



CRITICAL THEORY AND  
PRACTICE IN PSYCHOLOGY AND  
THE HUMAN SCIENCES

# Psychology's Contribution to Socio-Cultural, Political, and Individual Emancipation

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CARL RATNER

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# Critical Theory and Practice in Psychology and the Human Sciences

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Carl Ratner  
Institute for Cultural Research and Education  
Trinidad, CA, USA

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*United States Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776*

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.*

Marx:

*Our motto must be: reform of consciousness not through dogmas, but by analyzing the mystical consciousness that is unintelligible to itself. The reform of consciousness consists only in making the world aware of its own consciousness, in awakening it out of its dream about itself, in explaining to it the meaning of its own actions.*

*We do not dogmatically anticipate the world, but only want to find the new world through criticism of the old one. We do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles.*

*In order to secure remission of its sins, mankind has only to declare them for what they actually are.*

Marx to Ruge, Sept. 1843; [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43\\_09.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm)

*To Jenny and Matthew, a wonderful couple  
who make the world a better place.*



# Preface: Transforming psychology, Transforming Psychology, Transforming Society

This book seeks to make the discipline of Psychology—which includes academic Psychology, psychotherapy, educational psychology, special needs psychology—relevant to understanding and correcting urgent social and psychological problems of our era. I seek to make this understanding and practice (i.e., *praxis*) integral, or built into, Psychology. In other words, Psychology contains the tools for this praxis within its theories, methodologies, and interventions. Psychological theories, methodologies, and interventions *are* emancipatory. Social-psychological improvement then informs psychological work—psychological theory, methodology, interventions. Understanding and practicing social-psychological improvement will be performed in the course of doing Psychology.

Transforming Psychology requires reclaiming and reformulating its theories, methodologies, and interventions. Transforming the science of Psychology requires transforming its understanding of psychology. Psychological phenomena are reconceptualized as cultural phenomena.

An emancipatory Psychology is a cultural Psychology that researches cultural-psychological phenomena. This makes psychological phenomena into windows into culture/society. Psychological phenomena are formed in macro cultural factors by cultural processes which impart a cultural form to psychology. Formulated in this way by scientific, cultural

Psychology, psychological phenomena reflect and reveal culture; they critique culture; and they call for improving culture.

Emancipation becomes a component of psychological phenomena and scientific Psychology. Psychological science, psychological phenomena, and emancipation are integrated into a triple helix.

This will correct Psychology's historic errors of (a) ignoring social issues and (b) psychologizing social issues by reducing them to abstract, psychological principles. These complementary errors have stunted Psychology's scientific potential as well as its sociopolitical potential for improving social life and psychological functioning.

Explaining the vast extent of this reclaiming and reformulating of Psychology's elements shall occupy the first half of this book. The second half shall utilize refurbished Psychology to prove its mettle by analyzing and improving social movements that aim at social and psychological emancipation. This is one way that a refurbished Psychology can make important and distinctive contributions to social, political, and psychological enrichment.

Trinidad, CA, USA

Carl Ratner

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# **Section I**

**Developing a Psychological Theory  
for Scientifically Understanding and  
Enriching Psychology and Society**



# 1

## Introduction: Defining Emancipation That Forms the Parameters of Emancipatory, Scientific Psychology

An emancipatory Psychology requires conceptualization of emancipation. While the content of emancipation is a matter of dispute in today's climate of political, social, and moral polarization, I believe agreement is possible on which elements (or structures or conditions) of society must be transformed in order to achieve emancipation, however we define it.

