TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR A CRITICAL HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY

KURT DANZIGER*
York University
Toronto, Canada

Thanks to the work of pioneers like Josef BROŽEK the historiography of psychology has recently achieved a certain maturity. With the relaxation of the old imperative, that history should justify present disciplinary perspectives, there has been more scope for reflection about the tasks of the historian. Recent discussions about this issue appear to have resulted in fairly broad agreement that a non-justificationist historiography should in some sense be "critical" (WOODWARD, 1980). It is important, however, that this agreement should not lead to a fudging of some very real issues which will not go away even though no one wishes to be identified as an uncritical historian. When it comes to being critical, a declaration of intent is not terribly informative unless one is able to specify the implications of this rather ambiguous concept (see ASH, 1983).

Without attempting the impossible task of a comprehensive analysis of all the possible meanings that might be attached to the notion of a critical historiography, it does seem that we can at least distinguish between two broad senses in which this notion can be used. I will call these the *weak* and the *strong* sense, the former constituting a kind of minimum level of agreement without which it is not meaningful to talk of critical historiography at all, while the latter involves theoretical commitments that go well beyond this minimum level.

Before exploring this distinction it should be noted that it is only applicable at a level beyond the everyday demands of critical scholarship. It is assumed that a certain critical competence in handling the specifics of historical research can now be taken for granted. When one speaks of "critical history" it is not this tactical level one has in mind but rather the overall strategy of historical research. It is of course perfectly possible for sound tactics to be employed in the service of a misguided overall strategy and for a good strategy to be spoilt by poor tactics.

At the minimum, a commitment to a critical historiography involves taking positions with respect to at least three co-ordinates that form the immediate framework of the historian's activity. The first of these is constituted by the traditional historical sources and authorities. It is clear that a critical historiography is incompatible with that unquestioning acceptance of traditional biases which R.M. YOUNG (1966) found to be so pervasive in the field less than two decades ago. While there has been significant progress in this respect (e.g. O'CONNELL, 1979; KELLY, 1981) a critical historiography will, of course, go further and adopt a critical self-reflective attitude also to its own endeavours. Thus, critical history seems to involve the insight that the uncovering of historical relationships is not an unproblematical exercise but depends in crucial ways on the assumptions and commitments of the historian (GEUTER, 1983). Finally, it is hardly possible to speak of critical history unless the critical attitude extends not only to traditional authorities and to the historian's own perspectives but also to the discipline itself. This means that no assumption is made that the historical development of the discipline must necessarily have been a progressive one. In other words, the pursuit of critical history involves a conscious attempt to avoid taking current biases for granted and using them as an ahistorical standard against which the past is to be judged (cf. HARRIS, 1980).

While such perspectives provide the basis for minimal agreement on the goals of a critical historiography, it is possible to go further and to develop a framework which would define critical history in a strong rather than a weak sense. This involves an analysis of the fundamental assumptions with which pre-critical history operates and the explicit development of an alternative conceptual framework that is more suited to the tasks of a critical historiography.

Quite basic to this conceptual analysis is a clear recognition of a fundamental divergence between critical history and naive naturalism. According to the latter, psychology simply finds its objects in the natural world. Its history then becomes the chronicle of how a succession of objects was found by a succession of discoverers. The implication here is that the objects on which psychologists successively turned their gaze, like "sensations", "individual differences" or "behavior", were already existing in the natural world before their psychologist investigators arrived on the scene, rather like sleeping beauties waiting for their prince. By contrast, a critical approach must treat as a problem precisely that which was most readily taken for granted in the traditional view, namely, the historical emergence of the psychological objects themselves. Such things as "intelligence", "attitudes" or "personality" do not occur in nature as raw givens but are the product of human construction. The same is true of such psychological objects

as "experimental subjects" or "clients". If one takes seriously the insight that all psychological objects are man-made objects, then it follows that their history is in the last analysis the history of their construction.

There is a subjectivistic version of naturalism which treats psychological objects as found, not in objective nature, but in the minds of specific historical figures. Rigid distinctions between "context of discovery" and "context of justification" generally provide an excuse for a refusal to subject the former to critical scrutiny. New conceptions then become a kind of biological mutation which lacks a social dimension. As long as conceptions are held to occur *to* individuals they appear to arise without human agency, exactly like other natural events. It is only when ideas are analysed from the beginning as human constructions produced by social agents under specific historical conditions that we have a usable framework for a critical history (see BEM, 1983).

