

International and Cultural Psychology

*Series Editor:* Anthony J. Marsella, Ph.D.

Carl Ratner

# Cultural Psychology, Racism, and Social Justice

# **International and Cultural Psychology**

## **Series Editor**

Anthony J. Marsella, Alpharetta, GA, USA

Explores problems and challenges to mental health, psychosocial wellbeing, human growth and development, and human welfare that are emerging from our contemporary global context. It advances in psychological knowledge regarding the nature and consequences of the many social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental events and forces that affect individuals and communities throughout the world. The series covers areas like therapy, assessment, organizational psychology, community psychology, gender, child development, and specific disorders. In addition, it addresses major global challenges such as poverty, peace, urbanization, modernization, refugees, and migration. The series acknowledges the multidisciplinary, multisectoral, and multicultural nature of the global context of our lives, and publishes books that reflect this reality.

Carl Ratner

# Cultural Psychology, Racism, and Social Justice

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*Dear Owen,*  
*An urgent task beckons you: Save civilization from capitalism. This defines the meaningful life and the ethical life. Failing this task, meaningful life and ethical life will become obsolete, along with human life altogether. When this task feels overwhelming, snuggle with wonderful mom and dad, listen to Mozart, read Marx, and re-visit the splendor of Trinidad Bay, our Trinidad house, and Stone Lagoon.*



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## Chapter 1

# How Can Scientific Psychology Contribute to Social and Psychological Emancipation?



Capitalism is imploding from its social contradictions which have been caused by its economic exploitation of the populace. This implosion of the dominant global economic system has been termed “hegemonic decline” (Friedman & Chase-Dunn, 2005). Lachman (2020) explains this decline as the product of the success that capitalist elites have had in grabbing control of resources and governmental powers and cannibalizing the economy. In this process, not only are ordinary people harmed, but capitalists become increasingly unable to coordinate their interests as a class. They fail to adopt policies and make the investments necessary to solve social problems which they have created. Hegemonic decline is really shorthand for systemic disintegration. This not only characterizes individual countries such as the United States; it destabilizes global economic subsistence and human life itself. The totality of the collapse calls for a total solution that brings every domain of social life into the fray of comprehending the crisis and solving it through creating a humane, cooperative, global social order that is free from exploitation. This is the moral imperative which defines the meaningful life in today’s world. Ignoring this imperative makes one complicit in eroding human life.

This book adds the discipline of psychology, particularly cultural psychology, to this fray. It continues my work to make cultural psychology a scientific and emancipatory discipline that engages psychological phenomena as reflections of, and critiques of the established, failing social order and as containing insights to constructing a humane, cooperative, global social order that is free from exploitation. This book develops a comprehensive, coherent cultural psychological theory. It applies the theory to understanding racism and racial justice movements. Racism is a major social problem of capitalism, and this introducing of cultural psychology to comprehend and solve racism paves the way for cultural psychology to comprehend and solve any social problem in the imploding vortex of capitalism.

I utilize the brilliant work of Vygotsky’s cultural–historical Psychology which combines scientific insights into society and psychology with political insights for improving both by transforming them.

(Because the English term “psychology” is polysemous, denoting both a subject matter and the study of that subject, I shall designate the discipline—including theory, methodology, and interventions—as Psychology, with a capital “P” in distinction to psychology with a small “p,” which designates psychological phenomena such as emotions, cognitions, and mental illness.)

The book is concerned with demonstrating that human psychology is inherently cultural and therefore has the capacity to reveal, critique, and improve society—if this capacity is recognized in the practice of Psychology. This book seeks to reorient Psychology to this task. In other words, for psychology to be emancipatory and critical, it must be reconceptualized to be recognized as a cultural phenomenon. The science of Psychology must change in order to reconceptualize psychology as different from the way psychology has been construed by Psychology. Psychology, i.e., psychologists, has insisted that psychology is not-cultural and is some mixture of biological mechanisms + personal and interpersonal constructions. Psychologists have insisted on utilizing this noncultural conception of psychology—or, in their view, noncultural psychology—to address psychological, cultural, and political issues. However, this is like putting a square peg in a round hole. The peg must be reshaped, and Psychology must reshape its conception of psychology. Psychological phenomena *are* intrinsically cultural and intrinsically have the power to critique and transform society. However, conventional Psychology—i.e., psychologists—has denied this and has conceptually contorted psychology. This has rendered Psychology—i.e., psychologists—politically conservative as well as scientifically deficient. This has compromised the entire history of Psychology, including its academic and applied forms (see Ratner, 2017b, 2019, pp. 261–317; Ratner & Nunes, 2017, for this failure of “radical” psychoanalysis, Liberation Psychology, and “radical” Vygotskyian studies). They have all failed to put the square peg of their contorted Psychology into the round hole of human psychology and culture. This is not simply an intellectual, theoretical failure. It has caused enormous damage to social and psychological life by mystifying both and obstructing vital improvements in both.