We may begin with articulating what emancipation requires in an obviously oppressive social system such as slavery. Which social elements, structures, or conditions of slave society must be transformed in order to achieve emancipation of slaves from slavery? A Platonic questioning will help us to arrive at an agreeable, adequate conclusion: If slave owners reduce the daily labor by an hour, does this constitute emancipation? If slave owners provide more food, does this constitute emancipation? If slave owners provide education to the slaves, does this constitute emancipation? If slave owners provide pain killers to the slaves, does this constitute emancipation? If slaves practice cognitive techniques such as meditation, would that emancipate them? If they prayed to have a better life after death, would this emancipate them from slavery? If they learned to respect and empathize with their masters, would this emancipate them? If slaves learned to perceive and interpret their world differently,

through different meanings, would that emancipate them from slavery? If slaves communicated openly and expressed emotions to their fellow slaves, would this emancipate them? If they formed close relations with their families, would this emancipate them from slavery? If dark-skinned slaves became friendly with light-skinned slaves, would this emancipate them? If female slaves were treated the same as male slaves and given the same benefits, would that emancipate them from slavery? If homosexual slaves were treated equally with heterosexual slaves would that emancipate them?

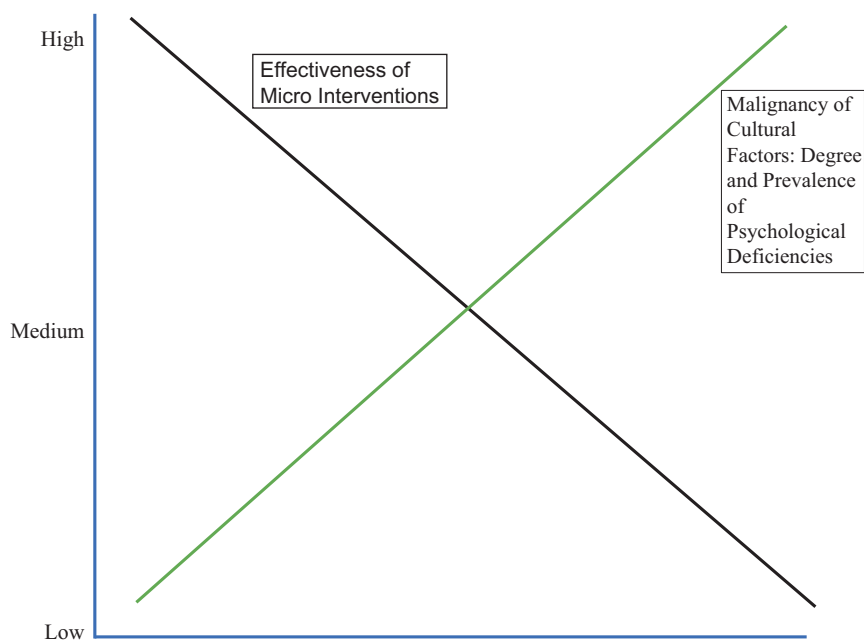
Clearly none of these is sufficient. Why? Because they do not abolish the social relations of slavery. The people remain slaves throughout these proposed reforms. They are simply comfortable slaves. (It is arguable that comforting reforms actually strengthen slavery because they generate some acceptance from slaves—and outsiders—which reduces resistance to slavery.)

Emancipation from slavery requires eradicating the social relation of slavery, and the social structure, and social institutions, and politics and power of slavery. The political economy of slavery must be abolished so that there is no such thing as slavery; there are no slaves and slave owners. The socioeconomic roles of slaves and owners are abolished. Nobody can own another person. Marx expressed this aptly: "An oppressed class is the vital condition for every society founded on the antagonism of classes. The emancipation of the oppressed class thus implies necessarily the creation of a new society."

This is the first element of emancipation. The second element is constructing an alternative social system that consists of fulfilling, harmonious, democratic, cooperative, supportive social relations throughout its institutions, transactions, and ownership and distribution of resources and products.

The emancipatory future alternative can only be brought about if the oppressive, existing system of relationships is thoroughly dismantled. Emancipation from slavery cannot occur within a functioning slave system of slave owners, slaves, institutions, traditional rights, privileges, obligations, and power.

Micro levels of society, such as interpersonal relations or subjective thoughts and meanings, do not transform macro cultural factors of slavery. Slaves and slave owners can hope, wish, talk, pray, sing, respect, and love as much as they want, but these do not eradicate the objective social



**Fig. 1.1** The necessity of macro cultural transformation to solve malignant macro cultural problems

structures and powers—for example, to own another person—that constrain slaves to be slaves.

