

# Comments on Thomas Teo's Critical Psychology

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**Abstract:** The paper is a criticism of Thomas Teo's presentation of Critical Psychology from the standpoint of Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory (CHAT). The paper points to the limitations of the Neo-Kantian foundations of Teo's Psychology and outlines how the Marxist-Hegelian foundations of Vygotsky's approach provide a superior foundation for a critical psychology. One book (Teo, 2005) and two papers (Teo, 2017 & 2018) are the focus of the commentary.

Teo's (2005) critical history of Psychology begins with Kant, and essentially *remains* with Kant, treats Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky superficially, ignoring Hegel's critique of Kant and the successive critiques by Marx and Vygotsky. Teo is a Kantian and he interprets all the theories treated in the works mentioned here (Teo, 2005, 2017 & 2018) exclusively through the Kantian lens, which is blind to the Hegelian critique. He is not alone in this, of course – almost all the critiques Teo reviews (Teo, 2017) share the Kantian standpoint.

## Kant and Hegel

Kant (see Teo, 2005, p. 162) held that human cognition relied on a priori intuitions of 12 fundamental categories (time, space, causality, unity, ...), but the origin of these categories remained unexplained. Neo-Kantians supposed that it is *physiological* structures which provide the frame through which the data of perception is interpreted, such as for example, Chomsky's "Language Acquisition Device." Teo suggests that it is *social* structures which somehow provide the "forms of intuition and categories" left unexplained by Kant, which made it possible for the subject to interpret the data of sensation. In this sense, Teo could be said to be a "3rd Generation Kantian."

This is no place to recapitulate Hegel's critique of Kant, but it can be summed up in a few words. Kant and his predecessors in philosophy problematized the isolated individual subject confronting a natural object, asking how he or she could know what this object is. Hegel avoided the resulting contradictions by observing that both subject and object were products of the same form of life, but it is by no means true that Hegel replaced the individual subject with some kind of collective subject. The conception of the subject-object did not eliminate the problems of cognition and thought, but simply made it soluble.

As Teo (2018) demonstrates, however, his 3rd generation Kantianism cannot go beyond tautologies and generalities which fail even as descriptions of social consciousness, far less as an explanatory Psychology. The aporia which plagued the Kantian philosophy from its inception and which drove the development of Classical Idealism, are not solved by attributing them to unidentified physiological apparatuses or inscrutable social structures. Either way, it is presumed that these categories exist from the outset of an individual's consciousness. The model remains an individual processing the data of experience with a fixed but inexplicable apparatus.

## “Subjectivity”

As Teo (2017) sees it, the subject matter of Psychology is “subjectivity,” which is taken to be the consciousness or psyche of an individual. This seems eminently reasonable, but as his *History* (2005) brings out, this chosen subject matter presents an insuperable difficulty: “subjectivity” can only be experienced by introspection but all agree that introspection cannot provide objective, scientific observation of subjectivity. On the other hand, direct observation of the physiological processes underlying subjectivity fails to provide either an adequate description or explanation of subjectivity, and produces only trivial results. Teo reviews a bewildering series of psychological systems which aim in one way or another to “embed” the psyche with which they began back into human biology or social life, notwithstanding the mind/body problem that has remained insoluble from Descartes to the latest neuroscience. All, however, have as their subject matter an immaterial and unobservable object associated with an individual person, or occasionally (according to Teo) some kind of “collective mind.” All, that is, except Behaviorism, which limits itself to the description and explanation of human behavior *without reference to consciousness*, something which is patently absurd.