Making Psychology socially relevant is a matter of elucidating features of psychology that objectively reflect society, expose its problems, and indicate processes that can reorganize society and psychology into alternative, emancipatory forms. In this sense, we seek to follow Darwin’s genius as described by Thompson (2019, p. 3): “Darwin’s genius was to see the wonder and the significance in the ordinary and mundane.”

This emancipatory psychological science is called macro-cultural psychology. It revolutionizes the discipline of Psychology insofar as it reverses the emphasis of Psychology. Psychologists and laypeople are not used to hearing that their feelings, reasoning, perceptions, emotions, motivation, imagination, and sexuality are cultural phenomena which reflect macro-cultural factors. Macro-cultural psychology follows Darwin’s ecological perspective in comprehending the environmental conditions that determined minute and complex biological changes. The shape and size of bird beaks crystalize, objectify, and reveal ecological conditions which form the anatomy of the beak. Tree trunks crystalize, or objectify, climatic conditions during

the tree's growth and inform us about them. Rocks similarly crystalize, objectify, and indicate geological conditions which formed the rocks. Conceiving psychology as reflecting, indicating, and critiquing cultural factors that organize it is simply another example of this general, scientific *ethos* which is to see wonder and significance in the ordinary and mundane.

Psychological phenomena are, in fact, formed by cultural factors and express them and are capable of critiquing and transforming them. For example, "Socioeconomic differentials in both verbal and general cognitive attainment emerge early in life, and widen during the pre-school and school years and continue to grow during adolescence and even into mid-life" (Sullivan et al., 2021, p. 208; <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/TheEarlyCatastrophe.pdf>). The authors empirically found that parents transmit socioeconomic elements of their class position to their children. Parents act as agents of their social class within their families and this is why class differences exist and widen.

This occurs in quite subtle forms: in parents' linguistic communication and also in the household artifacts which parents bring into the household. Sullivan et al. (p. 209) emphasize "the importance of the home literacy environment to children's language learning." One aspect of this environment is "the provision of age-appropriate learning materials (e.g., books and toys). Studies have found substantial socioeconomic differentials in these parental inputs" (ibid., p. 209). Thus, social stimuli in family interactions are historical materialist and they transmit their features to children who use them. This is how children acquire "cultural capital" and why social class becomes *more* dominant in psychology as psychology matures. The reason is that psychological phenomena become more embroiled with established macro-cultural factors in a growing array of activities.

The same is true for linguistic forms that parents of different socioeconomic classes employ with their children. Linguistic styles, syntax, grammar, vocabulary, and meanings (semiosis) vary with socioeconomic position. This provides children with different cultural capital/linguistic capital/symbolic capital. As Sullivan et al. (pp. 225, 218) state, "our central result is that parental vocabulary scores mediate a substantial share of the socioeconomic gradient in children's vocabulary at age 14." "The children of university graduates scored 8.6 on vocabulary versus 5.8 for children in households with no qualifications" (Sullivan, 2021, pp. 225, 218; <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/TheEarlyCatastrophe.pdf>).

It is clear that psychological maturation does *not* empower individuals to assert their individual agencies and circumvent social influences. On the contrary, *the ontogeny of psychological processes is socioeconomic ontogeny that stimulates, organizes, and supports levels of psychological development.*

This fact allows us to use psychological phenomena—e.g., ontogeny—as windows into society. The psychological maturation of psychological competencies in diverging demographics reveals inequalities in society. Psychological inequalities complement economic, educational, and medical inequalities. Psychology thus becomes social critique; Psychology adds to calls for social improvement, and Psychology suggests insights that social improvement must include specific structures which promote equal psychological fulfillment.

