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The Cultural Psychology of Oppression and Liberation

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Psychological liberation requires going beyond psychology and humanizing the full set of social influences on it. Vygotsky (1997, p. 236) expressed this sense in relation to education: "Questions of education will be fully solved only when questions of social order have been fully solved. Every attempt at constructing educational ideals in a society with social contradictions is a utopian dream." The same holds for psychological liberation. It cannot be achieved through psychological maneuvers alone.

We need a psychological theory that links psychology to broad (macro) social influences, so that as psychologists we may be sensitive to them and figure out the best ways of humanizing them. Only then will psychological liberation be a viable possibility -- in the general sense that we can use humane cultural factors as the basis for making our psychology more fulfilling, empowering, and oriented toward cooperative social relations.

Most psychological theories do not seriously relate psychology to broad social influences such as social institutions and cultural artifacts. This is the gap that cultural psychology was supposed to fill. I would like to explore how cultural psychology can delineate the linkage between psychology and macro cultural factors in a way that can help us promote psychological liberation. My exploration will take the name of “macro cultural psychology,” which I have articulated in detail elsewhere.¹

The path to psychological liberation is not an easy or direct one. It begins with its opposite, the psychology of oppression, which is why liberation is necessary. The psychology of liberation must be built upon an understanding of the psychology of oppression and it must systematically overcome each of its specific details and its supportive cultural context. The psychology of liberation is an internal development that issues from oppression and transforms it. This is the kind of historical-genetic thinking that Vygotsky emphasized. Liberation is not an externally imposed ideal that circumvents oppression or discounts it - - e.g., by simply asserting the existing agency of individuals, regardless of the conditions that confront them.

Macro cultural psychology provides the principles (constructs) for understanding the cultural psychology of oppression and liberation.

¹ Ratner, C. (2008). Cultural psychology and qualitative methodology: Scientific and political considerations. Culture and Psychology, 14, 259-288. Ranter, C. (forthcoming). Macro cultural psychology: A political philosophy of mind. N.Y.: Oxford University Press.

Principles of Macro Cultural Psychology

The main principle of macro cultural psychology is that psychological phenomena such as perception, self, emotions, cognition, and mental illness are cultural phenomena. Psychology is based on macro cultural factors, it embodies macro cultural factors, and it functions to sustain macro cultural factors. Culture comprises the operating system of the psyche. We think, perceive, feel through cultural factors.

A clear example is honor killings among devout religious people: For choosing a lover outside of her Kurdish community, Fadime was brutally shot and killed by her father at point blank range in front of her mother and younger sister. The father felt no regret; he felt the killing assuaged the shame that Fadime had brought upon him and his family. He was angry at his daughter for what she had done. This complex of emotions, reasoning, morality, and behavior was organized by a cultural script regarding proper male-female interactions.² This is what it means to say that cultural factors are the operating systems of psychology. His psychology was not a personal invention, nor was it a natural reaction

² Wikan, U. (2008). In Honor of Fadime. Murder and Shame. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Psychology is not simply “influenced” by cultural factors; it is composed of cultural factors. Cultural factors are inside the mind comprising our psychological functions, they are not entirely outside the psyche.

North American women are dissatisfied with their body image because they utilize cultural ideals of the good body shape as their own criteria for evaluating their own bodies, and these cultural ideals are difficult to achieve. They are about 25% lighter than the average N. American woman’s body. Consequently, the average body does not measure up to the ideal and women feel dissatisfied. The internalized cultural body standard generates dissatisfaction.

North American and European symptoms of disturbance rest upon Protestant values of individualism, self-control, rationalism, activism, and introspection. Catholic societies which value communalism, fateful acceptance of destiny and higher authority, manifest quite different symptomatology. Whereas American patients tend toward active symptomatology with ideational distortion and elaboration, Catholic Latin patients tend toward passive symptomatology with a suspension of cognitive effort. Americans tend toward obsessional thoughts, intellectualization, guilt, and self-blame, while Latinos suffer more somatic complaints, sleeplessness, and obesity. Americans are more lonely and suspicious than

Latinos, while Latinos are more dependent.³ The cultural concepts do not simply influence some more basic process to be expressed in these symptoms; the cultural concepts are the processes that generate these symptoms. This is what it means to say that cultural factors are the operating system of psychology.

