

# The origins, characteristics and development of Critical Psychology in Italy

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## Abstract

The paper discusses the development of Italian Critical psychology, as a current that enjoys full recognition within the psychological discipline, although it critiques the hegemonic currents making up the mainstream. We reconstruct its roots in the historical, political and cultural developments of the Country: the influence of German-language philosophy and science in the Italian culture; the socialist tradition of the nascent Italian social psychology of the 19th century; the protest movements of the late '60s in Italian psychiatric hospitals as well as in the universities; the “paradoxical” situation due to the fact that Gramsci’s Marxism promoted openness to psychology as the science of subjectivity; but ‘official’ Italian Marxism failed to recognize the potential emancipatory relevance of psychology. In this context, the publication in 1974 of the Italian translation of Holzkamp’s *Critical Psychology* appealed to Italian left-wing psychologists as the answers they had been waiting for regarding the external relevance of psychology and its relationship with Marxism, articulated in a complete systemic model of psychology. The relationships with the Cultural Historical School are also explained. Critical Psychology still enjoyed an active presence in Italy during the 1980s and we suggest that it still continues to exert a significant – although not manifest– influence on the areas of Italian psychology outside of the hegemonic mainstream. This influence - concerning in particular the emancipatory aims and use psychology to address concrete social problems – is visible in the development of the European Social Psychology, which has grown up in opposition to mainstream North American Social Cognition, in Rhetoric and discursive psychology and in the Italian critical community psychology informed by Lewin’s action research.

*Keywords:* Cultural-Historical Contest, Holzkamp, Cultural Historical School, Gramsci, Lewin’s action research, Emancipatory Community Psychology.

## Introduction. The question of critical psychology in Italy

The history of psychology has been marked by cyclically recurring waves of criticism regarding the theories, methods, and ultimately the usefulness or social relevance, of the discipline (Teo, 2009, p.37). By way of example, we may cite the Gestalt movement’s critique of that Wundtian psychology deemed “irrelevant and dull” by the young Kurt Lewin (Marrow, 1969). Or the “concrete psychology” of Georges Politzer (1973) in 1920s France: Adopting a Marxist perspective, Politzer too questioned the relevance of the dominant psychology of the period, especially behaviourism, which he saw as being excessively abstract. The 1920s also saw, in the then Soviet Russia, the founding of the Cultural-Historical School. This movement proposed an alternative to the dominant paradigm, challenging the very foundations of mainstream psychology (Vygotsky, 1980). It was not by chance that both Politzer’s concrete psychology project and the Cultural-Historical School were to be rediscovered and revisited, in Italy as elsewhere, more than 40 years later, when

similar problems and social movements to those of the 1920s re-emerged in Europe, after the state of paralysis that had characterized the dictatorships, war and post-war period.

Thus towards the end of the 1960s – under the influence of the political movements then sweeping through Europe in general and the universities in particular – the founding principles, nature and aims of psychology once more became a focus for debate in a number of Western European countries, including Italy. This is borne out by the literature from the early 1970s onwards: The year 1972 saw the publication of both Holzkamp's *Kritische Psychologie. Vorbereitende Arbeiten* in Berlin, and Israel and Tajfel's *The context of social psychology. A critical assessment*. The latter work examined the issues of how psychological research may be contextualized and under what conditions it is socially relevant, a line of thinking that later led Tajfel to focus his research on intergroup relationships and on the dialectic between social mobility and social change.

The criticisms voiced in these publications were promptly taken up by Italian social psychologists who raised some critical challenges of their own. In 1975, Gianfranco Minguzzi at the University of Bologna published *Dinamica psicologica dei gruppi sociali*, noting in the introduction that: "This book has been written on the basis of discussions that took place in 1968 between students, professional psychologists and teachers of psychology, all of whom were highly committed to advancing their knowledge of social psychology and dissatisfied with current theory and research in the field". Although Minguzzi's publication was designed for use as a textbook, it had had a similar genesis to that of Holzkamp. However, the Italian work did not contain any reference to Holzkamp or Berlin Critical Psychology, despite a declaration of intent regarding the adoption of a "Marxist perspective" to analyse power relations. The spread of critical perspectives within Italian social psychology led to the publication in 1976 of *Problemi attuali della psicologia sociale*, edited by Augusto Palmonari, also a professor at the University of Bologna; this took the form of a "special issue" in the *Giornale Italiano di Psicologia*, the most prestigious scientific journal in the field, that contained contributions from a number of Italian researchers, with an introductory essay by Tajfel.

In his introductory address to Italian psychologists, Tajfel stressed the need for "convergence between the study of psychosocial processes and an *explicit* awareness of the social context within which these processes operate" (1976, p.9), stating that he had "a number of European [social psychological] approaches" in mind. He was at pains to clarify that this "does *not* mean that these approaches aiming to a new convergence are confined to Europe...some ... have developed in the United States and elsewhere, and there is a clear awareness of a new brand of dissatisfaction both in Europe and outside of Europe. However, we in Europe have the duty to contribute to a social psychology that goes beyond the established perspectives, although the latter may have proved fruitful in the past...in Europe we have a better chance than currently exists anywhere else, to create a *second and alternative* intellectual centre for the development of social psychology" (1976, p.10). Tajfel therefore criticized, as in his other writings (1981), the adoption of the natural science model within psychology, which led to decontextualized and self-referential experimentation ("experiments in a vacuum") along with a "shift away from the earlier and more open tradition represented for example by Kurt Lewin". Tajfel also made reference to Holzkamp (1973) and Holzkamp-Osterkamp (1975-1976) on account of their "revisiting of perception and motivation underlying their relationships with their own background and social functions" (1976, p.13).

The articles of the Italian psychologists in the special issue *raised* similar issues to those previously *developed* by the Cultural-Historical School, and which at the time were being

dealt with by Holzkamp, but without making explicit reference to the first or the latter.<sup>1</sup> In the context of this renewal movement within Italian social psychology, the work of Lewin also enjoyed rediscovery, with the publication (edited by Palmonari) in 1972 of the translation of *Field Theory in Social Science (Teoria e sperimentazione in psicologia sociale, Bologna: il Mulino)*, a selection of Lewin's more specifically psychosocial writings originally edited by Cartwright in 1951.

Both European and Italian social psychology, in the late 1960s and early 70s, proved a fertile breeding ground for the development of "critical challenges". This distinctive characteristic of social psychology was recognized and explained by the Italian psychologists. As Palmonari wrote in the "Preface" to *Problemi attuali della psicologia sociale*: "We have the prospect of channelling into the area of social psychology, phenomena that have evolved within interdependent disciplinary areas: the new understanding of the influence of biological factors, the "natural" method within ethology, the concepts enucleated by the discoveries of cognitive psychology..." (1976, pp.5-6). Furthermore: "The area of research and application that goes under the name of social psychology is certainly one of the most affected by the crisis of psychology (see, for example, Elms, 1975)" (Parisi, Castelfranchi & Benigni, 1976, p.43). Social psychology may be said to be indeed in the front line in terms of being scrutinized as to its external relevance, one of the first issues to be raised in times of "crisis". We will come back later to this distinguishing feature which has characterized and continues to characterize "European social psychology" as defined by Tajfel.

With regard to the then emergent "critical psychology", the publication of Holzkamp's book, *Kritische Psychologie. Vorbereitende Arbeiten*, had considerable impact due to the well-established scientific reputation of its author and, even more so, on account of his role as Director of the Institute of Psychology at the Frei Universität of Berlin, which together with the Sorbonne was one of the leading European centres of the student movement. In this capacity, Holzkamp directly addressed the challenges posed to psychology by the protest movements, beginning with the issue of its use and aims, and providing an initial but well-substantiated response.