Psychological health in the United States confirms this macro-cultural psychological model. American mental health is deteriorating in lock step with socioeconomic–political deterioration. Major depression rates among youths aged 12 to 17 years rose by almost 63% between 2013 and 2016. American suicide rates increased by 33% between 1999 and 2019. The percentage of Americans who say they have no close friends has quadrupled since 1990, according to the Survey Center on American Life. Fifty-four percent of Americans report sometimes or always feeling that no one knows them well, according to a 2018 Ipsos survey (Brooks, 2021). In 2016 the suicide rate was 25% higher in rural and less-populated counties (those with fewer than 50,000 people) than in more populous ones (with at least one million people). Fifteen years earlier, it was only 10% higher.

This meteoric explosion of mental illness can only be caused by macro-cultural factors. Micro-level processes at the individual and interindividual level cannot account for this massive expansion across the American population in a few years. This proves that individual psychological effects are caused by macro-cultural factors outside the individual.

A psychological syndrome known as “deaths of despair,” caused by alcohol (alcoholic liver disease), drug overdoses, and suicide, was four times higher in 2017 than in 1999. From 2010 to 2020, deaths of despair averaged 70,000 deaths annually. Nationwide, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data found [overdose deaths may have surpassed 90,000](#), up from 70,630 in 2019. These deaths of despair are demographically distributed in the heartland areas that have greatly suffered from America’s economic decline. Its victims are primarily white, middle-aged men, with only high school education, who have suffered downward social mobility, with few prospects for the future (Case & Deaton, 2020; interview with Deaton in *Boston Review of Books*, May, 5, 2020, [https://bostonreview.net/class-inequality/joshua-cohen-angus-deaton-deaths-despair?mc\\_cid=b3888e1229&mc\\_eid=a9d9cc8ed6](https://bostonreview.net/class-inequality/joshua-cohen-angus-deaton-deaths-despair?mc_cid=b3888e1229&mc_eid=a9d9cc8ed6)). West Virginia, the national epicenter of the opioid crisis for the past decade, saw its fatal overdose rate spike by at least 45% in 2020.

The psychology of deaths of despair signifies, crystalizes, and “totalizes” (in Sartre’s term):

- (a) Structural economic decline, especially low levels of the population in the labor force.
- (b) Governmental responses to this decline which have failed to correct it.
- (c) Governmental responses to this decline which have failed to treat its psychological symptoms.
- (d) Poor physical health such as obesity.
- (e) Political attitudes of victims of deaths of despair.
- (f) Political and economic corruption in the manufacture and prescribing of medication—e.g., OxyContin—that is the proximal, physical agent of many deaths of despair. Prof. Deaton explains that “if the FDA had not been so much in the hands of the industry, and if we were not operating a rent-seeking, capitalistic health care system, then we wouldn’t have got those efforts to capitalize on the

despair. Other countries didn't get them to anything like the same extent" (*Boston Review of Books* interview).

The epidemiology and ontogenesis of the psychology of deaths of despair—as well as all psychological disorders—reveals social issues that comprise the constituents, motives, and affordances of the psychology of despair. These psychological problems exemplify Eric Fromm's conception of a "socially patterned psychological defect" or "a collective neurosis" (Fromm, 1955, pp. 23, 27; Ratner, 2017a).

Social aspects of the psychological syndrome are only issues if one emphasizes the social character of psychological phenomena, i.e., if one is a macro-cultural psychologist. If one construes psychology as natural, or as meanings that are generated by individual agency, or interpersonally constructed/negotiated, then one would never look for macro-cultural factors that generate and organize the syndrome of deaths of despair. (This is trying to fit a square peg in a round hole, or a stronger metaphor would be "putting Roundup on flowers.")

