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## **Italian and Spanish Critical Psychological Concerns**

This paper provides an overview of critical work carried out in the field of psychology in Spain and Italy during the last three decades. Firstly we briefly present the anti-psychiatry movement in our countries. In a second moment we move on to discuss the way critical work in Italy and Spain, despite their different trajectories, have recently found another common referent in social movements and organised collective actions. Finally we shall argue that critical psychology in these contexts is part of wider transformations rather than a disciplinary topic of interest by its own.

### **Anti-Psychiatric experiences**

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s critical work in psychology was part of a wider movement that promoted basic social values. A common concern among these works was that all forms of psychological knowledge and practices were bound to socio-political interests and, therefore, that psychology apparatus was a complex and well structured set of theoretical and material devices eager to adjust people to changing productive and regulatory regimes. Thus, these works focused on the causes not just the effects of oppression and worked actively to promote social justice. These concerns were also shared by the Italian anti-psychiatric movement since its foundation in the early 1970s.

For the Italian anti-psychiatric movement there was no separation between theory and practice insofar theories were constructed collectively and shared practices played a major part in such a process. In this context we could locate the *Calate di Reggio Emilia*. Under the common concern of opposing psychiatric abuses this initiative brought together professionals, intellectuals and lay people in order to gain control on the conditions in which their relatives were kept in mental institutions (Colacicchi, 1993).

Similar mobilisations took place in Spain during the sixties and seventies. The anti-psychiatric front in Spain was highly political and embraced active groups of patients and relatives, as well as neighbourhood associations, political groups, journalists, intellectuals and students (García, 1995). Some of these groups which moved beyond professional settings are still working against psychiatric abuse. They are still struggling for less oppressive mental health establishments as it is the case of the *Collectivo Crítico para la Salud Mental* [Critical Collective for Mental Health].

The Italian and the Spanish anti-psychiatric traditions have been mainly concerned with the deconstruction of the psychological problems as mental illness. They also have in common their demand for the closure of psychiatric hospitals and, alternatively, the provision of support for people suffering psychologically. Nevertheless the shift from the professional to

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the social and the political spheres which characterised Spanish critical psychiatry differs from the Italian one.

The anti-psychiatry decline in Italy obeyed to a combination of repression and institutionalisation processes (Biglia, 1999). Regardless the conformist nature of Basaglia's law<sup>2</sup>, as the reform was called; it was internationally claimed as extremely progressive<sup>3</sup>. The illusion of change accorded to it was used in Italy to divide and rule the entire anti-psychiatric movement. For its part the institutionalisation of anti-psychiatry in Spain served to, paradoxically, minimised the movement's criticality by means of allocating insufficient resources for its implementation.

Anti-psychiatry experiences in our countries, their different development and outcomes, brought to the attention of researchers and practitioners the need for disciplinary criticism. Before we move on to describing the current state of affairs in Spanish and Italian critical psychology, it is worth calling into attention that the institutionalisation processes might bring about unexpected outcomes as seen above. Thus, it is not always desirable to categorise critical initiatives under any disciplinary formation (i.e. critical psychology) however inclusive it might be.

### **Critical resources and trends in Spanish psychology**

Most of our 'critical' Spanish colleagues in the field of psychology refuse to be associated with any particular school of thought. This however, does not prevent our work from being mindful of and learning from other alternative trajectories and developments. This is the case of British critical psychology which has been and still is a key referent for much alternative work. The continuous theoretical and methodological exchange with critical British psychology runs parallel to other disciplinary considerations as illustrated by the following accounts:

Is there such a thing as 'critical psychology' in Spain? Should there be? Are we talking about another psychology? Is 'critical psychology' imported from UK and applied to the very same critical practices (as for instance feminists ones) already taken on board long ago?

Regarding critical Psychology in Spain and, in particular, in Madrid (it might be that there is a critical psychology in Barcelona), I would also say, it does not exist... Another issue is whether the unification under the 'critical psychology' term accords political strength to it in the UK or if it would be possible to articulate an equally efficient critique by means of distinct and diverse 'critical practices of psychology'.

The responses above, were provided by colleagues and researchers based at the Departamento de Psicología Social at the Universidad Complutense of Madrid, as discussed somewhere else (Cabruja and Gordo López, 2001). This group has been active in promoting alternative discussion and events within and outside academic spheres during the last decade. Their work has been supervised by social psychologists who since the mid-seventies inaugurated a debate

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<sup>2</sup> The full text of the law can be found at <http://www.ecn.org/telviola/L180.htm>

<sup>3</sup> As an example of its influence, it is worth noting that 1999 Brazilian psychiatric reform drew upon Basaglia's law.

between qualitative and quantitative perspectives.<sup>4</sup> The Anglo-Saxon oriented perspective goes along with the genealogical perspective. The former tradition, indebted to the European historical materialism, suggests that the increasing participation of psychology in culture should be understood as an added effect of modernization. A common preoccupation of the genealogical perspective is to analyse the social conditions which have rendered possible the increasing success and expansion of psychology beyond professional and academic settings (or *psychological culture*) and how this expansion is bound up with the also increasing discontent in culture.

