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## Fred Newman and the Practice of Method

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Fred Newman was an American Marxist who died this past July at age 76. For most, if not all, of you my talk today is an introduction to Newman, a man whose considerable influence in NY and beyond “defied easy description,” according the *New York Times*. Newman was my comrade and mentor for 35 years. I did and continue to participate in the mass social movement he has led, the institutions he organized followers to build as a way of challenging and transforming American psychology, culture and politics.

Newman was an eclectic and unorthodox revolutionary: a methodologist, community organizer, philosopher, political strategist, therapist, teacher, playwright, theatre director and lyricist—who discovered and developed his talents and skills as the architect of several very successful independent organizations headquartered in the US with increasing global significance. For more than thirty years, I had the privilege to study Newman’s work, not as a distant researcher, but as an insider to it—with him, a co-builder and co-studier at the same time. I hope in my remarks today to provide you with an overview of Newman’s *postmodern Marxism* that both produced and is the product of a new unit of revolutionary change, what he termed “the development community.” I will highlight the unique ways in which he engaged psychology with the creation of Social

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Therapeutics, its contributions not only to the organizing of Americans but also, increasingly, to the efforts of grassroots organizers and revolutionaries around the world—and to Marxist Studies. For, speaking as a Marxist and as a psychologist, I believe that the (re)organization and development of human emotionality is an integral part of the revolutionary activity of (re)organizing and developing the totality of society. In Newman’s words, social therapeutics was “both the breeding ground and the testing ground for numerous transformations of Marxian and post-Marxian conceptions—a ‘therapeutization’ of Marxism, if you will” (Newman, 1999).

Newman was a working class man who sold shoes and worked in a factory before getting a university education at a time when free education was possible in the US. He received a PhD in philosophy of science and language from Stanford University in 1965. The upheavals of the 1960s in the US and abroad radicalized him. Like millions of others, he felt the contradiction of capitalism’s success—both the benefits to humankind and the mass destruction of humankind it produced. He resonated with the ways that the cultural movements of the time were challenging the Western glorification of individual self-interest with grassroots communal experiments to transform daily life. He felt in his gut the need to confront America’s failure to honestly deal with its legacy of slavery and racism, as its African American population remained poor and shut out of America’s prosperity.

Believing that profound social change would not come from the university campus, Newman stopped teaching philosophy and left academia. With a handful of student followers, he set up community organizing collectives in working class neighborhoods of New York City. From these beginnings in the 1960s has grown a

development community of tens of thousands in the US and globally.

Along the way, Newman became a Marxist. He read and studied Marx and Marxists. While he appreciated it as a theory of history, analysis of social relations and alternative political economy, for Newman Marxism's primary value was as a methodological blue print for mass organizing activity.

Newman engaged contemporary capitalism with a *practice of method*. This is a term he and I coined in 1979 as the title of our first co-written monograph.<sup>2</sup> This phrase reflects what Newman and I take to be the most useful and relevant of Marx's insights and discoveries and analyses—his revolutionary dialectical materialist methodology. As we have come to understand and embrace it, this methodology and, thereby, the Marxian dialectic, is not another method to practice. It is more—more revolutionary and more practical—than that. It is a new understanding of understanding. Not understanding as typically “understood”—separate from or prior to activity—but understanding as revolutionary, practical-critical activity, as the *practice of method*. Newman (and I) think of Marxism as profoundly practical, not in the sense of being a practice *derived* from a theory and/or a method, but in the sense of being a theory and/or method that *is a practice*.

Newman had a solid training in both western and eastern philosophy, most particularly in the philosophy of science and language and in the British and American analytic and pragmatism traditions. He brought this to everything he built and to his exploration of Marxian concepts. For example, continuing in the

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<sup>2</sup> This monograph is listed under authors Hood [Holzman] and Newman. For further reading on Social Therapeutics, its history and intellectual and political locations, see citations for Holzman and Newman in the Citations and Further Reading section at the end of this paper.

theme of dialectics, Newman wrote:

Dialectical materialism is not a kind of materialism. Indeed, it is not an *ontological* or *epistemological* position at all. It is, rather, a full blown shifting of the philosophical ground to a methodological point of view – not an interpretation of reality at all but a changing of it! The dialectic is not to be found between the activity and its contemplation (the mind and the body); the dialectic is the full-blown rejection of “between-ness” in favor of a *radically monistic* (call it “one-dimensional” if you like) methodology. Activity is not a component of reality; it is a radical alternative to modernist (and pre-modernist) philosophy which objectifies the world. Of course, Marx is not denying the world. But more important, he is not philosophically affirming it. Rather, he seeks to discover a methodology suitable for transforming it. Dialectics as an activity theoretic method – a practice of method – is that discovery. (Newman, 1999, p. 37)