Ths historically constituted objects of psychology, then, have to be analysed in relation to the constructive activity of which they are the product. Such object constituting activities are of different kinds: There are purely theoretical activities which create conceptual objects, there are practical activities which construct technical objects like mental tests and experimental data, and there are institutional activities which define social objects like counselors and clients. These are, of course, analytic distinctions applied to features of action and not mutually exclusive categories of action. What is important from the point of view of critical history is the study of the relationship between such constructive activities and the nature of the objects they produce. Thus, significant changes in the objects must be traced to changes in the activities that produced them. Objects can only succeed one another in a historical sequence through the mediation of the activities of which they are the products.

Because of the traditional way of treating the historical succession of psychological objects as a sequence of natural events, or perhaps as a series of scenes unrolling as in a film, we have too often overlooked all the complex constructive activity that takes place behind the scenes. Not only do we have a paucity of studies that concern themselves with such matters, we even have to develop appropriate conceptual tools for pursuing a historical analysis on these terms. We need to ask a different set of questions in relation to our historical material. For example, what are the proccesses involved in the emergence of new patterns, not only of theoretical activity, but more particularly of practical and institutional activity?. How do relationships between these activities change historically and how does their status as epistemic settings emerge, that is to say, as settings for generating products that counted as psychological knowledge?. How do such settings mediate between a wider social context and the content of psychological knowledge?.

Answers to such questions are unlikely to be forthcoming unless we adopt an approach that, I believe, characterizes critical history in the strong sense. This approach involves an extension of the non-naturalistic approach to the historical evidence itself. What does this mean in practice?. It means a rejection of the notion that the answers to historical problems can be found in specific actions and intentions of concrete historical individuals. Not that such actions and intentions are of no interest to the critical historian -they are, but only as a point of departure, not as the terminal statement in his account. The constructive activities already referred to are not to be identified with the manner of

their representation by individual historical actors. Such an identification would merely re-establish the naturalistic perspective on another level, an outcome which can only be avoided by penetrating below the self-representation of individual historical actors. These self-representations are the product of the *reflection* of actors on their own actions (GIDDENS, 1979), and are not to be confused with the unreflected reality of their object-constituting activity.

The critical historian has a number of means at his disposal for penetrating below the level of the self-representation of historical individuals. He can examine evidence of the actual practical activity engaged in by the relevant historical actors without being blinded by the reflected representation of that activity by the actors themselves. For example, experimental psychologists have often given accounts of what they considered themselves to be doing, but these accounts omit crucial features of their activity. Yet, because of the public aspect of this activity, historical records are available, in the form of published experimental reports, which can be examined for evidence of the unreflected features of experimental activity. Thus, the self-representation of experimenters generally ignores the basic fact that psychological experiments involve a social system which is subject to historical change just like any other social system and which leaves evidence of its change in published documents (DANZIGER, 1981). In his analysis of object-constituting activities the critical historian must never substitute the self-representations of the actors for their unreflected practice. The latter commonly reveals itself in the incidental, the taken-for-granted, the unattended features of documents whose overt message may be significant less for the analysis of practice than for the analysis of ideology.

The critical historian's commitment to a type of analysis that penetrates below the level of self-representation of individual historical actors has particularly important implications for the analysis of the *structure* of knowledge generating activities. Such activities commonly occur in a problem-solving context. Psychological objects are constructed in the course of activities undertaken with certain goals in mind. Historical changes in these activities are generally associated with changes in their goals. This is true of constructive intellectual activities as much as of more practical, technical, activities. Hence it is certainly true that an understanding of such activities requires an understanding of their purposive structure. It makes good sense, when examining object-generating activities, to look for the problem situations that generated these activities themselves.

But such an inquiry cannot stop at the representation of problem situations by individual historical actors. For one thing, the conventions of exposition at a particular time may prompt such an actor to present his practice or his ideas in a finished, objectified form which hides the problems that gave rise to them in the first place. Or he may consider it inappropriate or impolitic to say much about the problematic ground from which his constructive activity springs. Most important of all, his own sense of this ground is often intuitive rather than fully articulate, and his ability to give an account of the intentional structure of his activity is limited by the fact that much of it is simply taken for granted and never explicitly represented to himself or others.

