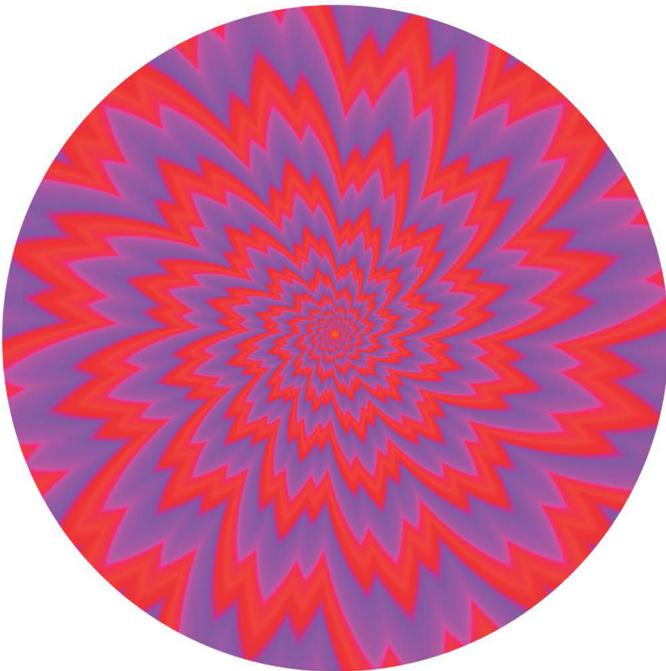


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*A Critical
Introduction to*

PSYCHOLOGY



ROBERT K. BESHARA
EDITOR

NOVA

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A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOLOGY

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of two pioneers
in critical psychology:
Tod S. Sloan (1952-2018) and Fernando González Rey (1949-2019)*

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PREFACE

A Critical Introduction to Psychology is the first scholarly book, in which fifteen critical psychologists analyze chapters from popular Introduction to Psychology textbooks. In their critiques of mainstream (Euro-American) psychology, the authors of this edited volume also envision a pluriversal, transdisciplinary psychology, which is inclusive of critical voices from all over the world.

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Chapter 2

**THE RESCUE OF SUBJECTIVITY FROM
A CULTURAL-HISTORICAL STANDPOINT**

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter is oriented toward discussing why the concepts of subjectivity and subject have remained restricted to an individualistic and rationalistic tradition during the modern period, being absolutely rejected by different philosophies during the 19th and 20th centuries, including that philosophy that has strongly influenced the critical movements in the social sciences and psychology since the second half of the 20th century. Together with this, the chapter advances a new proposal of subjectivity from a cultural-historical standpoint capable of integrating social and individual processes into a new qualitative representation that permits an understanding of individuals, groups, institutions and human sociality in

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their reciprocal subjective configuration. These instances are qualitatively configured within this new proposal of subjectivity, the emergence of which transcends external relations of determinism between them. All of these human instances are sources of unpredictable behaviors and phenomena that simultaneously affect the others at the subjective level.

The above-declared purposes can only be achieved through a cultural-historical approach to the topic of subjectivity. However, due to a set of different facts, many of them examined in previous works (González Rey, 2009, 2014a, 2016, 2017), the cultural-historical approach in psychology, which had its genesis in Soviet psychology, even creating important premises for advancing the topic of subjectivity on a new basis, only began to draw attention to this topic in the 1970s.

In psychology and the social sciences, the topic of subjectivity has been referred to, above all, as a specific process and a phenomenon without a more general theory being advanced about it (Teo, 2017). In the meantime, subjectivity was excluded from philosophy throughout the 20th century in favor of language, structures, action, and discourse, which were the main theoretical bases on which the philosophies of that century were advanced. Finally, the chapter defends the idea of the relevance of a theory of subjectivity for advancing new critical options in psychology and the social sciences in general.

SOME ANTECEDENTS OF THE REJECTION OF SUBJECTIVITY IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

Intellectual movements are always historical and, as such, they maintain subjective processes related to their historical periods, which makes science a human matter while, at the same, making the relative character of science unavoidable. Thus, the theoretical devices according to which the main expressions of human thought advance in each historical period are, in fact, the resources through which the different institutional social movements, including science, have advanced throughout history. In

this chapter, a brief picture will be drawn of some of the main facts that, in philosophy, science and, even psychology, have conspired since the beginning of Western modernity to treat subjectivity as separate from the different arenas of human knowledge.