## The Dualism of Psychology

Further, Teo (2005) correctly shows that all those currents of Psychology which share his Kantian setting off point, are trapped in a dualism: either they see Psychology as a natural scientific endeavor and adopt experimental methodologies emulating the natural sciences, generally recording the biological and/or behavioral response of individuals to various stimuli conceived as *causes*, or, they see Psychology as a human science like anthropology, sociology, historiography and so on, and *describe* the phenomena of social and cultural life in psychological terms but provide no explanation for consciousness, or, they are internally dualistic. No explanatory system of psychology adequately describes human experience in all its diversity, while humanistic descriptive methods offer no *explanation* for consciousness. Teo is quite correct in this dualistic characterization of the history of Psychology, but he offers no way out and ignores the one current of human science and psychology in particular which has overcome this duality.

Hegel (1830/1971) did formulate a Psychology, which is contained in the *Philosophy of Spirit*; Psychology properly so called, he treats in the *Subjective Spirit*, but it is almost entirely speculative, has received little attention beyond the ranks of Hegel specialists, and Teo ignores it. Nonetheless, as far as a 200-year-old speculative system can go, it is very good, and makes the transition from plant and animal life to human life comprehensible without the introduction of any ‘life force’ or such like, and provides a sound foundation for the *Objective Spirit* (his social theory) and *Absolute Spirit* in which the higher psychological functions characteristic of human societies are manifested. That is to say, for all its faults (and there are many), it overcomes the abovementioned dualism. The main contribution Hegel made to human science, however, was his critique of Kant mainly in the *Logic* (Hegel, 1816/1969) (also ignored by Teo). Hegel’s system of science was elaborated *speculatively* (as was Kant’s philosophy), on the basis of the limited empirical science of the time.

Hegel massively overestimated what it was possible to achieve by means of logic once it has distanced itself from experience; and he massively underestimated the

implications of the vastly expanded horizons of human experience that would follow from the development of technology and research in the 19th century.

It was quite impossible for natural and human science to proceed from where Hegel left it when he died in 1831, as a logically complete, integral and self-contained 'encyclopedia'. What took place after Hegel died was a piecemeal development of myriad separate scientific investigations without adequate coordination or conception of the whole. Kant provided an adequate philosophical basis for these kind of researches, but as Hegel predicted, as they proceeded, contradictions arose, and resolution of these contradictions would provide the motor for development of a rational system of science, and it was the logic of this kind of development that Hegel provided, but Science mostly proceeded without awareness of what Hegel could offer. I largely agree with Teo's critical history of the development of Psychology in the mid- to late-19th century.

However, the development of the human sciences in general, and Psychology in particular, were not able to progress in this spontaneous manner, and contradictions abounded and remain unresolved to this day, as Teo's historical review attests. I shall pass over further discussions of the contributions of Marx and Hegel, which I have dealt with at length elsewhere (Blunden, 2010, 2012 & 2019), and go straight to Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), whose specific contribution was in the construction of a *general psychology* and in the paradigmatic solution of a range of special problems in Psychology.

### Vygotsky's solution of the central contradiction (dualism) of Psychology

Vygotsky (1927/1997) confronted the dualism between a *descriptive* 'cultural' psychology which described the developed manifestations of human subjectivity in art, law, politics, etc., in their own terms, and an *explanatory* psychology which used laboratory methods to test behavioral responses to experimental stimuli, but produced results which were trivial, and failed to replicate in the laboratory the forms of mind manifested in real social life.

Vygotsky took his inspiration from Marx's *Capital* which began in chapter one with an analysis of exchange of commodities – according to Marx, the “economic cell form of bourgeois society”; money appeared only in the 3rd chapter and capital – the subject matter of the work – in the 4th chapter. Exchange of commodities was a simple act which could be viscerally understood by reader and writer alike, and the nature of money and capital was unfolded from Marx's analysis of exchange of commodities. Vygotsky took as his archetypal psychological process a human subject acting upon an experimental object, but using a *mediating artifact* drawn from the wider culture to use as a means of solving an object problem. (This idea was prefigured by Hegel in his Logic). Hitherto, epistemologists and psychologists had taken as their archetypal problem an individual confronting a natural object in isolation from all social or cultural mediation. By 'putting culture in the middle', Vygotsky brought the entire cultural context into the laboratory setting and made culture amenable to laboratory techniques. (See Blunden, 2010 & 2012 for a more detailed explanation.)

