



Big Ideas and Revolutionary Activity

*Selected Essays,
Talks and Articles
by Lois Holzman*

**Edited by
Carrie Lobman and Tony Perone**

Relating to People as Revolutionaries

Relating to People as Revolutionaries means relating to people as socio-cultural-history makers in their everyday life activity, even within the most mundane moments of life. By revealing and fostering our capacity to be both who we are and who we are becoming, social therapeutics empowers us to perform beyond ourselves. It reminds us of our human capacity to change totalities and create new and revolutionary ways of being and doing. Social therapeutics was created in the 1970s by a group of activists working with the poorest communities in New York City. Since that time, it has emerged as a methodology for human development and learning, therapeutics, community building and social change that is practiced all over the world. This methodology is deeply philosophical and theoretically grounded, and it is immensely practical. Social therapeutics embraces the dynamics that our intersectionalities (i.e., race, gender, sexuality, class and intellectual ability) bring to the stage and encourages us to create something new together. Its emphasis on the group or “groupness” allows its members to produce new meaning collectively, qualitatively transforming what is into what can be, together.

What do you do in your moments of despair upon hearing or seeing the latest horror human beings have inflicted upon each other—in your own neighborhood or thousands of miles away from it? Sometimes, what happens for me is a certain phrase or two will “pop into my head” and ground me, by which I mean allow me to locate the horrific events in the contradictory totality of human history and its dialectic with human society, in the human capacity to continuously overthrow (re-create) that which we have created. One of these phrases is a quote from the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky: “A revolution solves only those tasks raised by history” (Vygotsky, quoted in frontispiece, Levitin, 1982). Another is from French cultural theorist Sylvère Lotringer: “One does not cure neurosis, one changes a society which cannot do without it” (1977). And a third was spoken by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “The salvation of our world lies in the hands of the maladjusted” (King, 1956, 27 June 1956 address to the Annual Convention of the NAACP in San Francisco, <http://www.mindfreedom.org/kb/mental-health-global/iaacm/MLK-on-IAACM>). Each of these propositions speaks to me in the performative—“Don’t mourn, organize!” They convey not a critical but a *practical-critical* approach to the therapy professions.

In 2003 Fred Newman and I wrote an article entitled, “All Power to the Developing,” that appeared in the *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*. There we presented a picture of our practical-critical psychotherapy by foregrounding its debt to Marx’s radical humanism—by which we meant his insistence on the sociality of human beings and,

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in particular, his conception of revolutionary activity. In our discussion of social therapy, which was created by Newman in the 1970s, we focused on its activity of relating to all people as revolutionaries: “Relating to patients as revolutionaries entails relating to them as world historic in everyday, mundane matters, that is, as social beings engaged in the life/history-making process of always *becoming* (assimilating “all the wealth of previous development”). For what is history/making history if it is not the dialectic what is/what is becoming?” (Newman & Holzman, 2003, p.11).

This feature of social therapy was first articulated in a 1986 speech by Newman to the Congress of the Interamerican Society of Psychology, held in the Karl Marx Theater in Havana, Cuba. The following quote says more of what we mean by relating as revolutionaries:

We speak of social therapy as revolution for non-revolutionaries. This radical Marxist conception – that the fundamental or essential human characteristic is being capable of carrying out revolutionary activity (what Marx calls practical-critical activity)—that’s the foundation of anything which can be called or should be called a Marxist psychology. Ours is a radical insistence that we not accommodate reactionary society by relating to people—*any* people—as anything but revolutionaries. (Newman, 1991, p.15; Newman & Holzman, 2003, pp. 11-12)

It is now 2014, nearly 30 years since the Havana speech and more than a decade since the article “All Power...” appeared. Over these years, Newman and I continued to work together until he passed away in 2011—organizing, writing and expanding social therapy practices as well as other environments and activities that relate to people as revolutionaries. The methodology of social therapy (social therapeutics) has broadened to education, health care, youth work and organizational development. In the past decade the chasm that existed between theoretical critical psychology and alternative practices in psychology and psychotherapy has begun to blur. New critical practices have developed, and, to some extent, this has advanced the overall substance and quality of the intellectual conversation. The debate continues, but critique and practice are now closer together. At the same time, the bureaucracy and institutionalization of the helping professions of psychology, counseling, social work, psychiatry and psychotherapy have become more oppressive and harder and harder to get around. The medical and natural science models of understanding and relating to human beings are so dominant that non-mainstream approaches are rarely taught in universities or professional schools and the options available to those seeking help are becoming more and more limited. The work continues.