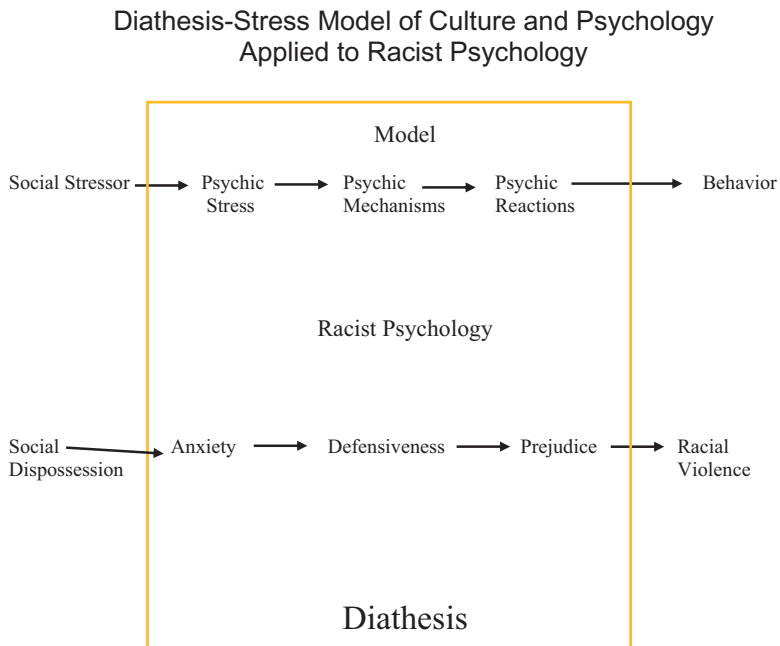
## The Diathesis–Stress Model Versus Macro-Cultural Psychology

The medical theory known as the diathesis–stress theory, which is popular in psychiatry, exemplifies this failure. It acknowledges environmental stressors that weaken the body, but it claims one's reaction to stressors depends upon the strength of one's biological disposition. Thus, the real cause of illness is not stressors but rather biological disposition. Stressors are acknowledged but minimized or dismissed. Medicine emphasizes treating the body, not the environment, despite the fact that improvements to the social environment, or public health, have produced the greatest improvements in physical health (Ratner, 1991, pp. 283–290).

Most branches of Psychology follow the diathesis–stress model. They postulate a psyche that is populated with endogenous, independent, self-contained, psychological mechanisms, processes, and factors—ranging from biological to personal—which "interact with," mediate, and modulate environmental factors which impinge on individuals. Racist psychology is treated as endemic to Caucasians, for example. (Sexist psychology is similarly rooted in endemic "toxic masculinity.")

This may be depicted in Fig. 1.1. The top row presents the schematic model of diathesis–stress; this is applied to racism.

The model acknowledges social stressors; however, the individual's reaction to them depends upon psychobiological diathesis. This is illustrated in the theory of racism known as the "behavioral immune system." Edsall (2022) describes it as the behavioral equivalent of the biological immune system: both avoid and exterminate foreign pathogens and contaminants. Foreigners and ethnic "others" are regarded as contaminants of native culture; these contaminants trigger avoidance and defensive behaviors. This is the character of racism that is depicted in Fig. 1.1 one. People



**Fig. 1.1** Diathesis-stress model of culture and psychology applied to racist psychology

vary in the sensitivity of their behavioral immune systems to ethnic “others.” Some are more open; some are more closed. These sensitivities react differently to social triggers. Trump supporters might have had a *latent tendency* to be opposed to immigration, and when Trump comes along and tells them that we need to “build a wall,” this latent tendency is activated. In contrast, individuals with weak behavioral immune systems are open to immigrants and reject Trump’s fear-mongering and side with democratic open immigration.

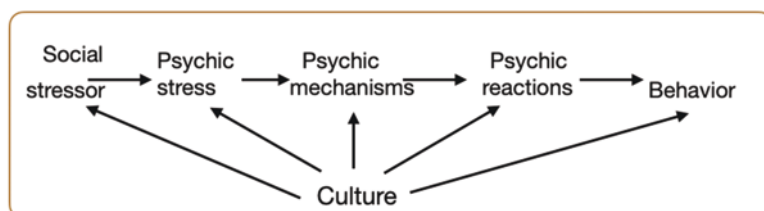
In contrast, macro-cultural psychology conceptualizes all of the elements in diathesis–stress as cultural phenomena. I have diagrammed this in Fig. 1.2 diagram.

Figure 1.2 shows that macro-cultural psychology is concerned with similar psychological processes and functions as conventional Psychology—namely, emotions, thinking, perception, needs, interpretations, expectations, development, dysfunction, attention, memory, impulsiveness, repression, activity, reflection, unawareness, confusion, and symbols. It reframes these as cultural processes and forms. These are what generate, form, transmit, support, and transform human psychology.