Macro cultural psychology does not simply record cultural differences in psychological expressions, it identifies the cultural operating system that generates those expressions. Again, this reveals culture in psychology, rather than psychology in culture. Reporting variations in psychology in culture is merely descriptive, it does not explain the processes that account for the variations.

Cross-cultural psychologists have proven that all psychological phenomena vary in different cultures. Macro cultural psychology explains why.

The cultural character of psychology makes psychology a window into society. Psychology incarnates and crystallizes cultural factors. It is a barometer of them because it reflects society. Psychology enables us to identify positive and negative aspects of society through (in the form of) self-concept, emotions, thinking, and mental illness. If we find deficiencies in these psychological phenomena, we can trace them to negative aspects

³ Carl Ratner, (1991). Vygotsky's sociohistorical psychology and its contemporary applications. N.Y.: Plenum, pp. 264-278 for additional examples and discussion.

of cultural factors and use our psychological analysis to suggest ways of reforming the cultural factors.

We can use the feelings, perception, reasoning of Fadime's father to indict the honor code that led him to kill her. We can use women's dissatisfaction with their body image to indict the exaggerated cultural ideal of beauty that generates the dissatisfaction. And we can trace the exaggerated cultural ideal to deeper cultural factors such as consumerism. Consumerism deliberately promotes unattainable ideals to motivate people to keep buying products. Thus, women's self-disappointment is really an indictment of consumerism.

A final example of how psychology can indicate the need for social reform concerns a technical process known as working memory. The level of working memory is inversely related to childhood poverty and stress. The income-achievement gap is already present by kindergarten and accelerates over time. The greater the duration of childhood poverty from birth to age 13 years, the worse one's working memory as a young adult. Working memory is thus a psychological window into social inequality and a testament to the need for social reform to reduce class distinctions.

The same is true for all other psychological phenomena such as literacy, violence, and mental illness.

Now I would like to explain the implications macro cultural psychology has for understanding and overcoming the psychology of oppression.

The Psychology of Oppression

Cultural psychology emphasizes that psychology originates in macro cultural factors, embodies their characteristics, and functions to perpetuate them. It logically follows that oppressive social conditions thus generate oppressed psychology. Martin-Baro provided a clear example of this in his discussion of fatalism.

Fatalism is a way for people to make sense of a world they have found closed and beyond their control; it is an attitude caused and continually reinforced by the oppressive functioning of overall social structures. Marginalized children in favelas, or champas, or other shantytowns of Latin America internalize fatalism not so much because they inherit it from their parents as because it is the fruit of their own experience with society. Day by day they learn that their

efforts in school get them nowhere; the street does not reward them well for their premature efforts at selling newspapers, taking care of cars, or shining shoes; and therefore it is better not to dream or set goals they will never be able to reach. They learn to be resigned and submissive not so much as the result of the transmission of values through a closed subculture as through the everyday demonstration of how impossible and useless it is to strive to change their situation, when that environment itself forms part of an overall oppressive social system (Martin-Baro, 1994, pp. 210-211).⁴

Martin-Baro's description is valuable because it links fatalism to cultural factors. Fatalism reveals problematical aspects of lower class existence that help to justify social reform. If he had linked fatalism to biochemical or interpersonal causes, we can easily see how this would have nullified insights into culture and social reform.

While Martin-Baro was a champion of the people, he recognized that we must begin with their

⁴ Martin-Baro, I. (1994). Writings for a liberation psychology. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

psychological reality which was oppressed to the point of being fatalistic. Of course, this is only one manifestation of oppression. There are many others, including ignorance, apathy, superstition, prejudice, violence, stress, illiteracy, and mental illness.⁵ This must be the case for psychology that is formed by oppressive conditions. New studies in the epistemology of ignorance and sociology of ignorance demonstrate that ignorance is actively promoted in the population to pacify them. Ignorance, self-doubt, fatalism, and other psychological defects are a means by which dominant classes retain their power over the population.