Firstly, I will refer to the way in which the Cartesian tradition treated the topic of consciousness, mainly as the rationalistic intrinsic capacity of human beings to produce a knowledge, whose the divine origin of which represented a link between humans, God and nature. That philosophy represented the beginning of a philosophy of consciousness that mistakenly marked most references to subjectivity in both philosophy and the social sciences. In turn, Kant overcame the link between reason, God, sociality and nature. In any case, despite transcending the omnipotent place given to reason by Descartes, Kant continued to focus on reason as the main resource for his representation of human beings as epistemological agents. Kant, unlike Descartes, defined the incapacity of human beings to know reality as it is; however, he located human capacity to find a moral path within the capacity to reason. That rationalistic and individualistic orientation to understand a universal human essence, in fact, led to the separation of human reason from human sociality, historicity, and emotionality.

The Kantian subject was, above all, a moral and an epistemological agent. Paradoxically, that orientation toward an individualistic, solipsist, and rationalistic understanding of the human being that integrates the modern philosophy of consciousness and of the subject, for some unexplained reason, gradually came to be represented in both philosophy and common sense as subjectivity.

The French Enlightenment, mainly through Rousseau, attributed responsibility for the nature of individuals to government. However, Rousseau also agreed with the existence of a human essence that preceded, and was independent of, society (Hawthorn, 1987). So, the goal of government should be to guarantee a social contract, oriented toward achieving a balance between individual expression and its rejection on behalf of a social order. That conflict continued the same rationalism that dominated Cartesian philosophy and the classic German philosophy

inaugurated by Kant. The theoretical model of human beings that was hegemonic in European philosophy in the 17th and 18th centuries was rationalistic and universal, something that has strongly influenced so-called modern psychology from its beginning in the 19th century up to the present day. The narrow comprehension of sociality in the Enlightenment led to the maintenance of individuals and society as two systems that were external to each other. This was a result of the absence of theoretical resources to advance alternatives to that dichotomy, which remained in psychology until the 20th century, despite the important step forward in transcending it put forward by Marx in the 19th century.

A second remarkable fact associated with keeping subjectivity outside of the main traditions of modern thought was the development of science, particularly with the emergence of Newtonian physics in the 17th century. Newton brought about a turning point toward the prevalence of empiricism as the basis of science, relegating rationalism to a secondary place (Cassirer, 2009). That radicalization excluded subjectivity and the subject as sources of noise and distortion in science. Facts were separated from ideas and the observer was excluded from observation. Induction and description became hegemonic in the search for an objective science, a position that was associated with the genesis of positivism in the 19th century, becoming the absolute model of doing science until the emergence of quantum mechanics at the beginning of the 20th century. Despite replacing rationalism as the way of doing science, empiricism became a source of new rationalistic expectations in both common sense and science, as in the illusions of human control over nature, and the illusions of progress and prediction. These illusions left no room to advance the topic of subjectivity, the reformulation of which demands a transcendence of both of them.

The fact of science becoming dominant as the expression of certainty, progress, and truth during three and half centuries has strongly influenced a social subjectivity for which imagination, fantasy, and desires were secondary compared to the powerful intellectual machine on which the hope of humanity was focused. The combination of rationalism and empiricism that characterized philosophy was inseparable from the model

of science that has become dominant since the 17th century, becoming a powerful intellectual model for thinking about not only the sciences, but also culture. The mechanical model of thinking that resulted from physics strongly influenced some of the main strands of psychology in the first half of the 20th century. So, for example, behaviorism was strongly influenced by a savage empiricism, that was even more empirical than positivism, giving a narrow interpretation of what science should be. Freud, meanwhile, even attempted to overcome a rational representation of human beings and could not avoid appealing to reason as the main theoretical device for conducting psychotherapy, and being deeply realistic in his idea of the need to repair the original experience that was distorted through repression.