This article is an invitation to go beyond the critical to create practical-critical psychotherapy and counseling approaches.

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Origins of Social Therapy

Social therapy originated in the 1970s as part of the social-cultural change movements of the time, which tied the “personal” to the political. It was developed by a community of activists who began by working in the poorest communities of New York City and has since gone on to organize middle class and wealthy people to support poor people to develop and provide leadership to the process of positive social change, free of government, corporate or university dependence. In this organizing process, new kinds of relationships are created between rich and poor, and all develop emotionally, socially and culturally. This organizing has led to international training in the social therapeutic methodology, the development of outside-of-school youth programs, a free of charge developmental learning center for inner-city youth and adults, a political theatre, a research and training center, an emergent international movement of performance activists, independent electoral campaigns, and partnerships with organizations on a national and international stage. With this significant quantitative and qualitative expansion over the decades, the inseparability of human development from community development has become more and more obvious.

Central to all the activities, organizations and projects of this activist community is an understanding of the necessity of affording opportunities for all people to engage in the practical-critical activity of creating their own development—in other words, of relating to people as revolutionaries. The mode of relating is performatory, grounded in the discovery that performing (as the “always becoming” activity) is what allows human beings to develop beyond instinctual and socially patterned behavior.

Similar to other new psychologies springing up at the time, social therapy was ideology based—in the belief that living under capitalism makes people emotionally sick and in the hope that therapy could be a tool in the service of progressive politics. Like the radical therapies of the 1970s, social therapy engaged the authoritarianism, sexism, racism, classism and homophobia of traditional psychotherapy. But social therapy’s unique feature, even in its earliest years, was its engagement of the philosophical underpinnings of psychology and psychotherapy. It rejected explanation, interpretation, the notion of an inner self that therapists and clients need to delve into, and other dualistic and problematic foundations of traditional psychology. These are characteristics of what are now known as postmodern psychologies (e.g., Gergen, 1991; Gergen & Gergen, 2012; Holzman & Morss, 2000; Kvale, 1992).

As an emerging practical-critical epistemological and ontological critique, social therapy was influenced by Newman’s study of Marxian dialectics and the philosophy of science and language (Wittgenstein’s work in particular), and my study of human development, psycholinguistics and Vygotsky, and work as a qualitative researcher. Their methodological innovations helped us to see the potential for ordinary people to effect radical social change and to better understand the subjective constraints that need to be engaged so as to actualize this potential (e.g., Holzman, 2006; Newman & Holzman, 2006/1996; 2003). In particular, we read Marx and Vygotsky

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as valuable contributors to dissolving the dualist gap between self and world, between thought and language, between who we are and who we are becoming, and between theory and practice, in such a way that it becomes possible to approach human beings as activists and activity-ists, not as knowers and perceivers.

Unpacking Marx

In actualizing Marx's dialectic understanding of history/making history in the service of supporting people to perform as revolutionaries, we had to "postmodernize Marx." Ironically, we find the seeds for such postmodernization in Marx's own work (his earliest, most philosophical writings rather than his later work on political economy). Marx was no psychologist and didn't particularly address psychological issues, but he was nevertheless a fine critical psychologist. In the *Economic and Political Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*, for example, Marx speaks clearly about the social nature, i.e., the ontology—of human activity and of human development.

... as society itself produces *man* as *man*, so it is *produced* by him.
Activity and mind are social in their content as well as in their *origin*;
they are *social* activity and *social* mind. (Marx, 1967, p.129)

This is as clear a rejection of the dualisms of the mental and the physical, thought and action, and the individual and the social upon which psychology is based as I have ever read.

We have further shown that private property can be abolished only on condition of an all-round development of individuals, because the existing character of intercourse and productive forces is an all-round one, and only individuals that are developing in an all-round fashion can appropriate them, i.e., can turn them into free manifestations of their lives. (Marx & Engels, 1974, p. 117)

Here we have a rejection of the psychological understanding of human development and the field of psychology's claim to investigate and come to understand it. Development does not happen to us, unfolding in a pre-determined progression of stages toward some end. For Marx, development is "all-round." All-round development is revolutionary, practical-activity. This social, communal and reconstructive activity of human beings exercising their power to transform the current state of things is what makes individual and species development possible (Holzman, 2009; Newman & Holzman, 2013/1993, 2003).