The psychology of oppression is even more complicated. It does not passively receive oppression and stultification. Psychology is active subjectivity. This means that oppressed psychology actively incarnates oppression and promulgates it. Oppressed psychology is oppressive psychology. It oppresses individuals through their own subjectivity and behavior. The act of thinking, feeling, perceiving, remembering, and sense of self activate oppressed aspects of these functions. Oppressed psychology thus oppresses the individuals who engage in oppressed psychological activity. This makes oppressed psychology oppressive psychology. It makes mystified psychology,

⁵ Jacoby, S. (2008). The age of American unreason. New York: Pantheon.

mystifying psychology. This is clearly the case with fatalism. Fatalism works on peasants to strip them of the confidence, optimism, and energy they need to improve their lives. Fatalism is oppressive in that it compounds the material oppression that enriches and empowers the dominant class.

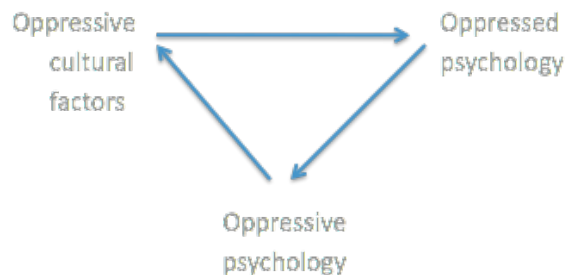
In this way, psychology is a macro cultural factor. It acculturates people into a certain life style. Psychology does cultural work just as institutions, artifacts, and cultural concepts do. If society is oppressive, psychology will reproduce oppression in peoples' minds and behavior. "Durable embodied cognitive schemes, acquired by children in class environments, are a principal cause of observed class variation in educational performance."⁶ Psychology can thus be an instrument of oppression, an oppressive force, an instrument of ruling class hegemony to maintain the subordination of the populace. Psychology can be a mystifying force in addition to being mystified.

This is depicted in figure 1.

Figure 1

⁶ Nash, R. (2003). Inequality/difference in New Zealand education: Social reproduction and the cognitive habitus. International Study in Sociology of Education, 13, 171-191; p. 174.

The Cultural Psychology of Oppression



Exploited people must have an oppressed psychology. Exploitation depends upon oppressing psychology to garner compliance with exploitation. Exploitation does not remain outside individuals in factories, mines, banks, board rooms, government bureaus, the IMF, the CIA, and advertisements. It penetrates their bodies and minds. It takes the form of physical disease and psychological deficiencies.

This has ominous implications for social and psychological improvement. For oppressed and oppressive psychology is an albatross, not a sure-sighted path to progress. Oppressed, oppressive psychology problematizes

emancipation and fulfillment, it does not guarantee them.

This cultural psychological analysis shows that consciousness and liberation are problematical. Oppressed consciousness/subjectivity does not spontaneously understand the full complexity of why and how it is oppressed, what the source of its oppression is, or how subjectivity is oppressive to the individual agent. Nor does subjectivity spontaneously know how to overcome oppression. Subjectivity is as little informed about the causes of its oppression and the way to overcome it as it is about the causes and treatment of diseases that ravage the body.

I say this from my own experience in the American coop movement. For two years I was the vice president of the largest food coop in California. While the community members and employees strongly wanted to create an alternative business model that would overcome the traditional capitalist model, we all had very little understanding of exactly what to do. Many of our strategies wound up recapitulating the very problems we sought to escape.

The Cultural Psychology of Liberation

Macro cultural psychology provides a direction for liberation. As I mentioned earlier, it uses

psychological deficiencies as symptoms of cultural factors. Macro cultural psychology leads us to analyze the nature of cultural factors that are generating our psychological unease. We can then work to reform these in specific ways that will enhance our psychological functioning. Macro cultural psychology emphasizes culture to deepen our understanding and control of psychology, not to lose sight of it.

Elevating our level of analysis to cultural factors, ties it to other scientific analyses of cultural factors regarding oppression and liberation. We draw on economic analyses of oppression such as Marx's, we draw on political analyses of oppression such as Chomsky's, we draw on educational analyses of oppression such as Friere's, we draw on medical analyses of oppression in health care, we draw on ecological studies of the social causes and distribution of environmental destruction. This approach breaks down the isolation of psychology from other cultural matters. It enables us to use other analyses of oppression to better understand psychological oppression and what to do about it.

Using Marx, for example, we could incorporate an analysis of social class, the profit motive, commodification, and alienation to understand the origins and the characteristics of the psychology of fatalism.

