

Sascha Frank & Sigga Waleng

Interview mit Fernando González Rey

Während der Ferienuni trafen wir Fernando González Rey für ein Interview. Der Psychologe, der sich an der kubanischen Revolution und dem Aufbau einer marxistischen Psychologie in Lateinamerika beteiligte, bekleidete von 1995 bis zu seinem Tod im März 2019 unterschiedliche Lehrstühle in Brasília, Brasilien. Ab dem Jahr 2000 war er Professor am University Center of Brasília, wo er unter anderem die Forschungsgruppe »Subjectivity in Health and Education« leitete. Er entwickelte eine einflussreiche Subjektivitätstheorie auf der Grundlage der kulturhistorischen Psychologie. Wir alle, die ihn auf der Ferienuni kennengelernt haben, waren und sind von seiner herzlichen Art, seinem kritischen praxisorientierten Denken und seiner solidarischen Umgangsweise beeindruckt und bleiben ihm verbunden.

Das Interview führten wir mit ihm auf Englisch.

During a break at Critical Psychology Summer School 2018, held in Berlin, we met Fernando González Rey for an interview. The Cuban psychologist participated in the Cuban Revolution and in the development of a Marxist psychology in Latin America. From 1995 until his death in March 2019 he worked as a professor in Brasília, Brazil. From the year 2000 on, he held a chair at the University Center of Brasília, where among other projects he led the research group »Subjectivity in Health and Education«. He developed an influential theory of human subjectivity based on cultural-historical psychology. His warmth, his critically and practically oriented thinking as well as his solidarity made a deep impression on those of us who got to meet him during the Summer School⁴⁹.

Sigga Waleng (SW): How was the Summer School for you so far? What is your impression of it?

Fernando González Rey (FGR): It has been a very interesting experience to be together with you in the discussion yesterday and during my presentation today. Because you are very young people and most of you are thinking which is something that impresses me. Unfortunately, there are a lot of students at the universities at this moment that never use their brain for thinking, you know. I don't know what has happened that the intellectual level in the universities has decreased so drastically in such a short period

49 At Summer School Critical Psychology he held the following presentations: »Soviet psychology's reception of Marxism and Holzkamp's Marxist reception«, »Holzkamp's proposal and critical psychologies in Latin America« as well as »What is subjectivity? Advancing a cultural-historical definition of subjectivity«. An obituary written by Daniel Magalhães Goulart was published in *Mind, Culture and Activity* (Goulart 2019).

of time. Then, yesterday and even today... At first, I felt a very comradely climate. You really are able to perceive your ideological position when you enter in contact with the people. And I think you are very open, and frank, and you seem to have no fear. That also is very difficult to find in the academy. Because egocentrism, narcissism and little groups are in fashion. Now the groups are closed groups. And they have no interest in confrontations with other groups or persons because they are afraid to lose prestige in front of the students or in front of other colleagues. Every group and every person has his or her own space. Here I perceive an openness. I listened to many young people who may not be PhD students because they are young. I heard reflections from all the students and that really impressed me. If I would live here, I would invite them to make a doctoral degree with me. Because I always try to find people who like to work with audacious thinking to invite them to my group of research.

SW: We would like to hear more about critical psychology in Latin American countries. Where do you see its beginnings?

FGR: In Latin America there were two strong movements of critical psychology. About the first one in the sixties I will talk tomorrow. That was within psychoanalysis, where very brilliant researchers were doing critics of psychoanalysis that no one in Europe or Latin America had done at that moment. One of the brilliant leaders of that group was José Bleger. He was a communist and member of the communist party of Argentina. Argentina was the most advanced Latin American country in the forties and fifties. In some sense it was similar to Cuba. Cuba also was a very advanced country at that moment. For all reasons we had a quickly growing commercial bourgeoisie and we were the first country in the production of sugar during the war. And after World War II we have had a booming economy that even after so many years you can perceive in the architecture of Havana. It is something fantastic. But Argentina was in front of us in the matter of culture, in the matter of science, and it had many millions of inhabitants. And José Bleger was a member of the communist party and of the Argentinian Psychoanalytical Association. In his person both organizations came together. Unfortunately, he died of an infarct with 50 years, very young. Tomorrow I will present some quotations of his work, and of the work of [Enrique] Pichon-Rivière. Both are really impressive for the time in which they offered their criticism. They tried to integrate Marxism to a different psychoanalysis. Not Freud-Marxism. They take principles of Marxism in order to socially and politically locate the unconscious processes. In that time that was fantastic. Even today the more advanced critics of psychoanalysis but who are psychoanalytic, like Frosh or Antonelli, who founded the psychosocial theory are not as advanced as those people were. They were not afraid of Marxism. This psychoanalytic critical movement did not identify itself as critical psychology. They identified themselves as Marxism and a socially committed psychology.