How did Newman see the world he was seeking to transform? His vantage point was on the ground and bottom up rather than theoretical and top down, and came from what he and his followers were building and its relationship to what else was going on politically, economically and culturally in the world. His analysis was historical, political and philosophical, and resulted in, among other things, identifying the paradoxical place where capitalism and communism have come to. To put it simply, communism is an ideologically driven, foundationally justified system. Its origins are the theoretical/philosophical/foundational writings of Marx and Engels, and while it has been advanced and modified by many, it remains methodologically foundational and

ideologically driven. Relative to communism and other world systems, capitalism—and here again I am simplifying—is less ideologically driven and far less reliant on an explicit foundational structure. Corresponding to this difference, capitalism and communism function with different principles of change. For capitalism, it is pragmatism and for communism it is dialectics.

The historical interaction between communism and capitalism is, not surprisingly, at once dialectical and pragmatic. According to Newman, pragmatism has been serving capitalism far better than dialectics has served communism—this despite the clear theoretical superiority of dialectics. Newman believed this is the case because pragmatism has no foundations other than “what works” (hardly a radical stance) and thus actually helped in capitalism’s evolution into its current neo-liberal form. In contrast, dialectics, which was conceived as a radical structural theory, became calcified in its need to conform to a set of ideological maxims and scientific axioms, and failed to keep communism sufficiently flexible in the face of rapidly changing global conditions. The situation is such, Newman proposed, that we find ourselves as world citizens at a place where the theoretically more radical dialectics has functioned conservatively for communism, and the theoretically more conservative methodology—pragmatism—has functioned radically for capitalism. Dialectics as the practice of method, not as a structural theory of practice, is needed to understand and transform contemporary capitalism and to understand and develop contemporary communism.

The practice of method involves continually creating and recreating institutions—political, cultural, educational, psychological institutions—that challenge the very foundations of these institutions. For example, in the 1980s we built a labor union for

unorganized labor, (welfare recipients who did not labor and, therefore, were at no point of production). We built a school for children that denied the individuated, knowledge-seeking model of learning that is the bedrock of schooling East and West. Among our current projects are social therapy centers with an approach to emotional help that denies the premises of mainstream psychotherapy; a university that is free, open to everyone who wants to participate and has no grades or degrees; a national network of talent shows for youth that denies the bourgeois conception of talent; electoral political campaigns that are not concerned with winning and political parties that exist to redefine politics and transform political culture—including the possibility of doing away with political parties as the mode of citizen participation. If you picture rebuilding a ship plank by plank as it travels across the sea, you can get a sense of what the process is. We build and rebuild the organizations necessary for the journey in order to discover how they work, even if doing so maximizes the risk of their “sinking.”

Under Newman’s leadership, his development community has grown through engaging in this practical-critical organizing for thirty-five years. Here are some of the people, places and activities who are practicing method all over the world.

[Slide show]

This organizing activity has also yielded certain philosophical/psychological/political understandings and taken Newman and his followers to new places, one of them being postmodernism. Postmodernism, broadly speaking, refers to a way of looking at the current historical period as one in which the ways we had of understanding and being no longer hold (even if people and institutions continue to hold on to them). Our grand narratives are breaking down; the existence of truth is constantly debated; human

subjectivity is fragmented; and meaning itself is continuously being destroyed and re-created and destroyed. Within such a world, human life is understood to be socially constructed, blurred or boundary-less, relational rather than individualistic, local and global rather than universal, and narrative as opposed to truth-based (Holzman and Morss, 2000).

Ironically, it was two brilliant thinkers who lived and wrote long before postmodernism emerged who helped Newman postmodernize Marx. One of them is Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Austrian philosopher writing in the 1920-40s. Wittgenstein tried to practice a new kind of philosophy without essences, truths and ideological presuppositions. The other is Lev Vygotsky, the Soviet psychologist writing in the 1920-30s. Vygotsky brought Marx's conception of revolutionary activity (practical-critical activity, dialectics) to the task of creating a Marxist psychology as a process of discovery rather than one of conforming to a set of rules. In carrying out our own work, Newman and I drew heavily on theirs to understand what we were doing. In the process, we came to have a new understanding and appreciation not only for Marx's radical humanism but also for the depth of bourgeois ideology in the every day lives of the world's people. I will today concentrate on the influence of Vygotsky and urge those of you interested in the influence of Wittgenstein on our work to read some of our writings on the subject (e.g., Holzman, 2011; Newman and Holzman, 2006/1996).