Honor killings exemplify this point (Ratner, 2011). In choosing a lover outside of her Kurdish community and living with him, Fadime was brutally shot and killed by her father at point-blank range in front of her mother and younger sister in 2002 in Sweden, at the age of 25 years. Her father shot her in the face as he shouted “you filthy whore.” The father felt no regret; on the contrary, he felt the killing



## Macro Cultural Psychology



**Fig. 1.2** Macro cultural psychology

assuaged the shame that Fadime had brought upon him and his family. His murderous act and his emotional response were condoned as moral by his wife and daughter, as well as the Kurdish community. All of the psychological details of his act and his family's and community's approval were cultural, as diagrammed in Fig. 1.2. The act; its intense rage; its perceptual, cognitive, and sexual contributions; its deliberateness (by the father, mother, and sister); and its emotional resolution in the form of eliminating sin and restoring honor and community (which included the family's reintegration into the community from which their daughter's sinful act had disgraced them) were generated by the cultural code. Invoking the sociological code to explain and describe the psychology does not displace psychology; it only displaces intraindividual, convoluted, mechanisms and processes such as repression, sublimation, projection, and reaction formation. The honor code replaces these with psychological stipulations (explicit and implicit) backed by social pressure.

A macro-cultural psychological analysis of the psychology of honor killings is emancipatory because it utilizes this psychology to reflect on macro-cultural factors that precipitate the killings. It elucidates the culture and politics of honor killings which brutally subordinate Kurdish women and their sexuality, all ideologically disguised as honor/morality. Psychologistic, e.g., psychoanalytic, conceptions of honor killings attribute them to convoluted unconscious psychological processes (such as repressed desires which become sublimated and projected and inverted onto cognitions, perceptions, and emotions about women's sexuality) of family members; this deflects attention from cultural politics, cultural critique, and cultural transformation that are necessary to understand and prevent the killings.

Dilthey explained why macro-cultural psychology is necessary to thoroughly comprehend human psychology. He said that the individual, instead of being a center of meaning, derives his meaning from his place in historical and social

processes. These constitute his psychology. “The whole content of psychic life is only an ephemeral specific form within the more encompassing content of spirit in history and society...The object of [contentional] psychology is thus always merely the individual who has been [artificially] singled out from the living context of socio-historical reality.” “A proper psychology must use the whole wealth of facts which comprise the subject matter of the human sciences in general...Since psychology by no means contains all those facts that comprise the subject matter of the human sciences...it follows that the subject matter of psychology is only a portion of that which takes place in each individual” (Dilthey, 1883/1989, pp. 81–82). Comprehending psychology requires a fuller conception of psychology that includes cultural, historical, and political characteristics. This is macro-cultural psychology.

### ***Book Organization***

I commence the book with a novel interpretation of Vygotsky’s cultural Psychology that is foundational to a scientific, emancipatory macro Psychology. Vygotsky’s great contribution to both of these dimensions rests upon his adopting of Marx’s concept of historical materialism. Historical materialism was Marx’s dialectical construct that explained the organization of society as well as the logical path to reorganizing society in a fulfilling form. Historical materialism is the paragon of a scientific and emancipatory construct. Vygotsky employed it to explain the formation and organization of human psychology as rooted in the political economy and class structure of society. This makes psychology a window into describing, critiquing, and transforming society. Vygotsky maintained that psychological fulfillment depends upon historical materialist dynamics that can transform capitalism into democratic, cooperative socialism (which requires articulation and clarification in contemporary conditions).

While Vygotsky was explicit about all this, it has been neglected by most of his followers (who emphasize personal and interpersonal comments about psychology that he made). Vygotsky’s cultural–historical Psychology therefore requires extensive recuperation and articulation. That has been the task of macro-cultural psychology. Chaps. 3 and 4 continue this task.

The remainder of the book applies macro-cultural psychology to analyze and solve a deep social–psychological problem. This serves to test the theory and also refine it in light of the empirical reality of social psychology. The issue I address is *racist psychology*. I have chosen this topic because it is complex and daunting. This is the level of real life which scientific Psychology must reach if it is to be scientific and emancipatory. As a first entry into this daunting psychological, political, and economic subject, I only hope to outline theoretical and methodological principles for approaching it and to validate them with historical material. I have undertaken a historical study of actually occurring racism/racist psychology from slavery till today. I examine the elements and forms of racism and slavery in order to integrate them within a theory of racism that can be coherently applied to social problems in

general. These chapters illustrate, confirm, and extend macro-cultural psychology with regard to racist psychology.