Sascha Frank (SF): Socially committed?

FGR: Committed, yes. They had different practices, coming to all the places in Argentina. They completely changed the traditional practice of private psychoanalysis. But the second critical movement was centered around social critical psychology. Maybe you have heard about Martín-Baró and the Psychology of Liberation. Baró was killed by the army in El Salvador. He was a very important figure in Latin American Psychology. He led a more eclectic movement of psychologists from all Latin American countries that we were following to overcome the restriction of the classical positivistic and cognitivist American social psychology in those years. This movement was in the eighties. It integrated people from Central America, from El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, South America, Silvia Lane from Brazil, from Cuba – I was in that movement, too. But the economical sponsor of that movement was the central university of Caracas in Venezuela – Maritza Montero, José Miguel Salazar and others. Because at that moment Caracas governed a very powerful country with its oil reserve.

SW: How did you become part of this movement?

FGR: At that moment I had just finished my first doctoral degree. I was 29 years old by the first time I was invited to Caracas. For the first time also, I left from Cuba to the Capitalism of Latino America. Because all my other trips during my dissertation were to the Soviet Union. And for one hour of presentation at the conference they paid me 2000 Dollars. I got completely lost. I did not know how to react, you know. And I took half of this money for me and the other half I gave to the Cuban state. It was the revolutionary ... no, it was the period of illusion. It was not the revolutionary period anymore because after the sovietization of Cuba in the seventies the revolutionary potential of the countries was decreasing very fast. Fidel was assumed a very autocratic position and the participation even within the party – because I was a militant of the party – was practically banned. It was really a very hard period. But my generation that grew up with the revolution, that participated in the alphabetization, in the war of Angola, and in all the tasks of the revolution – we still believed in that process! At that time, it was still assumed that there are problems but we fight them and that we can advance. Yet in the nineties no one had illusions anymore, right?

And that movement was very productive but eclectic. Because in the different countries of Latin America we have different histories. For example, Martín-Baró, who was the leader of the movement, studied in America, at an American University. He was a very sharp critic of the American social psychology. He knew the American psychology perfectly. And in that time, he had a very good dialogue with sociology, with Foucault, with other thinkers who included Marx. But he was a priest. He was not a Marxist in the exact meaning of the word. All these people of the congregation of Jesuits in El Salvador were very progressive. Most of them. Even the two vice rectors and Martín-Baró who were killed inside the university by official forces of El Salvador. Then, the revolution of thinking in Latino America was engaged in the armed conflicts. And this was maybe a limitation that for example Holzkamp did not have in his time here. He has had another kind of limitation, because it was the time of a strong student

movement here in Germany. I remember Rudi Dutschke. Many of the leaders of the German movement were very extremist in their position. And I read that Holzkamp was very pressured in some moments by radical positions.

For example, at that moment of my life I entered the movement through an attempt to rescue the place of the individual and personality in social psychology – something that Holzkamp did, too. Because in Latin America, even in the war, a social psychology was dominant that only took into account social psychological processes, not individuals. How individuals engage in collective ways in projects we were doing? The theory of social representation for example was a very important step forward but did not include the individual subject. It is like a social representation that unconsciously is pressing in and that allows a common language and to produce some other representation of reality. That was enough to explain the individual behaviors. It was a contradiction that Moscovici always had. At this moment I entered the movement. I was convinced that it was impossible to sustain a conception of personality that was not able to integrate the diversity of social phenomena, social symbolical construction. And not advancing on this topic was the fashion of constructionism that banned the critical movement in Latin America at last. Even when social constructionism was a critical psychology against the mainstream of psychology. But once it became fashion it held a monopoly on the ontological reflection of human phenomena. Discourse explained everything. And this is completely false.

SW: And do you think it is possible to integrate social constructionist ideas into critical psychology? Or should you think it should be kept separately?

FGR: No! In the contrary. Even I have had a paper in the journal *Culture and Psychology* very recently. Jaan Valsiner is the editor. It is called »Discourse and Subjectivity. Two important concepts for critical psychology«. These categories complement each other. Absolutely. The discourse was an important step forward in the critique of naturalism, and its objectivization of psychology. We have to understand discourse as social reality and not as a given fact that is external to us. The discourse system is very complex. It configures subjectivity in a singular way in each of us and in different groups and social instances. So, I have nothing against the relevance of the concept of discourse. The problem is what happens when you reduce everything to discourse. That was an important stream that took force in the moment when social constructionism had its peak. And at this moment social constructionism as a theory declined a lot. For example, very important figures like Ian Parker and Erika Burman no more identify themselves with social constructionism.

SW: What is so tempting in reducing everything to discourse?

