

# The Relevance of Marx to Therapeutics in the 21st Century

By Fred Newman and Lois Holzman

The challenge facing psychotherapists and other "helpers" is to transform psychotherapy in such a way that "therapeutics" comes out of the office and into the world. Therapeutics, to us, is the activity of human beings helping each other grow and develop. (It is a rare psychotherapy that has this as an explicit goal; yet what is effective about psychotherapy - when it works - is, we believe, precisely this.)

We see the new therapies (narrative, collaborative, constructionist, etc.) as heading in this direction, insofar as they are efforts to transform psychology and therapy from an approach designed to fix up what's wrong with us to an approach designed to support the expression of what's positive about us (specifically, our capacity to reshape our lives). These new therapies challenge the long-held belief that the process of therapy has to do with some kind of internal mental surgery. They are, to a lesser extent and to varying degrees, beginning to recognize that the process of therapy has to do, instead, with helping people to be more giving, to transform, to grow, to be more responsive to environments, to learn how to interrelate and to recreate our humanness.

Our own work can be described as an effort to make therapeutics a way of life. We also describe our work as building community - and the two are inseparable to us. Perhaps of greatest assistance to us has been Karl Marx. Performance social therapeutics, the name we use to describe our Marxian-based, dialectical practice, originated in our group therapy but is also the basis for a continuously emergent development community.

In recent years, we have been writing about the work we do and the community that we, along with hundreds of others, have been building for the last twenty-five years (e.g., Holzman, 1999; Newman and Holzman, 1997; 1996). In *The End of Knowing*, we argue that the relevant ontological unit for psychology in these postmodern times is activity, which requires a non-epistemological (non-objectivist, non-cognitive) methodology (1997). We use the term activity in its Marxian sense - "revolutionary, practical-critical, activity" (Marx, 1974, p. 121) - and not as a general reference to human action and/or agency, as many social constructionist and socio-cultural psychologists do.

Revolutionary, practical-critical activity is human practice that is fully self-reflexive, dialectical, transformative of the totality and continuously emergent. It is human practice that "abolishes the present state of things" (Marx and Engels, 1974, p. 57) by the continuous transformation of mundane specific life practices into new forms of life. This conception of activity as revolutionary activity is key to understanding our calling for therapeutics as a way of life. Revolutionary activity is not a kind of activity; it is a new methodology for a new kind of political-psychological practice: "Marx is urging us to consider the need for an activity revolution" (Newman, in press).

*The End of Knowing* grows out of our efforts to create the conditions for "an activity revolution." Since the 1970's we have created and sustained the building of an ever-expanding, diverse community of what is now tens of thousands of people and an interconnected network of cultural, psychological, educational and political projects that support people to transform existing environments and ways of relating that they find oppressive, painful and destructive of the human spirit into ones that meet their/human needs. We have done this without applying any method, but (again, following Marx) by

practicing method - an approach in which method is inseparable from the object to be studied. Lev Vygotsky, Marx's follower in the area of psychology, stated it this way: *"The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of psychological activity. In this case, the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study."* (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65)

Vygotsky is saying that human activity cannot be studied apart from creating the very tools with which to study it. It cannot be studied instrumentally, that is, by applying an existing or even newly created method. It cannot be studied epistemologically. "Method as simultaneously tool and result" is dialectical practice, not a new method but a new conception of method - method as the practice of dialectics. Method and object are a totality, a dialectical unity. The entire enterprise - human life and its study - is a search for method. We coined the term tool-and-result methodology for Vygotsky's (and our) practice of method in order to distinguish it from the instrumental tool for result methodology that characterizes the natural and social sciences (Newman and Holzman, 1993). Our community building and the projects that comprise it - the East Side Institute for Short Term Psychotherapy, the East Side Center for Social Therapy and affiliated centers in other cities, the Castillo Theatre, the All Stars Talent Show Network, the Development School for Youth, etc. - are practices of this methodology.