### Vygotsky's solution to studying the 'unobservable'

This methodological move was made possible only by a corresponding ontological shift. Rather than making 'subjectivity' or 'the psyche' the substance and 'chapter one' of his

psychology, Vygotsky made the basic unit and substance of his general psychology not a 'thought', but an artifact-mediated action. Actions differ from behavioral deeds in that an observer can only make sense of an action by presuming that the action includes an inner aspect (consciousness or purpose) – as well as an outer aspect (behavior). Subjectivity is thus real enough, and remains the object of research, but it is understood as an *abstraction* from actions and activity which are the substances.

Subjectivity is a real abstraction, in that consciousness and behavior are not mirror images – we are capable of thinking of things without actually doing them, and we even learn to act contrary to our desires (Vygotsky, 1934/1998). But thinking and doing are inextricably linked in their development, and can only be examined and understood as aspects of a single whole.

According to the 'genetic law of cultural development' (Vygotsky, 1931/1997), every psychological function appears first on the interpersonal plane, and only later on the psychological plane. By studying the use of symbolic artifacts in the solution of problems, especially in children, Vygotsky was able to trace step by step how actions are transformed into psychological functions, in which the use of an external means is replaced by an internal means. For example, a child who obeys the commands of their mother, later literally commands themselves, aloud, and later silently, demonstrating how the child learns to control their own behavior. As egocentric speech gradually contracts and recedes into inner speech, its structure and function can be observed.

An action is understood to be inclusive of thought processes which may long precede an overt act, and consequences which continue long after the act itself; act and thought are not identical mirrors of one another, but form a coherent whole, a unit of human social life. (This was also anticipated by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right*). Thought and deed are two sides of the same coin, and neither exist without the other (see Hegel, 1821/1952). An action is not a "unit of thought and behavior" because neither thought or deed exist separately from action. A thought which is in no way manifested in action (e.g. a secret daydream) is not a subject matter for Science. Likewise, behavior which is unconnected with consciousness (e.g. shivering when cold) is a matter for Biology but not Psychology.

In Vygotsky's most famous study, *Thinking and Speech* (1934/1987), he traced the separate roots of thinking and speaking and how in the course of development the two processes joined up and thinking became intelligent and intelligence became verbal. Prior to this stage, children manifest unintelligent speech and nonverbal intelligence. The subject matter of this work is *concepts*, which Vygotsky analyzed as forms of action: he presented children with tasks and symbolic means for their solution, and assisted the child in using the means, observing the development of ever more adequate forms of action using the artifacts. The various forms of action he observed were concepts at various stages of their development.

The practice of determining what concepts someone is using by observing their actions is hardly revolutionary. The point is that Vygotsky showed how this could be utilized in a laboratory, natural scientific setting. By observing the *development* of psychological functions, first in interpersonal actions, and then internally, Vygotsky overcame what Teo calls the dualism of Psychology.

A. N. Leontyev (1978), a colleague of Vygotsky, utilized these ideas, understanding that an action is defined and delineated by the difference between its immediate purpose and

its motivation (the reason for doing it). The motivation characterizes a whole series of actions, only one of which might be performed by the individual subject, while other actions might be completed by other people collaborating in a social division of labor to achieve the object which motivates all the actions. Conceptual thinking thus arises in collaborative labor with other people according to norms. The aggregate of artifact-mediated actions which combine together in pursuit of an object he called an *activity*, but it can equally well be called a 'social practice'. An activity is a social 'form of action', manifesting a *concept*. Concepts can therefore be identified with social practices, in the same way as actions manifest meanings, while entire social systems are conceived of as aggregates of social practices.