It is of key importance to note here, in the interest of clarifying what we mean by "Italian Critical Psychology", that "Berlin Critical Psychology" differed from other contemporary critical psychological currents not merely because it defined and presented itself as "critical", nor on account of the historical context described above in which it arose, but in terms of *theory* and *content*. As we will illustrate in the following pages, the *theory* underpinning Berlin Critical Psychology is rooted in a deep and complex relationship with Marxism, which is virtually unique in the history of psychology. Only the Cultural Historical School, which Berlin Critical Psychology recognized as an influence, may also be said to have been informed by Marxism. With regard to *content*, Berlin Critical Psychology was not confined to the area of social psychology, but dealt with psychology as a whole, including the topic of perception analysed from biological, "naturalistic", historic and social perspectives. Indeed, one of the metatheoretical assumptions of Berlin Critical Psychology, shared by the Cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Of particular note in this regard is the contribution of the psychologists at the Institute of Psychology of the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche [National Research Council], who listed the following "points": the study of "social behaviour in the natural conditions in which it takes place"; "the comparison between man and other animals in the field of social behaviour"; the study of the evolutionary bases for social behaviour; the need for an explicit analysis of the ideological premises and political implications of social psychology as well as for constant reference to the real social situations for which such research may be relevant" (Parisi, Castelfranchi, Benigni, 1976, pp.43-61).

Historical School, is that psychology is intrinsically social of itself and therefore it does not make sense to distinguish between “social” psychology and “non-social” psychology.

It was not by chance that after its emergence and consolidation in Europe in the 1970s, “critical psychology” – that is to say the psychology that identifies itself with the critical psychology *movement*<sup>2</sup> – mainly spread to countries in the so called developing world: South America, Africa, India... as reflected in this special issue. In spreading and broadening its horizons, critical psychology came to acquire multiple meanings though maintaining a number of common traits in line with the general core definition provided by Maiers: “Critical Psychology is a politically engaged, Marxist, scientific position that is critical of traditional psychology” (Maiers, 1991, p.23). However, the link with Marxism has at times been somewhat vague or weak, as Doise (2012) has pointed out, and much of the *movement* seems to have moved away from the original meaning of Berlin Critical Psychology, to the extent of seeming to have forgotten its roots<sup>3</sup>.

There are those who claim – both in general and with regard to Italian critical psychology – that: “Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, critical work in psychology was part of a wider movement that promoted basic social values” (Biglia & Gordo López, 2006, p.148). In this paper in contrast, we define critical psychology generally and Italian critical psychology in particular not as “*a wider movement*”, but as a *specific current*,<sup>4</sup> that enjoys full recognition within the psychological discipline although it critiques the hegemonic currents making up the mainstream. A *specific current* within psychology that was born of the relationship between academic research and the needs and problems of society, as always comes about when academia resists its tendency to be autistically self-referential and fulfils its mission.

This “narrow” conception of critical psychology<sup>5</sup> is based on both *factual analysis* and *reflection*. It is a *fact* that within the Italian psychology community, “Critical Psychology” has always been understood as a current of the discipline that first appeared in Italy in 1974, with the publication of the Italian version of *Kritische Psychologie*. Holzkamp’s book had a wide-reaching impact in Italy too, and became a guiding light for many young psychologists who had taken part in the political movements of the late ’60s, providing them with the answers they had been seeking about psychology and about their role as psychologists, as well as tracing a path for them to practice the kind of psychology they aspired to.

The writings of Holzkamp and other exponents of the Berlin “school”<sup>6</sup> were translated into Italian thanks to the efforts of Dario Romano, Director of the Institute of Psychology at the Philosophy Faculty of Milan University. The fact that Italian Critical Psychology was born in

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<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps useful to distinguish between “critical work in psychology”, that is to say a great variety of critical needs or challenges that may potentially arise within any area of the discipline, and “critical psychology” in the sense of a movement or current that defines itself as such.

<sup>3</sup> For example “Critical Social Psychology” edited by Ibáñez and Iñigue (1997) cites Marxist thinkers from the broadest possible range of perspectives but omits Holzkamp and the other representatives of the Berlin school, as well as Leontiev, who, as we shall see, was a key influence for both Berlin and Italian critical psychology.

<sup>4</sup> From now on, we will use uppercase initials to refer to the specific current.

<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Doise claims that “Il y a deux psychologies critiques. Celle ‘d’origine’ qui s’identifie avec l’oeuvre de Klaus Holzkamp (1972, 1973) ... Une autre psychologie critique fait maintenant école en Gran Bretagne, dans d’autres pays de l’Europe du Nord, ainsi qu’aux Etats-Unis. ... Je considère qu’elle ne relève plus du projet théorique de Holzkamp...” (Doise, 2012, p.22-23).

<sup>6</sup> After “Psicologia critica” (1974) the translated works of other German critical psychologists were published as part of the same collection. Finally, in 1983, a reading edited by Guglielmo Bellelli was published, with papers by Holzkamp, Holzkamp-Osterkamp, Schurig, Keiler and Volker.

this particular city and “fathered” by this particular scholar is neither a random coincidence nor without its consequences.

Indeed, the Institute of Psychology had been founded and directed – before he was succeeded by his pupil Romano at the end of the 1960s – by Cesare Ludovico Musatti, a name that we will have cause to mention again in the following pages. In his academic career, Musatti combined experimental research on perception, an interest in organizational psychology and the study of psychoanalysis. Musatti indeed viewed psychoanalysis as a key current within psychology and introduced it into an Italian university curriculum for the first time. He was also a leading exponent of secular and left-wing psychology in Italy. The University of Milan, especially the Philosophy faculty was one of the most important centres of the student movement. Milan was the country’s principal economic, industrial and cultural centre, and as such had always acted as an incubator for new political movements.

*Reflection* on the other hand, leads us to point out that critical psychology would be at risk of losing its identity and its guiding theoretical framework, if generically defined as part of “*a wider movement*”, that is ‘anti-’something (anti-psychological, anti-psychiatric, anti-homophobic, etc). The very principle of “no separation between theory and practice” (Biglia & Gordo López, 2006, p.148), which poses very complex challenges, must be based on solid theoretical premises and applied through empirical researches that should preferably be experimental in nature, if it is not to be reduced to an ineffective declaration of intent. Recently, a prominent Italian psychologist, in his obituary for Dario Romano has written: “Who today remembers the verbiage of 1968 and critical psychology? They have disappeared, dissolved, blown away by far stronger winds. And nonetheless the issue of naturalism remains” (Legrenzi, 2011, p.12).

However, as we will try to show, it is debatable whether Critical Psychology can justifiably be put on a par with “the verbiage of 1968”, if understood as a fully recognized current of the discipline and not generically as a varied set of critical challenges forming part of “*a wider movement*” that lacks a clear identity. Undoubtedly, in Italy as elsewhere, there have always been “winds” in psychology which are “far stronger” than critical psychology, which, as previously stated, has always stood as a challenge to the hegemonic theories within the discipline. Examples are Cognitivism, which has become increasingly more specialized and continues to adopt the model of human information processing as its paradigm or core concept; and more recently, neuropsychology with its diverse and all-pervasive off-shoots, which are extending into the areas of social, economic and political psychology. Undoubtedly these currents enjoy hegemonic status within academia, in Italy as elsewhere, providing strong winds to boost academic careers.

It is nonetheless still debatable whether Critical Psychology may be considered “vanished, dissolved”, or as a closed chapter that has not had a lasting influence on psychology, including Italian psychology; apart from “the issue of “naturalism” that still remains, as recognized by Legrenzi himself. Obviously critical psychology, in terms of a framework for the entire discipline as envisaged and described by Holzkamp and in Italy by Dario Romano, would seem to have failed, having faded off the scene in the face of the progressive hyper-specialization and fragmentation of the discipline; although we should ask ourselves whether the latter is an inevitable and positive fact, the necessary price to pay for advances in psychological understanding. We should also acknowledge that, for reasons that should be investigated, critical psychology, understood as both a broad movement and a specific current, would seem to have come to an end in Italy in the early 1980s; and this contrary to what can be said for other Western countries, as evidenced by a relevant and recent literature.

However, at the same time we suggest that Critical Psychology has continued to exert a significant – although not manifest or declared – influence on the development of areas of Italian psychology outside of the hegemonic mainstream. In other words, Holzkamp's book has not simply been forgotten on a library shelf, but has continued to influence those who read it, as is often the case with certain books discovered in one's youth. In order to describe the characteristics and development of Critical Psychology in Italy, and discuss the notion that its influence has persisted over time, we need to explain its origins, particularly in terms of its link with Berlin Critical Psychology, and situate it in relation to the Italian historical and cultural context.

