, 1968, p. 94). Brückner (1966) noted a concrete aspect of this general idea under the keyword *pathology of obedience*: On the basis of the psychoanalytic theory of culture and structure, he describes ego ideal and superego as “bridgeheads within the interiority of the governed individuals,” thanks to which social authorities can rule (Brückner, 1970, p. 19; see 1968, p. 100). He conceptualizes the superego as a function that not only co-determines the vicissitudes of the drive but can also suppress nonconformist perceptions of society and political reflective processes. She or he who has internalized too many social imperatives gets afraid when criticizing, doubting, thinking, and questioning normality.

This insight builds one core of what is maybe the most careful analysis of the antiauthoritarian current of the student protests of the 1960s: Brückner’s reflections on *The Transformation of Democratic Consciousness* (Brückner, 1970). With their antiauthoritarian protest, the students

collectively engaged in a deconstruction of the inner “bridgeheads” of authority. By projecting these (back) onto authority figures, they perceived them as a part of reality that could be provoked and attacked. They produced social situations in which they could change their superego structures and, thus, their thought blocks and their feelings of fear, helplessness, and shame in the process of a social interaction with authority figures (see Brückner, 1970). Brückner is convinced, however, that this “organized self-liberation” (Brückner, p. 47) and the alteration of superego structures can only succeed within the context of political practice. Brückner showed solidarity with the protest movements of the 1960s and accompanied the movements of the 1970s up until the RAF with critical reflections (see Brückner, 1973, 1976a, 1976b; Brückner & Krovoza, 1972b). He did not want to *legitimize* but to *understand* them against the backdrop of the historical development of society. Official politicians as well as the university directorate of his home university in Hannover did not comprehend this difference between understanding and legitimating: In their eyes, Brückner had not distanced himself from the armed groups decidedly enough; he was suspended from his service as a lecturer and barred from university.

Brückner does not halt at these insights into the pathology of obedience but uses them to reflect on psychology and psychologists in a science critical manner (see Brückner, 1966; Brückner & Krovoza, 1972a): Socially induced thought blocks can also be found in (political) psychologists (see Brückner, 1968). For this reason, political psychology can only gain valid insights into social reality “when it destroys its everyday occurrence by means of critique” (ibid., p. 94). Political and psychological activity (Brückner, 1968, p. 95) is part of its method of knowledge; “it understands phenomena by trying to change them” (Brückner, 1968, p. 95). This attempt to change society allows the researchers to experience that which cannot be thought of and to analyze when feelings of fear, shame, guilt, insufficiency, and helplessness occur. It is only the political and psychological reflection of this experience against the backdrop of its social basis

that makes emancipative knowledge of social power structures possible: “Experiencing who we are and who really rules in society is part of the *same process*” (Brückner, 1968, p. 98). Brückner’s methodological call for radical reflexivity aims at the abolition of the separation between “value-neutral” scientist and “concerned” person.

Regardless of the fact that Brückner’s hopes for a far-reaching social change remained unfulfilled, the following must be noted: It was only in the course of its further development in the context of the protest movements that critical psychoanalytic social psychology gained a “reference point beyond theory and, as a consequence, a specific approach to its subject that mediates psychological and political thought. In this regard, this phase marks both the end and the new beginning of political psychology in Western Germany” (Krovoza & Schneider, 1988, p. 34).

International Relevance

The debates in the field of political psychology were conducted in German and have hardly transgressed this language barrier. It is only the works of Mitscherlich that have been translated into other languages. The theoretical debates, Lorenzer’s theory of interaction forms, Brückner’s interventionist political psychology, and Dahmer’s ideology critical reflections on psychoanalysis were completely ignored. Marcuse, however, who followed the German debates and political activities from the USA, played a significant part in the US-American student movement.