This cultural analysis would also generate knowledge for overcoming fatalism. We would

explore collective, cooperative socioeconomic formations that oppose private property, commodity production, and social classes.

We would use these insights in psychotherapy. We would help patients to understand the social pressures that cause their unease, we would help them avoid these pressures, and we would encourage them to become politically active to transform them. These cultural aspects of therapy would supplement personal considerations such as their family history. We recognize that both considerations are important.

We rely upon cultural analyses, and we also contribute to them. We elucidate psychological issues involved in social class, the profit motive, commodification, alienation, health care, education, entertainment, and news. We illuminate the thinking, perception, emotions, and self involved in maintaining and participating in these cultural factors. This enriches an understanding of cultural factors.

Macro cultural psychology also directs other social sciences to emphasize the macro cultural factors we do. Economics, for example, is dominated by the theory of rational choice which emphasizes individual decisions as the basis for economic markets. Macro cultural psychology would critique this individualistic emphasis and encourage economists to study structural dynamics of capitalism.

Finally, we provide reasons to transform oppressive cultural factors and we provide directions the transformation should take. We explain that cultural factors need to be transformed because they impair psychological functioning. And we use our analysis of the psychology of fatalism (for example) to delineate the kinds of social changes that are necessary to ameliorate and prevent it. Our reasons and directions complement and supplement economic, educational, and medical reasons.

Macro cultural psychology joins forces with social sciences to analyze and improve macro cultural factors.

Macro cultural psychology is the only psychological theory that directly contributes to social analysis and reform. It is the only theory that regards psychology as a window into apprehending, evaluating, and transforming society. Attributing psychology to biochemical causes, instincts, or personal causes, such as the Oedipal complex, precludes using psychological phenomena in these ways. In these views, psychology is independent of society. Psychology is then added to society as an external element in order to make society compatible with psychological tendencies. For instance, to reduce conformity, advice from social psychology will urge breaking larger social units into smaller ones because Asch found the conformity is less in small groups than in large ones. This is a

universal psychological tendency; it has nothing to do with a particular society.

Psychologists need know nothing about the cultural customs of Guatemala, Taiwan, the Congo, or Romania. They need know nothing about social possibilities that could be developed to replace deleterious macro cultural factors. Psychologists only need know the universal principles that conformity is lessened in small groups. This solution to conformity requires no change in customs, government, politics, law, pedagogy, religion, economics, or health care. There is no internal transformation from a particular social problem to a particular solution by altering the social system in a particular direction. On the contrary, the external psychological principal -- reducing group size -- supplants all this and is sufficient to solve conformity in any social context without substantive social reform. This is why mainstream psychology is so popular!

Liberation Psychology

The perspective known as psychology of liberation has a very different view of psychology and politics from that of cultural psychology. I used to believe these were differences in emphasis, but I

now see these differences as antagonistic. I respect the progressive motives of the authors, but I believe that their psychological perspective and political program are flawed.

I shall demonstrate that they adopt a non-cultural view of psychology and divorce psychology from cultural influences such as exploitation, hegemony, mystification, and social class. This leads to idealizing the psychology of people as free from oppression. This, in turn, leads to abdicating any substantive political-economic analysis of oppression that could help people develop a democratic, humane society. Thus, advocates provide little assistance to the struggle for liberation, despite their good wishes.⁷

These weaknesses are found in Montero & Sonn's 2009 book "Psychology of Liberation."⁸ The chapters are indefinite about the means and the goals for social change/liberation. Montero & Sonn define liberation psychology as "The necessity to produce a science constructed by praxis. That is, practice that produces knowledge, and knowledge that turns into action -- theory and practice informing each other." No particular social theory is specified. No guidelines are suggested for

⁷ I expand this critique in Ratner, C. (2009). Cooperativism: A Social, Economic, and Political Alternative to Capitalism. Capitalism, Nature, Socialism, 20, 2, 44-73.

⁸ Montero, M., & Sonn, C. (2009). Psychology of Liberation: Theory and Applications. N.Y.: Springer

developing a theory. The only criterion mentioned is that it must be based on praxis. But what kind of praxis? Any praxis? How will praxis help us understand oppression know what direction to take?⁹

Similarly, liberation psychology encourages oppressed people to “develop modes of control of their lives.” But what does it mean to control their lives? Community members in the U.S. have elected school boards committed to not teaching sex education or evolution -- because these violated their conservative religious beliefs. The people controlled the schools and would therefore qualify as implementing the vague definition of liberation psychology. Indefiniteness in terms such as controlling life can lead to supporting very regressive actions by community members.