To introduce Vygotsky to you, we have to go back to Marx. Let us examine what Newman and I came to identify as two lines of practical-critical thought in Marx's writings: 1) class struggle and 2) revolutionary activity. The well-known opening of *The Communist Manifesto* illustrates the first: "The history of all hitherto existing society is

the history of class struggles” (Marx and Engels, 1987, p. 12). Marx’s Third Thesis on Feuerbach illustrates the second: “The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*” (Marx, 1974, p. 121). *Class struggle* puts the anti-capitalist and deconstructive front and center, while *revolutionary activity* forefronts the communistic and reconstructive. Together, they could transform “all existing conditions.” They must be synthesized, Marx says (e.g., *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 1967).

*Communism* is the *positive* abolition of *private property*, of *human self-alienation*, and thus the real *appropriation* of *human nature* through and for man. It is, therefore, the return of man himself as a *social*, i.e., really human, being, a complete and conscious return which assimilates all the wealth of previous development. (Marx, 1967, p. 127)

and

We have seen how, on the assumption that private property has been positively superceded, man produces man, himself and then other men; how the object which is the direct activity of his personality is at the same time his existence for other men and their existence for him. Similarly, the material of labor and man himself as a subject are the starting point as well as the result of this movement (and because there must be this starting point private property is an historical necessity). Therefore, the *social* character is the universal character of the whole movement; *as* society itself produces *man* as *man*, so it is *produced* by him. Activity and mind are social in their content as



well as in their *origin*; they are *social* activity and *social* mind. (Marx, 1967, p. 129)

Marx is telling us that the transformation of the world and the transformation of ourselves as human beings are one and the same task (since, for Marx, human beings are both producers and product of their world). Many readings of Marx (by his followers and detractors alike) either ignore revolutionary activity or subsume it under class struggle as Revolution (that is, a quite specific type of revolutionary activity). Newman does not deny class struggle; rather, he takes it to be a *description* of—and not the activity of—all of human history. *Revolutionary activity* is the activity of all of human history, an “always becoming” unique kind of tool—at this point in history simultaneously anti-capitalist and constructive—with which human beings can change the world.

Because we believe, with Marx, that 1) a fundamental human characteristic is being capable of carrying out revolutionary activity and 2) that carrying out revolutionary activity is necessary for ongoing individual and species development, we relate to people as revolutionaries. This feature of our work, in particular our psychological work through social therapy, was articulated by Newman twenty-five years ago at the 1986 Congress of the Interamerican Society of Psychology, held in the Karl Marx Theater in Havana, Cuba:

We speak of social therapy as revolution for non-revolutionaries. This radical Marxist conception – that the fundamental or essential human characteristic is being capable of carrying out revolutionary activity (what Marx calls practical-critical activity)—that’s the foundation of anything which can be

called or should be called a Marxist psychology. Ours is a radical insistence that we not accommodate reactionary society by relating to people—*any* people—as anything but revolutionaries. (Newman, 1991 p.15)

Relating to people as revolutionaries entails relating to them as world historic in everyday, mundane matters, that is, as social beings engaged in the life/history-making process of always *becoming* (assimilating “all the wealth of previous development”). For what is history/making history if it is not the dialectic what is/what is becoming? Here is where Vygotsky comes in.

Vygotsky and his colleagues were a part of a great real-life experiment in creating the hoped-for new Soviet society from its founding in 1917 through the mid-1930s (see Bruner, 2004; Friedman, 1990; Holzman, 2009; Newman and Holzman, 1993; Stetsenko, 2004). One of my favorite quotes from Vygotsky is this: “A revolution solves only those tasks raised by history” (Vygotsky, quoted in frontpiece, Levitan, 1982). For him and his peers, the specific tasks were raised by the first successful socialist revolution, and Vygotsky devoted himself to revolutionizing the psychology of his day to solve them. Though his efforts ultimately failed (inseparable from Soviet socialism’s unraveling), his methodological breakthroughs are proving useable in efforts to solve the tasks history is raising today.

In the 1920’s, the field of psychology was well on its way to becoming an empirical and experimental science, and questions of method and units of analysis were hotly debated. For example, would taking psychology in the empirical,

experimental direction of the natural sciences mean excluding the very nature of human consciousness from the field of psychology? Vygotsky was not willing to give up the study of consciousness (nor the “higher psychological processes” that are its manifestations). Nor was he willing to settle for two kinds of psychology (a subjective one for mental events and an objective one for non-mental events) or one psychology if it bypassed consciousness by reducing mental events to non-mental ones. Both options, he argued extensively, rested on an erroneous belief in an objectivist epistemology, which, in effect, denies science as a human (meaning-making) activity and mistakenly treats human beings as natural phenomena, like planets and stars. For Vygotsky, psychology as a human science could not develop so long as it was based in objective-subjective dualism (Vygotsky, 1997). In this, Vygotsky followed Marx and anticipated postmodernism.

