

THE MINIMAL MEANINGFUL CONTEXT(1)

WILLEM VAN HOORN
The University of Amsterdam

1.- CONTEXTUALISM IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS: 1971-1983

In a number of position papers and other publications, Thom VERHAVE (CUNY) and I have tried to elucidate the contextualism approach towards the history and theory of psychology (e.g. VAN HOORN, 1972, 1981 and 1983, VAN HOORN & VERHAVE, 1977 and 1980; VERHAVE and VAN HOORN, 1977 and 1984, in press). In "The methodologist in the bathtub" (1971), the differences between a knowledge of control and emancipatory psychological knowledge (SCHELER, HABERMAS) were discussed (2)). A plea was made for a pluriform methodology in psychology. "One may expect that the removal of the spell of empirical-analytic methodology, will enable sociology and psychology to more adequately contribute to the emancipation of society than is the case nowadays".

In *As Images Unwind* (1972), contextualism was defined as "the parts which immediately precede or follow any particular passage or text and determine its meaning". However, there was more to say. In a broader sense "contextualism becomes part of the theory of *Weltanschauung*", as this was put forward by Wilhelm von HUMBOLDT (3)

"Socio-economic factors and the roots of American psychology" (1977) forms the dividing-line between our internalistic and our externalistic conception of 'contextualism' (4). In that paper VERHAVE and I have pointed to the possible links between societal developments -the industrial revolution, World War I, the anti-immigration laws lobby- and the development of theoretical and applied psychology in America. This programmatic essay clearly implied a sociology of knowledge viewpoint, which in our case was inspired by an exchange of ideas with MARX, SCHELER, WEBER and MANNHEIM. "The influence of industrial mechanization upon the praxis of psychology, most certainly has to be taken into account. The mental test movement, Social Darwinism, the turn towards scientific management and the outburst of Taylorism, will be mainly regarded as developments in the praxis of psychology in a money-ridden, pragmatically-oriented, industrializing society. As we have set forth in our other paper (VERHAVE & VAN HOORN, 1977), alienation, anomie, dissociation, neurosis and repression are the concomitants of urbanization, secularization, industrialization, stratification, and professionalization. It is a thesis well-worth further. In "The temporalization of ego and society" (1977), the phenomenon of temporalization (LOVEJOY, 1936) was related to a further elaboration of the relationship between psychology's societal development and social change (5). Among other things, "temporalization" refers to the subjection to uniform and linear time of mental and societal processes. "The development of the social sciences since the days of VICO can be viewed as a process of temporalization that runs parallel with the temporalization of the Great Chain of Being".

In "Wundt's changing conceptions of a general and theoretical psychology" (in BRINGMANN & TWENEY, 1980), we have extensively discussed the reasons why a "Wundtian" general and theoretical psychology was thwarted by the emergence and spread of the many societal psychologies of post World War II.

In "Wundtian psychology and the psychologies in post-industrial societies" (1982), a distinction is drawn between theoretical, "applied" and practical psychology. The idea is put forward that in psychology, almost invariably, practices - education, changes in the labor situation, new concerns for mental health - come first, next is "the application", to be followed by theory construction. Since the days of the scientific - technical revolution, we are dealing with an inverse relationship between *theoria* and *praxis*. It is the dynamics of the socio-technic-industrial process that guide and direct the production of knowledge, theoretical and practical.

This is one of the reasons why we have to distinguish between "an emancipation oriented psychology" and "an establishment-oriented psychology". In our overall view, a principal goal of the social sciences should be to contribute to the emancipation of individuals and social groups. In the framework of an emancipatory psychology, much effort should be put into the development of a preventive psychology, "a psychology explicitly dealing with the penetration of mechanization, automation and technology into the realms of the mind and the mental. Instead of giving in to the endless pleas for "more" psychology, which, after all, cannot do much else than whitewash the mental evils of capitalist societies (including state capitalism), a wiser social policy would be to support the construction of a preventive psychology".