### **Reasons for the relationship between Italian Critical Psychology and Berlin Critical Psychology**

If we are to understand how Berlin Critical Psychology initially exerted an influence in Italy, we must briefly review some historical factors. In the first place, German-language philosophy and science had traditionally played an influential role in Italy from the second half of the 19th century up to the Second World War. The Italian university system, set up after the unification of the State in 1861, was based on the German model as reformed by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the Kingdom of Prussia. Benedetto Croce, a leading liberal thinker, and Giovanni Gentile, official philosopher of the Fascist regime, were both proponents of Hegelian idealism. German science was equally influential, especially in the fields of medicine and biology<sup>7</sup>.

When the scientific study of psychology took off in Italy in the early 1900s, it was even more directly and decisively informed by developments in the German-speaking countries where the new discipline had already taken hold. The leading Italian schools of psychology, which continued to flourish in subsequent decades, were founded by Friederich Kiesow, a pupil of Wundt's, called to occupy the first chair of psychology at the University of Turin where he set up a large group of experimental psychologists; and by Vittorio Benussi, who having begun his research career under Meinong at the University of Graz, moved to the University of Padua in 1919 to take up the first chair of psychology instituted at this ancient university. Benussi's role merits particular emphasis in the context of this brief historical overview, insofar as he specialized in the study of perception<sup>8</sup> – a key concern for both German and Italian Critical Psychology – founding a leading Italian school of experimental research.

Holzkamp himself was primarily a psychologist of perception<sup>9</sup>, as in Italy was Dario Romano. However, perception was not just a leading interest for Holzkamp and other critical psychologists, but was of key importance to Critical Psychology itself. As pointed out by Maiers, Holzkamp's book on the historic phylogenesis, function and social importance of

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<sup>7</sup> An emblematic and significant example of this influence is the career of Jakob Moleschott (1822-1893), a leading exponent of the materialist school, who having been forced to leave the University of Heidelberg, after a brief interlude in Zurich was called to teach physiology at the University of Turin and subsequently at the University of Rome: "He brought the new German scientific methods to Italy; but above all he had to battle for the secular and anticlerical culture that met the needs of the new political class that had just risen to power (in the new united Italy)" (Mondella, 1973, p.648; see also Cosmacini, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Boring ranks Benussi amongst the "important names" of the Austrian school (1950, p.440) claiming that "Benussi was an able experimenter, in fact, the most productive and effective experimental psychologist that Austria had had"(ivi, p.446)

<sup>9</sup> On the back cover of "Grundlegung der Psychologie" (1983-1985), the book in which Holzkamp presents Critical Psychology as a broad theoretical framework, he is presented as having become known and owing a successful academic career to his experimental research in the fields of perception, thought and sociopsychology in the broad sense.

perception (*Sinnliche Erkenntnis – Historischer Ursprung und gesellschaftliche Funktion der Wahrnehmung*, 1973) may be considered “...the first monograph that was ‘Critical Psychology’ in the strict sense of the word” (Maiers, 1991, p.36). Holzkamp, in common with other critical psychologists, never expressed a blanket rejection of the classical tradition in the study of perception, in which he himself had a background, but – applying in exemplary fashion the critical historical method – he critically analysed the limitations of classical perceptology, but he also incorporating its contribution into the new perspective that he was proposing.

The key significance of perception within Holzkamp’s Critical Psychology was clearly grasped by his Italian colleagues:

“Holzkamp deems inadequate the Gestalt vision, which he accuses of formalism and of not having recognized the distinctive qualities [historical, social: Author’s note] of human perception compared to that of other organisms, but he finds equally insufficient the neo-functionalist approach represented by Bruner, who has inappropriately subjectivized perception, not recognizing the objective nature of knowledge, understood as the perception of meanings. He therefore follows Leontiev’s activity theory and the objectivization-appropriation dialectic, which is the basis for the historicization of the perceptive function: thus the key concept in Holzkamp’s analysis is *object meaning*, while he views perception as a specific aspect of human activity that involves the appropriation of object meanings” (Bellelli, 1983, p.17).

The central focus on the issue of perception within Italian Critical Psychology is confirmed by the fact that, after Holzkamp’s “*Psicologia critica*”, the book which had the greatest impact was Stadler, Seeger and Raeithel’s (1979) monograph on perception, which opened with a strongly critical analysis of the studies on virtual contours conducted by Gaetano Kanizsa (1955, 1974) – an elderly pupil of Musatti’s and a leading light in Italian research on perception – who “points out that the naive observer sees [in a figure designed by Kanizsa; Author’s Note] a white triangle ... covering another triangle underneath”, but analyzes this “optical illusion” without taking into account the concrete conditions in which it was produced: “In the cited example of the virtual contours, there is a clear difference between concrete activity and perception and this does not occur in normal perception” (Stadler, Seeger & Raeithel, 1979, pp.9-11).

The critical importance of the issue of perception in this monograph is clearly underlined in the preface to the Italian edition:

“The theoretical and explanatory framework, based on a solid dialectical-materialist approach, makes the book of broad scope, on the basis of a clearly defined theory of knowledge. Perception, viewed within the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, may thus be systematically connected to active behaviour: this places the emphasis on the dynamic and “concrete” nature of the perceptive process, on its indivisible link with the *Tätigkeit*, or concrete human activity. Only awareness of this connection can save the psychology of perception from being reduced to the study of perceptive illusions within the limited context of laboratory experiments. This brings up the more general issue of the typical limitation of bourgeois science, that is to say its tendency to confine itself to in vitro experimentalism... But what is of far greater interest here is the fact that the metatheoretical approach, applied to the classic issue of perception, allows the authors to *incorporate the most useful contributions of classical*

*perceptology* – such as the Gestalt movement – critically pointing out areas of affinity and convergence and identifying its limitations” (Lazzaro, 1979, pp.7-8).

In Italy as elsewhere, the Critical Psychology approach to perception was subsequently completely dropped, due to the dominance of a mainly, if not exclusively, neuropsychological or neurological approach: that is to say, the “naturalism” referred to by Legrenzi. Thus, psychology research has failed to avail of the opportunity to enrich the substantial technological, theoretical and methodological resources offered by neurology, with a perspective that takes into account, or at the very least does not ignore, the historic and social nature of “human perception”. In this sense, “the wind of critical psychology” may truly be said to have “vanished”. In short, both for critical currents and for the discipline in general, perception is “the weather vane of psychology” par excellence (Ittelson, 1973).

### **Historical and cultural background or antecedents of Italian Critical Psychology**

If the development of psychology and of the human sciences in general is inextricably linked to historic context, this is all the more true for a current such as Critical Psychology. It follows that Italian Critical Psychology had its roots in the historical, political and cultural developments that affected the country in general. In the editorial comment to Issue 20 of the *International Journal of Critical Psychology*, devoted to “Critical Social Psychology in Italy”, it was pointed out that “...Italian social psychology emerged from the socialist tradition and started in substance as a social psychology of politics” (Sensales, 2007, p.5). The reference was to Enrico Ferri, “a criminal lawyer and criminologist who devoted himself to defending workers who took part in demonstrations and who coined the expression ‘collective psychology’ in 1881”; and to Pasquale Rossi, a socialist doctor from Cosenza (a provincial capital in Calabria, the extreme South of Italy), one of the first along with contemporary and more renowned French (Tarde, *Le Bon*) and English (McDougall) scholars to study collective psychology, then better known as crowd psychology (*psychologie des foules*, *Massenpsychologie*). Rossi (1898; 1902) was one of few scholars, if not the only one, to critique the ideas of mainstream crowd psychologists which were imbued with a ‘prejudice against crowds’ and ultimately came to dominate collective psychology in its entirety: “Pasquale Rossi opposed strongly such a prejudice by supporting, in an enlightened way, the positive role of those human masses which were asking for citizenship. He developed a specific discipline, ‘demopedia’, which was devoted to the education and valorisation of the masses...” (Sensales, 2007, p.6).

These examples (Ferri’s collective psychology and even more so Rossi’s opposition to the “prejudice against crowds” and his “demopedia”) could be said to indicate an early *de facto* Italian critical and emancipatory psychology. Aside from these precocious critical tendencies, the overall discipline in Italy underwent a phase of strong development between the late 19th century and the early decades of the 20th, thanks to the positivist and liberal culture that prevailed in the country in those years, as well as to the previously mentioned influence of German culture.

However, Italy was characterized by political and cultural contrasts that affected the field of psychology too. Crowd psychology was also taken up by the great Roman lawyer, Scipio Sighele, a theorist within the Nationalist movement and a typical representative of the ‘prejudice against crowds’ school of thought (his most famous work was *La folla delinquente* [The Delinquent Crowd] published in 1891 and soon translated into French); in his view, even the Parliament displayed the same irrationality as any other type of crowd (Sighele, 1905).