This brought Vygotsky to question the very method of scientific inquiry, that is, the entire methodological approach, not a specific research technique. While the method of natural science might work for studying natural phenomena, Vygotsky believed that it could not be a good fit for the study of human beings. He wrote that a psychology with a natural science method contains “an insoluble methodological contradiction. It is a natural science about unnatural things” and produces “a system of knowledge which is contrary to them” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 298). A scientific study of human beings (a “scientific socialism”) requires a new conception and practice of science, specifically, a nondualistic method—a precondition of which is a nondualistic *conception of method*. Here is how Vygotsky phrased the creative challenge:

The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of psychological activity. In this case, the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65)

Newman and I saw Vygotsky's proposal as a radical break with the accepted scientific paradigm that psychology was in the process of adopting, in which method is a tool that is applied and yields results. When method is applied, the relation between tool and result is linear, instrumental and dualistic, or what Newman and I call *tool for result methodology* (Newman and Holzman, 1993). Vygotsky proposes a qualitatively different conception of method: not a tool to be applied, but an activity (a "search") that generates both tool and result at the same time and as continuous process. Tool and result are not dualistically separated, nor are they identical, nor one thing. Rather, they are elements of a dialectical unity/totality/whole. Method to be practiced, not applied, is what Vygotsky was advocating. Newman and I call this *tool-and-result methodology* (Newman and Holzman, 1993) to capture the dialectical relationship of this new conception. Neither objective nor subjective, it is outside that dualistic box. That is its strength and potential power as practical-critical psychology.

In making this break, Vygotsky brought Marx's brilliance to bear on the practical questions of how it is that human beings learn and develop, and how historical conditions have virtually halted these processes. Yet he made it clear that it was Marx's dialectical

method and not any Marxist dogma that he was working with: “I don’t want to discover the nature of mind by patching together a lot of quotations. I want to find out how science has to be built, to approach the study of mind having learned the whole of Marx’s method” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 8).

Tool-and-result is, it seems to us, is a remarkably new and historically relevant kind of tool, one that brings together what is radically useful about both dialectics and pragmatism to create something new. In being monistically dialectical, it points the way out of the objective-subjective and theory-practice dichotomies that have plagued Marxism and both Marxist and bourgeois social science for decades. Speaking politically and psychologically, to the extent that human beings can become world historic (that is, revolutionary), they must exercise their power as methodologists, that is, not merely users of the tools that are currently available but collective creators of new tool-and-results. In this spirit, Newman’s organizing goal is *to inspire, invite and help people to practice method, to create new forms of life, to build environments that are at once the context for revolutionary activity and revolutionary activity itself.*

Newman’s social therapy is one such environment-building activity. It is specifically designed to create emotional-social growth. It is a deconstruction-reconstruction of the capitalist ontology which admits of no history/history making—human beings are understood to be only *who we are*. And who we are (especially those in late capitalist culture) are commodified and alienated individuals, the products of a sick society to which we have adapted. (“Production does not only produce man as a *commodity*, the *human commodity*, man in the form

of a *commodity*; in conformity with this situation it produces him as a *mentally* and *physically dehumanized* being,” Marx, 1967, p. 111). Transforming this sick society must involve the de-commodification and de-alienation of its human “products.” This is neither negative nor destructive, but rather the positive and constructive process of producing sociality. In social therapy’s *process ontology*, human beings are both who we are and *who we are becoming*. And who we are becoming are creators of tools that can “abolish the present state of things” (Marx and Engels, 1974, p. 57) by the continuous transformation of mundane specific life practices into new forms of life. Creating these new kinds of tools is the *becoming activity* of expressing—in how we live our lives—our sociality, our adaptation to history, our “species-life,” as Marx referred to it (“Individual human life and species-life are not *different things*...In his *species-consciousness* man confirms his real *social life*,” Marx, 1967, p. 130).

It is people—Marx made plain—who change the world. But what kind of people? The common and “correct” answer is, “The working class” or “The proletariat.” Newman’s answer is, “People who are developing.” (People—young, old and in-between—such as the ones you saw in the slides.) Development—for individuals, for “the class” and for the species—doesn’t come from some abstract ideological commitment to being a better person or to making a better world, but only from a participatory process in which people exercise their collective power to create new environments and new emotional growth. This is the “therapeutization” of Marxism that social therapeutics and the developmental community Newman spawned have effected. The therapeutic theme is there in Marx’s writings, as in this passage from *The German*

*Ideology*: “We have further shown that private property can be abolished only on condition of an all-round development of individuals, because the existing character of intercourse and productive forces is an all-round one, and only individuals that are developing in an all-round fashion can appropriate them, i.e., can turn them into free manifestations of their lives” (Marx and Engels, 1974, p. 117).

Fred Newman was thrilled when I told him I was invited to speak to you. He died before he and I could talk about what I might say to you, and I feel that loss. But in keeping with his life-long practice, I think he would be most interested in your responses, for it is in the conversation we create together that we have the possibility of becoming. What we become is up to us.

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