2.- TRANSFORMATIONAL CONTEXTUALISM (6)

Both Thom VERHAVE and I started to work in the historiography of psychology as historians of ideas. We shared a strong interest in the history of philosophy, which characterizes most of our earlier publications. To me it seems that this first period of my scholarly development culminated in the guest-lectures which I gave at BROZEK's N.S.F. Summer Institute which was held in June and July 1971, at Lehigh University. There, in a week's time, I presented in rough outline the contents of my academic thesis on "Ancient and Modern Theories of Visual Perception", which was published as a book entitled *As Images Unwind* (1972). The *Images* closes off a markedly philosophically oriented period of dealings with the history of science. ARISTOTLE, Leonardo DA VINCI, DESCARTES, NEWTON, GOETHE and HELMHOLTZ figure prominently in papers from that time. A careful distinction was made between the history of scientific psychology (\pm 1875-1970), historical psychology and problem-oriented history (vide PONGRATZ, 1967). VAN DEN BERG (1962) and FOUCAULT (1966) must have had something to do with this distinction.

The idea is the following: each cultural period in social history is limited by its own horizon of knowledge (*Erkenntnishorizont*, GADAMER, 1962). The horizon of knowledge sets the limits to all possible universes of discourse in a particular period. Scientific concepts, methodologies and scientific techniques are encompassed by the boundaries of the prevailing horizon of knowledge. The horizons themselves succeed each other in a discontinuous way. Thus conceived, epistemology, social history and historical psychology are closely intertwined. DESCARTES' mechanistic approach to the problems of vision in the *Dioptrics*, e.g., can best be understood as a theoretical offshoot of the Baroque, i.e. as a fascination with movement and mechanical extravaganzas.

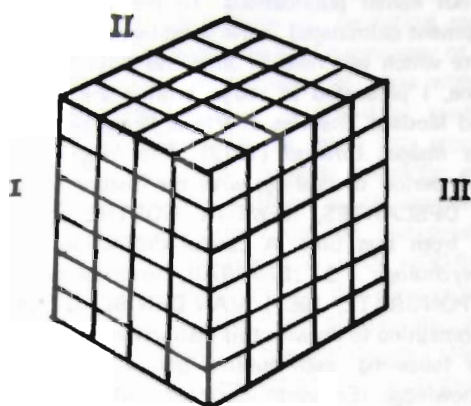
The present-day encapsulation of cultural life by computer science, could be viewed as the morbid triumph of linear time, regulating business affairs and missiles alike. So much for "the horizon of knowledge".

In the second period of my scholarly activities the emphasis shifted away from the history of ideas toward social and economic history. As a natural result, the period of research interest moved to the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The study of the fields of psychological practice now comes to the fore (1973-1979).

The third period sets in by putting forward the basic tenets of what is now called transformational contextualism (VAN HOORN, 1981, 1983a and 1983b). Since I have given a rather extensive overview of what TC aspires to in the publications just mentioned, it may suffice here to shortly recapitulate what VERHAVE and I hope to achieve.

Transformational contextualism may be conceived of as a theory of the emergence and spread of psychology as a science, a profession and an "application", i.e. as a social technology which is used to maintain order in industrialized societies. The tripartite distinction is not without significance, because ninety percent of all psychologists earn their living outside academia (see Fig. 1).

FIG. 1: A THREE-DIMENSIONAL REPRESENTATION OF
TRANSFORMATIONAL CONTEXTUALISM



- I: Specific societal conflicts.
- II: Theory construction in psychology.
- III: Action: the fields of psychological practice.

The distinction between 'theoretical' and 'applied' psychology was already referred to earlier in this paper. In our opinion it is rather far-fetched to think that academic psychologists *first* develop theories and subsequently apply them in the fields of psychological practice. The reverse seems to be true. First, all kinds of matters change place in social life and practical psychology - racial issues, changes in interpersonal relations, emancipation movements - before so-called applied psychology and theoretical psychology get involved. In our view it is societal conflicts which form the source of psychological knowledge. For this reason it would make sense to carefully delimit a *minimal meaningful context*, as the smallest historiographical unit of analysis. I shall come back to this idea in the third section of my paper.