The final two chapters compare my analysis of racism to contemporary analyses that have a great deal of currency within society, social movements, and news media. I explain that the main approaches to racist psychology are lacking because they are ignorant of the important concepts, principles, and methodology of macro-cultural psychology. This scientific weakness retards their ability to direct viable solutions to racism.

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## Chapter 2

# Introduction: The Science–Emancipation Dialectic or Mobius Strip



Macro-cultural psychology is both scientific and socially politically emancipatory. However, this is an imprecise and misleading phrasing of the relationship. It implies that the two elements are independent variables which coincidentally coexist together. The meaning of “Psychology is scientific and emancipatory” is that the elements are internally related. Each one stimulates, enriches, and supports the other; forms the other; informs the other; embodies the other; and depends upon the other. In an emancipatory, scientific psychology, the scientific constructs promote and inform social–political emancipation; the scientific constructs *are* emancipatory; they do not simply coexist with emancipatory features. Conversely, emancipatory features *are* scientific, they are built upon scientific attributes of the psychology, and the political emancipation of psychology advances scientific attributes by providing vital information about scientific aspects of psychological phenomena that are revealed in psychological emancipation. Consequently, our psychology is scientific because it is emancipatory; it must be emancipatory for it to be scientific. Conversely, it must be scientific for it to be emancipatory; if it were not scientific it could not be emancipatory because it would have no viable basis for emancipation. Each strand of the double helix depends upon and contributes to the other.

This dialectical relationship between psychological science and political emancipation is artfully expressed by Vygotsky in a single phrase: “the highest psychological development becomes only possible on the basis of cultural development” (in van der Veer, 2020, p. 176). This phrase is a statement of a scientific fact, but it is equally an intentional, proscriptive statement that demands cultural improvement *in order to achieve* psychological development.

This dialectical relationship between psychological science and political emancipation is depicted as a Mobius strip (Fig. 2.1).

Macro-cultural psychology reconstitutes the science and the politics of psychology. It resolves the twin dilemmas (conundrums) of psychology, namely, (1) its poor scientific quality and (2) its poor political quality. Psychology is weak scientifically because it fails to recognize that psychology is essentially cultural; psychology is



**Fig. 2.1** The scientific–emancipatory dialectic of cultural–historical psychology

politically weak because it has little to say about the nature of society and the direction that it can be improved. Psychology’s scientific and political weaknesses go hand in hand (as a Möbius strip); they both stem from avoiding culture. Psychology’s withdrawal from serious political contribution incapacitates it from scientifically comprehending psychology’s cultural character; reciprocally, Psychology’s aversion to scientific cultural psychology incapacitates it from improving psychology.

For psychology to be simultaneously and organically scientific and emancipatory, it must apprehend psychology’s ability to reflect, reveal, critique, and transform society; psychology must recognize psychology’s cultural nature. It must recognize that psychology is formed in, stimulated by, formed by, supported by, and administered by macro-cultural factors. Without these properties, psychological phenomena would not reflect, reveal, critique, and call for transformation of society. This is the central, overriding theme of this book. *Any psychological approach that compromises the full cultural nature of psychological phenomena is scientifically and politically compromised.* This is unfortunately the case with virtually all psychological approaches. The history of psychology is really the history of minimizing and marginalizing the full cultural character of human psychology. This is equally the history of undermining the scientific and emancipatory power of psychology. That power only stems from elucidating the cultural–political character that psychological phenomena inherently possess to reveal, critique, and transform society.

Throughout this book, I shall critique a variety of ingenious strategies that psychologists have cooked up to minimize and marginalize the full cultural character of psychological phenomena. Psychologists falsely claim that their strategies are designed to emancipate people from cultural oppressions; they falsely claim that culture-centric psychology traps people in cultural oppression. These psychologists misunderstand the nature of emancipation. They deny that emancipation requires radical social transformation and turn instead to individual, interpersonal, and biological improvements. However, I shall explain that emancipation requires radical social transformation which is only possible if people comprehend their social structure and what is necessary to improve it. Psychology can only contribute to this comprehension and transformation if it elucidates psychology’s inherently cultural character which reveals, critiques, and transforms society. This is the fundamental difference between macro-cultural psychology and all other psychological approaches.