It is therefore necessary to make a distinction between the *problems* that a historical actor sets himself and the *problematic* within which he operates. The problems

to which he consciously applies himself are apt to be of a specific, often technical, kind. But they only arise within a much broader framework that sets the limits of possible problems and provides the generic types of which specific problems are exemplars. A problematic defines the schemata, the images, the metaphors in terms of which specific problems are formulated and thus limits the range of possible questions that can be asked within its domain. As it is these questions which generate the constructive activities that produce the psychological objects occurring in history, the analysis of the constitution of such objects should be pursued as far as the problematic within which they arise. Critical historical analysis cannot stop when it uncovers the representation of specific problems by individual historical actors but must use such representations as clues to the underlying problematic.

The recognition that science is based neither on observations nor on theories but on problems is of course part of the genuinely critical side of the philosophy of Karl POPPER. However, POPPER's (1972) distinction between "problems" and "problem situations", while useful up to a point, defines the latter in a very limited, rationalistic, manner. The term "problematic" seems more appropriate for the broader interpretation of problem situations that the critical historian must work with.

The concept of the problematic also introduces a further perspective that is inseparable from critical history in the strong sense. While it is possible for specific problems to be formulated by individual historical actors, a problematic is never the property of a single individual but only arises in the course of social interaction. It involves the forms in which individuals communicate about shared problems. Thus, a problematic is an aspect of social life, just like other symbolic forms. This has some rather far reaching consequences. One of these derives from the fact that a problematic functions, not as an inert form, but as a generating process. It shapes specific problems and object-constituting activities. Thus, in the last analysis, it is not individual actors who function as historical subjects but rather the groups who share a common problematic.

The recognition that psychological objects are not natural objects but are the product of human construction must lead to questions about the nature of the agency involved in this activity. However, we have seen that a consistently critical approach cannot equate the self-representations of individuals with such an agency. The unreflected activity of individuals leads us closer to the source, but such activity only has historical significance because it is embedded in a network of activities that involve many individual actors in a patterned relationship to each other. In other words, critical history in the strong sense has to work with some conception of "collective subjects". This is not to say that it should ignore individual subjects, but rather that it must seek to penetrate beyond this level to the general formation which the individual instantiates.

Different conceptions of such general formations have been proposed from time to time. They range from dehumanized "epistemes" to social classes and intellectual communities. A commitment to critical history does not by itself enable one to choose among such alternatives. It does however place such a choice on the agenda. Critical history in the strong sense certainly involves the recognition that the intentional constructive activity of individuals involves a problem structure that exists at a trans-

individual level and that must be analysed at this level. There remains, however, a considerable degree of latitude about how this analysis is pursued.

Nevertheless, certain broad features of such an analysis are entailed by the version of critical history presented thus far. In particular, it should be noted that the trans-individual level is regarded as a source of agency and not merely as a source of influence. That is why the term "collective subject" represents this position more accurately than the term "context". Critical history in the strong sense involves more than a determination to study the actions and thoughts of historical individuals in their social context. The model of the individual actor subject to social "influences" is still a naturalistic model based on the prototype of the biological organism reacting to an environment that is external to it. While the human relationship to certain aspects of the social context can at times take this form, it is distinctly uncritical to accept, without further reflection, that this form is the paradigm case in terms of which all historical action is to be understood and analysed (see MORAWSKI, 1981). In fact, the very term "environment" is often quite inappropriate when paired with the adjective "social". It suggests the wrong model when one is dealing with the individual's *participation* in a social subject that is as much within him as outside him. (In other words, the physical metaphor of a body with an inside and outside becomes inappropriate here).

The individual's participation in the collective subject can take varied forms, such as active participation in an intellectual tradition or a social grouping. But from the point of view of critical history one form of this participation is crucial. It will be recalled that the focus on object-constituting activities and the recognition of the need to go beyond the self-representation of individual actors led to the concept of the problematic, the shape given to specific problem solving activities by a collective subject. Thus, the social link which is important here involves a dynamic aspect concerned with pressures to move from one state of affairs to another. The problematic which provides the ground of the individual's activity is an open-ended structure that defines a problem area and prescribes the general nature of acceptable solutions. It is not simply a set of cognitive categories but always an expression of social *interests*. The existence of a problem situation implies an interest in some kind of solution. Only insofar as it involves interests in a solution can a problematic function as the source of new intellectual or technical products. But such interests always take a specific form which determines what kinds of objects are likely to count as candidates for solving the problem