Montero & Sonn tell us that liberation psychologists “foster the recuperation of historical memory of the oppressed majorities, in order to overcome alienation and ideology.” Again, the authors never specify what historical memory consists of. What aspects of history are important to recall? Will alienation be overcome if people remember that 500 years ago their Indian ancestors sacrificed children by burning them to death? Or

⁹ Mao Tse-tung explained this in his 1937 essay entitled “On Practice.” He emphasized Marx’s concept of praxis known as historical materialism, in which production is the fundamental activity. Our psychologists would profit from reading this discussion of real, revolutionary praxis.

recalling that a witch doctor said that people should strip off their clothing and pray for rain?

The omissions in the Montero & Sonn's chapter are also noteworthy. They never mention capitalism, commodity production, the World Bank, the CIA, extracting surplus value from wage labor, or interlocking boards of directors which are the cornerstones of oppression. They never mention Marx. They never mention socialism.

These omissions are deploring in the context of Latin America where Marxism has been a powerful orientation for liberation struggles. Excluding any mention of Marxism or socialism or even capitalism from an account of liberation psychology is a harmful obstructing of a real liberatory science or policy. For it leads liberation movements to ignore the dominant economic system in the world, and the viable alternative to it. This "conspiracy of silence" about Marxism is far more destructive than open debate and critique, for it makes Marxism disappear from discussion so that it cannot be considered in any form.

Instead of developing such concrete analyses, psychologists in the book orient liberation psychology toward the following abstractions:

- Choosing man, choosing our people integrally conceived
- Choosing love for the poor
- Choosing integral liberation

- Denouncing everything that goes against justice
 - Defend the right to live in dignity
 - Generate strategies to develop collective consciousness

Since none of these terms is defined with any particular content or social relations, they are useless. What is justice? Is it preserving property rights? Is it raising the minimum wage for work? Is it requiring managers to inform workers 30 days before they are laid off? Or does it involve replacing the capitalist ownership of resources by workers' associations?

Are we supposed to love everything about the poor? Even their domestic violence, crime, high murder rate, drug dealing, lack of education?

These psychologists endorse these abstract, unhelpful notions for a reason. The masses of people are believed to know the truth. They can find the way to liberation by looking at their own indigenous experience and memories. External, expert ideas are unnecessary. They are even harmful impositions that will stifle the indigenous creativity and agency of the people. This is why the authors shy away from mentioning specific concepts that liberation psychology should utilize. Leaving concepts open and vague allows the people to implement them according to their own knowledge, experience, and desires.

Jimenez explains it in his chapter.¹⁰ “The role of the social psychologist must be defined according to the circumstances of the people in question, not to solve their collective problems, but to search a solution with them and from their own perspective as a way of helping the people to overcome their alienated personal and social identities by transforming the oppressive conditions of their context. Consequently, psychologists must adopt the perspective of the popular majorities and follow them on their historical path towards liberation.” Furthermore, “As proposed by Ignacio Martín-Baró, ‘de-ideologization’ assumes a critical commitment which gives back to the people the knowledge they have gained of their reality.”

This motive to encourage the self-activity of people may be well-intentioned. However, it must be evaluated scientifically before it can be endorsed.

Jimenez’s statement assumes that within their oppression, the people have acquired knowledge of their reality that has been suppressed (by the elites) and needs to be brought back to consciousness. This is the familiar psychological notion of recovering memories that will reveal to us the truth of our experience that has been

¹⁰ B. Jimenez-Dominguez (2009). Ignacio Martín-Baró’s Social Psychology of Liberation: Situated knowledge and Critical Commitment against Objectivism. In Montero, M., & Sonn, C. (Eds). Psychology of Liberation: Theory and Applications. N.Y.: Springer

suppressed.

However, this notion needs to be assessed rather than asserted. The question is, “To what extent have the people acquired knowledge of their reality?” Macro cultural psychology worries that the oppression of people’s experience and psychology have mystified them. Oppressed, mystified psychology is not deeply knowledgeable. I have offered a detailed argument for this. Advocates of liberation psychology need to address this argument. They do not. They rely on assertions rather than arguments.