Nonetheless, it is curious the lack of attention in the history of psychology to a sequence of German philosophers from the 19th century, namely: Dilthey, Windelband, and Rickert. According to Hawthorn (1976), Rickert advanced on Dilthey's ideas, making an association between culture and the idiographic methods on one side, and the science and nomothetic methods on another. The relativity of cultural phenomena and its implication for the study of the subjective nature of human phenomena gained epistemological relevance in the very interrelated works of Heinrich Rickert and Max Weber. Weber opened a new epistemological path for the social sciences, rejecting the possibility to enunciate general laws in history. Weber also questioned the capacity of the sciences for coming to a final explanation. Psychology, based on a crude empiricism, completely ignored these discussions until the works of Kurt Lewin and his group in the 1930s and Gordon Allport in the 1950s.

Weber discussed the subjective side of socioeconomical processes, as it was clear in his famous writing about the role of morality and religion in the advent of the capitalism (Weber, 1992). The attention of those German thinkers, from Dilthey to Weber, has never been studied in its relevance for the phenomenology of Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl. This last philosophical stream, following the transcendental positions of its predecessors in the German philosophy, advanced one important further step: the transcendental ego was an active and thinking substance that

expressed itself in intentional human beings. The transcendental ego is no longer understood as a priori to active intentions instances.

Phenomenology, however, did not give continuity to the sequence of the above-mentioned thinkers either theoretically or epistemologically, returning back to the erroneous identification between subjectivity and metaphysics. Only Merleau-Ponty (1962) broke down this identification in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Husserl was an important antecedent to Heidegger's radical rejection of subjectivity and epistemology. In fact, the pretension of psychology in becoming a natural science led to its dominant a-theoretical character (Koch, 1999) and to its cult of the method (Danziger, 1990), ignoring the epistemological demands of its own development. Nonetheless, it was not Wilhelm Wundt who excluded philosophy from psychology. In his definition of "Völkerpsychologie," he clearly took a position in regards to the limitation of the experimental method in the study of complex processes that result from the integration of culture and psychology. It was his disciples, James McKeen Cattell, G. Stanley Hall and Edward B. Titchener among others, who turned experiments and tests into the core of an instrumental psychology, which has so strongly impacted our discipline from the 20th century to this day.

Finally, among the facts that made it difficult to advance on a new representation of subjectivity in the psychology of the 20th century, it is important to refer to the turn made by psychology toward social and linguistic facts in the 1960s in reaction to the hegemonic empirical, individualistic, and instrumental psychology of the first half of that century. That stream of thinking emerged in psychology through the concepts of social representation (Moscovici, 1961) and the social cognitive approach to prejudice (Tajfel, 1981), the latter beginning a line of thinking that led Tajfel, together with Turner, to the concept of social identity in 1986. In his first and foundational work, Moscovici (1961) also expressed a rather cognitive approach in his first definition of social representation. However, the analysis of the concept as a social symbolical production, inseparable from human communication, represented an important advance for the comprehension of the social psychological

processes behind a rationalist or individualistic reductionism (Moscovici, 2000).

Nonetheless, that important turn toward the social processes, which decisively contributed to introducing a new revolutionary angle in the comprehension of the social side of human psychology, excluded the individual and its psychological processes as inseparable from those processes involving relations organized on the basis of social representations (González Rey, 2015). The relevant matter of how individuals and social processes integrate with and reciprocally configure each other in new qualitative processes specific to human beings and human culture did not find a place in the Moscovici agenda. As a result, a new strand began in psychology, one oriented toward replacing psychological processes by social ones, as was evident in the split supported by Farr (1998) between a sociological social psychology and an individual social psychology. This new orientation of psychology represented another fact to be considered in its abandonment of the topic of subjectivity, commonly associated with an intra-psychical individual mind. The theory of social representation brought to light the relevance of symbolical social processes, quickly evolving from its beginning into a comprehension of social representation as a symbolical social production (Moscovici, 2000). The development of the theory of social representation was the first step in social constructionism – a psychology deeply oriented toward dialogue and discourse that has advanced on the basis of French post-structuralism since the second half of the 1980s.