By taking any given geological structure as a moment in its formative process, the geologist is able to reconstruct the whole science of Geology without ever witnessing, for example, a glacier gouging out a fjord. In this sense, the Psychology is no different from any other Science. While it is possible to observe behavior immediately and more or less unambiguously, it will be noted that the same is not true of actions because actions essentially contain an internal aspect, which is manifested in action, but has to be *deduced* and reconstructed by an analysis of action. But this is the same situation as applies in geology, history, quantum physics, etc., – all the empirical sciences in fact, where the researcher must piece together the process of formation from the traces which are given for observation. One rarely witnesses a geological formation in process, and only eye witnesses see history in process, and no-one sees quantum events. (See Vygotsky, 1925/1997).

### Mind / Body Dualism

So in this brief summary I have shown how Vygotsky and his followers overcame the dualism of *human science vs. natural science* at the methodological level, and at the same time overcame the Cartesian dualism of mind and body by taking activities as the substance, with behavior and consciousness understood as *abstractions* from the basic concept of action, rather than taking behavior and consciousness as two distinct substances to be added together. The so-called unity of mind and body is not the result of 'embedding' thoughts in bodies, but on the contrary, mind and body are abstractions from an original whole – activity.

### Methodological Individualism

Vygotsky resolves at the same time the dualism of *individual and society*. We do not have an individual organism, analyzed by the methods of natural science, which are then "embedded" in society where they soak up categories and forms of thought from their social environment. Rather, the person is made up of the series of actions which are attributed to him or her, and these actions are made pursuant to activities (social practices), the aggregate of which constitute a social formation. Each – both the individual person and the social formation – are comprehensible in terms of these units. A social formation is constituted and understood as an aggregate of what Leontyev called 'activities' but which I prefer to call 'social practices' or 'projects', the motivation for each of which is grasped as a concept. Individuals, meanwhile, are constituted by their actions which aggregate together as social practices. 'Society' is not a fundamental concept here.

The very conception of ‘society’ as the ‘social environment’ is merely the other side of taking the isolated individual as the unit of analysis. Social classes and entire social formations are constituted by social practices. A ‘society’ is an abstraction approximating an aggregate of social practices constituting, for example, a nation state. The relation an individual has to the larger world around them exists only through participating, positively or negatively, in social practices / projects. The working class is not a collective, it is a project in which the constituent actions are motivated by the need to protect and strengthen the solidarity of working people; it is an aggregate of actions not individual persons. An activity is not tantamount to a collection of people – the people involved in an activity change from time to time, and every individual person is participating in multiple activities.

The analysis of complex formations relies on the choice of units of analysis, made possible by the choice of actions and activities as substances. This insight flows directly from the examples of Hegel and Marx, whose works are overlooked or misconstrued by Teo (2005). The artifact-mediated action and the activity constitute foundational concepts for a *general psychology*. For the solution of specific problems in and branches of psychology, Vygotsky recommended the identification of a *unit of analysis*, and each unit must be chosen differently according to the phenomenon to be analyzed. However, the conception of the basic substance of the characteristically human life remains the same.

### Critical Psychology and Neoliberalism

As a good Kantian, Teo is a prisoner of methodological individualism. He seems to think that “methodological collectivism” is the alternative to methodological individualism, and thus misconstrues Hegel and Marx as if they took the subject to be a collection of individuals. As was shown above, this is not the case. Only by moving away from individuals and bunches of individuals as the units of analysis, to actions and activities, is it possible to reveal the complexity of the individuals and the activities they may or may not be engaged in. The extent and nature of a person’s entanglement with the market is not the same for all citizens of a neoliberal social formation.

Every critique of Psychology, for example, is not produced by an individual critic, but rather by a social movement, in other words, a social practice. Critique of Science in general and Psychology in particular can be understood only by first grasping the formation and constitution of social movements and practices generally – not ‘societies’.

