

Psychology and Marxism in Mexico*

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Abstract. *This paper is a report on the Second Conference on Marxism & Psychology, organized by the Psychology Faculty of the Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, and held in Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico, from the 9th to the 11th August 2012. A discussion is offered on the political context for the conference, and in particular the Cherán and #YoSoy132 movements.*

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Marx famously argued (against the view that ‘religious essence’ could be resolved into and thereby explained by ‘human essence’) that the human essence cannot be treated as something fixed and then taken for granted as if it were an ‘abstraction inherent in each single individual’. Instead, Marx (1846) pointed out, this apparent human essence is ‘the ensemble of social relations’. This elementary starting point of a Marxist approach to human ontology – that is, the nature of the thing that is a human subject – poses big problems for the study of individual psychology. The discipline of psychology which came into being at the same point as capitalism has revolved around investigations into the ‘human essence’ and attempts to fix it in place, and to adapt or exclude those who do not fit. Psychology makes each individual human being (whose psychology is assumed to be an ‘abstraction inherent in each’ of them) understandable to those in power.

As psychological ideas spread through society, and are now globalised so that Western psychology becomes the model for individuals in other cultures to also understand themselves, it embeds itself in ideology and necessary false consciousness of a political economic system in which everyone must believe that it is normal and natural that some individuals should exploit others. Psychology is bourgeois ideology at its purest condensed into models of development and personality and mental disorder, and packaged as ‘self-help’ so that as you work upon yourself and your own psychology you come to believe at an even deeper level that alienation is your problem and it is

your responsibility to make your little prison of the self a happier place to live.

Many Marxists have avoided ‘psychology’ for this reason. Why bother trying to work out how the bits of the jigsaw at the level of the individual fit into the bigger picture if all you will end up with is a little shape that is already cut to size in such a way that it seems like competition and violence is universal, hard-wired, and so here to stay? But we do experience this inhuman world through our everyday relations to others, and keep it going by buying into the idea that there is no alternative and deep down this is what our psychology is really like. And then, when we can stand it no more and crack, our misery and distress is here in full at the level of the individual. This is why some Marxists work as psychologists, and they know that as they patch things up their task is also to open up the possibilities of social change, perhaps of understanding the psychological reasons why people attach themselves to power as a survival strategy. It includes the task of encouraging collective action that will resolve that ‘psychology’ into historical transformation of society and what we today think of as the ‘self’. To do that some Marxists have tackled psychology itself, tried to grasp how it works as a key component of capitalism, interpreting it so that it might be changed, might change itself.

Academic and professional psychologists from different Marxist approaches to psychology gathered at the beginning of August 2012 at the Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo in Morelia,

Mexico, to work on these questions at the second Psychology and Marxism conference. The conference brought together representatives of the Russian ‘activity theory’ tradition that developed in the wake of the October Revolution in the open space for new ideas about the human subject as ‘ensemble of social relations’. They spoke alongside versions of this tradition that have been forged through revolutionary practice in different places ranging from New York to Ciudad Juarez as ‘social therapy’, and debated with German historical materialist ‘science of the subject’ researchers and with those taking up Frankfurt School attempts to turn Freudian psychoanalysis into a Marxist theory of the individual. Lacanian psychoanalytic attempts to link up with some form of Marxism (or in some cases to try and supplant it) jostled alongside discussion of the work of the radical psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (the Lenin of Africa, it is sometimes said) on how colonialism and racism insinuate themselves into the individual. Latin America is also site of a ‘liberation psychology’ inspired by the Brazilian ‘liberation theologies’, and this makes any abstract discussion of individual change quite impossible, for to be Marxist it must take the form of ‘action research’ that makes academic work part of the real world.

In different ways, deliberately and despite itself, the conference was no mere academic conference. The reality of life in Mexico today should have made that impossible, and the organisers made that impossibility evident right from the start. The conference inauguration was a Purépecha ceremony led by representatives of the town of Cherán (a ceremony the Universidad Michoacana authorities did not want to happen) and which gave an additional edge to an already charged situation. The state of Michoacan pretty well corresponds to the territory of the pre-hispanic Purépecha, and there are communities that still speak the language and today they are retrieving this as a heritage of collective struggle against the conquistadores and now against neoliberal capitalism.

Michoacan is also site of one of the most powerful of the Mexican drug cartels ‘La Familia Michoacana’, now in an uneasy informal truce with the state administration following the recent election of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), the party La Familia themselves endorsed. Cherán, a town of about 16,000 people high in the mountains of west Michoacan, was subject to illegal logging and murders in which La Familia were involved and against which the police and army would do nothing until April 2011. Women from Cherán took power into their own hands, took some of the loggers hostage, burnt the trucks, set up blockades, and the town now

still operates with some other surrounding villages as a self-governing autonomous community. State security forces cannot enter the town, volunteers staff the defence posts, and decision-making is through popular assemblies.