Despite the fact that Moscovici was advancing forward the consideration of social representation as symbolical processes intrinsically related to human communication, the new theoretical critical wave, as represented by social constructionism since the 1980s, was deeply critical of the concept of social representation. The main focus of that criticism was the epistemological realism that the concept still maintained (Gergen, 1985; Ibañez 1988). The critique of the cognitive character of social representations was another important topic of criticism (Potter & Edwards, 1999). Nevertheless, some of the pioneers of social constructionism attempted to integrate the French post-structural legacy

with the more instrumental and cognitive Vygotsky and with the American cognitive revolution, as the basis of a new discursive psychology. In this regard, Harré (1995) stated: “Since discourse is primarily public and only secondarily private, so cognition, the use of various devices for mental tasks, is primarily public and social and only secondarily private and individual... The second cognitive revolution is nothing other than the advent of discursive psychology” (p. 144).

Both the theory of social representation and social constructionism shared a non-recognition of individual psychological processes and their inseparability from the social systems of relationships. The idea, as stressed by Harré, and originally emphasized by Vygotsky, that any mental operation is always primarily social and only secondarily private and individual, represented the comprehension of individual psychical processes as mere epiphenomena of social operations, leading to an instrumental-functional representation of the human mind that denies any creative and generative capacity of individuals. The world of human fantasy, imagination, motivation, and creation was completely detached from both the theory of social representation and social constructionism. Even so, social constructionism monopolized the representation of a ‘new psychology,’ which at the same time also became the main version of a critical psychology. In fact, as a result of this process, social constructionism became a kind of mainstream critical psychology. In this way, such critical theories have omitted the heuristic value of subjectivity for the study of processes that can be exhausted neither by language nor by discourse.

That new psychological movement eclipsed the emergence of other important critical movements that appeared during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in the non-Anglo-Saxon world. I refer to the critical movements represented by German Critical Psychology (Holzkamp, Osterkamp, and others) that, from its criticism of mainstream psychology, came to be centered on advancing a psychology of the subject, overcoming any kind of social and linguistic determinism, as well as the critical psychoanalytic Argentinian movement of the 1960s (P. Riviere, J. Bleger, among others) and the Latin-American critical social psychology of the 1980s (Martín

Baró, Montero, Salazar, Jiménez, Lane, González Rey, among others). It is interesting that all of these movements, unlike social constructionism, attributed an important place to individuals and their psychological processes, attempting to advance a new psychology capable of integrating a new definition of the human mind as inseparable from social and political processes (González Rey, 2019).

Subjectivity, as the concept is proposed in this chapter, is neither private nor individual, nor is it secondary in relation to other human phenomena; subjectivity is a new qualitative phenomenon that results from the social, cultural, and historical character of human existence, and is characterized as a new ontological definition presented in all human phenomena, whether social or individual. Subjectivity expresses the human capacity to generate emotions as symbolical processes, which leads to new dynamic units, the integration of which is qualitatively different from what traditionally have been defined as psychological processes. Psyche and subjectivity do not exclude each other but are deeply interrelated. However, they are irreducible to one another; each process has a different genesis and functioning, even when they are configured to each other. So, for example, a human perception can only be a cognitive process, but it is also a subjective one when emotions emerge as symbolical devices that actively participate in that perception.

SUBJECTIVITY FROM A CULTURAL–HISTORICAL STANDPOINT: ITS RELEVANCE FOR ADVANCING A NEW CRITICAL PATH IN PSYCHOLOGY

Although the last three centuries have not represented the best intellectual grounds upon which to advance the topic of subjectivity, there have nevertheless been important philosophers during the 20th century who, while not having referred specifically to the topic of subjectivity, have made interesting theoretical contributions that remained little known and fragmented. The absence of subjectivity as an intellectual reference

was, to some extent, responsible for this fragmentation and lack of recognition of such contributions. In any case, those contributions permit the envisaging of the need for subjectivity as a topic in the human sciences in order to advance new theoretical and practical paths in regards to human phenomena (González Rey, 2019).

