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POWER, AUTHORITY AND POINTLESS ACTIVITY  
(THE DEVELOPMENTAL DISCOURSE OF SOCIAL THERAPY)

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If excitement about postmodern and discursive therapies has recently waned, as editors Tom Strong and David Pare suggest, perhaps this is because, for the most part, these therapies are all talk! This is, paradoxically, their strength relative to mainstream modernist therapies and their limitation relative to what is needed if we human beings are to transform our emotionality so as to prevent our killing ourselves off (whether quickly or painfully slowly).

We have been asked to speak concretely and practically to readers, to show our therapeutic approach—social therapy—in action, to stay grounded in our practice—and we will. However, we must, as well, situate ourselves as “on the left” of the postmodern spectrum, both methodologically and politically—which, we hope to show, is neither a characteristic nor the “location” of social therapy, but its activity. To do so, we need to speak to the issue of power.

I. POWER AND AUTHORITY REVISITED

Among the more thoughtful Marxist critiques of postmodernism is Ian Parker's "Against Postmodernism: Psychology in Cultural Context," which appeared in *Theory & Psychology* (Parker, 1998). Parker's critique of postmodernism is, as we understand it, valid. What is his criticism? Essentially, that most versions of postmodernism avoid or deny the issue or question of *power*. Parker has leveled this attack against postmodernism in general and, we must add in the name of intellectual honesty, at virtually all of our positive writings on postmodernism. Some postmodernists avoid the issue (question, topic, etc.) of power, we imagine, because they take power to be the fundamental flaw of modernism and, therefore, it is precisely what postmodernism must get rid of (as if avoiding something gets rid of it!). Others, with varying degrees of sophistication, deconstruct and discard power as a necessary component of social life. We have always been somewhat bewildered by Parker's critique of our efforts since we regard all that we have written—and far more importantly, what we have organized or created—as a postmodern explication/expression of power. For we believe that the matter of power (not to mention the power of matter) must be postmodernized if we are to go beyond postmodernism as a mere stage of modernism (Jameson, 1984).

Power (or the word "power" if you prefer), no doubt, has multiple meanings. But, as we have long argued, the socio-political sense of power is best understood in its dialectical relationship to *authority*. First, some simpleminded remarks. Authority goes from the top, down. It is imposed. Most importantly, it must be known. Power comes from the bottom, up. It is expressed. It is created. Obviously, in ordinary language, power and authority are often treated as synonymous. Yet nothing could be further from the truth (in our view, everything is actually equidistant from the truth, viz. an infinite

distance!). But the commonplace confusion of the two, power and authority, says a great deal about the *authoritarian* structure of our ontic, now worldwide, culture. For not only are commodities fetishized—turned into god-like authorities, a la Marx—but *everything* is commodified. Hence knowledge, scientific and otherwise, is God-like here in late-modernism/early postmodernism.

The fetishization of knowledge has led some philosophers (for example, Rorty, 1982, 2000; Newman, 1999; Newman and Holzman, 1996) to abandon it, and others (for example, Davidson, 2000) to attempt to rehabilitate it. But even “getting rid” of knowledge is not enough. The more serious issue (activity) is eliminating the *authority of knowledge* in favor of the *creativity of power*—not to mention the power of creativity. Even Davidson, the supreme rehabilitator, recognizes the defect of knowing as an authoritarian conception. He believes we can overcome that defect analytically, i.e. philosophically, and he is no doubt right (he almost always is!). But it would make no difference, since philosophy (analytical or otherwise) has for many years now had little or nothing to do with the activities and the struggles of ordinary people. Philosophy has no one to blame for that except contemporary philosophers. Newman and Rorty have not abandoned philosophy. Rather, they are unwilling to abandon people in the name of the ever-shrinking academic niche into which philosophy has retreated. Unless postmodernism wishes to become as irrelevant as institutionalized philosophy, it must move beyond a *deconstruction* of knowing (which, in its extreme form, is an *elimination* of knowing, Newman and Holzman, 1997) to an active reconstruction of power—the *activity of power*.