These passages from Marx presage contemporary postmodern concerns with psychological and psychotherapeutic methods that are premised on *individuals*, that is, entities which exist in social surrounds but are not themselves social; and *development* as a characteristic of such entities, specifically, of particular aspects or parts of such entities.

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Social therapy is an actualization of the above critique. First, its focus, meaning the work of the therapist and the group—no matter the size, i.e., a group of 2 (therapist and client) or a group of 30—is the activity of the social unit developing. By engaging in this new kind of activity of creating their group, people are simultaneously creating who they are/are becoming, emotionally speaking. Such a focus on development is rare in the psychotherapy world, which focuses on "curing" the individual, relieving her/his symptoms, or some other form of correction of something presumed to be internally faulty and causing problematic outward manifestations.

Second, emotions in social therapy are not understood as products or possessions of individuals or as something internal that is made manifest in outward behavior, but rather as social, relational activity ("social activity and social mind"). In social therapy, the group is working to exercise its power to overthrow—to the extent possible under current political, economic and socio-cultural conditions—the alienation and commodification necessary for everyday life, including the professional and everyday psychological understanding of what emotions are and where they "reside."

Social therapy is most often conducted in groups and it is not the individual members of the group, but the group itself that is the therapeutic unit. This is different from most group therapies, in which the group serves as a context for the therapist to help individuals with their emotional problems. Clients who come together to form a social therapy group are given the task to create their group as an environment in which they can get help. This group activity is a collective, practical challenge to the assumption that the way people get therapeutic help is to relate to themselves and be related to by others as individuals, complete with problems and with inner selves.

In the US-based centers for social therapy, groups range in size from 8-30 people, a mix of women and men of varying ages, ethnicities, sexual orientations, class backgrounds and economic status, professions and "presenting problems." This heterogeneity is designed to challenge people's notion of a fixed identity (e.g., based on gender, ethnicity, diagnostic label, or "That's the kind of person I am"), and to maximize the diversity of "material" the group has to create with. Groups are typically 90 minutes long and meet weekly in an ongoing basis. Some group members remain for years, others months; people leave and new members join. The therapeutic environment and its potential "building material" is thus in continuous flux.

In a sense, each social therapy group is working to re-locate itself in history while remaining in society. For we all live in that dialectic. But we don't experience it. Most people do not experience their world-historicalness; they experience only their societal location (e.g., temporal, spatial and cultural). Our social identities are versions of the many ways there are to be alienated, commodified, separated and objectified. Our historical identity is as revolutionaries, as social, cultural, historical creators of something new out of what exists.

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The many hundreds of practitioners trained in social therapy who work in institutionalized settings modify their practices accordingly. Additionally, in other countries, social therapy is practiced in a structure and manner that is coherent with the specifics of the given cultural environments.

Vygotsky's Contribution

Vygotsky has been invaluable to our understanding the contemporary relevance of Marx's radical historical humanism just discussed, and to the continued development of our practical-critical psychotherapy (Holzman, 2009, 2013; Newman & Holzman, 2014/1993). During the revolutionary times of the early 20th century when both the first communist state and the new discipline of psychology were beginning, Vygotsky saw his task as that of having to create *a new kind of method* (method as dialectical activity) in order to study psychological activity and create a new psychology that would be coherent with and support the development of a new kind of society: "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).

Here Vygotsky is suggesting a radical break with the accepted scientific paradigm in which method is a tool that is applied and yields results. There, the relation between tool and result is linear, instrumental and dualistic (coined *tool-for-result methodology* in Newman & Holzman, 2014/1993). Vygotsky's "search" is a qualitatively different conception of method— not a tool to be applied, but an activity that generates both tool and result at the same time and as continuous process. Tool and result are not dualistically separated, neither are they the same or one thing. Rather, they are elements of a dialectical unity/totality/whole. Method to be practiced, not applied, is what Vygotsky was advocating. To capture the dialectical relationship of this new conception, Newman and I called this *tool-and-result methodology* (Newman & Holzman, 2014/1993). Importantly, this new conception of method is neither objective nor subjective, but something outside that dualistic box.