Critical history in the strong sense therefore involves a rejection of the idea of "pure cognition" and a recognition of the fundamental role played by "knowledge-constituting interests". Although the modern revival and restatement of this concept is due to HABERMAS (1971), the practicing historian has to work with knowledge-constituting interests at a far more concrete level than the philosopher. At the concrete historical level these interests take the form of social interests, that is to say, they are the expression, not merely of the most general conditions of human activity, but of more specific conditions characterizing various situations in which knowledge producing subjects operate. In the relatively recent historical periods that are likely to be of most relevance to the historian of psychology the significant conditions to which social interests refer will involve the social position of the producers of psychological knowledge in the social

structure as a whole. This entails such matters as the relation of these producers to actual or potential competitors, to consumers of their products and to those who control the material resources on which their work depends.

However, it would be short sighted to limit the importance of social interests to this level. The activities which constitute psychological objects also have a socially *reproductive* aspect. Such activities depend upon the products of the activities of past generations which are largely taken for granted. At any point in time new products appear within an already existing framework. This framework, theoretical, practical and institutional, is in fact reproduced in the course of constituting a new range of objects, although at times the framework may change too. This reproduction is seldom attended to by the historical actors but for the historian it is an important aspect of their activity. If we accept the fundamental role played by interests in all knowledge generating activity, we cannot make an exception for the socially reproductive aspects of such activity. In other words, it has to be recognized that the reproduction of specific kinds of concepts and practices involves social interests, although the historical actors may have lacked insight into this aspect of their activity. The reproduction of a social and intellectual tradition -inseparable from the construction of psychological objects- naturally involves interests of much broader significance than the particular interests which characterize the specific situation of the producers of psychological objects. These broader interests pertain to the perpetuation of the general social formations in which the activities leading to the constitution of psychological objects are embedded. Critical history cannot ignore this ideological component.

One further implication of this analysis has relevance for the distinction between critical history in the weak and in the strong sense. This pertains to the relationship between the intellectual and the social aspects of the object-constituting activities that the historian is interested in. Critical analysis in the weak sense is generally based on a dualistic separation of these aspects into two entirely distinct orders, so that the question becomes one of social "influences" on intellectual products or of the distribution of influence among "external" and "internal" factors. It will be clear from what has already been said that this essentially physicalistic spatial analogy of outside and inside belongs to the language of naturalism and is inappropriate in a critical context. The subject matter of a critical history does not consist of inert bodies but of human activities in which the social and the intellectual aspects are inseparable. The activities which constitute psychological objects are as much social as they are intellectual activities. In the very act of producing a certain cognitive content they are reproducing particular social formations and advancing the interests of definite groups.

It should be added that the position taken here does not imply a kind of sociological reductionism. To say that cognitive products are the results of activities that are socially embedded does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the objective reference of these products is *nothing but* more or less disguised social imagery. The existence of such a reference does not exclude other references that the product may have.

The concepts that critical history has to use when it attempts to give a meta-historical account of its subject matter are concepts that express the unity of the social and the intellectual aspects. The concept of the problematic, for example, belongs to this

category. While a specific problem generated within a general problematic may have a purely technical significance, the problematic itself is always at one and the same time an intellectual and a social problematic. Whatever the situation may be in the natural sciences, for psychology this double aspect of its fundamental questions is inescapable. In fact, the division between what constitutes a purely psychological question and what a socio-political one is itself historically variable, and it does not behove the historian to legislate in this matter. At a very fundamental level the definition of psychologically relevant problem types has a double aspect. The fact that the psychological and the social aspect are not independent of one another, does not mean that the one is the *cause* of the other. Rather, in addressing a particular problematic, historical subjects simultaneously address psychological and social issues. It is only when the status of a question changes, so that it loses its broader significance and becomes of purely technical interest, that this double aspect fades. The fate of the once powerful mind-body problematic in the twentieth century would be a case in point.