From our vantage point then, we would like to analyze the development of post World War II psychology (science, profession and application) as an intertwined transformation of changing societal conflicts, theory construction and the development of the fields of psychological practice (medical, educational, industrial and testing psychology). Since in an industrialized society, science and technology are the productive forces *par excellence*, the course of psychology, like the course of all other sciences, is steered by the development of industry and production (of goods and materials, of services and of information). We owe this insight to MARX and we should be grateful for it (*Grundrisse*, 1857).

In transformational contextualism we lay emphasis upon two points:

a.- The empirical search for the *mediating links* between societal conflicts, psychological theory construction and the actions of the psychologists. One example should suffice here. The bourgeois attitude towards sexuality -double moral standard, phallic behavioral patterns, woman as the second sex- constitutes a series of societal conflicts which are reflected in the micro-form of family relations. At the level of theory construction, these conflicts are represented as 'the greater repression of sexuality in women', 'penis-envy' and 'the animality of many women', (FREUD in FISCHER, VAN HOORN & JANSZ, 1983).

At the level of the actions of the psychotherapist, we can see the maintaining of the double moral standard, the cherishing of male dominance patterns and the attempt to reconcile women to their natural predicament.

b.- Temporalization and transformation of the phenomena under study. In transformational contextualism aspects of uniform and linear time are brought to bear upon the transformations taking place, simultaneously, earlier (*Voreilung*), or later (*Nacheilung*) in one of the three domains of our model. In general, we assume that mental as well as social processes have become subjected to the iron grip of uniform, industrial time, which, in the course of this century, has assumed mythic metamorphoses in the Western World (see *Tijdsverschillen* and 'The dragon of industrial time', 1983c and 1983d). Thus, temporalization refers to linear time, as it is measured by modern clockwork and technology and as it is *experienced* by human beings from the beginning of the nineteenth century on (history of mentality). We also assume that social history and the fields of psychological practice form the *fons et origo* of psychological knowledge. There is nothing in theoretical psychology that was not first in society. We thus tenaciously adhere to a sociology of knowledge viewpoint, until proven wrong.

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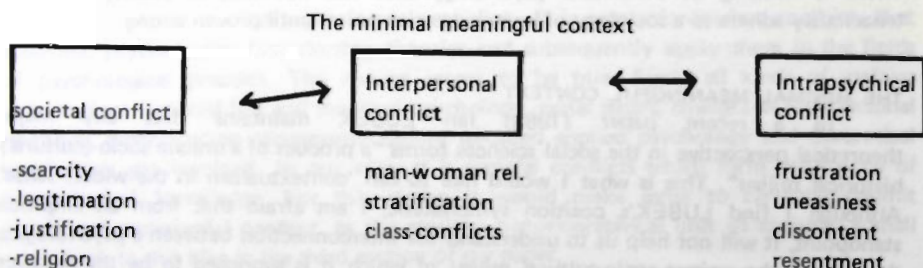
In a recent paper (1983) Ian LUBEK maintains that any major theoretical perspective in the social sciences forms "a product of a unique socio-(cultural)-historical milieu". This is what I would like to call 'contextualism in the widest sense'. Although I find LUBEK's position sympathetic, I am afraid that from an empirical standpoint, it will not help us to understand the interconnection between a psychological theory and the *unique* socio-cultural milieu of which it is supposed to be the *product*. Yet, this is what VERHAVE and I -using the perspectives of transformational contextualism have been saying all along. Thus the reader is entitled to ask for our

contribution to a refinement of historiography in order to escape the dangers of meaningless generalization.

At this point, introducing the idea of a minimal meaningful context is appropriate. Earlier I have indicated that it is *societal conflicts* which form the basic source of inspiration for the production of psychological knowledge. Let us pursue this line of thought.