This can be depicted in Fig. 1.1.

Figure 1.1 illustrates that prevalent, malignant cultural factors require macro cultural transformation to eliminate cultural-psychological malignancy. Micro cultural reforms can only solve cultural problems when they are moderate in severity and prevalence. Because social and psychological emancipation requires radical social transformation, reforms such as pedagogical or psychological intervention can only achieve limited success. Our example of reforms to slavery exemplifies this. In oppressive societies, reforms make the oppressive system palatable. More perniciously, reforms distract from radical change; they are touted as real change when they actually support the status quo. I shall explain how civil rights fits this mold.

Specialized pedagogy for disadvantaged youth exemplifies this problem. It is touted as a means for overcoming impoverished social and material conditions. However, it can never overcome these conditions. And it is not intended, by the powers that be, to overcome conditions. Social-economic-political power in class societies depends upon oppression. It only accepts reforms that elevate a few individuals while consigning the majority to continued subaltern status. This is true of specialized pedagogy for disadvantaged students. The very existence of specialized pedagogy for literacy, language, and mathematics indicates the inadequacy of the normal social environment to support such competencies. Healthy, fulfilling environments would support these competencies, as they have done in many historical periods. For example, people have been learning language, literacy, and math for millennia without special techniques because the social environment supported these. It is only where the social environment is impoverished that artificial, specialized techniques for literacy and language are developed to substitute for broad support. However, these interventions can never overcome the impoverished environment—especially because that environment benefits from impoverished individuals who are adjusted to it and lack the skills for resisting it. This is why specialized pedagogical techniques to assist disadvantaged students rarely succeed in elevating their competencies to a high level that is necessary to succeed in high-level tasks and institutions.

All societies in the world today are oppressive in various ways (which does not mean they are totally oppressive or equally oppressive). Marx, in a letter to Annenkov, December 28, 1846, said, “Being an economic category, slavery has existed in all nations since the beginning of the world. All that modern nations have achieved is to disguise slavery at home and import it openly into the New World.” Emancipation requires (1) comprehending the political economy, forms of ownership and control, class structure, institutions, artifacts, concepts, and ideology that oppress people and (2) transforming/reorganizing these sources of oppression in radical ways into a new social system that becomes the source of social and psychological fulfillment.

In other words, emancipation requires scientific knowledge about the sources of oppression and viable alternatives to them, as well as political

action that implements this knowledge in destructive acts and constructive acts, respectively.

Because the first element of emancipation—comprehending and dismantling the existing oppressive system—is prerequisite to the second element of comprehending and reconstructing an emancipatory alternative, this book shall utilize its limited space to concentrate on the first element. This focus is justified by the fact that many activists fall into false, incomplete critiques of the system that are powerless to comprehend it and dismantle it. As long as activists are stuck in this problem, they are incapable of providing the groundwork for transforming the system. Indeed, the transformation is only viable if it grows out of a radical critique of the status quo that reveals precisely what must be transformed and the direction that this can take. Future liberation is a dialectical outgrowth of the oppressive present. I shall indicate some ideas about an emancipatory alternative that emerge from my critique of the existing system.

## 1.1 Social-Psychological Emancipation and Macro Cultural-Psychological Science

The problematic of this book is to explain how psychological phenomena and the academic discipline that studies them—which I designate as Psychology—can contribute to social-political emancipation. In other words, how can psychology and Psychology contribute to (1) comprehending the macro cultural sources of oppression that are rooted in the political economy (such as the political economy of slavery), (2) critiquing these fundamental, central sources of oppression, and (3) transforming them into political-economic, macro cultural sources of fulfillment?