In its historic roots (religious, legal, scientific, civic, etc.) authority is dominantly individualistic. The “author” is, for the most part, an individual, an actor, an agent. There is, strictly speaking, no activity of authority. It is fundamentally *regulatory*. Authority is an inactive negative for essentially inhibiting growth and development in the name of those in control—or, as we sometimes confusedly say, in the name of those “in power.” But being “in power” (somewhat ironically) does not at all involve the activity of power. It is, rather, the commodification of power (labor power) into authority. And while commodities can be sold, they do not develop; they are consumed. Authority stifles growth. It is not a necessary evil. It is an unnecessary evil. What is necessary for development is the activity of power, the exercise of power, the development of power by the many—collectively, democratically and creatively. It is the work of the laborer, Marx teaches us, that creates value (Marx, 1967). It is the authoritarian commodification of this process that yields a *realization* of this value which, in turn, maintains the authority of the owners of the means of production.

But authority (vs. power) goes well beyond the economic sphere. It is constantly present, under capitalism, in the psychological sphere. The human capacity to authoritarianly commodify oneself is in constant psychological struggle with the human desire and capacity to exercise power *without commodification*, i.e., freely. This understanding, first articulated by one of us in a vulgarly ultra-left political form in *Power and Authority* (Newman, 1974), has been refined in practice, over decades, into what is now identified as *social therapy*.

Our efforts to give meaning to the concept of power led us to practicing and speaking of the *activity* of power rather than either a *definition* of power (a classical

modernist mistake) or the *use* of power (a revisionist understanding of Wittgenstein). On our view, a careful and sympathetic reading of Wittgenstein (such as that of Baker, 1992) suggests that it is not meaning and use which are equatable, but meaning and the *activity of using*. Meaning is a *doing*, not an interpretation. (“the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life,” Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 11). The use of something, on the other hand, is a functional interpretation (an Aristotelian essence)—What is a chair used for? To sit on? The activity of using is, in point of fact, what the chair *is* used for (standing on it to swat a mosquito). The meaning of a term is not its interpretive use but what it is (*in activity*) used for. Wittgenstein’s “slab” examples (Wittgenstein, 1953) make this point precisely because the function of the “slab” is unknown (indeed, unknowable). The endless “ordinary language” analyses, based presumably on Wittgenstein’s later writings, bear little or no resemblance to the pointlessness of Wittgenstein’s “slab” examples—indeed, to the pointlessness of all of Wittgenstein’s later thinking. Thus, it is the activity of power, not the pointedness of power, that interests us in social therapy and, indeed, throughout our organized postmodernist community.

Postmodernism must be an organized activity—it must be performed—if it is to be truly powerful. The temptation to keep postmodernism unorganized, or even disorganized, is a misunderstood libertarianism, an anti-power perspective—ultimately, a liberal authoritarian perspective. Postmodernism must reorganize the world in anti-authoritarian ways, i.e. in *powerful* ways. But powerful ways must be activities. As with Aristotle’s practical syllogism, “the conclusion” of postmodernist understanding must be an action (more precisely, an activity). For postmodernist understanding is a moral

discourse. It goes from descriptive premises to a normative activist conclusion (in Aristotle's language, an action). It is not a mode of thought going from description (interpretation) to description (interpretation). It is a journey from "what is" to "what ought to be." As such, it is creative and powerful.

While Aristotle's remarks about the practical syllogism (his ethics) are an interesting prefiguration of our activist manifesto, Aristotle was, of course, the grandfather of dualism. And modernism is, arguably, little more than dualism writ large. From Lovejoy to Dewey to Quine to Davidson to Rorty, and on and on and on, dualism has been under attack for a century. Still, it flourishes, largely because, as we noted earlier, philosophy (including critical philosophy) is so alienated from the popular culture. Postmodernism's efforts to present a critique of deadly dualism in a more popular voice has brought nasty self-serving criticism from the establishment intellectual community—including, of course, the philosophers. In their efforts to defend themselves from these vicious pseudo-intellectual attacks, postmodernists have for the most part noticeably avoided the theoretical psychological writings of Lev Vygotsky, no doubt because he was a Marxist—and a Soviet Marxist at that. But, on our view, Vygotsky's critique of psychological dualism is potentially of great value in understanding the activity of power and the creation of a new psychology.