The human capacity to perform, that is to be both who we are and who we are not at the very same time, is central to our practice. Performance is, we have come to believe, the revolutionary activity by which human beings create their lives (develop) - qualitatively transforming and continuously reshaping the unity that is us-and-our environment. Over the last two decades we and our colleagues have learned an enormous amount about performance from the dozens of projects we have created for and with young people and adults. Our therapeutic practice, performance social therapy, is based in the power of performance as revolutionary activity. We believe that talk therapy helps people grow emotionally to the extent that "the talk" is performatory; more specifically, "some kind of development takes place in the process of ensemble, collective performance of not just someone else's play, but the performance of our own discourse with each other" (Newman, 1999, p. 130).

A note is warranted here about development, a term currently out of favor with postmodern and critical psychologists alike. We agree with our colleagues that development, as defined and studied by mainstream psychology, has little constructive to do with human life; however (and fortunately), human beings do engage in developmental activity, i.e., abolish the present state of things, transform totalities. It is this concept of developmental activity that we want to bring to the forefront of any new postmodern psychological practice.

Performance social therapy, we believe, has helped many with their emotional pain. It has, as well, been both the breeding ground and the testing ground for numerous transformations of Marxian and post-Marxian conceptions. Our "therapeutization" of Marxism is an ongoing clinical developmentalist recasting of the classical class analytic, cognitive view known as dialectical materialism. Some of the more important Marxian conceptions reshaped by social therapeutics include the conception/practice of power, self, group, meaning and dialectics itself.

For example, Newman's earliest therapeutic/analytic work brought to light the critical distinction between power and authority, where power is the creative capacity of the group by the exercise of its emotional labor to generate new environments, and authority is the societally overdetermined predisposition of the individuated members of the group

to passively accept class-dominated, patriarchal emotive environments (Newman, 1974). In the vortex of the conflict between power and authority, the social therapist is, at once, the organizer (facilitator) of the group's emotive labor power and the potential (or even actual) repository of the group members' authoritarian "instincts." Thus, in working out the precise nature of this emerging relationship, the group changes its relationship to power and to authority, i.e., it hopefully becomes more powerful and less alienated.

The group's practical-critical consideration of self is a related issue. For self and the therapeutic principle of "knowing thy self" are, in our opinion, little more than a cover-up for individuated alienation. The Marxian notions of species identity and world historic identity are re-tooled to do battle against the Freudian (bourgeois) fear of group behavior. Wittgenstein's (1953) critical commentary on private languages, and his philosophically therapeutic mode of teaching it, serve here as a kind of humanistic "shock" therapy to help individuals recognize that they do not (and need not and cannot) know themselves since they are themselves. The social therapist works with the group (not the individuated selves that, reductionistically speaking, comprise the group) organizing it as an emotional zone of proximal development, or zpd, to borrow Vygotsky's term for how and where human development is culturally-socially created (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). 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 ongoing and ever-changing activity is developmental for all - even those who are most "individually" developed.

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?"

This 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, we reject the simplistic equation of meaning and use that is common amongst many followers and students of Wittgenstein in favor of the dialectical relationship between meaning and activity. The meaning of conversation is not to be found in how it is used but in that it is used (Newman, 1999, pp. 84-85).

The above, of course, is an abstract characterization of social therapeutics. How does the engagement of power, authority, self, etc., occur? What is a group like? Social therapy groups are typically comprised of 15 to 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 leave and new members join. A group typically begins in a fairly traditional manner as different people bring up issues they want help with. But the real work of the group is figuring out how to talk about what they want to talk about, i.e., the group's activity is figuring out what to do with all the "stuff" that's been put out, how to create an environment/a methodology/a conversation. In other words, the therapeutic work is methodological, not psychological. The therapist helps the group practice method, i.e., create a tool (as in tool-and-result) uniquely and specifically to deal with what it is they want to talk about. It is in the group's activity of creating the method that such issues of self, language, power, etc., get engaged. The social therapeutic process, then, is not to help people with their problems; rather, it is to help groups of people create environments for getting help. This, we have found, is most helpful.

In orthodox psychology, the moral dimension of life activity is ruled out of order in the name of good science. Fact and value are arbitrarily distinguished even though in the "becoming" of life "ought" and "is" are dialectically intertwined. Not surprisingly, psychology has become less and less relevant to human life and growth. A new science/art is needed - a revolutionary science/art practiced by all - to help us navigate through the swirling waters of a new and complex millennium.

### **Further reading**

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