Since all societies have to struggle with the basic problems of scarcity of materials, products, services and information, the existing order of society as it is expressed in vested interests, lobbies and institutions, has to be justified and legitimized through politics, religion, science, and technology. Since science and technology are fully embedded in modern industrial society, their applications and results can either increase or decrease societal conflicts. It is our conviction that there is a growing awareness of the fact that science and technology -so far- have mainly contributed to an increase of societal conflicts and social differences. The dream of reason and technology has borne societal monsters. The post-Hiroshima era should be *en garde* against the evils of hard and soft technology. The practitioners of psychology have, for the most part, closed their eyes for the evils just mentioned. Free as the gods they have moved in the space of social relations (6). Yet it could be shown that the actions of the psychologists have also contributed to the increase of societal conflicts in the domains of their involvement. The societal psychologies, such as educational, differential, industrial, clinical, military, forensic, advertising and abnormal psychology, each by themselves and all taken together, have mainly contributed to an increase of societal conflicts. The gifted and the less gifted, the able and the less able, the normal and the not so normal, the criminal in prison and the criminal at large, the young and the beautiful and the less beautiful people of our time, have been driven apart partially as a result of the actions of the psychologists.

In view of the aforesaid, I propose to take societal conflicts as the minimal meaningful context of any aspect of a psychological theory under analysis. By so doing we can work our way up, starting from our premisses. From the analysis and meaning of societal conflicts (MARX, the Frankfurt School, etc.), we move to interpersonal conflicts and their representations in behavior and mentality (SULLIVAN, MEAD, etc.).* Intrapsychical conflicts, finally, are viewed as a reflection of and a reaction to (intentionality) interpersonal and societal conflicts (7). In a schema:



* I would like to thank Ingeborg Teunisse for sharing stimulating thoughts on this subject.

We have assumed that as part of a more general process, the relationship between theoretical and applied psychology has become inversed in the course of this century. Around the turn of the century, psychology has become a technical body of knowledge and a social technology. For this reason the idyll of academic psychology was rapidly transformed into an urban societal drama. In VERHAVE's and my view this societalization (German: *Vergesellschaftung*, Dutch: *vermaatschappelijking*) of scientific psychology, more than any other factor, has determined its course and direction in the twentieth century. To avoid a possible misunderstanding: We do not mean to say that the development of twentieth century 'capitalism' has determined the course of our science. What we would like to bring out is that the *nature* of scientific psychological knowledge has discontinuously changed during the scientific-technical revolution. It is precisely this factor which has to be elucidated to clarify the historiographical significance of transformational contextualism. This is one of the reasons why we have chosen societal conflicts as the minimal meaningful context to study and understand theories in psychology (8).

SUMMARY

This paper discusses the *contextualist* approach to the development of psychology as an 'application', a science and a profession. The idea is put forth that in psychology changing practices in social life usually precede its applications and subsequent theory construction. During and after World War I, and especially after World War II, psychology has become a technical body of knowledge and a social technology. In the hands of a new academically trained elite, this has become an instrument to maintain and renew social order in industrializing societies. This observation provides a reason for distinguishing between an establishment-oriented psychology, an emancipatory, and a preventive psychology.

In our view it is societal conflicts which form the source of theoretical and practical psychological knowledge. Psychology in use either increases or decreases societal conflicts (the ratio seems to be 80/20 per cent). In transformational contextualism emphasis is laid upon the empirical search for the mediating links between societal conflicts, psychological theory construction and the activities of professional psychologists. For this reason the concept of a *minimal meaningful context* is introduced in the present paper. From now on, this idea should help us to better understand the interconnection between a psychological theory and the *unique* societal constellation of which it is supposed to be the product.

Future empirical research will have to unearth the many specific minimal contexts from which psychological theories bloom like desert flowers in the spring.