First, Vygotsky gave us a new conception of method, one that is not dualistically instrumental—tool for result—but monistically dialectical—*method as simultaneously tool-and-result* (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65).<sup>1</sup> With this, the scientific community could have

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<sup>1</sup> The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of

finally ended the theory-practice debate, yet still it persists, even among postmodernists. Second, his *zone of proximal development* offered psychology a way out of the conundrums generated by its dualistic framework: person-environment, self-other, internal-external, to name the most longstanding (Vygotsky, 1978). As we understand Vygotsky, learning and development in early childhood is a tool-and-result activity in which learning leads—dialectically, not linearly—development, a phenomenon made possible by the social, collective construction of the environment that makes learning-and-development possible (Newman and Holzman, 1993). Creating zones of proximal development is the activity of power.

Third, Vygotsky deconstructed the centuries-old dualism between thought and word and, in so doing, he provided a means for the rejection of not only the pictorial but also the pragmatic view of language. His position can be seen in the following remarks:

The relationship of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a movement from thought to word and from word to thought ... Thought is not expressed but completed in the word. We can, therefore, speak of the establishment (i.e., the unity of being and nonbeing) of thought in the word. Any thought strives to unify, to establish a relationship between one thing and another. Any thought has movement. It unfolds. (1987, p. 250)

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psychological activity. In this case, the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65).

The structure of speech is not simply the mirror image of the structure of thought. It cannot, therefore, be placed on thought like clothes off a rack. Speech does not merely serve as the expression of developed thought. Thought is restructured as it is transformed into speech. It is not expressed but completed in the word. Therefore, precisely because of the contrasting directions of movement, the development of the internal and external aspects of speech forms a true unity. (1987, p. 251)

There are not two separate worlds, the private one of thinking and the social one of speaking. There is, instead, the dialectical unity, speaking/thinking. Children would not be able to perform as speakers, and thereby learn to speak, if thinking/speaking were not a *completive social activity*. Like Wittgenstein, Vygotsky provided the basis for a non-dualistic (non-expressionist, non-descriptive) conception of language and a method for moving beyond epistemology (even a social one) to a new ontology of activity.

Social therapeutic practice is in many ways a synthesis of Wittgenstein's and Vygotsky's approach to language and human subjectivity (Newman and Holzman, 1996, 1997). "Completion" is far more than a critique of dualism. It is a positive (postmodern) move (an activist move) beyond dualism. It is not, like dualism, secretly value laden. It is not pointed. It is (like Wittgenstein) properly pointless. As such, it is a useful frame of reference for a value-free psychology—indeed, for an infinitude of value-free psychologies. Creating these psychologies—actively creating new psychologies—is, in our view, the critical work (the revolutionary activity) of postmodernism.



## II. SOCIAL THERAPY—POINTLESS, POWERFUL AND PARADOXICAL

If you have been following our argument, you may have spotted some seeming paradoxes. Two are of particular relevance to the doing of social therapy. One, if individuals have become commodified selves, how can they exercise their power freely, i.e., uncommodified? Two, we seem to be saying that morality and moral discourse can and ought to be pointless and value free, but aren't these the very things that comprise morality and moral discourse? We will take each of these in turn.

Typically, people come into therapy groups, as they come into any group setting, individuated. They want help and think that the way to get it is individualistically—a perfectly understandable notion, given that in our culture people are socialized to an individuated learning and development model. They say things like, “I had this awful fight with my mother last night. I was furious....and I'm really upset right now.” They look to the therapist for some advice, solution, interpretation, explanation or, in more postmodern approaches, leadership in a collaborative process that might generate some new understanding of themselves. They are, again understandably, appealing to *authority*—that of the therapist, of knowledge and of language. To the extent that *power* is a relevant concern to them, they want only to “feel more powerful,” by which they typically mean that they want, *as individuals*, to have “more control” over their lives.