And indeed both parliament and democracy were to be abolished by Mussolini who, as well as having been an attentive reader of Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* (1895), agreed with Sighele's theories.

The promising beginnings of Italian psychology, linked to positivist and secular approaches and in some cases to socialism, were suffocated by the fascist dictatorship (1922 – 1943). Not only because dictatorships are adverse to a science aimed at increasing the value of subjectivity (at most exploiting the tools provided by psychotechnics) but also because Italian culture at that time was dominated by the idealism of Giovanni Gentile and Benedetto Croce. Gentile was 'the philosopher of fascism' and minister of education under the regime; in the latter capacity, he introduced an influential class-based reform of the school system. Croce was the recognized leader of the liberal movement, and therefore of a cautious cultural opposition to fascism. Both opposed positivism on the basis of Hegelian historicism, belittling the natural sciences and psychology even more so, deeming inadmissible "a natural science of the spirit".

The chairs of psychology at the leading Italian universities (from Padua to Naples), which had multiplied in the first twenty years of the 20th century, now diminished drastically in number; by 1941, there were only two left, in Rome and Milan respectively. Psychoanalysis which had been introduced into Italy in the early 1900s, only survived thanks to clandestine work in closed circles (Mecacci, 1998).

The leading proponent of academic psychology in the fascist period was Father Agostino Gemelli, a positivist doctor who converted to Catholicism (he dressed in the tunic of the Third Order Franciscans) and founder of the Catholic University of Milan and its Institute of Psychology – still one of the most important in Italy today – where he successfully trained a considerable number of students who were later to make a significant contribution to the rebirth of the discipline in the postwar period. Gemelli achieved all of this on the strength of support from the Vatican and heavy concessions to the fascist regime.

From an applied perspective, the psychology developed by Father Gemelli was a typical instance of what Holzkamp (1972) defines as "technical external relevance", aimed at controlling social and economic processes. For example, Gemelli devised "psychotechnical" methods (setting up short university training courses amongst other strategies) for the recruitment of personnel in the industrial sector, as well as for the selection and training of air force pilots. We may go even further and claim that psychology managed to gain acceptance from the fascist regime mainly by emphasizing its own "technical external relevance", due to the activism of Gemelli and other psychologists that supported Mussolini and his regime (Mecacci, 1998, p.28).

After fascism and the war, Italian psychology again began to develop in different directions. Experimental research on perception that had traditionally been informed by the Gestalt movement got underway once more. Most significant however was the opening up to psychological currents from the United States. This marked the beginning of the dominance of North American psychology which still today characterizes mainstream Italian psychology: first functionalism-behaviourism, then from the 1970s to date Cognitivism and, within social psychology, Social Cognition.

In the same years, in line with developments in other Western Countries, Italian applied psychology moved from an exclusive emphasis on psychological testing and psychotechnics

to develop applications in the fields of organizational psychology, human resources, school and careers guidance, and health issues. This general context of renewal was the backdrop to an initiative at the Olivetti factories in Ivrea<sup>10</sup> (Pampaloni, 1980), which was to have a lasting impact on Italian work psychology in the second half of the last century (Musatti, Baussano, Novara & Rozzi, 1980).

Adriano Olivetti started up this project, which was to continue throughout the post-war decades, in 1943 when he called Cesare Musatti (whom the fascist regime had expelled from the university) to direct a Centre of Psychology with broad aims "... not intended as a laboratory of psychotechnics but as a centre for the study of the different psychological problems linked to working life and to workers conditions" (Sensales, 2007, p.8). The mission of this centre was to improve work conditions and thereby worker productivity, but at the same time to enhance the overall quality of life and cultural level of the workers, their families and the entire local community. In other words, the utopia that Olivetti strove for and partly achieved, was a clear application of the principles, albeit reinterpreted, of community psychology and action research. This project came to an end with the sudden death of this unusual industrial leader and the decline of his company, but it left behind living roots in Italian psychology. We suggest that the spirit and inspiring principles of Critical Psychology subsequently lived on in Italy and, as we shall see, are still present today, in the form of a substantial line of community psychology and action research.

The protest movements of the late '60s made their influence felt in Italian psychiatric hospitals as well as in the universities. A successful "anti-psychiatric" movement was founded, leading in 1978 to the abolition of mental hospitals and a law on psychiatric care (known as the "Legge Basaglia" after the leader of the movement that campaigned for it) that remains one of the most advanced in Europe today, although not without its problematic aspects.

This movement, also referred to as "critical psychiatry", had contact with the Berlin Critical Psychology school, which had already displayed interest in psychiatric issues especially on the part of the students and younger researchers. The applied social projects of the Psychology Institute at the Freie Universität of Berlin included a community centre for psychiatric patients, services for children with psychiatric disorders and a comparative analysis of psychiatric clinics in a number of European countries; and "in the context of the latter project, staff members from the Venice Mental Health Centre were invited to a seminar in Berlin. Subsequently a group of German students came on a study visit to the Venetian psychiatric services in November 1989" (Calò et al., 1994, pp.407-409).

While these episodes were significant, they did not amount to a continuous exchange. Therefore, although *Italian critical psychiatry* was an important part of the wider critical movement (Sensales, 2007), it may not be considered representative of, or still less synonymous with, Italian Critical Psychology, contrary to what Biglia and Gordo López (2006, p.148) have implied. In the first place, the anti-psychiatry movement had to do with 'psychiatry' and not 'psychology'; the leaders of the movement were psychiatric doctors who continued to consider themselves as such despite their "anti" or critical positions, and in no way saw themselves as having a connection with psychology. The position of Giovanni Jervis, one of the few to address the theoretical issues affecting critical psychiatry, is emblematic in this regard. In his *Manuale critico di psichiatria* (1975), which explicitly

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<sup>10</sup> A city in Piedmont (a region of Northern Italy) where the Olivetti factories produced typewriters, mechanical calculators and where the first personal computers were born.

proposes a Marxist framework for the analysis of power relations and emphasizes the concept of “false consciousness”, Jervis write in the notes to a brief section on “Psychology–Psychopathology”: “In this book *the theme of ‘psychology’ is only touched on in passing, with a view to providing the reader with some basic indications as to how it differs from psychiatry*. There are however some critical writings on psychology, which it is appropriate to mention here because they develop theories (first and foremost that of the non-neutrality of the psychologist and of his science) that may usefully supplement and expand the topics dealt with here in relation to psychiatry” (Jervis, 1975, p.301; italics mine). He goes on to cite Deleule, Armistead and finally Holzkamp’s book on critical psychology. Ultimately we may conclude that this movement “... established a close, but sometimes also contradictory and conflict–ridden, relationship” not so much “with psychology”, as written by Sensales (2007, p.12), but with individual psychologists.

With regard to the overall political and cultural situation, a key factor to be highlighted is that post-World War II Italy boasted the largest communist party (PCI) in the West, as well as an active trade union movement whose broad social role went well beyond defending the various worker categories. These more political aspects were combined with the cultural hegemony of the Marxist left in the universities, including in the field of psychology. Musatti – who on his return to teaching was appointed Director of the Institute of Psychology at Milan State University – was a member of a socialist party to the left of the PCI and president of the Italy-USSR Cultural Association. Angiola Massucco Costa, who directed the Psychology Institute of the University of Turin and who had founded the first Italian review on social psychology” (*Psicologia e Società. Rivista di Psicologia Sociale*), published a book on “Psicologia sovietica” (1963) and in the 1970s promoted the translation into Italian, often directly from the Russian<sup>11</sup>, of the writings of Leontiev and Luria. Raffaello Misiti, as pointed out by Sensales (2007, p.11) was a long-serving Director of the Institute of Psychology of the National Research Council and a prominent member of the PCI.

At the same time however, the relationship between Marxist culture – in particular the “official” Marxism espoused by the Communist Party – and psychology was highly contradictory. The Party’s “cultural line” reflected its basic estrangement from psychology, particularly with regard to psychological interventions in factory, work-place and social contexts. Sensales in his previously-cited editorial (2007, p.9) has provided a number of reasons to explain this antagonism, to which we may add that both the PCI and the largest Italian trade union (CGIL), controlled by the Party, generally considered organizational psychologists to be technocrats serving capitalist interests as well as competitors for trade union representatives in the fields of recruitment, training and workplace safety. A prejudiced attitude that, as usually happens in such cases, led to the baby being thrown out with the bathwater.