In addition to proposing a qualitatively new way to study human life, Vygotsky is pointing to the dialectical nature of human development and how to re-initiate it if it has been stopped. For human beings are not only tool users but also tool makers. We do not merely respond to stimuli, acquire societally determined and useful skills, and adapt to the determining environment. The uniqueness of human social life is that we ourselves transform the determining circumstances. Human development is not an individual accomplishment but a *socio-cultural activity*.

Understanding Vygotsky's conception of method as dialectical tool-and-result provided a new way of seeing social therapy, namely, as the group's activity of creating itself as the tool-and-result of their (becoming) emotional development. We identified Vygotsky as a forerunner to "a new psychology of becoming," in which people experience the social nature of their existence and the power of collective creative

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activity in the process of making new tools (-and-results) for growth (Holzman, 2009). Relating to people as revolutionaries is akin, we came to believe, to relating to them as tool-and-result makers/methodologists/practical-critical dialecticians.

Further Vygotskian insights followed from this methodological one. For example, his understanding of the role of play in early childhood remains today unique and uniquely dialectical. "In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102). We took this as a metaphor for the being/becoming dialectic of human development and expanded it to adolescence and adulthood. Recognizing that performers on stage are also simultaneously who they are and the characters they are playing, we came to understand performance as a Vygotskian kind of play, and to understand that human beings perform our development. This became not only the topic of our subsequent investigations and writings but simultaneously the direction our practices and those of our colleagues took in therapy as well in educational, organizational and cultural settings (Friedman, 2011; Holzman, 1997, 2009; Holzman & Newman, 2012; Lobman, 2011; Martinez, 2011; Newman & Holzman, 1997, 2006/1996).

In order for social therapy participants to create their therapy group and simultaneously create new emotional activity, they must *perform therapy*. Such an ensemble performance is the difficult work/play of engaging in the activity of speaking and creating conversation as transformative of "saying what's on your mind." Here, Vygotsky's challenge to the received wisdom that language expresses thought was essential: "Speech does not merely serve as the expression of developed thought. Thought is restructured as it is transformed into speech. Thought is not expressed but completed in the word" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 251). We synthesized this instance of Vygotsky's dialectical understanding of human activity with that of Wittgenstein, taking Vygotsky's "speaking completing thinking" as a Wittgensteinian "form of life" (Wittgenstein, 1958, pp. 11, para. 23). We expanded the concept of "completion" to other people; others could "complete" for you. Very young children become speakers of a language with and through others, and we posited that caregivers "complete" babbling babies, and that the babies creatively imitate their completers.

We drew out the implications of this Vygotskian insight throughout the lifespan and concluded that the human ability to create with language—to complete, and be completed by others—can be, for adults as well as for very young children, a continuous process of creating who we are becoming. In terms of therapy, it suggests that speaking about "what's going on for you" is therapeutic because and to the extent that it is a *socially completive activity* and not a transmittal of so-called private states of mind. Thus, the social therapist's task is to support the group in practicing method so as to relate to emotional talk relationally and activistically rather than individualistically and representationally. In this process people experience that they can create and that developing comes with participating in the process of building the groups in which one functions (Holzman, 2009; Holzman & Newman, 2012).

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The focus of therapy is no longer the individuated self who discovers deeper insights into his or her consciousness. The focus has become the collective that is engaged in the continuous activity of creating a new social unit. The typical therapeutic question, "How is each individual doing?" becomes "How well is the group performing its activity?" This shift from the individual to the group reorganizes what is traditionally related to as a dualistic and antagonistic relationship between individual and group into a dialectical one. Mainstream psychology has tended to negate the group or reduce the group to the individual. Mainstream Marxism has tended to negate the individual or reduce the individual to the group. However, recognizing the "group-ness" of human life does not inevitably negate individuals. The social therapy group is producing something collectively and, as with many life activities, individual members contribute in different ways and to differing degrees. Focusing on how the group is performing its activity does not preclude seeing individuals; one can see and relate to both simultaneously.

In terms of Vygotsky's understanding of play, social therapy can be understood as a playful activity in the "head taller" sense. The adult clients are being supported by the therapists to do what is beyond them—to create new ways of speaking and listening to each other, and new ways to understand and relate to talk and to emotionality. By their language play, they are creating new performances of themselves as a way out of the rigidified roles, patterns and identities that cause so much emotional pain.