FGR: To explain everything is impossible. It is a stream in human thinking in general in philosophy, in psychology. You advance in a very important path, but you end up absolutizing this path. You know it has happened along the history. Throughout the history of psychology. For example, from my point of view Freud was a genius. His work

was a very important moment in the change of the representation of what the human mind was. But all that was an invention of Freud. But anyway, it opened new lines for advancing a new path in relation to the study of human beings. For example, yesterday Morten [Nissen] polemicized and tried to oppose me even accusing me indirectly that I was against speculation. But no, I am completely in favor of speculation. There is no science without speculation. But metaphysics has different assumptions – universal entities, universal laws, universal principles. To explain everything. For example, in the concept of need [laughs]. In my opinion social constructionism is a very important theory. I always respected it. I related my critique to social constructionism. I always criticized them, because it was very sad to see that our advance in the more modest critical social psychology was completely banned, put out of the scene, when the social constructionism entered in Latin America. We forgot completely our own route in the production of our own thinking. That is the path I am trying to keep myself. The proposal on subjectivity from a cultural historical point of view is a critical psychology. It is a very subversive psychology. It is our psychology. It has antecedents of course. Bleger or other works of psychology. It is impossible to have a national psychology. But something that I observe in economically powerful countries like Brazil, is that we don't have groups producing their own thinking. Everyone tries to find the umbrella outside of Latin American production, you know. And this is very bad – politically and also scientifically.

SW: Does Latin America need a particular kind of critical psychology?

FGR: I think that critical psychology, before all, has to be a good psychology. You know, this is the more important thing. And a good psychology, a fruitful psychology, that tackles the problems of our societies that other approaches do not tackle. This is a critical psychology for me.

SW: Do you say this in favor of a universal critical psychology?

FGR: In my opinion the contributions of critical psychology are useful in very different places. For example, Foucault's critique was. Because everything in science and in human thinking has positive sides and negative sides. For example, I got together five philosophers: Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, Cassirer, Marx and Dewey.⁵⁰ To align these people is completely crazy. I am not crazy. I get isolated elements in the thinking of all of them that no one has explored. And that ensemble shares one theoretical core that is a very important basis for my approach to subjectivity. And I make a different reading, another interpretation from all these philosophers. And Dewey has a lot in common not with Rorty, not with the more radical American pragmatism, but with Vygotsky, with cultural-historical psychology, with the place of imagination and emotion. And no one ever mentioned Dewey in this sense, you know. And then I think that we have to find a new path in order to rescue new ideas, different ideas, that remained in the shadow of the fashion through which very important thinkers have been interpreted.

50 Der Artikel ist inzwischen im *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* erschienen (González Rey 2019).

Terry Eagleton, for example. He is a fantastic Marxist thinker. But he doesn't have any comprehension of what subjectivity means. For example, he wrote in his last book, that there exist productive fantasies and fancy fantasies. Who can judge what is fancy and what is effective at one historical moment? Because the work of the creators of all the new technologies of communication looked like a fancy fantasy when they began, you know. And it's the fancy fantasies through which many important paths in the social changing are advanced.

SW: Critical psychology as a pursuit of productivity...

FGR: I think that there are many critical psychologies. Because one psychology is critical in one context. Not universally. For example, Holzkamp was very critical to the mainstream psychology of the sixties. After the sixties, psychology advanced on many different paths and I don't feel that the followers of Holzkamp took these paths and attended a dialogue with the Holzkamp position. It is impossible in science to be ahistorical. We all are historical. And to be historical means to have borders, to have limitations, to have your own prejudice. For example, I am very open minded – but within my culture and within my history, you know. And now, as an old person, I find things that are very difficult for me to tolerate. But human life ... this is the path of human life! We cannot aspire to have one universal and fantastic critical psychology. When you aspire to do this, you are not critical anymore. Critical psychologies have to be alive; they have to be living psychologies.

SF: So, you suggest a more dialectical reception of Holzkamp, reflecting and integrating the contexts in which he worked.

FGR: If my opinion is important, I would say it is necessary to integrate with other psychologies and to advance new paths. I like the Thomas Teo quotation that it is necessary to go beyond Holzkamp based on Holzkamp. It is a universal formula for me. To advance on Vygotsky's legacy it is important to be based on Vygotsky. Because in my opinion Holzkamp was a cultural historical psychologist. He located individuals in history, in social networks more than soviet psychology. And he recognized historical moments of that psychology. He provided a representation of human being that is sensitive to historical changes, and this is very important.

SW: ... starting from that point: What do you think society needs from critical psychology today? What should critical psychology look like today?

FGR: It is a good question. I am very centered on my topic of subjectivity, because it is a very subversive one. But, in my opinion, we have to overcome a certain critique of capitalism, that is the capitalism of another century – the twentieth century. I don't know if today or yesterday I said: Marcuse had an interesting idea that capitalism and technology are hand by hand. How to fight against the technological advance, that has colonized our subjectivities? This is a very important problem. For example, we all are intellectuals from an upper middle class. And the circles in which I move in Brasilia

all are intellectual. They use technology. Everyone has access to technology. How to attack the ways in which technology is embedded into the advancement of capitalism? These are completely new topics that we have to discuss, but they are rarely entering the agenda.