Instead of evidence, logic, or argument, Jimenez disparages any questioning of the knowledge, creativity, and motivation of the people. Jimenez reprimands “elites who promulgate the belief that people are passive, submissive and fatalistic in regard to the prospect of changing society towards a more socially just arrangement.” This is an odd criticism for Jimenez to make, because the very man that he devotes his chapter to -- Martin-Baro, the champion of the people -- writes that fatalism is the real character of the popular majorities. I cited his statement earlier. His statement supports my contention that oppressed people have oppressed psychology that is also oppressive psychology and sustains oppression. Jimenez is wrong to think fatalism is some elitist prejudice against the popular majority. It is their real oppressed psychology as their champion, Martin-Baro, emphasizes: people

have “learned to be resigned and submissive.” Jimenez overlooks Martin-Baro’s emphasis that fatalism is an impediment to people’s capacity to dig themselves out of oppression and poverty.

Mao Zedung, not exactly a stranger to, or enemy of, the revolutionary struggle, similarly worried about the culturally-based backward thinking among the Chinese peasantry with whom he worked for decades. He said: “given the various kinds of deep-rooted feudal relationships in the countryside, it will not be an easy task to raise the class-consciousness of the peasants to the extent that they all realize that, in the end, it will be essential to eliminate the feudal remnants.”¹¹

Other problems abound with Jimenez’s orientation.

Who belongs to “the popular majorities”? Whom should we follow and support? Whom should we refuse to ally with? Presumably Jimenez and Montero are not members, for they are privileged university professors. Is the wage-earning supervisor of the meat department at a supermarket a member of the popular majority? If a peasant owns 100 hectares of land is he a member? If a farmer rents a room out to travelers is he a member of the majority or is he a landlord or

¹¹ cited in Nick Knight, 2007. Rethinking Mao: Explorations in Mao Zedung’s thought. Mass: Lexington Books, p. 98.

capitalist? Who decides? Jimenez does not address this question that is vital to the politics of liberation. Indeed, he is incapable of addressing it because he has no analysis, no criteria, no program.

“The popular majorities” is a nebulous, ambiguous term with no recognizable, or useful, meaning. It is also semantically incoherent; for a majority is more than half the population, so there cannot be multiple “majorities.” Jimenez’s term deliberately spurns more precise, useful social designations such as working class, or peasantry. These terms would identify people’s social position and provide some basis for understanding and evaluating their behavior -- as Mao did in his analysis of the peasantry during the Chinese Revolution.

Mao made a very precise class analysis of different interests among the peasantry, including rich peasant, poor peasant, landlord, and merchant which were carefully defined. This allowed him to identify the different “levels” of class consciousness, social critique, and allegiance to the revolutionary struggle that currently existed. It also helped Mao to understand different kinds of education that needed to be addressed to the different groups in order to help them understand the sources of their problems, and to understand

the kinds of solutions that were viable¹². “Popular majorities” loses all this valuable information about people.

Furthermore, even the truly oppressed cannot be uncritically admired, supported, and loved. Their perspective is often ignorant, superstitious, prejudiced, and sexist. They may wish to participate in privately owned enterprises and the system of commodity production. They may endorse IQ tests, lobotomies, or fascism; they may lynch Negroes; they may mistreat women. Should we follow them?

Here, Jimenez hedges his bet. He adds some recognition that a critical perspective must be added to support for the popular majority: “Drawing on Liberation Theology, Martín-Baró pointed out that Latin American psychology must identify the virtues of the oppressed people and adopt a critical commitment, defined as identification with the oppressed, and at the same time, a necessary distance to examine with critical eyes the proposals emerging from their own praxis (meaning a conscious practice).”

¹² Stuart Schram & N. Hodes (Eds.) Mao's road to power: Revolutionary writings 1912-1949, vol. IV, Armonk: Sharpe, 1997

First of all, this contradicts his opinion that we should adopt the perspective of the people and follow them. Now he allows us to be critical. Why the change?