Philosophers like Marx, Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, Cassirer, and Foucault developed important ideas at different stages of their work, which unfortunately were not compatible with the different philosophical mainstreams within which their works were predominantly classified. In their works, it is possible to find fragments that are oriented toward new questions and that represented important antecedents for the need to introduce the topic of subjectivity in both philosophy and the human sciences (González Rey, 2019).

Our proposal on subjectivity started from a principle that was not incorporated within the dominant intellectual strands during the 20th century. Subjectivity is not a reflection, nor an internalization, nor a rational construction; it is a new kind of phenomenon that results from the on-going evolution of *Homo sapiens*. That new capacity that distinguished *homo sapiens* in relation to other animal species was its broader use of symbolical devices, the use of which led to the interrelation of different kinds of human activities and forms of sociality. The use of tools for work deals with the emergence of social aggrupation that made it possible for the emergence of language, which was inseparable from other symbolical activities like painting, that is, activities that were inseparable from each other in the endless capacity for development of *Homo sapiens*. The endless development of these resources was the basis of the development of human culture.

A new era had begun in the development of animal species; subjectivity is the quality of human processes that is co-produced with culture. Humans have killed each other on behalf of symbolical reasons that are historically located. Historically, the reasons for these endless rivalries motivated by symbolical values have disappeared from one historical period to another, making it evident that the rationalities that served as the bases of such rivalry were relative and, as such, historically

located; human beings, rather than being rational creatures, have been subjective animals since the beginning of humankind. There are no objectivities in human existence that are separated from subjective productions. This is what characterizes human phenomena. Reality and fiction are inseparable from human processes; this is the strongest and weakest trace of human existence.

Nonetheless, subjectivity is what defines us as human and is inseparable from the cultural, historical, and social character of human existence. It would be impossible to talk about a cultural, historical and social character of human beings without giving an explanation of what kind of phenomena made the relative, creative, and endless human condition possible. The specific ontological character of human subjectivity is based on the symbolical genesis of emotions; the symbolical-emotional units that are always beyond conscious representations and intentional language are continuously in process like flashes of snapshots that are impossible to be grasped by consciousness. These units, which never become isolated entities, and which exist within a very dynamic flux that has configured itself in lived events, defining how these events are singularly experienced by individuals and different social instances, are named in our theoretical proposal as subjective senses.

Subjective senses embody a new theoretical phenomenon according to which a new ontological definition of human subjectivity is proposed as capable of expressing how a social cosmos, historically and culturally located, appears as subjectively experienced. From the flux of subjective senses emerge new units of a higher order, the subjective configurations, which become sources of subjective senses that gain a relative independence of immediate experiences.

This definition of subjectivity allows advances in three important topics that, in my view, are important for a critical psychology that is culturally, historically, and socially located. These topics are outlined in what follows:

1. This definition of subjectivity represents a new way of treating human motivation. In fact, subjectivity is a motivational system,

since human motivations are subjective configurations that include multiple subjective senses (González Rey, 2014b). This definition transcends the rather extended comprehension of human motivations as entities with the function of driving human behavior toward a particular action, a function that is separate from others, thus maintaining the fragmentation between affective and cognitive processes. Motives have been understood on the basis of specific needs that define emotional orientation to one or other psychological function or behavior; thus, for example, motive is understood as different from thinking when it is really the subjective configuration of thinking about its own motivation (González Rey, 2012, 2014b).

The implications of this definition of human motivation for a critical psychology are the following: a) Human motivation does not depend on the facts involved in a concrete activity or relationship. Any human motivation, as a subjective configuration, integrates a social constellation of experiences through which individuals' social lives can be deciphered. b) Institutional processes and social symbolical constructions, objectified in normative systems and in informal systems of relationships, appear configured in individual and social motivational processes that are beyond the current lived experiences of both individuals and groups, making possible subversive positions in opposition to immediate institutional processes. Many political readings can be drawn from individual and group motivations. c) Motivation understood as subjective configurations allows a rethinking of human practices, stressing its emancipatory character since there are no external influences that can model human motivation. Human motivation emerges as individually and socially generative of experiences of individuals and groups, a fact that leads to an understanding of the human capacity to generate subjective development even in the face of adverse conditions.

