

## The End of Knowing as Critical Praxis (Practical-Critical Activity)

Presentation, International Critical Psychology Praxis Congress  
Northern New Mexico College, Espanola NM  
September 27-29, 2019

Lois Holzman  
East Side Institute, New York NY USA  
eastsideinstitute.org

The question I put before us today is this—How do we reconstruct our world in such a way that people can not only meet their current needs but go beyond that to create new wants and needs? I have no answer to the question—for I believe the answer has to be created by what people, including us, do. What I do have is a direction, one that's guided by a methodology that goes beyond the critical to the practical-critical. I take that term from Marx, for whom it meant revolutionary activity, the changing of ourselves that is dialectically united with world-changing. This practical-critical methodology guides the work that my colleagues and I have been engaged in across the US for over forty years and, for the past ten years, in many other countries of the world. In my brief time today, I can only highlight the key features of the approach, known as social therapeutics and performance activism. If you're interested in learning more and seeing examples, there are many books, articles and videos I can give you references to. I've chosen four features of our methodology that I think are of particular relevance to the future of critical psychology to share with you.

1. Engage the epistemological bias.

The authoritarianism of Western ways of knowing is often and well critiqued, including by critical psychologists (myself included). All well and good. And while non-Western epistemologies should be honored and respected along with all the other features of a given culture, I think that *all* epistemologies are authoritarian. It is the epistemic posture itself that is a fetter to revolutionary activity. All peoples are, to greater and lesser degrees, guided (consciously and unconsciously) by a knowing paradigm—that we can and must know what is, what to do, who we are, how we feel, what is real and what is right and what is true. Institutions (education, the law, economics, psychology, science, religion, and so on) derive their authority from it. They socialize us to ways of understanding and feeling and relating that are, in the current times, conservative and destructive. Living by the knowing paradigm stifles creativity and discovery, closes off other ways of understanding, and constrains our ability to imagine and create a new world.

## 2. Don't confuse power with authority.

As a child of the 60s, I still bristle when I hear the word “power” used negatively by progressives, as a pejorative, something bad or even evil, and a property of those who rule. I'm still a believer in “power to the people.” I don't know exactly when “power” lost its revolutionary meaning, but the talk today is most often about the exercise and abuse of power by those “in power.” What then, could it mean, to “empower people?” But you might be thinking, aren't these merely different uses of the word “power” in different contexts? Yes, they are, but not “merely.” Leaving it at that masks an important distinction that I have found invaluable in my political understanding and work. That distinction is between

power and authority—power being *created from the bottom*, and authority being *imposed from the top*. From this vantage point, being “in power” and “exercising power” are as different as can be. Being “in power” is the commodification of power into authority. Exercising power is engaging, collectively, democratically and creatively, in practical-critical, revolutionary activity—without commodification.

Professionalized and institutionalized psychology, psychotherapy, counseling, social work, health care and education in the US and increasingly, elsewhere, practice and promote all manner of dehumanizing authoritarian commodification—DSM and ICD diagnoses, identity psychology and identity politics, testing and evaluation are just the most obvious. The authority of these institutions is so thorough that people not only commodify themselves in these and other ways—we feel we *need* to. At the same time, I believe that people not only need, but *want*, to exercise power *without commodification*. Psychologically, this desire is in nearly constant struggle with the human need to authoritarily commodify oneself. Given this contemporary human condition, it's a huge creative challenge to create ways to support people to *exercise power without commodification*, that is, free of authority.

### 3. Reinitiate the development of persons and communities.

Mainstream psychology is interested in who we are and, working from that position, it grandiosely and erroneously tells us who we will become. That's because it is thoroughly epistemological and authoritarian, claiming to be a predictive science. Prediction, however, knows nothing of dialectics, of the

practical-critical, of revolutionary activity. A practical-critical, a humanizing psychology, is not predictive but possibility-generating, in that it engages directly the human struggle between power and authority—the power of becoming and the authority of being. For human beings are not just who we are, as persons, communities and nation states. We are also and at the same time, who we are becoming. We all live in a particular culture, society, space and time. But we also all live in history, by which I don't mean the past, but the totality of past, present and future. Most people, though, experience themselves societally, rather than dialectically living in society and history. They don't feel themselves as simultaneously self-and world-changers, as creators of qualitative transformation, as active bringers-into-being new ways of feeling and relating to themselves and others. Reinitiating the development of persons and communities involves building environments in which people can stop being only who they are (societal) and become who they are becoming (historical), in which they can engage in the revolutionary activity of creating new wants and needs and emotions and relationships.

#### 4. Play and Perform.

To create new needs and new wants we have to imagine. More than that, we have to allow our imaginations to impact on our past experiences, and our past experiences to impact on our imaginings—and generate new social activity.

There are at least two things people in every culture, so it seems, do that accomplish this. One is play and the other is performing. Both allow—indeed, depend on—our being both who we are and not who we are at the same time.

When little children roar like lions in the zoo, they are themselves and not themselves. When babbling babies carry on conversations with adults, they are playing with language and performing as speakers before they know how to talk, they are both who they are (babbling babies) and who they're becoming (speakers). When actors perform in a stage play, they are themselves and the character they're playing at the same time. In both cases, babies and actors, experiences and imaginings are creating something new and other.

The four features I've just laid out are of the practical-critical methodology known as social therapeutics and performance activism. It is studied and practiced all over the US and internationally, from the Mexico-US border and the refugee camps in Europe, from the schools in Brazil and Japan to the streets of Kolkata and the villages of Uganda. From my own work and that of others around the world, we've come to think of what we're doing as a new kind of activism. Not a reactive activism, but a reconstruction-deconstruction of the existing circumstances. People coming together, with their different histories and identities, their agreements and disagreements, and creating something "other" with them. We've seen first-hand in thousands of cases that to generate new possibilities, people have to perform, to step out of their comfort zones (as the teenagers put it), to do whatever it is they're trying to do without knowing how. They have to play and perform life. And by engaging in this practical-critical activity of deconstruction through reconstruction, they are reigniting their historical identity as revolutionary changers of the circumstances that determine us, creating the possibility that they will not only meet their current needs and

wants but create new, more humanizing, inclusive, relational and developmental ones. I think you'll agree that all of us need and want that.