Practice Relevance

Political psychological debates were taken up by the student movements of the 1970s that provided fruitful soil for social critique and for a critical account of National Socialism and the role of the parent generation in Nazi crimes. They influenced essentially discourses on the emotional heritage of

National Socialism. The social movements of the 1970s also gave way to a psychoanalytically oriented critical pedagogy and the kinderladen movement with its antiauthoritarian educational concept. Many of these ideas were developed in tandem with the political psychological critique of the way in which socialization structures reproduced authoritarian power relations. In the student movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the reception of psychoanalysis (especially W. Reich) also fueled ideas of sexual liberation and sexual revolution. Finally, political psychological perspectives influenced the practical work of many psychoanalysts who were thus sensitized to the social conditions of inner-psychic conflicts of their patients.

Future Directions

The decline of the social movements in the 1990s also led to a decrease in debates in political psychology. It had then already succeeded in becoming institutionalized in some places, e.g., in Hannover, Frankfurt am Main, and Bremen. However, all of these venues were affected by more or less severe cutbacks.

One of the most vivid developments of political psychology was furthered by its adaptation by the women’s movement and by attempts to adapt psychoanalysis for a feminist critique of society: The “Hannover approach” by the Adorno disciple Regina Becker-Schmidt and her colleagues differed from others in its emphasis on the significance of mediation between the structure of society and the structure of the subject rather than deductive thinking. Taking up discussions on social characterology, feminists criticized the concept of a rigid male and a female social character as ideology, and contradictions in gendered subjectivity became more evident (Liebsch, 1994): Actual women and men are not as is expected of them by social norms. Hannover feminists in particular have analyzed how the objective contradictions of women’s “double socialization” (Becker-Schmidt, 1987), i.e., women’s place in both paid labor and family, are reflected psychologically as

subjective ambivalences. However, this side branch of political psychology had to witness institutional drawbacks, too. The chairs in Hannover do not exist anymore, and psychoanalysis is hardly received at all in German gender studies.

Political psychology, like many other critical science projects, is trapped in a process of institutional decline. On the other hand, especially on the younger generation of psychoanalytically oriented political psychologists, the edging away of political psychology from the universities has also had an activating and (re-)politicizing effect, visible in a multitude of new cooperations, conferences, and publications particularly in the field of gender studies and studies on right-wing extremism, nationalism, culture of remembrance, and anti-Semitism. Outside of the universities socio-critical groups increasingly turn to political psychology in order to explain current social phenomena.

Debates around the concepts of drive and social character are currently being taken up again and furthered. Pivotal in this regard are attempts to link these discussions to poststructuralist, difference theoretical, and interaction theoretical reflections.

The institutional eradication revealed the lack of inclusion of other advanced strands of critical theories. It is no wonder, then, that the desire to open up and to create dialogue, discussions, and alliances, as well as to transgress the boundary of the German language and to establish international exchange is very evident at the moment.

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Geropsychology, Overview

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Introduction

Geropsychology is an increasing field of clinical practice within professional psychology. Due to the rapid increase in the proportion of older people across countries, a growing number of psychologists work with older adults, their families and caregivers, and aged-care systems concerned. Historically, the origin of the study of the psychological ageing is often credited to A. Quetelet who initiated the first collection of psychological data in examining human development and ageing and published the book *On Man and the Development of His Faculties* in 1935 (Cook, Herson, & Van Hasselt, 1998). Although afterwards more research had investigated psychological functioning of adults, including older adults, and scholars recognized the need for the scientific study of older people, at the beginning of the twentieth century, most clinicians were unwilling to extend psychological treatment to older individuals. For example, Freud (1905) suggested that psychological treatment of patients over 50 years of age would be ineffective. In the clinical domain, K. Abraham (1927) was regarded as the first psychoanalyst to recognize and express optimism for the psychoanalytic treatment of older individuals. Later in 1929, the first psychotherapeutic program for older adults, the San Francisco Old Age Counseling Center, was founded in the USA. Following this developmental trend, S. L. Pressey (1939), as the first psychologist to publish a book on psychology of ageing, focused on the development of adulthood and ageing. Despite the increasing scholarly interests in older adults, the field of geropsychology remained in its infancy. It was until after World War II the field of psychology and ageing attracted substantial