Especially relevant for the Spanish genealogical tradition have been Robert Castel's study on *Le Psychonalysme* (1973) and the influential works of Norbert Elias (1982) and Michel Foucault (1971, 1977, 1980). This research perspective in Spain, half-way between a critical sociological approach to the history of psychology and critical psychosocial research, finds its maximum exponents in the co-authored work by Fernando Álvarez-Uría and Julia Varela (1986; 1989) and Tomás Ibáñez (1982; 1989; 1990). Some of their research topics include the relations between power, disciplinary knowledge and subjectivity as well as the increasing psychologisation of culture since the crisis of welfare state and the arrival of neo-liberalism.

If Anglo-Saxon, mainly British, critical psychology and French materialism have greatly informed key methodological and theoretical debates. South and Central American socio-political struggles have been equally inspiring for critical work in Spanish social sciences. It is not accidental that political psychology became a major referent for emerging social movements and academic critical settings in Spain (but not only). This form of political psychology was forged in the aegis of revolutionary movements and social transformation in Latin America. So they were the continuous preoccupations for devising other forms of community representation and participatory action-research.

Half-way between the demands of theoretical knowledge and popular mobilisation, participatory action-research promoted forms of research committed to social urges (Montenegro, 2001). Unlike orthodox Marxist guidelines, this form of participatory perspective kept outside its aims notions of total revolution or direct power undertaking. What was proposed instead was an active engagement in social mobilisation in order to yield a deepening in methods and procedures which involve decisions which affect people's lives. Achieving such targets, according to this approach, involves the inclusion of intellectual work into social movements, and therefore, a process of 'de-professionalisation' of expert knowledge.

Seemingly influential for critical psychology have been other works in South and Central America in the field of social psychology, in particular on the relations between culture and subjectivity (Fernández Christlieb, 1994; Correa de Jesús, Figueroa-Sarriera y López, 1991) and, among other topics, on gender and technological issues and relations (Figueroa-Sarriera, López y Román, 1994). These influences can be noted in various edited volumes by Spanish scholars published under the title of 'social critical psychology' (Ibáñez e Íñiguez, 1997), 'social psychology as critique' (Ibáñez y Domènech, 1998) psychology and power (García Borés et al, 1995; Gordo López and Linaza, 1996; Gordo López and Parker, 1999) and psychology and warfare development (Díaz, 1998).

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<sup>4</sup> An updated overview of these 'new social psychology' and its dialogues with more established trends in Spanish academic psychology can be also found in Íñiguez (2000), Fernández Villanueva (2003) and Ovejero (2000, 2003).

## Critical initiatives inside/out Italian psychological establishment

Besides the profound influence of anti-psychiatry in the seventies and eighties, inhuman treatments and conditions still exist in Italian mental health system: confinement in hospitals, electroshock, and arbitrary use of psychoactive drugs, among other aberrant policies. In response to these in November 2000 a national demonstration was held in order to speak out against these practices and, subsequently, demand government compromises. This protest was organized by the *Consulta Nazionale per la Salute mentale* [National Consulter for Mental Health], an organization that involves *Psichiatria Democratica*<sup>5</sup> [Democratic Psychiatry], groups of relatives of mental health survivors, NGOs, neighborhood associations and trade unionists (CGIL). This platform condemned the exclusive control specialists have gained over mental health policies (Armuzzi, 2002).

With regard to more specific psychology networks and agencies, a significant number of voices are found outside academic work. A common concern amongst them is that anti-psychiatry is not a theory but a practice, “an everyday practice with which we confront other people’s experience and at the same time define our own [...] interpersonal relations” (Bucalo, 1997: 54). For these experience have been strictly related to social movement practices and, in many cases, find shelter and alliances in squatter Social Centres.

Some initiatives worth mentioning here includes the *Telefono Viola*<sup>6</sup>, an autonomous phone line which offers legal support to people that have been psychiatrically treated against their will. This sort of forum helps psychiatric survivors to meet and exchange experiences and resources in order to safeguard themselves from new abuses. *Telefono Viola* set off in Bologna in 1993 and quickly spread to other Italian cities where groups of people frequently connect with the ‘autonomous movement’ (Antonucci and Coppola, 1995).