This disaffection towards psychology, which impacted on the everyday life contexts of the factories and other social organizations such as schools<sup>12</sup>, was also underpinned by a theoretical prejudice. Although a bias against psychology was typical of the dominant or “official” Marxist culture, as a totalitarian ideology, transmitted by the Soviet Union in its role as “guiding country”, it was already well-rooted in Italy in any case, due to the cultural influence of Benedetto Croce, including in left-wing circles, that still persisted in the decades after the Second World War.

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<sup>11</sup> Thanks to the untiring translation work of her student, Maria Serena Veggetti

<sup>12</sup> As a result, the primary school system in particular came to be controlled, almost exclusively, by Catholic pedagogy.

The peculiar nature of the Italian political and cultural context, briefly outlined here in order to illustrate the background to the subsequent rise of Critical Psychology, could be termed ‘the paradox of Gramsci’. Gramsci was the leading theorist of a humanistic and anthropocentric form of Marxism, which rejected a dialectical materialism based on deterministic laws that are superordinate to subjective will and action as well as to concrete existences. From such a materialist perspective, even the “working classes” became an abstract subject. Thus, Italian culture also featured this Gramscian brand of Marxism which critiqued the dominant culture in the countries practicing “real socialism”, as well as in the communist parties that were “brothers”, or more appropriately vassals, of the Soviet Communist Party, with the ultimate outcome of which we are all aware.

Gramsci put forward a “philosophy of praxis” – defined as the responsible and intentional activity (Tätigkeit) of both individuals and the masses – that valued common sense, as an expression of collective psychology and popular culture; we may only touch briefly on this aspect here, while pointing the reader elsewhere for an in-depth analysis of the topic (Colucci, 1999).

The situation may be termed “paradoxical” insofar as Gramsci’s Marxism should have promoted greater openness to subjectivity and to psychology as the science of subjectivity; but ‘official’ Italian Marxism proved blindly unreceptive to Gramsci’s teaching<sup>13</sup>, although, at the same time, the Communist Party founder and martyr to fascism was continuously invoked as a seal and symbol of Italian communists identity. The clearest symptom of blindness on the part of “official” Marxist culture was its failure to recognize the potential for “emancipatory social relevance” inherent to psychology; such was the prejudice against the discipline that it was labelled a “bourgeois science” and thus totally written off.

At the same time, Italian psychologists themselves failed to grasp the importance of Gramsci’s work for their discipline, remaining boxed into the rigid experimental frameworks that characterized research on perception, cognitive and sociocognitive processes. In short, the “paradox” lies in the fact that Gramsci’s key contribution to Italian culture did not have an impact on psychology, or on the relationships between psychology and Marxism and between psychology and society<sup>14</sup>.

Although we have described this situation as particularly “paradoxical” for Italian psychology, it actually reflected a much more widespread and generalized situation outside of Italy. The anthropological value of Marx’s work, and therefore for psychology as the science of the subject, generally fell by the wayside on account of the dominance within Marxism of dialectic materialism that, as already noted, ignored subjectivity. The key exception to this rule was obviously Vygotsky and the Cultural Historical School, soon silenced and restrained

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<sup>13</sup> Symptomatic of this situation is the fact that the complete critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks* did not come out until 1975 (Einaudi editore, Torino). Bringing them to publication had been a long and difficult enterprise, partly reconstructed in the editor Valentino Gerratana’s Preface to the Einaudi edition, which had been preceded from the 1950s onwards by partial editions brought out by the publishing house (Editori Riuniti) of the Partito Comunista Italiano and “edited” (or rather “controlled” and “censored”) by Palmiro Togliatti, historic secretary of the PCI, who had been a prominent member of the Komintern in Moscow during the fascist dictatorship. The certainly stormy relationship between Gramsci, imprisoned under the fascist regime, Togliatti and the Partito Comunista are still a topic of debate.

<sup>14</sup> Gramsci has frequently been cited in relation to psychology on the strength of a few brief references to psychoanalysis, which, as he himself admitted, he hardly knew anything about, when discussing his wife’s mental illness in letters to his sister-in-law Tatiana.

however in Stalin's Soviet Union; with the addition in the West of some isolated and theoretically shaky but interesting episodes such as Politzer's concrete psychology and Sève's (1969) Marxist psychology.

One of the consequences of this situation, in Italy in particular, was a bizarre split in the lives of left-wing psychologists, many of whom were Communist Party activists: a split between their weekdays spent on research activities and their holidays and free time devoted to political activism. The lack of communication between the two spheres made it seem as though the psychologist and the militant were two different people.

Holzkamp's Critical Psychology appeared to offer a way out, or *the* way out, of this state of affairs, of these paradoxes and splits, which seemed particularly unsustainable in the wake of the political movements that had swept through society, and especially the universities, at the end of the 1960s; thus on its arrival in Italy in the early 1970s, it was hailed as the solution that many psychologists had been waiting for.

### **The structural relationship with Marxism and the external relevance of psychology**

Clearly, if the split between weekdays and holidays was to be overcome, individual principled choice and good will could not suffice. If principles were to be put into practice, the social aims of psychology, that is to say its external relevance, needed to be redefined; which in turn demanded an explicit and detailed account of the relationship between Marxism and psychology. Romano wrote in the Introduction to the Italian translation of Holzkamp's *Kritische Psychologie*: "It may not be right to impose one's one ideas on others, but one may ask a scientist to be coherent with his principles: or a "left wing" psychologist to take account of the Marxist conception of the person and of the knowledge" (Romano, 1974, p.I).

Holzkamp's Critical Psychology appealed to Italian left-wing psychologists, sensitive as they were to the theoretical demands of Marxism, because it seemed to provide the answers they had been waiting for regarding the external relevance of psychology and its relationship with Marxism, providing an in-depth analysis of these themes for the first time within Western culture: "...the views of dissident psychoanalysts, such as Bernfeld, Reich and Fromm, never went beyond a flimsy tacking together of Freudian and Marxist themes that did not survive the first political differences encountered and the diaspora imposed by Nazism; while in France, Politzer's *Revue de psychologie concrete*, although launched on a well-thought out basis, over its short life span of two issues did not find contributors capable of understanding or sharing the ambitious project of its founder" (Romano, 1974, p.II).

Thus, the "distinguishing" characteristic of Berlin Critical Psychology was, as Maiers (1991) later emphasized, its in-depth and exhaustive examination of the relationship between psychology and Marxism, beginning with "...the insight of the early Marxian developmental theory that 'History itself is a real part of natural history, of nature becoming human' (Marx, 1844/1981, p.544)". Maiers further observed that while other positions that defined themselves as critical "...disputed or severely circumscribed the competence of Marxism to deal directly with psychology or other special scientific problems, Critical Psychology became distinguished by its assertion of Marxism's full competence in such matters" (Maiers, 1991, pp.35-36). It was this very "distinguishing" feature that was so well-received by Italian Critical Psychology. For example, though acknowledging that Holzkamp "drew on Sève in formulating the concepts of 'social formation', and 'social form of individuality'", it was nevertheless observed that: "To the Berlin psychologists we must undoubtedly attribute the merit of having intentionally addressed the issue of an exhaustive – differently to the unsatisfactory formulations of other Marxist psychologists such as Sève – definition of human

nature, and in so doing, avoiding both biologicistic reductionism and sociological extremism, while rigorously maintaining a historical-analytical perspective ...” (Bellelli, 1983, pp.27-28). It was easier for Italian Critical Psychology to take Marxism as its base, along the lines of Berlin Critical Psychology, due to the fact that both currents were informed by the Cultural Historical School. It is not our place here to reconstruct the complex relationship between the Berlin Critical Psychology of Holzkamp and colleagues and Leontiev’s theory of activity and psychic development: the Berlin psychologists assimilated and at the same time critically analyzed the work of the Russian psychologist, to whom Holzkamp later dedicated (*zum Gedenken*) his most comprehensive work, *Grundlegung der Psychologie*, published in 1983. With regard to Italy, as outlined in the previous section, the Cultural Historical School was widely known for autogenous reasons independently of the influence of Berlin Critical Psychology. In addition, while the latter drew almost exclusively on Leontiev<sup>15</sup>, Italian psychology was familiar with the works of Leontiev and Luria and most especially the seminal works of Vygotsky, the founder of the Cultural Historical School.