People come to social therapy with similar understandings and expectations, even if they might have heard that it isn't like “ordinary” therapy. Social therapy is not designed to help individuals with their individual problems, nor to help individuals feel or become more powerful, since we believe that only authority—and not power—is ascribable to

individuals. It is, rather, designed to help people *exercise* their collective power to create new emotional growth, a process that requires deconstructing the sense of self (an authoritarian commodification) and reconstructing the concept of social relationship.

Our experience is that this comes, not from some abstract ideological commitment, but from a participatory process in which people actually construct something together—namely, the group. The key focus in social therapy is building the group. Groups are typically composed of 10-25 people, a mix of women and men of varying ages, ethnicities, sexual orientations, professions and “problems.” Most groups are ongoing (although we do some time-limited groups) and meet weekly for 90 minutes. Members’ length of time in group varies; some people remain for years, others for shorter periods of time, and new members join periodically.

Power is the creative capacity of the group—by the exercise of its emotional labor—to generate new environments; authority is the societally overdetermined predisposition of the individuated members of the group to passively accept class-dominated, patriarchal emotive environments. Conflict between the two gets played out in social therapy groups, where the unit of transformation/change/growth/learning is the group, and the therapist is simultaneously the organizer of the group’s emotive labor power and the potential (or even actual) repository of the group members’ “authoritarian instincts.” The ongoing process of social therapy is the working out of this relationship; as the group engages in the activity of building the group, it is changing its relationship to power and to authority and becoming more powerful. As one social therapy group member, a man in his early 40s, put it: “The social therapy term ‘building the group’ is probably the one that drives people crazy more than any other. It’s so hard to get your head around!

There's a vagueness and a clarity about it at the same time. It's what's going on in group. Early on, you can't see it even though you know something's happening."<sup>2</sup>

In this process people come to appreciate what—and that—they can create. Simultaneously, they come to realize the limitations of trying to learn, grow and create individually and that growth comes from participating in the process of building the groups in which one functions. This new learning rekindles development—development by virtue of the group growing. In social therapeutic terms, human development is the activity of creating the conditions for development (Vygotsky's zone of proximal development) and the unit that engages in this activity is the group (the collective).

A recent social therapy group began with a woman, very upset, asking for help. She described what was going on at her job as a teacher in an inner city school, things she and the group members found oppressive and oppressing. Some members of the group responded that they would like to help but that how she was asking was all about herself and her problem and wasn't connected to them or to the work the group had been doing for weeks. The woman acknowledged various group members' comments, but persisted in being upset and saying she needed help with this problem. At one point, she turned to the therapist and asked him for help. He suggested that she respond to the group. She kept pursuing her agenda and group members were becoming exasperated. One long-time member of the group burst into an impassioned and very moving "speech" about how she too comes to group wanting to be taken care of, given advice, etc. for what's going on with her, but she never gets it. Instead, she said, the therapist insists that help

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<sup>2</sup> This and subsequent quotations from social therapy clients are taken from an ongoing interview project.

comes from building the group, the struggle over that ensues, people do some building, and she leaves group every week feeling very loved and helped from the work.

Then a woman new to the group said that she knew she couldn't get help with her personal problems in social therapy, but that this was OK with her. One or two group members—including the upset woman who had begun the group and had been its focus for much of the time—supported her, others disagreed, and the group went around on this topic for awhile. The therapist then said that as he understood it, those who believed that social therapy doesn't deal with people's personal problems had a misunderstanding. Indeed, it does—*building the group* is how social therapy helps people with their personal problems. He contrasted how people go to therapy with how they go to a medical doctor. You might go to a medical doctor for a pain in your eye, he said, but if after some conversation and examination, he tells you he has to treat your kidney, you might be surprised but you probably won't fight with him and insist that he must help you in "your way." The social conventions of medicine and illness and health are such that we accept the doctor's way of helping us. But therapy, evidently, is a different story. People come to therapy not only with their personal problems, but also committed to a particular way of getting help with them. The group then worked with another group member who wanted help with problems he was having dealing with his young son; they experimented and played with ways of talking (asking for help) so as to contribute to the growth of the group.