Another interesting organised action took place in Furdi Siculo (Sicily) held by the *Comitato d’iniziativa Antipsichiatrica* [Anti-psychiatric Initiative Committee] between 1986-1992. Its main intent was to develop mental health practices and accounts on community assumptions. This was achieved by incorporating into mainstream practices all sort of lay people’s experiences and narratives in order to minimise psychiatric impact in peoples’ lives. (Bucalo, 1993)

Recently, cyberspace has become another major arena for critical networking and experiences, including the *Isole Nella Rete* [Isles in the Net] project which, since the mid nineties, founded the European Counter Network<sup>7</sup> offering Social Movements technical support and ways to exchange information and co-ordinate actions. This network is currently devoted to the organisation of workshops, seminars, and publications which promote political uses of the Net.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of these examples, ‘critical psychology’ does not exist in Italy either as a corpus of knowledge or a common way to analyse society. However there are psychologists working from critical perspectives even though most of them are reluctant to be identified under any form of alternative discipline or critical formation. This is the case of epistemologist and

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.psichiatriademocratica.com>

<sup>6</sup> Further information can be obtained at <http://www.ecn.org/telviola/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ecn.org>

<sup>8</sup> A more detailed account of this sort of work can be found in Baraghini (1994), Berardi (1990), Collettivo Interzone (1991), Daniele (1997), DiCorinto and Tozzi (2002), Pasquinelli (2002) and Scelsi (1990).

psychology historian Saadi Marhaba whose main agenda is to render visible the ideology that undergoes psychological theories (Marhaba, 2000, 2001, 2002a, b). The sociologist Ivano Spano pays attention to the influence of social processes in the construction of subjectivity drawing on Marxist and social theory resources as well as critical sociology of scientific knowledge (Spano, 2000a, 2000b, 1999, 1983). Another interesting critical line is the phenomenological one which addresses the relations between theory construction and psychological practices (Borgna, 2003, 2001, 1999; Galimberti 2004, 2003a, b, c). Finally there are research groups working on care-education relations and media construction of mental health from a feminist perspective (Fiorillo and Cozza, 2002; Ipazia, 1997).

### **Critical work in the time of neoliberal geopolitics**

As we have shown above different projects co-exist under the umbrella of critical work in Italy and Spain. Among these activists and/or research groups there are those who conceive critical psychology as a temporal strategy or as another form of psychology. Other colleagues who are positioned in the critical margins of psychology (and psychiatry) find ways of interfering with the increasing participation of psychology (and medical discourses) in wider socio-political spheres, or simply, a way of constructing less restrictive spaces for alternative work in (often still total) institutions.

Another issue is whether the institutionalisation of critical research groups and collective actions placed at the margins of the establishment involves the confinement of critical work to clinical, educational and research sectors, or to what extent such institutionalisation, as it is the case of most British critical psychology, involves rendering critical methods and theories into research technics, thus in this way being emptied of their former critical intent. Such preoccupations have resulted in a lack of acknowledgement of more diversified scenarios and socio-political issues, which, paradoxically, work as the condition of possibility for critical psychology to be developing into another sub-discipline in the wider international neo-liberal scenario.

We believe these processes of institutionalisation renders visible the way neo-liberal logic finds it easier to take the critical demand, turn it upside down, empty it of meaning and use it as a slogan to shut up 'popular protest' (Biglia, 2003). If in the 1970's activists who decided to enter institutions were considered treacherous, and if in the 80's and 90's, with the demise of popular protest many people participated in formal politics under the slogan of resisting and articulating transformation from within, today we ought to pay attention to the sudden increase of other forms of struggle. We ought to be vigilant also to the way neo-liberalism incorporates and requires continuous shifting of critical margins (and its marketing, whether in the form of critical psychology and qualitative research methods, social forum, NGOs, or even Social Forum founded by devious multinational and international holding as in Barcelona 2004).

Under the current social and global shifts, in our view, there is the urge for radical work in psychology to promote and jump into the wagon of already existing mobilisations as those taken over by minority or indigenous groups world-wide or even on the lines of changing international law on migration, global citizenship, condemnation of external debts and the like. These are major references to take into account by critical psychologists. Most of these initiatives recreate space for debate outside institutions, their frontiers or disciplinary legacies. Such lines of action are becoming a reality as indicated by the GNU Project-Copy Left on which different groups are working (as the international Hackers meetings in Italy and Spain)

and the raising up of different autonomous groups of action-research such as Universidad Nomada (Madrid), Laser (Italia), Facoltà di Fuga (Italia), Precarias a la Deriva (Madrid), BORDERlines (Barcelona).

Any critical action, whether inside or outside psychology in the final analysis, might support ways of opening up and connecting resources and struggles in local and global settings. It necessarily involves moving between disciplinary practices and the transformations which punctuate them, as shown by the correspondence found between, for instance, developmental psychology and world development (Burman, 1995) and, between world wide transnational forces and processes of subjectification (Papadopoulos, 2003). The latter is still a pending subject for critical work in psychology in Spain and Italy although there are some attempts, as we have indicated in this paper.

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