For the psychologists that led the dissemination of Critical Psychology in Italy, a key strength of the “Berlin school” as we may call it, was that it did not confine itself to criticisms of “bourgeois psychology”, but proposed, beginning with Holzkamp’s fundamental work in 1972, a complete systemic model of psychology (Bellelli, 1983; Conti & Romano, 1979, pp.143-150, Romano, 1991). This system included, amongst other issues: sensory knowledge and perception, rigorously analysed in light of classical psychological research with a view to mapping out their evolution and functions within natural historical and social historical perspectives (Holzkamp, 1973); the natural history of the psyche and consciousness (Schurig, 1975); the phylogenesis of motivation and needs, studied with a view to assimilating but at the same time going beyond the insights of psychoanalysis and ethology (Holzkamp-Osterkamp, 1975-1976). *Theoretical relevance*, understood as the extent to which the theoretical assumptions of the psychological system were integrated, was central to tackling the core issue of “external emancipatory relevance” (Holzkamp, 1972, pp.7-37)<sup>16</sup>.

However, there were some weak points in the psychological system proposed by Berlin Critical Psychology – mainly linked to an excessively ideological rigidity – which were noted by the Italian critical psychologists:

“The analyses of subjectivity in the bourgeoisie ... appear to be too bound by the assumption of the “primacy of production” ... The risk is that of excessive schematism and approximation, particularly when [such analyses] are almost entirely polarized in terms of the conflict between the capitalist and working classes ... we cannot wholly rule out the risk – implicit in such a perspective – of a tendency to mechanically deduce subjective phenomena on the basis of the subject’s status in the productive process” (Bellelli, 1983, 30-31).

Stated more explicitly, certain positions adopted by Critical Psychology ran the risk of linking emancipatory relevance to politics in the narrow sense, ultimately reducing it to political indoctrination. Furthermore, the criticisms of Holzkamp and other critical psychologists

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<sup>15</sup> The writings of Holzkamp and the other Berlin psychologists contain frequent references to Leontiev or Rubinstein, but hardly any to Vygotsky.

<sup>16</sup> Holzkamp, drawing on the ideas of Habermas (1969; 1970), distinguishes between *technical external relevance*, aimed at controlling social and economic processes, and *emancipatory external relevance*, which should contribute to the self-clarification of the person regarding his social dependence and create the conditions for the person to enhance his situation by freeing himself from this dependency.

(Stadler, 1975) regarding certain aspects of experimentation, such as decontextualization or the exclusion of supposedly disturbing variables, ended up being extended to the entire experimental method (e.g. Staeuble, 1972).

Partly on account of these limitations, and the consequent “risk of involution” that had been identified by the Italian critical psychologists (Bellelli, 1983; Romano, 1991), both German Critical Psychology, and the parallel Activity Theory current that was developing Cultural Historical theory in the context of an advanced Western society, were almost completely wiped out by the collapse of the Berlin Wall, or rather by the overall crisis that affected left wing culture at the end of the 1980s which was symbolically represented by the coming down of the Wall<sup>17</sup>.

Critical Psychology still enjoyed an active presence in Italy during the 1980s, though it certainly did not dominate the psychological scene: a wind, to take up Legrenzi’s metaphor once more, that was to blow ever less strongly, but that was to continue to *guide the choices* of those Italian psychologists who had been influenced by Berlin Critical Psychology, although the forms and directions taken would be different to those of the original movement. In this sense, we may legitimately claim that Italian Critical Psychology is not a closed chapter, to be relegated to the past, but continues to be present. If this has come about it is partly thanks to the fact that, compared to their German counterparts, the Italian psychologists influenced by Critical Psychology were both less rigidly bound to the ideological schemas typical of a certain Marxist culture, and more pragmatic in the sense of more attentive to concrete social problems.

### **An ongoing story**

The *choices* of Italian psychologists to which we refer here are those that have emancipatory aims and use psychology to address concrete social problems, as proposed by Holzkamp. It is not merely a question of coherence between theory and practice: psychologists in this field only make one choice, in the sense that theory and practice are so closely interrelated that it is not possible to distinguish between them.

Within overall social psychology, the particular theoretical orientation informing this kind of emancipatory work is the European Social Psychology, which has grown up in opposition to mainstream North American Social Cognition with the aim of providing “a more social social psychology” (Contarello & Mazzara, 2004), and is informed by the theoretical bases (philosophical and sociological as well as psychological) of European culture (Amerio, 1995, p.239).

In the Introduction we have already made reference to the specific characteristics of both social psychology and European Social Psychology. There are a number of connections and similarities between ‘European Social Psychology’ and Critical Psychology. Apart from what we have already described in relation to Tajfel – who in Part I of *Human Groups and Social Categories* (1981), his key work, provided a critical historical reconstruction of social psychology – we should mention the books edited by Peter Stringer (1982) that were part of a collection overseen by Tajfel (series editor) and published by Academic Press in collaboration with the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology. These books, like Critical

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<sup>17</sup> We are unable to agree with Doise when he states that the *Kritische Psychologie* is “*toujours en vogue*” (Doise, 2012, p.22). We do believe it possible however that *Kritische Psychologie* may enjoy a revival in the future.

Psychology, focused on relevance, which was referred to as the issue of “application” and discussed in relation to ideologies and power relations. A Marxist perspective and references to Holzkamp’s Critical Psychology are particularly explicit in essays such as that of van Strien (*In search of an emancipatory social psychology*, 1982), who, as the editor notes in the introduction “...is concerned with the way in which practice-oriented research in organizations might follow an emancipatory mode. His attention to the Frankfurt School and Marxist approaches is more characteristic of Continental Northern European Social Psychology” (Stringer, 1982, p.1).

Discursive psychology is also close to the critically-oriented current represented in the Stringer essay collections, as shown by the fact that J. Potter also contributed a paper. Potter appealed to the “...traditions of Marxism that scientific knowledge should be tested in practical application and, when it is correct, would enable new forms of practice. Lenin claimed that a leap forward in knowledge is necessary for the realization of any radically new practice” (Potter, 1982, p.25).

Even more direct and substantial is the relationship between von Cranach theory of goal-directed action, the Tätigkeitstheorie of the Cultural Historical School and Berlin Critical Psychology: “Statements about phylogenetic and historical development of consciousness cannot but remain speculative. Two of the main attempts to clarify them will be emphasized here: the ethological (Lorenz, 1973) and the Marxist perspective.... Within psychology, fundamental conceptions concerning the phylogenetic and historical aspects of development have been mainly worked out by the Marxist psychology of action (Tätigkeitspsychologie). The phylogenetic origins are seen in socially organized work activities. Action plays a special role in this development...In many ways, the views of Lorenz, Rubinstein (1977) and Leontiev (1977) are very similar” (von Cranach, Valach, 1984, pp.290-291).

Another connection worthy of note is that with Michael Billig, although the latter stands more in isolation on account of the originality of his ideas. In his well-documented rediscovery of the key role of rhetoric, Billig did not just make a generic appeal to Marxism, but discussed the relationship between Marxism and psychology. He was also the first to grasp the potential value for psychology of Gramsci’s thinking (Billig, 1991)<sup>18</sup>.

There are two key theoretical similarities between European Social Psychology and Critical Psychology, which we now synthetically outline. The first is the rejection of Kantian universalism that characterizes Cognitivism and Social Cognition. In a Kantian perspective, historical, social and cultural aspects are background factors of minor importance to cognition. It follows that the cognitive processes of Social Cognition are “social” only because applied to “social” objects. Implicit in this assumption is that it is both sensible and feasible to distinguish between “social” and “non-social” objects.

In contrast, for European Social Psychology as for Critical Psychology and the Cultural Historical School, historic, social and cultural aspects are an intrinsic part of cognitive processes. This theoretical perspective was outlined by Tajfel in Part I of *Human Groups and Social Categories* (Tajfel, 1981, pp.13-53). Doise<sup>19</sup> (1982) developed it further, defining it as

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<sup>18</sup> The interest of this author to the issues of Critical Psychology is also well demonstrated in his recent volume *The Hidden Roots of Critical Psychology* (2008).