To do otherwise, for example to characterize an entire social formation as “neo-liberalism” with all the individuals belonging to that social formation having the same neo-liberal form of subjectivity, NLFS (Neo-Liberal Form of Subjectivity. Teo, 2018), creates an abstraction which falls apart at first glance wherever it is not a blatant tautology.

It is worth noting in this context that Critical Psychology traces its origin from Holzkamp’s work in 1983, and Critical Psychology is largely to be found in those very social formations where Neoliberalism is most evident. This suggests that Critical Psychology is co-extensive in time and space with Neo-liberalism. Teo (20205) sees “wide parts of Western psychology as constituting an indigenous psychology of male Euro-Americans, which may have limited relevance for people from other ethnic backgrounds and origins and for women.” But one must go further. Critical Psychology

recognizes Feminist, Anti-racist and Post-colonial Psychologies as Sciences in their own right; indeed Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex presumably each have their own Psychologies as do the people of each different nation and diaspora. This is archetypically the standpoint of Neoliberalism in Psychology: every person, or at least every social group or Type, has their own Psychology. We cannot avoid the conclusion that Critical Psychology is the Psychology of Neoliberalism, despite the fact that it is so only to the extent that it is critical that it is Neoliberal. In fact, we could say that in his paper on “Home neoliberalus,” Teo conducts an *immanent critique* of Neoliberalism.

It can certainly be argued that every section in a contemporary nation state has their own ‘psychology’ in the sense of a way of thinking and feeling, etc., but it does not follow from this that each section must have their own Science of Psychology, as Teo seems to suggest. A feminist critique of Psychology aims to *change* Psychology, and expunge the imprint of patriarchy from it, not set up a rival Feminist Psychology.

Given that Critical Psychology has the same fundamental conceptions as neoliberal capitalism, and its practice a component part of neoliberal capitalism, it is hardly surprising that Critical Psychology, like “mainstream” Psychology today, is an indigenous psychology of neoliberal, “Western” capitalism. Teo observes that in general critiques of “mainstream” psychology have come from social movements representing a section of people excluded in some way, and generally speaking these critiques have left the fundamentals in place while objecting to the exclusion of their specific point of view, and/or the neglecting of their contribution to Psychology, and/or the denigration of their specific form of life, and/or the denial of their specific difference. All these critiques have contributed to the progress of Psychology, in particular by making it more sensitive to the social and cultural formation of the mind. This has not prevented however, ever more expansive universal claims for “psychology” based on the latest advances of neuroscience.

This situation is not contradicted by Critical Psychology’s place as a critic of Neoliberal capitalism.

The current of Psychology that I have promoted here, CHAT, is far from being immune to the types of critique which Teo reviews in his History (2005). My book, an “Interdisciplinary Theory of Activity” (2010) described itself as an *immanent critique* of Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory (CHAT). My recent “Hegel for Social Movements” (2019) includes a ruthless critique of Hegel along with an appropriation of his philosophical achievements. CHAT is not at all immune from criticism. CHAT originated in the Stalinist Soviet Union, where it was insulated from the social movements which have had such an impact on human science in the “West.” When it implanted itself in the USA in the 1960s, it was already well ripe for critique, and in general this critique has been and continues to be conducted from within the ranks of CHAT, though under the impact of the social movements of the past several decades. The point however is that by taking at its basic conception human actions mediated by cultural artifacts, it had within itself the means to incorporate cultural variation without destabilizing the foundations. Kantianism of the 1st, 2nd or 3rd generation does not.

Contrariwise, in the approach set out in Teo (2018), the author remains wedded to methodological individualism. This paper basically finds that neoliberal capitalist societies are populated by people imbued with neoliberal ideology and values, engaged

in practices appropriate to the neoliberal worldview and that the psychologists likewise, studying neoliberal subjects through the lens of neoliberal ideology recreate in scientific terms the image of a neoliberal subjectivity. To study psychology on the basis of individuals who are transmitters and reflectors of the ethos of the culture in which they live is methodological individualism. To observe that Chinese people speak Chinese, follow Chinese customs and exhibit the mores of Chinese society, unless they are raised in Canada, in which case ... etc., is no great revelation. And all the necessary qualifications (“only to a certain extent” and “some of the time,” etc.) do not improve matters. It is just a truism, and although useful as a mode of public commentary, it provides no analytical purchase whatsoever.