Moreover, this new opinion introduces another question. What would be the perspective that forms the critical eye to evaluate peoples' proposals? How does one decide which peoples' proposals are acceptable virtues and which need to be criticized? Remember that we are prohibited from introducing ideas outside the people's perspective. (Jimenez follows Montero & Sonn in omitting any mention of Marxism or other political-economic theories that could be of service.) It thus becomes problematical what perspective would inform the critical eye trained on the people.

Furthermore, who would be the critical evaluator? Jimenez? Then Jimenez would be the truth czar. But what criteria would he use to decide what to criticize and what to approve about the people's behavior?

He repudiates objective science, which inexorably lands him in arbitrary subjectivism.¹³ He tells us that "Martin Baro had established that psychology must go beyond a scientist obsession with objectivity and instead focus on the urgent needs of the poor majorities in Latin America and find new ways of

¹³ See, Carl Ratner, Epistemological, Social, and Political Conundrums in Social Constructionism. Forum Qualitative Social Research, Oct.. 2006, vol.6, #3. (online at my web site)

(re) searching the truth from their own perspective.” But this returns us to adulating the people’s perspective with no possibility of critical evaluation. Jimenez takes us from glorification to criticism to glorification all by declaration, with no justification for any of his contradictory positions.

In addition his renunciation of objective science in the struggle to solve urgent needs is astonishing. If the poor are dying of dysentery and are in urgent need of treatment, are we to repudiate a scientific obsession with objectivity in our search for a cure? Does Jimenez want to discard all the medical science that objectively understands the causes of dysentery? Should we renounce all the engineering science that knows how to treat polluted water which is a source of dysentery? Should we renounce engineering science that knows how to treat sewage and prevent dysentery? Will popular opinion provide better solutions?

Obviously not. Jimenez’s subjectivistic, anti-scientific, anti-realist epistemology prevents addressing the people’s urgent needs.

I recently visited the Ganges River in India and saw the horrific result of relying on “the people’s” perspective. The local Indians think it is true that the river is blessed by god and that when animals and people die they should be blessed by god by being thrown into the river. So the river is full of dead cows and people, it is terribly polluted, and the wonderful people are dying from drinking and

bathing in the water. Is this one of the peoples' truths we should respect and elevate over scientific obsession with objectivity? Will this lead to solving peoples' urgent needs?

If “psychologists must adopt the perspective of the popular majorities and follow them on their historical path towards liberation,” then what do social scientists have to contribute? Evidently, only to remind us to get out of the way of the masses. For experts are proscribed from contributing any theoretical knowledge or methodology or scientific obsession that is outside the people's indigenous perspective. There is clearly no need for us to get PhDs in social science if we are only going to follow the popular majorities. It seems that Jimenez has just rendered himself, and all of us professional social scientists, irrelevant to the movement for liberation.

Conclusion

Glorifying indigenous people is pseudo humanism. The words sound humanistic in supporting popular movements, however, the approach is reactionary because it offers no specific analysis of problems that could open the door to viable social liberation. Indeed, it impedes this kind of analysis with its reckless denigration of science, objectivity, expertise, and political parties with leadership.

When Marx spoke of a working working-class perspective as the guide for social change, he was not referring to contemporary outlooks by workers. He was referring to an objective, theoretical perspective that had workers' interests at its core. It was a perspective that comprehended the political economic basis of the exploitation of workers, and the need for a new socialist political economy that would solve this problem. The Marxist perspective is working working-class in that it takes working working-class oppression as its target of analysis and solution. The working working-class perspective has to be developed by studying Marx's complex analysis of capitalism and socialism. The working class does not have this deep understanding simply by virtue of being oppressed. The working working-class perspective is not the perspective of the working class (as currently constituted.)

To conflate the two is romanticize working class consciousness. It assumes that economic, political, educational, and medical oppression have no effect on the consciousness of the people: Despite all this oppression, the people have nevertheless acquired clear knowledge of their problems and how to solve them. This is a novel, illogical conception of oppression, and psychology in general: it presumes a radical divorce of consciousness from social influence, an isolated Cartesian mind. Oppression may be all around us and even wrack our bodies

with disease and disability, but it stops, somehow, at the borders of the mind.