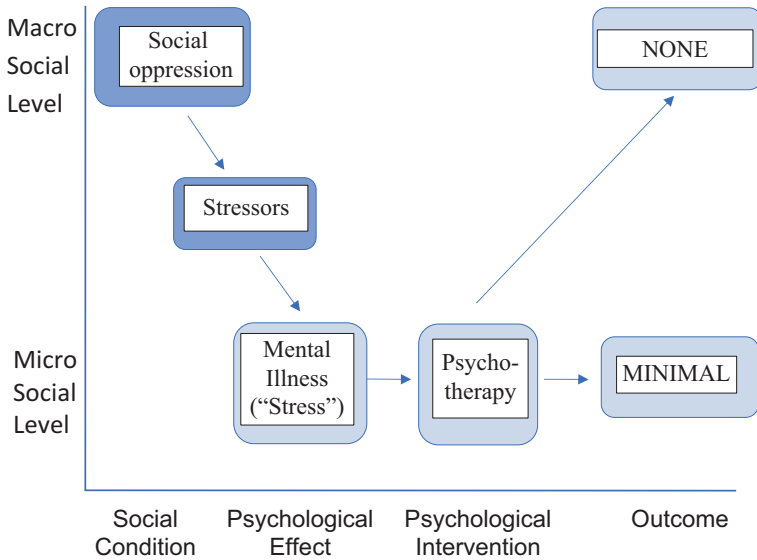
This question is problematical because emancipation is a macro, social-level phenomenon that analyzes, critiques, and transforms macro cultural formations, while Psychology studies psychological phenomena on the micro level of individuals' minds (psyches) and bodies and interpersonal interactions. The problematic is how the latter can contribute to understanding and transforming the former. How can the macro and micro levels be made relevant to each other?



This is a knotty problem that requires a sophisticated, radical solution. It is not solved by adding a few cultural variables to psychological phenomena and to the discipline of Psychology. The problem is that mainstream Psychology does not simply overlook culture, it actively obscures it. Consequently, Psychology is not patiently waiting to learn cultural aspects of psychology; it makes it difficult to learn these aspects. Psychology has accomplished this by drawing culture down to psychology which is conceived as micro-level bio-psychology or personal psychology that can be understood by principles of existing academic Psychology. This “psychologizing” of culture means that culture is improved via psychological principles and psychological processes that govern psychological phenomena. However, mainstream Psychology has few insights into culture after it has reduced culture to non-cultural factors and processes.

This problematic of mainstream Psychology for contributing to cultural understanding and improvement is illustrated by Psychology’s conception of mental illness. Where mental illness is actually a by-product of social oppression, Psychology reduces oppression to “stressors,” which are then conceived as triggering biological or personal vulnerabilities, and then generating biological or personal coping mechanisms to “stress.” Psychological forms of intervention are then utilized to mitigate the reactions to “stress.” This conversion of concrete issues to an abstract circuit of stressors and stress, that is the focus of treatment, effectively precludes mental illness from adding to our understanding of society or improving society. It also generates minimal psychological improvement because it has neither comprehended nor challenged the ultimate basis of mental illness in social oppression. This is the serious cultural problematic of mainstream Psychology. It is what we shall solve. We depict this problematic in Fig. 1.2.

It is important to emphasize that conventional Psychology does not only psychologize culture; it psychologizes psychological phenomena as well. This means that the field of Psychology *construes* its subject matter as micro-level phenomena that primarily originate in intra-individual mechanisms, as well as operate by intra-individual mechanisms, and serve individual needs and interests. This statement means that the discipline of Psychology imposes a certain way of thinking about psychology that is