This particular social therapy group session highlights—in both form and substance—the group's active struggle with its power (of collective creativity) and authority (of individual knowing). It also suggests the activist and collective way that

the social therapist responds to therapy talk. She or he conveys, in varying ways, that what is being said (“I had a fight; I’m upset; I need help”) is of no interest (qua social therapy) except in so far as the group can make use of it in the activity of creating itself into a new socialized helping environment, i.e., in its exercise of power. The task of the group is to *do* something with what people say in therapy, something that contributes to the social process of development. The social therapist works with the group (not the individuated selves that, reductionistically speaking, comprise the group) to organize itself to engage in this process of building the group. In this process the group becomes an *emotional zone of proximal development (emotional zpd)*. The various members, each at different levels of emotional development, are encouraged to create a new unit with a new level of emotional development, i.e., the group’s level of emotional development.

This process involves a qualitative change of therapeutic focus—from the individuated self who discovers deeper insights into his or her consciousness to the collective engaged in the continuous activity of creating a new social unit, the emotional zpd. The overriding question transforms from “How is each individual doing?” to “How well is the group performing its activity?” A longtime social therapy group member speaks to how this impacts: “The focus in social therapy on the group and not the individual is really helpful. It helps you get out of yourself. It changes your orientation to the world, how things are organized in the world.”

Social therapy’s ultra-focus on activity, specifically on the activity of speaking, i.e., on the conversation, transforms meaning itself. Reconsidering Wittgenstein from a Marxian and Vygotskian activity-theoretic vantage point, social therapy rejects the equation of meaning and use that is common among many followers and students of

Wittgenstein in favor of the dialectical relationship between meaning and activity. Meaning is created, Vygotsky has shown, through the activity of speaking completing thinking. Social therapy extends (“completes”) Vygotsky’s picture in the following manner. If thinking-speaking is a continuous process of completing, then the “completer” need not be the same person who is doing the thinking. *Others can complete for us.* When people speak, participate in a dialogue, discussion or conversation (or write), we are not simply *saying* what’s going on but are *creating* what’s going on. And we understand each other by virtue of engaging in this shared creative activity. As one newcomer to social therapy commented, “Social therapy is like a new practice of relationship. In our group the creating of our conversation is the activity of our interconnectedness.”

Inevitably, and nearly continuously, the group confronts the conflict between our socio-culturally constructed adherence to authority and our world-historic capacity to exercise power, as we saw in the group session discussed above. *“How can we talk so that our talking helps build the group?”* This question encapsulates the group’s process of discovering a method of relating to talk relationally rather than individualistically—in Wittgenstein’s terms, as “activity, or a form of life;” in Vygotsky’s terms, “completely” not expressively. It is the activity of talk—not the substance of talk (its aboutness) nor the use of talk (its societal pragmatic function)—that is the focus of the group’s activity. The authority of language (as expressive of truth, reality and self) is challenged explicitly as people falteringly attempt to converse in this new way, to create meaning together. Commenting on her group, one woman said, “The group creates a different language in the course of a group [session]. I never realized that the meaning of words is so contextualized. We create a vocabulary and a language that’s particular to each group.”

In this process, group members come to see that what they are saying to each other has no meaning other than what they create. Like poets, they become meaning makers, creators of language and of a new conception of language, one that is non-essentialist and non-descriptive. It is in the creating of their poem, the therapeutic conversation, that the group exercises its power.