Macro-cultural psychology is a *different kind of psychological theory*. It commences with social and political questions as the framework of psychology. It asks “how does the field of Psychology have to reconceptualize psychological phenomena in order to realize them as windows into society which expose social problems and indicate social improvements that solve problems?” This is a meta-theoretical question. It does not seek to apply or advance existing psychological science to social-psychological issues such as crime, or drug abuse, or prejudice, or violence. Macro-cultural psychology seeks to reconceptualize the very nature of psychological phenomena as elements of society that reflect and reveal social issues that can be politically transformed. Macro-cultural psychology seeks a new *episteme* for psychology, a new *ethos*. Vygotsky proposed historical materialism as this *episteme and ethos*.

## Social Medicine

This *episteme/ethos* was propounded in the concept of *social medicine* by the eminent German physician, Rudolph Virchow, 1821–1902 (Waitzkin, 1978, 1981, 2000; Taylor & Rieger, 1984; Kaufman, 2021). Virchow discovered leukemia and he also founded cellular pathology. He linked disease to social conditions. He wrote, “diseases are always traceable to defects in society.” “If disease is an expression of individual life under unfavourable circumstances, then epidemics must be indicative of mass disturbance” ([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/50854652\\_Rudolf\\_Virchow\\_A\\_Physician\\_and\\_Politician/link/00b7d5282f6eb76faa000000/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/50854652_Rudolf_Virchow_A_Physician_and_Politician/link/00b7d5282f6eb76faa000000/download)).

Virchow coedited a weekly newsletter called *Medical Reform* from 1848 to 1849. In an editorial he and his colleagues stated, “Medicine is a social science, and politics is nothing but medicine on a grand scale.” Virchow followed Engels’ *The Condition of The Working Class in England* that documented the industrial revolution’s exploitation of labor and its harmful health effects on working class people.

His social theory of disease led him to pursue medical anthropology. In 1869 he was a founder of the German Anthropological Society, and in the same year he founded the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory, of which he was president from 1869 until his death. He founded the journal *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (Journal of Ethnology). Franz Boas, “the father of anthropology,” studied anthropology from Virchow in Berlin in the 1880s. It is trenchant that the “father of cell pathology” would become “the father of German anthropology” in order to comprehend cultural conditions of disease.

Virchow insisted that social epidemiology of disease logically entails humanizing society in order to alleviate and eradicate disease. He said, “The medical reform that we had in mind was a reform of science and society.” “Mass diseases require mass solutions.” He insisted on the importance of full employment, adequate income, housing and nutrition, unlimited democracy, devolution of decision-making, universal education, disestablishment of the church, taxation reform,

agricultural improvement, industrial development, and the creation of grassroots agricultural cooperatives. Virchow believed that socioeconomic improvements are more effective for health than medical improvements because they simultaneously improve conditions for masses of people which are central to their well-being.<sup>1</sup>

Virchow's political understanding of disease inspired him to become politically active in progressive social–political causes. He took to the streets with a rusty sword and an antiquated gun, in the protests of 1848 that swept across many European countries against monarchies. Virchow was elected vice-president of the Berlin Revolutionary Committee. He called for a constitutional government, freedom of the press, and universal health care for workers

In 1856 he founded the Prussian Workers' Party and was admitted to the Prussian parliament a year later. In 1861 he helped found the German Progressive Party and was elected to the Prussian diet as a leader of the constitutional forces opposed to Otto von Bismarck. Virchow later continued that fight as a member of the German Reichstag from 1880 to 1893. As chairman of the finance committee, Virchow once blocked the creation of a German navy! He stated the transformative goal of his political activism: “All that we are now doing in the political field, the entire constitution, is only the means by which the condition of society is to be transformed to its very foundations” (in Hamerow, 1954, p. 27).

Virchow supported the Paris Commune of 1871. He joined the movement to reduce the influence of the Catholic Church in German society—after the Vatican Council declared papal invincibility in 1870—and he coined the term “Kulturkampf,” or culture war, in 1873 to designate this kind of struggle “in the interest of humanity.”