Another example of a concept that expresses the unity of social and intellectual aspects is the concept of "intellectual interests" (DANZIGER, 1979). These interests involve the definition of scientific goals which simultaneously express certain social interests. Cognitive products are determined, among other things, by the goals which their producers set themselves. But these goals, or intellectual interests, are also an expression of the interests which are entailed by the social situation faced by the practitioners. They are goals that tend to legitimate certain kinds of activity vis-à-vis those who control the resources that these activities require. The circle is completed when the activities and products conceived under this tutelage serve to reproduce the forms of social control that served as their standard in the first place. But for critical history the challenge lies in the development of modes of analysis which do not perpetuate the artificial separation of intellectual "content" and social "conditions" but which seek to do justice to the interlacing of social and intellectual aspects in real world human activity.

The Kuhnian notion of scientific paradigms was valuable insofar as it recognized this challenge and attempted to come to grips with it. But the concept of scientific paradigm is subject to a fatal limitation in the context of the history of psychology. This limitation arises out of the essential role assigned to successful problem *solutions* (KUHN, 1970, p. 187). In psychology this does not provide a convincing principle of unity either socially or cognitively. Common definitions of goals and problem structures have played a demonstrably greater historical role than any faith in the efficacy of certain solutions. The important scientific communities have been those united by shared intellectual interests and a common definition of the nature of the relevant problems, even though there might have been considerable divergence in respect to preferred solutions.

Such a characterization also seems to apply to the critical history of psychology, and in this case we must regard it as the "normal" state of field. For it would surely be self-contradictory to equate "critical" history with a fixed model of the historical processes that are under scrutiny. Critical history in the strong sense cannot commit itself to a kind of theoretical closure that would involve the substitution of the critical by a dogmatic attitude. Rather, the definition of critical history must be undertaken in terms of the

definition of its tasks and challenges. Needless to say, the principles discussed in the present paper are no exception. They are intended to define the nature of certain tasks, not to present their definitive solution.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ASH, M.G.: "The self-presentation of a discipline: History of psychology in the United States between pedagogy and scholarship". In L. GRAHAM, W. LEPENIES, and P. WEINGART (Eds.): *Functions and Uses of Disciplinary Histories* (Sociology of the Sciences, Vol. 7). Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983, 143-189.

BEM, S.: "Context of discovery and contextual history of psychology". In S. BEM, H. RAPPARD and W. VAN HOORN (Eds.): *Proceedings of the first European meeting of Cheiron.* Leiden: Psych. Inst. v.d. Ryksuniversiteit Leiden, 1983, 207-221.

DANZIGER, K.: "The social origins of modern psychology". In A.R. BUSS (Ed.): *Psychology in Social Context.* New York: Irvington, 1979.

DANZIGER, K.: *The historical construction of social roles in the psychological experiment.* Invited address, Division 26, American Psychological Association Annual Convention, Los Angeles, 1981.

GEUTER, U.: "The uses of history for the shaping of a field: Observations on German psychology". In L. GRAHAM, W. LEPENIES, and P. WEINGART (Eds.): *Functions and Uses of Disciplinary Histories.* (Sociology of the Sciences, vol. 7). Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983, 191-228.

GIDDENS, A.: *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis.* London: Macmillan, 1979.

HABERMAS, J.: *Knowledge and Human Interests.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1971 (Orig. 1968).

HARRIS, B.: "Ceremonial versus critical history of psychology". *American Psychologist,* 1980, *35*, 218-219.

KELLY, B.N.: "Inventing psychology's past: E.G. Boring's historiography in relation to the psychology of his time". *J. Mind and Behavior,* 1981, *2*, 229-241B.

KUHN, T.: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Second edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

MORAWSKI, J.: "The limits of a "contextualist" and "objectivist" historiography of psychology". Presented at Symposium on Critical History, 13th annual meeting of Cheiron, 1981.

O'DONNELL, J.M.: "The crisis of experimentalism in the 1920's: E.G. Boring and his uses of history". *American Psychologist,* 1979, *34*, 289-295.

PETERSON, G.L.. "Historical self-understanding in the social sciences: The use of Thomas Kuhn in Psychology". *J. Theory Soc. Behaviour,* 1981, *11*, 1-30.

POPPER, K.R.: *Objective Knowledge.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.

WOODWARD, W.R.: "Toward a critical historiography of psychology". In J. BROŽEK and L. PONGRATZ (Eds.): *Historiography of Modern Psychology.* Toronto: C.J. Hogrefe, 1980.

YOUNG, R.M.: "Scholarship and the history of the behavioural sciences". *History of Science,* 1966, *5*, 1-51.