NOTES

- (1) I am grateful to Hella van der Steen for improving the English of this paper.
- (2) Here I am referring to SCHELER's famous distinction between *Herrschaftswissen* and *Bildungswissen*; see 'Die Soziologie des Wissens' in SCHELER's *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8, Bern, 1960. "Der soziologische Character alles Wissens, aller Denk-, Anschauungs-, Erkenntnisformen ist unbezweifelbar" (p. 58). SCHELER had a keen eye for the discontinuous development of science: "...ein durchaus plötzlicher, stossweise und in gewaltigen Sprüngen auftretender Prozess" (p. 98). It would be most interesting to investigate how much Jürgen Habermas has been influenced by SCHELER. Think, e.g. of HABERMAS' notion of 'Erkenntnisinteresse'. According to him, empirical-analytic sciences are guided by a technical and critical sciences are guided by an emancipatory interest. See HABERMAS' *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, Frankfurt, 1968 here SCHELER is not mentioned.
- (3) Humboldt's *Weltanschauungslehre* became best known through Dilthey; see Vols II and III of his *Gesammelte Schriften*. For the relation between Humboldt and Dilthey, see Ilse Bulhof's *Wilhelm Dilthey*, The Hague, 1980, pp. 15, 27 and 199 note 43 and Gadamer, 1965².
- (4) It is the explicit aim of *transformational* contextualism to do away with the distinction between an internalistic and an externalistic approach towards science's progression. Still, we hold to the idea that there is nothing in science which was not first in society.
- (5) Without doubt, the concept of temporalization has become a key idea in transformational contextualism. Not only the individual, but also society, is in constant flux. This fact has far-reaching consequences for theory construction in psychology. Transformational contextualism tries to systematically take into account the circumstances under which a theory emerged and the course of its further development in and through time. For this reason the concept of transformation is introduced to indicate that some elements of a theory remain constant over a certain period of time, while others are transformed. In this connection the story of JASON, the argonauts and the continuous repair of their boat during their travel, comes to mind. When they finally reached their destiny, all the vessel's original elements had been replaced. Yet for them it was still 'their' boat.
- (6) Thom VERHAVE and I have considered to call our model 'genetic' or 'evolutionary' contextualism. Since there are two basic dynamic forms for evolving systems viz. *transformational* development and *variational* evolution, the choice was not difficult. Transformational development *in humans*, refers to *short term* (one or two decades) social and individual change. In human beings, variational evolution usually takes tens of thousands of years. Physical systems and social institutions evolve transformationally, because every individual element or person undergoes a *similar* transformation in linear time. Variational evolution, which is unique to the *organic* world, "occurs by the change of frequency of different variants, rather than by a set of developmental transformations of every individual" (R.C. Lewontin in the *New York Review of Books*, June 16, 1983, p. 23). Since transformational contextualism is only a model for the development of 20th C. psychology, we may take it for granted that evolutionary processes (selection/adaptation, s.s.) have not played any role in the changes which have taken place in theoretical, 'applied' and practical psychology.
- (7) As Kenneth GERGEN (1982, p. 190) has pointed out esteemed psychologists of high visibility and lengthy research experience have recently expressed their doubts about the promises of *traditional* psychology. Among others, GERGEN refers to publications by ARGYRIS, BRONFENBRENNER, BRUNER, CRONBACH, GRAUMANN, HOLZKAMP, MEEHL, SARASON and SARBIN. As I wrote elsewhere (1983), GERGEN himself, Russell JACOBY, James HILLMAN and Gordon WESTLAND could be added to this list.
- (8) In a collection of historiographical definitions assembled by Jill MORAWSKI, contextualism was described as "explanation of past events in science through identifying the complex 'context' of multiple social and intellectual factors in which a particular event was situated". Since it is practically impossible to *empirically* investigate the complexity of multiple social and intellectual factors ('context'), the idea of a 'minimal meaningful context' refers to the empirical investigation of the *specific* context in which a psychological theory emerged and underwent transformations in time.

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