Virchow's nonmedical writings on social medicine were condemned in Nazi Germany.

Virchow explained that his political activism fulfilled his scientific objectives for understanding and treating cellular pathology and his personal objectives of wholeness and fulfillment. He wrote his father, “I am no longer a partial man, but a whole one, and my medical creed merges with my political and social creed.” Virchow stated, “*The Medical Reform* [newsletter] comes into being at a time when the overthrow of our old political institutions is not yet completed, but when from all sides

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<sup>1</sup>While Virchow's social medicine was a powerful emphasis of pathological social environments causing pathological diseases, Virchow occasionally fell into extreme, doctrinaire positions that rejected any and all natural causes of anatomy and disease. He questioned Darwin's theory of evolution in which the environment selected among genetic variations, those that are most adaptive to the environment. Virchow also rejected the germ theory of disease that emphasized biological (genetic) weaknesses in cells as predisposing individuals to illness that was precipitated by unhealthy environmental conditions. Virchow could have easily replaced his doctrinaire environmentalism with more nuanced formulations as follows: Endemic diseases like typhoid, dysentery, measles, pulmonary tuberculosis, etc. have their origin in bacteria; however, their geographical spread and individual susceptibility to them are determined by social factors such as housing, working conditions, diet, and sanitation. Of course, social–psychological pathology is a different order from physical disease and biological evolution. Social–psychological pathology and development is entirely social, as Vygotsky made clear. Consequently, Virchow's extreme social medicine is applicable to social–psychological pathology and development.



plans are being laid and steps taken toward a new political structure. What other task could then be more natural for it to undertake than that of participation in clearing away the old ruins and in constituting new institutions?... In this situation medicine cannot alone remain untouched; it too can no longer postpone a radical reform in its field" (Eisenberg, 1984, 1986).

The last sentence reveals that social medicine extends to medical science as well as disease. Virchow recognized that the social pathology which causes biological pathology additionally degrades the medical discipline of pathology. Consequently, medical science must be reframed in order to adequately comprehend its subject matter (that requires emphasizing its social conditions and solutions). Both medical science and lived biological pathology must be reformed in tandem, and this requires transforming exploitive society. This is why Virchow became politically active. "Social medicine" integrates science and politics in a Mobius strip.

Social medicine was popular in Latin America where liberation movements adopted it. Ernesto ("Che") Guevara (who was a physician) conceptualized "revolutionary medicine," which trained all health-care professionals, including physicians, in the social origins of illness and the need for social change to improve health conditions. Che Guevara's reflections played a profound role in the Cuban, Chilean, and Nicaraguan revolutionary governments' reform of medical and health-care systems and education. At the University of Chile, Max Westenhofer, a former Virchow student, taught social medicine as well as pathology to the future president of Chile, Salvador Allende (who was a physician). Allende developed a Marxist conceptualization which profoundly influenced the subsequent development of Latin American social medicine and inspired the creation of a national health service under his presidency in the 1970s.

Waitzkin (1978, p. 272) explains that social medicine is essentially "*historical materialist* epidemiology which relates patterns of death and disease to the political, economic, and social structures of society. The field emphasizes changing historical patterns of disease and the specific material circumstances under which people live and work. These studies try to transcend the individual level of analysis to find how historical social forces, at least in part, determine health and disease."

The truth of social medicine is evidenced in the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of COVID-19 were due more to social considerations than biological ones. Strong, definite, concerted, governmental, and societal responses to the initial outbreak limited the lethal biological effects, as well as disruptive social effects on the economy and education and mental health, whereas laissez faire responses exacerbated the virus' biological and social-psychological effects. China's strong, definite, concerted, governmental, and societal responses to the initial outbreak limited deaths to a few thousand in a population of 1.4 billion. After a quarantine of a few months in early 2020, social functioning returned to normal. In contrast, the United States, under the leadership of Donald Trump, pursued a capitalist approach that weakened government intervention and relied upon state and local organizations to address the pandemic on their own. (See Clark, D., May 29, 2021, *New York Times*, "Inside the Chaotic, Cutthroat Gray Market for N5 Masks"; <https://www.justsecurity.org/69650/timeline-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic-and-u-s-response/> for a