<sup>19</sup> An author who has long been interested in Kritische Psychologie as he has recently confirmed: “... j’effectuerai ici un retour sur l’oeuvre de Holzkamp dont j’ai suivi les developments pratiquement dès leur début; je m’y réfèrais déjà il y a plus de trente ans dans mon premier livre (Doise, 1976)” (Doise, 2012, p.22).

“societal”. The same term has been used to describe Holzkamp’s psychology (Maiers, 1991), to show that it operates at the highest and most comprehensive “level of explanation” that a psychology can: That is to say, its analysis includes the relationship between subjects and social structure, and the ideologies and power relations inherent to this relationship.

This not only implies rejecting “naturalism”. It essentially means avoiding all forms of subjectivism and objectivism, a position that is shared by Critical Psychology (Maiers, 1991, p.29ss) and European Social Psychology as understood by Tajfel, Moscovici, Doise and von Cranach. The individual subject is neither viewed as isolated – a unit of analysis suspended in a vacuum – nor passive in relation to nature, history or the economy.

Valuing the subject, or rather the subjects, in the sense of a thinking society (Moscovici, 1984), has the further implication that, as suggested by Gramsci, value would also be attributed to common sense with its critical and emancipatory potential, instead of viewing it as a mere set of commonplaces or the source of the repetitive biases that have been examined in painstaking detail by cognitive psychology (Colucci, 1999; 2007).

The avoidance of both subjectivism and objectivism led Leontiev, in defining his Tätigkeitstheorie, to attribute a key role to the dialectic relationship between subject and object, viewed as bidirectional and mediated by activity. This implies a circular and progressive process linking interiorization and exteriorization (Stadler, 1980) which is in contrast with linear and mechanistic causal processes. Thus the second key convergence between Critical Psychology, for which Tätigkeitstheorie is a core framework, and European Social Psychology is the avoidance of “binary” schemas – in place of which Moscovici has proposed a “ternary conception” in his theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1984, p.62) – and consequently of the flow charts that Social Cognition has co-opted from the cognitive analysis of the basic psychic processes<sup>20</sup>.

At the same time, although Critical Psychology and European Social Psychology share the common ground that we have just outlined they do not make up a coherent theoretical system. This is firstly because, as already pointed out, the former bases its psychology on an in-depth relationship with Marxism, and secondly and even more importantly because it does not just appeal to the explicitly social dimension of psychology or social psychology, but frames itself as an approach to psychology as a whole.

Italian social psychology had already begun to contribute to the European Social Psychology in the early 1970s<sup>21</sup>, in line with the pre-existing tradition of social psychology in Italy described earlier in the paper. Since then, Italian social psychology has increasingly adopted the theories and methods of this European current<sup>22</sup>, which today characterize a significant proportion of the work carried out in the field. Italian scholars that represent this approach include amongst others, Augusto Palmonari at the University of Bologna who has led the

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<sup>20</sup> Examples of flow charts used in Social Cognition include reasoned action theory (Fishbein, Ajzen, 1975), planned behaviour (Ajzen 1988) or Petty and Cacioppo’s model (1986).

<sup>21</sup> We have already mentioned Tajfel’s influential contribution to the debate that took place between Italian psychologists in those very years (Palmonari, 1976). For this and other reasons, we do not concur with Sensales (2007) when she refers to an initial “marginalisation” of Italian social psychology when the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology was being founded (for the participation of Italian social psychologists see Palmonari, Emilani 2009, pp.12-17)

<sup>22</sup> The writings of Tajfel, Doise, von Cranach and Moscovici have been translated by leading Italian publishing houses and are widely present university reading lists. The most recent example is Moscovici’s “La psicanalise, son image, son public” edited by Anna Maria De Rosa (2011, Milano: Unicopli)

dissemination and development of Tajfel and Moscovici's theories in Italy (Palmonari 1980; Palmonari & Emiliani, 2009) and Piero Amerio at the University of Turin who, drawing on the psychology of Lewin, has developed an original theory of context-bound and purposeful concrete action (Amerio, 1996; 2007).

Rhetoric and discursive psychology, which continue to be associated with a critical perspective (Hepburn & Jackson, 2009), are also actively pursued in Italy. The key works of Billig (1991; 1996) have been translated into Italian and enjoy a wide readership. Discourse psychology in Italy has taken the form of research, with the publication of studies on topics such as the representation of key social events (Sensales, Angelastro & Areni, 2010) and representations of politics (Sensales, 1994). Alongside this empirical work, theoretical analysis of the key critical features of discursive psychology has also been carried out, showing that the study of discursive and argumentative repertoires can contribute to psychosocial research by enhancing our understanding of the cultural and social nature of psychological processes (De Grada & Bonaiuto, 2002; Mantovani, 2008).

The continuity and importance of both the theoretical orientation of European Social Psychology and the set of features that come directly from Critical Psychology is not only borne out by books and publications. In 1991, to mark the centenary of Gramsci's birth, an international seminar was held at the Istituto Gramsci in Bologna to discuss the relevance of Gramsci's thinking – especially his concepts of common sense and of praxis – to contemporary social psychology. This provided an opportunity for debate between scholars representing European Social Psychology - including Serge Moscovici, Willem Doise, Mario von Cranach, Piero Amerio and Augusto Palmonari – and those with a background in Critical Psychology and the Cultural Historical School or Activity Theory, including Charles Tolman, Martin Hildebrand Nilsson, Georg Rückriem and Dario Romano (Colucci, 1994).

More recently the Associazione Italiana di Psicologia organized a conference on “The social relevance of psychological research” (Parma, 7-8 April 2011). Given that the theme was “social” or “external” relevance, and not only in the field of social psychology but in “psychological research” in general (although in practice the conference dealt with mainly psychosocial topics), it was significant though not surprising that Holzkamp's book on Critical Psychology made a reappearance at the event.

While European Social Psychology is rooted in the tradition of classical thinkers, it has also provided a framework for renewed interest in the work of Lewin (Amerio, 1996; Colucci, 2005), who has recently acquired a new following, especially in Italy, not only on account of his group dynamics but on the strength of his theory as a whole. Lewin's field theory and criticism of approaches based on *social tendencies* (Lewin, 1943), especially psychoanalysis and behaviourism, may be equally relevant today to critiquing the paradigms of Social Cognition. Of particular importance is the notion of *psychological ecology* (Lewin, 1943), according to which all psychological research should take non-psychological factors into account. Such *ecological* factors may legitimately be said to correspond to the *material conditions of existence* of Marxist terminology.

We may therefore contend that Lewin, a heterodox Gestalt psychologist, subscribed to a critical psychology perspective given the theoretical aspects outlined above as well as the emphasis on the theory-practice dialectic that underpinned his entire work and ultimately led him to develop action research. The emphasis on the theory-practice dialectic is particularly

indicative of the (ignored) influence of Marxism on Lewin, who completed his training and began his research career in Berlin during the Weimar Republic (Colucci, 2008).

If the theoretical orientation we have described, with its associated problematic aspects and potential, lives on in Italian psychology, demonstrating that Critical Psychology may not be superficially considered a snuffed-out wind, the *choices* of Italian psychologists regarding the social and emancipatory relevance of psychology, in short the use to which it is put, are even stronger symptoms of the survival of the critical perspective. This leads us to discuss action research in general and community psychology as an ideal field in which to apply the principles of action research.

Obviously action research is not of itself an expression of critical psychology nor does it automatically guarantee emancipatory social relevance. Action research is critical and emancipatory when interpreted as originally intended by Lewin (Colucci, 2008). This is not only because Lewin viewed action research as having an explicitly emancipatory social aim – the reduction of discrimination towards minority or under-privileged groups (Lewin, 1946) – but even more fundamentally on account of some common theoretical premises. In fact, one of the basic tenets of Lewin’s action research is a conception of the subject that is shared by Critical Psychology and is in contrast with the mainstream view, as it was in Lewin’s and later Holzkamp’s time and remains today: “In its predominant objectivistic direction, psychology has misapprehended the activity and subjectivity of concrete human beings living in historically determined societal conditions as the behaviour or experience of abstract individuals standing opposed to and determined by an environment which itself is misunderstood in naturalistic and ahistorical terms” (Maiers, 1991, p.29). For this reason, even when action research is carried out with experimental methodologies, it is not based on “un rapport sujet-objet” as in traditional experimental psychology, but on “un rapport entre sujets”, like the Critical Psychology of Holzkamp (Doise, 2012, p.24). Thus, the experimental method is often preferred when carrying out action research in the tradition of Lewin (Colucci, 2008), because it anchors the relationship between theory and practice to experimentation reflecting *Galilean modes of thought* (Lewin, 1931). The latter is an indispensable requirement if the relationship is to successfully go beyond a sterile declaration of intent or statement of objectives, as already mentioned in the Introduction to this paper. Furthermore, action research as envisaged by Lewin (1946) involves the interdisciplinary exchange between psychology, history, anthropology and economics, that Holzkamp believed to be essential to building up an understanding of the evolution of the psychic functions (Doise, 2012, p.27).