2. This comprehension of subjectivity is inseparable from human activity. Actions appear as subjective configurations in process,

not as external to subjectivity. This fact transforms actions into permanent sources of subjective senses, which actively involve agents and subjects of actions, either individual or social. This malleability and continuous involvement in actions allow subjective senses and configurations to capture the multiple and simultaneous ways in which individuals, groups, and institutions experience social networks within which they are each interwoven with one another, allowing the identification of how social and individual subjectivities support the current dominant systems, even when they are verbally criticized and apparently rejected.

The importance of this fact for advancing a critical psychology is the understanding, through actions, of complex subjective configurations. As such, human actions of any kind are the path toward advancing knowledge of subjective configurations, which never appear explicit in human actions. This approach to human actions overcomes the rationalistic character frequently attributed to political movements, as well as the myths created around their leaders as being guided only by justice, two of the main reasons for the failure of revolutionary movements in the 20th century.

3. The proposal of subjectivity expresses a cultural-historical and social character since it is historically located, expressing itself through actions that are subjectively configured by the cultural symbolical devices of a particular epoch and generated within the specific forms of sociality of that epoch. Their malleability and continuous involvement in actions allows subjective senses and configurations to capture the multiple and simultaneous ways in which individuals, groups, and institutions experience the endless social symbolical productions within a single concrete life trajectory. Both individuals and groups understand social symbolical constructions like health, illness, race, gender, physical appearance, disability, and nationality in the way they are subjectively experienced. Never before in psychology, even within the positions taken by Soviet psychology, has it been possible to

advance the idea of human beings as configured by the ways in which social realities are experienced by individuals and groups within complex social networks, within which social and individual processes are reciprocally configured to each other.

The relevance of this fact for a critical psychology is to advance our capacity to put ourselves in the place of the Other, something that is frequently repeated as an ethical principle, but one that is little understood theoretically in order to facilitate paths toward new professional and social practices. In fact, this frequently applies to the ideas of emancipation, decolonization, and liberation are developed from world centers of political and economical power, becoming an expression of colonizing thinking when are a-critical imported to different contexts, as for example, Latin America, whose culture and problems are quite different from those that characterized the countries where those ideas were engendered. It is impossible, or at least conservative, to think that the main position oriented to political and social changes in one context, should be considered as having the same value in other contexts. The current theoretical proposal is a device to advance not only in the social sciences and philosophy, but also in terms of a system of social and professional practices in which the protagonists would be considered as active agents and not a mere epiphenomenon of ‘scientific authorities’ independently of the merits from which this authority has been gained.

CONCLUSION

This proposal on subjectivity is an attempt to put forward a cultural-historical psychology in its critical compromise, making it possible to understand the inseparable integration of individuals and social contexts, while understanding the reciprocal subjective configuration of both instances beyond the conscious intentions of individuals and groups. These conscious intentions can become important sources of subjective senses, but never as a result of the intentions of the protagonists. Conscious

productions never completely rule the unpredictable and malleable paths of social and individual change.

The inclusion of subjectivity in a psychology monopolized by the symbolical, whether through language, discourse, or conversational systems, allows individuals and motivation to be integrated in a critical psychology that has predominantly excluded individuals and their subjective processes from social functioning. In fact, to consider subjectivity as generalizable to human phenomena, whether social or individual, opens up new paths toward explanations of phenomena, which have previously been narrowly understood in terms of their communicative and linguistic expressions, consequently leading to new practices. Subjectivity is not contrary to social symbolical productions; it represents a new ontological definition that is inseparable from symbolical processes, but is not reducible to them.

Power, colonization, and hegemony are not simply intentions. They are subjectively configured as an expression of dominant social subjectivities, the implications of which are beyond individual consciousness. These could be considered “collateral effects,” using Beck’s language, that are configured in social subjectivity without the consciousness of its more progressive agents. Such collateral effects have been perceptible throughout history in multiple historical and scientific events, such as the cult of Stalinism through the positions of progressive Western figures, the abandonment of Latin-American critical social psychology due to the influence of social constructionism, and many other historical examples.

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