

MARXISM & PSYCHOLOGY CONFERENCE – 2010

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The Marxism & Psychology conference took place from 5-7 August at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada. Around 100 participants from around the world discussed the intersection between different traditions in psychology and different strands of Marxism. The Island is the site of a number of political-economic cultural forces, ranging from the minority “Acadian” community descended from French settlers (the Acadians were expelled from the Island by the British and some ended up in Louisiana where they become known as “Cajuns”) to the Mi’q Maks who are now mainly confined to the much tinier Lennox Island off the coast of the main island (where they sell tacky souvenirs, including parmesan flavour dog biscuits in the shape of Prince Edward Island). These potent reminders of the history of colonialism and class were sidestepped in the conference by a focus instead on Anne of Green Gables (the musical is in its 46th year and “all things Anne” sustain the tourist trade). I put together the main sessions, so this is also a self-critique.

There were three plenary sessions, one on each of the days of the conference, which were organised thematically, around “Alienation”, “Ideology” and “Methodology”. Rather than have a long keynote “presentation” and then “questions”, there were introductions to the theme in Marxism and then review of developments and intersections with psychology. The first session, on alienation, was guided by the following questions: What is the specific contribution of Marxism to understanding and overcoming alienation? Is the sense of alienation that sociology and psychology describes reducible to the “experience” that we have of it? Should a Marxist account of alienation rest upon a particular notion of nature and human species-being and estrangement from that nature under capitalism? Athanasios Marvakis from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki started off by outlining what Marx had to say about alienation as a concept in his early writings that we now understand in the light of the later published work. Then Joel Kovel, a former psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and now well-known ecosocialist activist spoke about how the concept of “alienation” was related to other notions that Marx and colleagues were working with, and this helped us to step back a bit and focus on the context for the use of the notion in Marx’s work. Then John Cromby addressed what notion of psychology “alienation” calls upon, and whether psychology as such could ever be more than a codified form of alienation.

The second session was on ideology, organised by the following questions: Why is the ruling ideology more potent and dangerous than simply being a set of ideas? What is the difference between ideology and a “belief system”, and do people actually need to believe ideology for it to function? What is the role of “false consciousness” in ideology

and should psychologists have anything to say about that? Morten Nissen, who has been a key figure in the development of Kritische Psychologie in Denmark, kicked us off by saying what Marx had to say about the concept of ideology. Then Gordana Jovanovic from Belgrade, who, among other things, wrote the detailed preface to the translation of Wilhelm Reich's work into Serbo-Croatian, talked about how the concept of ideology is related to other notions that Marx and colleagues were working with. Raquel Guzzo, a developmental and educational psychologist in Campinas Brazil, took time out from her electoral campaign in Sao Paulo with Partido Socialismo e Liberdade, to talk about what notion of psychology the image of a subject beset by "ideology" calls upon. Hans Skott-Myhre, a Deleuzian Negri-style communist from Brock University in Canada talked about whether the notion of ideology must always necessarily suppose a subject deluded or trapped by it.

The final session of the conference was on methodology, that is: Is there a distinctive Marxist methodology that characterises the way Marx grasped the nature of capitalism? Must dialectics be the core of the methodological approach we take to social relations and can it then also be used to grasp natural phenomena? What is the impact of revolutionary methodology for the way we think about the place of psychology now and in the process of change? In this session Thomas Teo from York University, a historian and critic of mainstream psychology dealt with the question as to how Marx differed from idealist speculative philosophy elaborated by Hegel, and how Marx's dialectical approach introduced something new, something more revolutionary. Carl Ratner, a cultural psychologist from California spoke about how Marx's methodology differed from the positivist project in mainstream psychology to accumulate facts about society in order to simply improve it. And then Lois Holzman from the Social Therapy and Performance of a Lifetime Fred Newman group based in New York dealt with how Marx's practice of method works as an instrumental tool or epistemological framework, and how that transforms the way we think about methodology in psychology.

The more conventional paper sessions ranged from detailed exegesis of the work of theorists well-known in psychology (such as Lev Vygotsky), to not so well-known writers outwith the discipline (such as Herbert Marcuse), to some who should be required reading for all psychologists (such as Ignacio Martin-Baro). One can gather from this range that there were some full and frank exchanges over the contribution of the broad activity theory tradition (including Leontiev, Bakhtin and Volosinov), psychoanalysis (including strands in the Frankfurt School and those working in and alongside the Lacanian tradition), and liberation psychology (from Freire to Montero). The Holzkamp folk were there, as were some of the discourse people, but the discussion was energised by perspectives not usually included in psychology conferences, and we were thus able to step back from our rather parochial debates into thinking about the wider compass of subjectivity and social change.

The conference was sponsored by the Marxism and Psychology Research Group (<http://discoveryspace.upei.ca/mprg/>), and organised mainly by a small collection of people in the University, with much of the administrative work, ferrying around of speakers and general coordination undertaken by Michael Arfken. It was an ambitious project and an amazing success. The worst reward would be to press Arfken to take on (something like) "Marxism and Psychology II: Return of the Radicals" in a couple of year's time, though there have been threats to land this on him. Who will step in to save him from this, and take forward these debates?