As we have just argued in relation to action research, community psychology *per se* is not necessarily a critical psychology. This point has been made by Prilleltensky and Nelson who argue that the initial aspirations to contribute to social change that characterized the beginnings of the current in the 1960s, became considerably watered down over the following decades. For this reason, they distinguish between on the one hand a “mainstream community psychology” and on the other a “critical community psychology” “that is contextual (ecological) and political (focusing on social injustice and power), value-driven (emphasizing social justice) and critical (in its ontological, epistemological and methodological underpinnings)” (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2009, p.129).

In Italy, there is a tradition of the “critical community psychology” referred to by Prilleltensky and Nelson that began with the Olivetti project and became well-rooted and widespread from the 1970s and ’80s onwards. Palmonari and Zani, in an essay entitled

*Towards a community psychology in Italy*, refer to the strong points of Holzkamp's Critical Psychology -- "favour a change of attitude, in an emancipatory rather than a manipulative way (in the sense intended by Holzkamp (1972))" -- but equally to the limitations of North American Community Psychology that include a lack of attention to power relations in social contexts; as a result the concept of "class is rarely used" as it is replaced by that of "groups" (Palmonari & Zani, 1982, p.186, p.193).

In his definition of community psychology, Piero Amerio, who played a key role in introducing this approach into Italy, emphasizes characteristics that clearly echo the critical criteria of Prilleltensky and Nelson and, without explicitly referring to it, of Critical Psychology. Firstly, according to Amerio community psychology differs from mainstream psychology in that: it offers an alternative point of view that aims to connect the subjective-individual sphere with the social-practical sphere, to connect research and intervention, and to renew the link between attention to the single case and the formulation of general models. Secondly, community psychology follows the Marxist teaching that psychological processes and intersubjective relationships are to be viewed as inseparable from the material conditions of existence and power inequalities. Thirdly, community psychology values participation as the outcome of consciousness raising in the Gramscian sense of the term and as an expression of the active competencies of individual and collective subjects: "active participation requires consciousness raising, activation of the competences of individual and *collective* subjects (I stress the latter term), relational capacities and so on, as is evident in the work of the Marxist, who cannot be suspected of psychologism, that was Antonio Gramsci" (Amerio, 2003, p.25).

Participation, and the related theme of empowerment, have been the focus of a key strand of research within Italian community psychology, including recent studies on the link between individual empowerment and collective political struggle (Francescato, Arcidiacono, Albanese & Mannarini, 2007), as well as public involvement in social and political participation processes in a gender perspective (De Piccoli, Rollero, 2010).

Therefore, community psychology as it is applied in Italy intervenes with individuals, but also involves – in an equal relationship with the researchers and in any case not imposed from a position of authority – communities and, within these, groups that become conscious agents of change and of their own emancipation (Arcidiacono, 2008). In the course of their activity, the subjects are continuously faced with *ecological factors* (Lewin, 1943), or the *material conditions of existence*. If these factors are not taken into account the result will be either voluntarism or the masking – as in the typically North American myth of empowerment – of processes of adaptation to the existing reality. These contemporary *choices* on the part of Italian psychologists influenced by Critical Psychology often achieve in practice what in the 1960s and '70s were only plans<sup>23</sup> and aspirations that ran the risk of remaining empty slogans, such as the notion of university institutions *reaching out to the territory*. On the basis outlined here, action research and community psychology, two key lines of enquiry within contemporary Italian psychology, have the potential to achieve the aims of Critical Psychology, overcoming its weaknesses and vague areas (Mairers, 1991, p.27). It is to be noted however that, in Italy, this ongoing story – that is to say the persistent influence of

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<sup>23</sup> The study programme of the students at the Psychology Institute of the Frei Universität had provided for a second phase in which students took part "in practical social work projects of various kinds, involving work experience in a range of social services and institutions" (Calò 1994, p.408).

Critical Psychology or in any case of direct or indirect critical features – only involves the field of social psychology<sup>24</sup>.

### Conclusions

We have tried to show here that the critical perspective in Italy has displayed continuity over time. From the beginnings of modern psychology, there has always been a tendency – represented, for example, by scholars such as Ferri and Rossi, mentioned in the Introduction – to engage in a *de facto* critical psychology: critical, insofar as in contrast with the mainstream, critiquing psychology that was self-referential, irrelevant or provided ideological or technical support to the ruling classes. The community project pioneered by Olivetti in Ivrea was another key example of this longstanding critical tradition.

Since Critical Psychology proper emerged in the 1970s, it has continued to influence the *choices* of a significant proportion of Italian social psychologists, who have identified action research and community psychology as appropriate frameworks for the pursuit of their aims, as outlined here.

From a general perspective, in Italy as elsewhere, the persistence within psychology of a critical tendency, whether declared or *de facto*, is to some extent inevitable, with all due respect to those who monitor the rising and falling of the wind. This is due to the inbuilt human drive to act according to one's principles, which in the case of psychologists or social scientists, means striving for coherence between their ideas and feelings about the *polis* and their actual research activity, thus healing the split between weekdays and holidays, to come back to the metaphor used above. Furthermore, Holzkamp's Critical Psychology is part of a longer-standing and deeply-rooted European cultural tradition, that goes back even further than Marx to Illuminism and Kant. The latter thought of his critical philosophy as helping men come out of their "minority" condition (Kant, 1784), that is to say, to *emancipating* them. With regard to Italy in particular, we may note a tendency to seek pragmatic solutions to concrete social problems, outside of the great ideological systems. This is borne out by the form taken by Italian Illuminism from Cesare Beccaria to Carlo Cattaneo (1967). The same tendency, *si parva licet paragonare magna*, would seem to have emerged once more in the community psychology and action research described here.

Although Critical Psychology in Italy may not be simplistically considered "disappeared, dissolved, blown away by far stronger winds", Legrenzi is essentially right. Not only have we seen the failure of Holzkamp's original project to provide a new framework for psychology as a whole, but even in social psychology where some form of critical work has been carried on, the mainstream is firmly occupied by the very positions criticized by Holzkamp and Tajfel forty years ago: adoption of a strong natural science mode, decontextualized experimentation in which the experimental subjects are ever more objectivised, formalized just for the sake of it... The dominance, in Italy as elsewhere, of this self-referential form of psychology is all the more surprising given the constant changes and newly emerging problems affecting society. However, although the need is great, if a critical and emancipatory psychology is not only to address "the issue of naturalism which remains", but address the problems of society and fulfil its mission, it will have to successfully meet a number of challenges.

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<sup>24</sup> This has recently been borne out by the publication in the journal *Critical Psychology* of a section dedicated to Italian Critical Social Psychology (Sensales, 2007).

First – if effective practice requires a sound theoretical base – it will be necessary to work towards the construction of a systematic theory, albeit provisional and open to continuous development as demanded by a society in a constant state of flux. To this end, a long-awaited in-depth comparison of European Social Psychology, Critical Psychology and the Cultural Historical School may be of value.

We should also seriously question whether an emancipatory psychology must necessarily be rooted in Marxism, or more precisely in a certain type of Marxism such as that represented by Gramsci. Even if the answer to this question is yes, this will still be insufficient: given the societal changes that have already taken place and are still ongoing, any form of Marxism will require constant revision. Such a process may benefit from a critical and comparative rereading of classic scholars such as Lewin, Vygotsky, Leontiev and Tajfel..., who should be viewed as living and not ancestral voices.

It will make sense to pursue these solutions if we do not wish to evade the issues facing us by locking ourselves up in sound-proofed laboratories or in an exclusive and excluding relationship with our own virtual crutches.

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