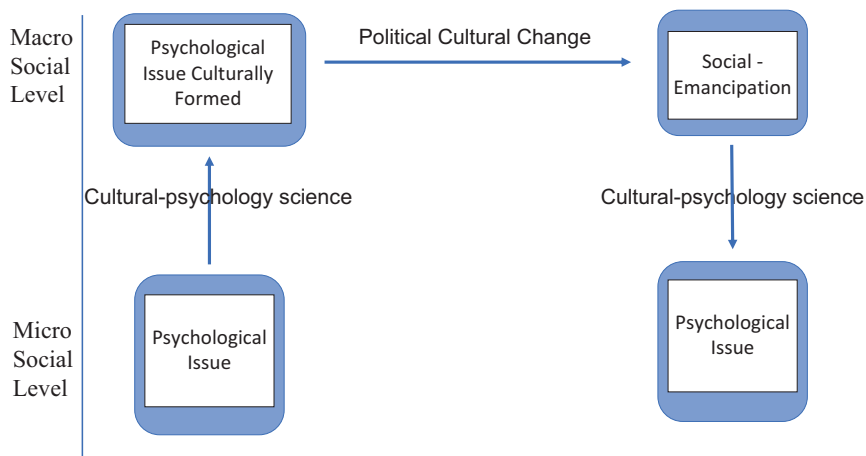


**Fig. 1.2** Psychologizing psychological phenomena and society

not natural or universal. Psychology's approach to psychology is *theory driven*, that is, ideologically driven. This is what it means to say that Psychology *psychologizes* psychology.

Correcting these errors in mainstream Psychology obviously requires a major reconceptualization. We must reconceptualize psychology as formed by macro cultural factors. Then, psychological phenomena reflect their formative cultural factors; they are expressions of them and windows into them. Psychological science would then apprehend social problems in and through psychological phenomena. In this way, psychological phenomena are uplifted to the cultural level; psychology is "culturized." More precisely, the original, intrinsic, cultural character of psychology is recovered (*recuperar*) from its psychologization by mainstream Psychology.

After psychology has been recovered and "reculturized," it can indicate how social factors and systems should be improved so as to generate fulfilling psychological phenomena. Psychological phenomena and Psychology would thereby complement the social critiques that are made by other disciplines—for example, health critique, educational critique, economic critique, news critique, cultural critique, and so on. Psychology



**Fig. 1.3** Culturizing psychology and society

will also be improved by these cultural critiques and the social improvements they generate. This is schematically represented in Fig. 1.3.

This analysis of psychology and society is the theme of this book. This analysis “culturizes” both everyday psychological phenomena and the discipline of Psychology that researches psychological phenomena. Both subjects are made into windows into society that reveal society, critique society, and contribute to transforming society.

Psychological anthropologist, Lutz (1988, pp. 5–6, 152) explains how emotions have this macro cultural nature: “emotional meaning is fundamentally structured by particular cultural systems and particular social and material environments...The concepts of emotion can more profitably be viewed as serving complex communicative, moral, and cultural purposes rather than simply as labels for internal states whose nature or essence is presumed to be universal...Emotion is culturally defined, socially enacted, and personally articulated. Talk about emotions is simultaneously talk about society – about power and politics, about kinship and marriage, about normality and deviance.” “A people’s most basic assumptions about the nature of the self can be seen as the ideological products of particular social structures and political economies” (see Ratner 2000, 2007 for discussion). This means that emotions need to be culturized from their micro-level existence and brought up to the macro social level.

From there, emotions reveal political problems, and emotions generate cultural critique that combines with other critiques to politically improve society. This improved society then generates fulfilling emotional reactions.

The psychology of mental illness exemplifies this point. Guo (2019), a full-time psychological counselor at a factory in Dongguan, China, reports how mental illness reflects disruptions in the capitalist economy.

Many Chinese millennials – including those from rural backgrounds – experienced traumatic upbringings separated from their parents, who had gone to cities in search of work. Others grew up rootless, drifting along with their families as their relatives bounced from job to job. A 2017 study shows that over 36% of Chinese migrant workers born after 1980 had experienced symptoms of psychological distress. Millennial migrant workers were 30% more likely to experience psychological distress than those born prior to 1980, and are more likely to show symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, and anxiety.

Mental illness thus reveals that contemporary work patterns in China are psychologically damaging. This exemplifies how psychological research can comprise a cultural critique that complements other social critiques.

Guo brings up an important point that the discipline of Psychology is as cultural as its subject matter (psychological processes) is, and a political analysis of the discipline similarly reveals macro cultural problems which call for social improvement. Guo says that factory management evidences little concern about workers' psychological problems. This reflects on broad socioeconomic policy that allows managers to ignore the mental health of their employees.