But for example, the subjectivity of Indigenous Australians can be studied by observing how they care for the land, how they navigate using dark constellations, and so on. To measure an indigenous person’s IQ using counterfactual syllogistic puzzles would, on the other hand, be silly. Indigenous artifacts and indigenous social practices are necessary means of revealing and understanding the indigenous mind. (See Cole, 1996 for more on this in relation to mathematics learning in Liberia, for example).

### Critique

Sciences progress either by the solution of known problems, which is the normal course of scientific progress, or in response to critique. It is critique which is able to produce fundamental change in a science by drawing attention to hitherto unsolved and probably unnoticed problems and demanding that these problems be addressed. Critique does not necessarily produce fundamental change however.

There are two kinds of ‘external critique’ – dogmatic criticism and critical exposé. *Dogmatic criticism* is where an opposing current of thinking tells the subject where they are wrong, speaking in their own language and concepts. This usually has no impact on the target of critique, witness the plethora of rival currents of Psychology in existence today. *Critical exposé* is where the target theory or aspects of it are shown to express the point of view or interests of some social group, and are therefore not objective or universal. For example, when Feminists point out that “mainstream” Psychologist is saturated with patriarchy. Orthodox Marxist critique was of this kind, denouncing political and philosophical opponents as ‘bourgeois’. Most of the critiques of Psychology treated by Teo are of this kind, too. This kind of critique may not destabilize the foundations of the target science and may be fruitful where it is backed by a substantial social movement engaged in a widespread critique of ideology and social conditions. But where an external critique goes to fundamentals, it generally takes a social revolution for such a critical exposé to be successful.

This critique of Critical Psychology falls into this category – a critical exposé of the foundations of Critical Psychology, and consequently I would not expect an adherent of Critical Psychology to be persuaded by my rhetoric.

The most important mode of critique is *immanent* critique. Immanent critique is where the critic accepts and clarifies the methodological presuppositions and substantive premises of the science but by doing so consistently and rigorously, draws attention to internal contradictions which arise from these premises. This kind of critique may be carried out by an internal critic or from outside by a critic who consciously *enters into* the premises of the target science, provisionally abandoning their own methods and

premises, and conducting the critique in a language and conceptual framework which is indigenous to the target science. Having irrefutably established internal contradictions within the target science, it then becomes possible to address the problem and find a way forward. This would be impossible if a contradiction were to be identified based on premises and concepts which are alien to the target science.

Finally, immanent critique is most fruitfully carried out through *mutual appropriation*, in which two distinct currents of thinking collaborate towards a common end, and on the basis of that shared object make themselves open to criticism from the other, and are compelled themselves to make criticisms of the other. This practice is inherent in *collaboration*. The opposite mode of working together is where the two parties cooperate towards a common aim on the basis of not challenging each other's fundamental premises, which may achieve the object of cooperation but would not lead to fundamental development in Science.

### Conclusion

So long as Critical Psychology makes it its task to correct the errors of “mainstream” Psychology without addressing the Kantian philosophical foundations which it shares with the mainstream, all that is achieved is the fragmentation of Psychology into the various critical currents which co-exist alongside the mainstream.

This is so because the Kantian approach does not have within it a means of incorporating cultural difference at a fundamental level. All that can be produced is the ‘absorption theory’ – individuals soak up the ideology of their social surroundings.

A fundamental shift is possible only by addressing the philosophical foundations, viz., Hegel's critique of Kant and the successive critiques by Marx and Vygotsky and Vygotsky's contemporary followers.

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