A woman began a recent group saying that she still hated her father. She couldn't be absolutely sure, but she thought he was always out to abuse her, he looked at her in a certain way, etc. The initial response of several group members—a line of questioning that is typical in this kind of situation—was to ask for details (what happened, when, for how long, etc.) in order to find out what “really” happened, was she “really” abused, etc.—that is, in order to get to the “truth.” After about twenty minutes, the group began to question what this woman meant by some of the words she was saying and how it was that she was saying them (“What do you mean when you say ‘you hate him’; what do you mean by ‘abuse’; why are you saying this to us now,” etc.), and these words and their contextualization (the group’s *doing* of meaning) became the focus of the conversation.

At this point, the group had abandoned the pursuit of truth in favor of exploring the activity of their speaking together. This changed activity—from trying to find the truth to creating meanings—created a group sense of new meaning rather than a collective sense of truth. Engaging in this activity, the group gains a heightened understanding that finding truth is not possible, that meanings are created collectively and that they have the power to create meanings. In the words of one group member, “The challenge in our group is always to not take what’s said as truth. We don’t always succeed! It’s very freeing, though, when I can hear and see what so-and-so is saying and

doing and not experience it as ‘This is really what they’re doing and so this is what I have to do in response.’ People say words and we don’t know what they mean until we create their meaning. The group grows a lot by taking ownership of what it creates.”

All we have said thus far relates to the question of the place of morality in postmodernism in general and postmodern therapies in particular. Morality as we know it is authoritarian—it comes from the top, it is imposed and it must be known. Certain behaviors, acts, values and beliefs are wrenched out of the ongoing life process and reified into a code or system of conduct. People (or peoples) are then judged by how well they conform to the code or system. Moral discourse is always in reference to authority (the knower or the known, a god, truth, dogma, belief, system or rule, etc.). In trying to escape authoritarianism, much of postmodernism accepts or embraces alternative moralities (i.e., codes or systems of conduct). For this, it is accused by some of being “rampantly relativist” and/or amoral (Parker, 1998; Rosenau, 1992). And we agree that it is, so long as it fails to reject the ontological premise of modernist morality. Why it hasn’t is unclear to us, for there surely is no evidence that human beings require a moral system in order to know what to do. Throughout history, countless terrible things have been done in the name of moral systems (and people seem no better able to know what to do for having such a system). Human beings no more need a code of ethics in order to live morally than children need rules of grammar in order to speak. Neither activity requires an *appeal* to any authority. It is human activity that produces both.

With activity as the ontological unit of human life, social therapy rejects morality (an authoritarian code or system) in favor of *moral activity*. Ordinary people create morality in ordinary ways every day. When it is not commodified into a finished product



or code (and then imposed on its creators by others, usually those “in power”), but is allowed to be continuously created and developed by its creators, then moral activity is another tool-and-result of the social process of making meaning. It is then not authoritarian but powerful.

Sharing his experience in social therapy, a man in his early 30s brought up the topic of morality: “There’s a certain morality to social therapy. It’s not so judgmental, not into ‘people should be a certain way.’ It opens up space for people to be *all* the ways they are. The question is what people do together, not how they are. I’m much closer to people now. It used to be that my relationships were based on what people said five minutes ago or five months ago. But that keeps you distant. In group, we’re freed up to have certain kinds of dialogues not based on your interpretation of what people say or on how you’re feeling or how they’re feeling. It challenges us to be open to bringing something into the mix so we can constantly create something.”

In so far as it is realizable, human freedom lies in our collective ability to create meaning, not in our individualistic capacity to discern truth. In social therapy we “make the problems vanish” (following Wittgenstein, 1980) by changing their meaning through an appeal to the collective capacity, responsibility and creative power of the group.

And why isn’t all of this just a vulgar idealism? Because, in practice, the philosophically religious dualism, Realist-Idealist, is rejected in favor of an activity-theoretic *world* (more accurately, *life*) view. Social therapy is a humanistic radical rejection of all forms of reductionism. This leaves us with only one tool to build with: human activity. And that tool is a tool-and-result. The anthropological discovery of humans as tool users was the theoretical basis of humanistic Marxism. The psychological

discovery of moral humans as tool-and-result users is the theoretical basis of humanistic postmodern Marxism. All creative power to the activity of the people!

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