Now Cherán (which, they remember, rose up during the Mexican revolution) is at the forefront of indigenous peoples’ resistance. The Mexican constitution defines the state as ‘pluricultural’, and in response to the Zapatista movement – one of the enduring visible successes of the movement throughout Mexico – a federal law was passed in 2001 which gives indigenous people autonomy over natural resources and the judiciary. The town leadership is uninterested in branding and marketing itself (selling Cherán honey would be an option if they went down this road) to the consternation of some reformists who want to help it become self-sufficient. The remittance economy (in which about a third of the population go to the United States and then return with ideas about individual self-sufficiency, competitiveness and success compatible with the worst of Western psychology) threatens to corrode the community. The participants at the conference recognised that this is an ongoing political question, and were keen to use the conference to internationalise the struggle, to make their activity a centre for a different kind of globalisation antithetical to capitalism. This does not mean that the ‘Cherán K’eri’ – the collective leadership of Cherán – is Marxist, though it does include Marxists. It has shut out all political parties, but the Town Council welcomed the National Encounter of the Autonomous Anti-Capitalist Resistance in May (Carolina, 2012). At our conference Cherán K’eri were comrades learning about Marxism and we were learning from them.

One of the striking things about the conference was the active participation of students, as organisers from the university and as visitors from different parts of Mexico. Of the 700 who packed out the parallel sessions, a majority were young local activists and radicals learning about activism and political debate. The conference organisers oriented to the local autonomous movements (such as Cherán K’eri) rather than the ‘Casas del Estudiante’. (These are halls of residence, some of which are party-affiliated, to which the university claims to devote a large proportion of its budget but in fact currently devotes only a minimal amount, about three percent, and which the university did not defend during recent police incursions when the students demanded more funding). In plenaries and the closing session, for example, the student movement #YoSoy132 were invited to contribute. The PRI which held power in Mexico for just over

seventy years until 2000 has just succeeded in getting back into power (nationally, in Michoacan state and so also, as a consequence, in the university administration and the lecturers union) following a ruthless and corrupt election campaign.

Effective resistance to the patently unfair rigged election began in May at the Universidad Iberoamericana (an expensive elite institution where the PRI presidential candidate Enrique Peña Nieto felt safe), and the student protests at that campaign meeting were condemned by the PRI and the media (Televisa and TV Azteca were notoriously in the pockets of the PRI) as being orchestrated by 'outsiders'. The Ibero students responded by posting 'Video 131' in which they held up their student cards to prove they were actually students, and this was followed by postings by supporters who identified themselves as 'student number 132', hence 'yo soy' (I am) '132' as the name of the movement (<http://www.yosoy132media.org/>). In July, just before the Psychology and Marxism conference, the Morelia Assembly hosted the seventh interuniversity assembly, and in alliance with some lecturers in the Universidad Michoacana (most significantly those who were organising our conference) #YoSoy132 has become a focus for open left political debate, arguing now for broader political challenge to corruption and consumerism. If the key signifier of Cherán is 'autonomy' (with democracy through the popular assembly as a necessary element of the struggle), then the signifier that animates #YoSoy132 is 'democracy', and it is being activated in diverse autonomous forms that effectively break from bourgeois fake-democracy (atomised 'voting' every few years for a different 'representative' in a market-place of corrupt parties) and from bourgeois psychology (atomised individual existence in thrall to the market).

The conference sessions oscillated between theory and practice, and the fact that this took place in Morelia now was what forged a link between the two. The final plenary session chaired by Cherán K'eri and with interventions by #YoSoy132 saw a most bizarre slow carnival upending of academic conventions as the invited psychologists (myself among them) were bit by bit replaced by student organisers from the audience who came up on stage during the discussion. We had longer time for this rather chaotic process because the plenary talk before the final one had been cancelled; that speaker had been unable to get to Morelia because the main highway from Mexico City

had been blocked by La Familia and an army operation to try and stop them.

An academic conference, even on 'psychology and Marxism' is a rather protected space, and it is tempting to for those inside that space to romanticise the 'real world' and then, looking back, to romanticise the conference as if it were itself a free space. There were reminders day after day during the conference that even psychologists can be dangerous to those in power and can be endangered themselves. No more so than in this final session where a call went out to demand that the authorities take seriously the disappearance of three community psychologists from the town of Paracho in Michoacan the month before. These three had come to work in the community at a local festival. Blood and signs of struggle in the hotel from where they were abducted were dismissed by the police (<http://nomasvictimas.org/abduction/>). A petition was signed, and letters of support are now being sought from psychology and community organisations from inside Mexico and abroad. A national demonstration took place in Mexico City at the beginning of September.

The surreal atmosphere in the final session of the conference culminated in students chanting 'Yo Soy Ciento Treinta y Dos' and Cherán K'eri congratulating the organisers for making this a forum for change, a forum in which change took place. If something significant did happen here then it might have involved some 'psychology' and in some ways 'Marxism' was part of what happened, but what was most radical was the opposite of what we know about the discipline of psychology and what it tells us about ourselves. It was a collection of surprising collective events, events that Marxists today do not have ready responses to but will be forced to engage with if social and individual change (at a local, national and international level) are ever to be linked in revolution.

References

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