Areas to Explore (Practical-)Critically

As a practical-critical process ontology, social therapeutic group activity raises some questions that those working to develop critical psychotherapy might wish to explore.

Individual Therapy

What is the purpose of individual therapy? If the unit of study is the group creating itself and the group activity is the tool-and-result practice of reconstructing Marx's species identity/history making, then perhaps the entity experiencing distress (an individual client) need not be the focus of the therapy. Perhaps individuals need to be organized as social units in order to carry out the task of developing. This is, after all, the case for countless other human endeavors in which people become organized as social units to get a specific job done. (Manufacturing, most team sports, theatrical and other performance activities—not to mention the military—come immediately to mind as examples).

Alienation

A second area for exploration is alienation. The alienation that Marx (1974) describes—relating to the products of production severed from their producers and from the process of their production, that is, as commodities—is not limited to smartphones, cars and Big Macs, not even for Marx: "Production does not only produce man as a *commodity*, the *human commodity*, man in the form of a *commodity*; in conformity

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with this situation it produces him as a *mentally* and *physically dehumanized being*" (Marx, 1967, p. 111). It has become the normal way of seeing and relating to everything in contemporary Western (and, increasingly, global) culture. People relate to their lives, their relationships, their feelings, their culture, and so on, as things, torn away from the process of their creation and from their creators. Such "thingification" is a major factor in people's emotional problems, but rarely spoken about by psychotherapists as something that is engaged in their practices.

However, if, following Marx, we are commodified and alienated individuals, then any transformative social change necessitates de-commodifying and de-alienating such human "products" through a positive and constructive process of producing sociality and regaining humanity. Vygotsky's psychology of being/becoming can be employed (as it has in social therapy) to de-commodify and de-alienate, through a reconstruction-deconstruction of the ontology of modernist psychology in which human beings are understood to be only who we are (hardly world-historic, in Marx's sense). In social therapy's process ontology, human beings are both who we are and who we are becoming. And who we are becoming are creators of tools(-and-results) that can continuously transform mundane specific life practices (including those that produce alienation) into new forms of life. Creating these new kinds of tools is the *becoming activity* of creating/giving expression to our sociality and historicity as revolutionaries.

Power

Finally, we would do well to rethink how we understand and speak of *power*. Critical psychologists and (educators and economists and...) speak of "power" as a pejorative, something bad or even evil, the property of those who rule. Instances of this abound; this book's editors, as one example, speak of "the exercise of power" in the negative. When and how did "power" lose its revolutionary meaning? What happened to "power to the people?" What does it mean to "empower people" if the "exercise of power" is to be avoided? But these are merely different uses of "power" in different contexts, you might be thinking. Yes, they are. And more. To relate to people as revolutionaries (engaged in "all-round development") these multiple meanings need to be deconstructed.

A starting point is to see power in its socio-political sense as distinguished from authority—power being *created from the bottom*, and authority being *imposed from the top*. From this vantage point, being "in power" and "exercising power" are as different as can be. Newman and I drew out the implications of the power/authority dialectic as it is manifest psychologically as we argued that the *activity* of power is practical-critical, revolutionary activity:

But being "in power" (somewhat ironically) does not at all involve the activity of power. It is, rather, the commodification of power (labor power) into authority. And while commodities can be sold, they do not develop; they are consumed. Authority stifles growth. It is not a neces-

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sary evil. It is an unnecessary evil. What is necessary for development is the activity of power, the exercise of power, the development of power by the many—collectively, democratically and creatively. It is the work of the laborer, Marx teaches us, that creates value (Marx, 1967). It is the authoritarian commodification of this process that yields a *realization* of this value which, in turn, maintains the authority of the owners of the means of production.

But authority (vs. power) goes well beyond the economic sphere. It is constantly present, under capitalism, in the psychological sphere. The human capacity to authoritarily commodify oneself is in constant psychological struggle with the human desire and capacity to exercise power *without commodification*, i.e., freely. (Holzman & Newman, 2004, p. 75)

“Authoritarian commodification” aptly describes professional, institutionalized psychotherapy, counseling and social work in the US and, increasingly, elsewhere. It is epitomized by the nearly universal necessity of a DSM or ICD diagnosis in order to help or be helped. In the face of such dehumanizing by authority, the practical-critical practice of social therapy is one method of supporting people to *exercise power without commodification*. It is this psychological struggle that I urge critical psychotherapy and counseling to support in their work with clients.

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