Guo is one of only five factory-affiliated psychological counselors in Dongguan that is home to more than 5 million industrial workers. "At my current job, I'm expected to provide psychological consulting services to a staff of over 10,000, and I spend every day talking to workers and managers one on one. It's a service provided by very few factories in China...And those that do are clearly more concerned with avoiding liability and mitigating risk than providing real treatment. Such services aren't designed with employee needs in mind, but with an eye toward monitoring them and preventing major incidents" (ibid.).

The (everyday) psychology of mental illness and the (academic) Psychology of mental illness both can be examined by a critical psychological perspective to contribute important, distinctive critiques of Chinese economic policies/practices and social policies, respectively. These critiques supplement educational, moral, and economic critiques. Psychological critiques of psychological phenomena (mental illness) and social policies that address mental illness combine with other critiques to suggest directions for transforming social relations. *Psychological science will thereby contribute to social emancipation, psychological emancipation, and Psychological emancipation (of the academic discipline)*. This cultural approach to psychology follows Fig. 1.3. (The term “psychological issue” in the figure encompasses psychology and Psychology.) It corrects the problems with mainstream Psychology in Fig. 1.2.

This book articulates a Psychology that conceptualizes psychology in these terms. This Psychology is called Macro Cultural Psychology. I have developed it over many decades. It is an extension of Vygotsky’s cultural-historical Psychology. The book articulates the scientific and emancipatory principles of macro cultural psychology/cultural-historical psychology. It uses these principles to conceptualize the first stage of social-psychological-political emancipation, which is comprehending and critiquing the social system in order to know the causes of problems, and the societal level at which they must be eradicated. It also indicates a sense of what an emancipatory society would consist in. This theory of emancipation is then employed as a standard for evaluating emancipatory social-political movements and concepts. The objective is to ferret out mistakes and correct them, to enhance the struggle for emancipation. I focus upon populist social movements—that are devoted to improving the ecology, civil rights, justice, inequality, and oppression—because they are prominent and popular in this era. I explain that populist social movements, in general, contradict the scientific-emancipatory principles of macro cultural psychology/cultural-historical psychology. They seek change at a personal level and minimize the structural, macro, political level. This renders these important movements for progress ineffective and counterproductive. It renders them complicit with oppression instead of opposing oppression. This book is a constructive criticism that lays the foundation for an effective, viable emancipatory movement which is scientifically grounded in culture theory and psychological theory.

## 1.2 Marx's Emancipatory Social Science and Scientific Emancipation

Marx's study of the capitalist political economy is a model integration of science and emancipation. It exemplifies emancipatory social science that generates scientific emancipation. Marx's intellectual career was motivated from the outset by his revulsion at capitalist industrialization, exploitation, alienation, and poverty. It inspired Marx's deepening scientific explanation of the causes and solutions. His deep study of the capitalist political economy was aimed at comprehending the causes of social evils and the possibilities of correcting them. Marx's scientific political economics strove to build in critical, emancipatory constructs. He identified exploitation and alienation as the basis of capital/profit. His science of capitalism was an exposé of its exploitation and alienation that led to a socialist alternative. The search for alternatives to industrial capitalism led Marx to develop a dialectical ontology and epistemology as explaining contradictions that generate changes in social systems.

Rather than distracting from good science, Marx's emancipatory political interest led his scientific political economics to probe more deeply into capitalism than anyone had or has. It made Marxist political economics the most advanced, most comprehensive, most descriptive, and most predictive science of capitalism. Reciprocally, Marx's profound science of capitalism led to a profound, viable, concrete, comprehensive, negation of it in the form of socialism. Marxian socialist transformation is a logically deduced, concrete negation of capitalism's objective, scientific principles. Socialism is not an abstract dream of justice, respect, and equality.

## 1.3 Vygotsky's Marxist Cultural-Historical Psychology

Vygotsky modeled his emancipatory psychological science on Marx's. Vygotsky and his colleagues were serious Marxists (and Bolsheviks) during the Russian revolutionary period. They informed cultural-historical psychology with Marxist social scientific concepts and Marxist political