This romantic notion contradicts the body of empirical psychological research that proves otherwise -- namely, that psychological functions are formed by cultural factors and vary with cultural factors. Specifically, lower class conditions adversely affect cognitive competencies. Romanticization also contradicts the empirical facts of oppressed behavior which is mystified and destructive in many ways.¹⁴ Romanticization also contradicts the inability of the popular majorities to figure out any solution to massive social problems and lead us to the promised land. My coop members and managers and employees can't organize novel social relations in our coop food store. What have the popular majorities said about restructuring the world economy to escape the catastrophe that is upon us?

Oppressive psychology has ominous consequences for social and psychological improvement. It keeps people ignorant about the causes and solutions to their problems, and it makes solutions appear unattractive to us. For instance, many people reject collective solutions because these appear burdensome and intrusive to their bourgeois sensitivities (privacy, independence, negative freedom).

¹⁴ Thomas Frank (2005). What's the matter with Kansas?: How conservatives won the heart of America. N.Y.: Holt.

Oppressive psychology is an active force that leads people to actively resist accepting novel ideas that could help them. The people play an active role in preserving their own oppression by utilizing their agency to reject collective solutions. Oppressive psychology actively keeps up trapped in oppression, both by recapitulating existing oppression and by eschewing solutions to it. And it works through our agency, through our desires, expectation, motivation, self-concept/confidence, and preferences.

Oppression does not manipulate from the outside like a puppet master pulling the strings to our limbs. Oppression works from inside us, through our culturally constituted psychology to animate our behavior. This is why we need a cultural psychology of oppression to explain how “our” “inner” psychology is really not our own at all, is not empowering or liberating. We must acquire a new psychology through a systematic analysis of the cultural origins, characteristics, and function of our oppressed psychology and how it oppressively traps us in oppression, and what a new cultural system and cultural psychology would look like.

The cultural psychology of oppression introduces the notion of social agency. Agency is thoroughly infused with cultural features. Therefore, agency oppresses us by acting. Agency is not outside oppression, it is an agent

of oppression. “Our” agency is a Trojan horse. It appears to be our own that empowers us to realize our objectives. But it is really the oppressor’s agency that has been implanted inside us and does the oppressor’s bidding, to empower that person, not us. We are utilizing the oppressor’s agency in our actions, not our own. It appears to be our own because it is inside us, and because bourgeois individualism has led us to believe that our individuality is our own. But this is ideology. The agency inside us is not necessarily ours.

If this is true, then validating people’s psychology is validating their cultural psychology of oppression. It is not validating their “own” personal psychology because we have just seen that psychology is not their own. What appears to be a humanistic validation of personal empowerment is really the dehumanizing validation of oppressed and oppressive cultural psychology. It is reactionary to validate and glorify people as they are. It is not progressive and humane. Validating mystified psychology masks its mystification, for validation assumes that people are agentive and not mystified. Thus, validating psychology validates society because it implies that society does not mystify people’s psychology. This insulates society from criticism. Social leaders can applaud validators of psychology and say

“see, in our society people’s psychology is fine; even liberation psychologists agree.”

Liberation psychologists persist in glorifying the popular majorities. Because these majorities have not had the benefit of extensive formal education, they must have acquired their understandings outside formal education and scientific training. This leads Jimenez, Montero, et al. to romanticize informal, situated learning as more truthful than scientific training -- as a show of respecting the experience of the people.

However, this is backwards. We should not glorify the people as they are, and glorify their experience as the standard for how life (e.g., education, medicine) ought to be, and reject all other experience and knowledge. For the way people are now is oppressed, including their consciousness.

Personal experience is not a guide to liberation, especially when personal experience is oppressed and oppressive, mystified and mystifying. Liberation is only illuminated by sophisticated, scientific, complex analysis of social conditions. Macro cultural psychology offers this kind of analysis that links with sociological, economic, educational, and medical analyses. If poor people lack this analysis, or the tools to generate it, they should be helped to acquire them. Jimenez proceeds in the opposite direction, to disparage sophisticated, complex, scientific analysis because it does not come from

the people. This kind of identity politics is as harmful as depriving the poor of medical care because they did not discover it themselves.

Macro cultural psychology brings useful knowledge and analytical skills to the people to use and refine. This helps them analyze and transform their oppression in viable ways. This is not elitist or autocratic, any more than any teacher in a classroom is elitist or autocratic because she has knowledge to share with students. Liberation psychology would be better served by subsuming it within macro cultural psychology.