SW: Tomorrow we will discuss this topic on Ferienuni, with Ernst Schraube, he is also in Denmark.

FGR: Ah yes. Ole Dreier has talked about him. But you know, for example for this reason this kind of meeting is important. For example, yesterday I casually found a little book of Wolfgang Fritz Haug at the Ferienuni, »Being a Marxist«⁵¹. Fantastic! I love his critique! I was strongly impressed with it. One fantastic thing he said is »Socialism killed Marxism«. This is real. I completely agree to the processes he describes there. Of course, he has a strong influence from Gramsci. I love Gramsci, too. State socialism was the autocracy of the state and even today it is not an option to capitalism. At all! That was very interesting for me to hear.

SF: A critical community psychology also established in Latin America, didn't it?

FGR: Communitarian psychology was part of this movement of social critical psychology. For example, the more important communitarian psychologists in Latino American psychologies were Maritza Montero, Jorge Mario Flores, Irma Serrano and Tovar in Cuba.

SF: After every Ferienuni we ask ourselves what comes next? Are there structural changes we should possibly make? Now that you have experienced it yourself for several days, are there any modifications you can imagine? In your talk today you mentioned community psychology strategies to get involved with people ...

FGR: You make me think because I am working in communities, but never with students that are distributed in many different geographical spaces. In Cuba and in Brazil this kind of work that we make in the communities has been very important. At the core of the community there were people that began to get interested and began actively to extend the movement to other persons and suddenly a very strong network was formed that discussed problems and made suggestions. So that in Cuba even we were forbidden to continue the communitarian work. Because political critics began to emerge that never were accepted in Cuba.

SF: Of course people might as well get organized elsewhere if they aren't already. But the structural question for us is quite interesting when organizing the next Ferienuni. What would be your way of strategical thinking in this regard? How to engage more people into critical psychology through Ferienuni?

51 Einzeldruck des gleichnamigen HKWM-Artikels in Deutsch und Englisch durch die Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (Haug 2015).

FGR: [Pauses]. In general, there is a tendency in humanities right now that can be understood as one of the more aggressive expressions of capitalism – the tendency to fragment all social order and individuals. Everyone is centered on his or her personal success in life, everybody is working a lot of hours, even professionals. And one of the effects of technology is that I create my own world. I enter it and live in the network of contacts passed through second or third level. You don't have a society of critical psychology?

SF: There is the Society for Subject-Scientific Research and Practice, GSFP, the main institutional carrier of the Ferienuni behind its independent organization group. But in general, it is not as practically involved in politics as for example the Turkish Association of Psychologists for Social Solidarity (TODAP) is. TODAP has political claims and demands, they do solidarity work in Turkey. And the GSFP has »Praxis« in its name but currently its limited forces are bound to organize conferences, discussions and a scientific journal.

FGR: It is a challenge. It is a big challenge. It is something to think about. But if you analyze the political and historical moment of Turkey it is quite different. In relation to Germany, where the far extreme right has gained forces and has integrated new people who are not right extremist but the objections against migration is a point at this moment that has separated the social forces. And the emergency of nationalism now even in Sweden that has very strong liberal tradition shows that the extreme right positions are gaining tremendous political space. Trump in the United States symbolized this kind of phenomena on the world scale. For example, the Brexit in England wouldn't be possible without a president of the United States like Trump. There is now an international movement in which we perceive a tendency to go to the right side of the political spectrum. It is another thing that the leftist position we have to work and think about this. Because for example something that prejudices so much the leftist position is the dogmatism and the extremism. In Latin America you have many leftists they never were participating in the political struggle. And for example, I am a critic of the Cuban government. Not of the Cuban revolution. Of the Cuban government. Today the Cuban government is something terrible. It is a family, that governs the country for 60 years. It is impossible to be leftist from this position. For me to be leftist is a matter of values. Not a matter of astral principles to be exposed. Then at this moment is an important group from the University of Chile. The strongest University of Chile invited me to make several lectures. And some of them suddenly read my critical papers, of that I have only one in English. A conversation with David Pavón-Cuéllar. I don't know if you know him. He is a very interesting Mexican critical psychologist. A partner of Ian Parker in the movement of *Discursive Unit* and so on. But all my critiques are in Spanish and in Cuban publications when I was in the political confrontation there. And they say he can come here but he cannot speak critically about Cuba. I said I am one person. What kind of leftist movement are you, that is afraid to face me and to discuss with me about the Cuban Revolution? Or your movement has

interests that are supported economically by the Cuban government. Because all the corruption sustained through the leftist movement in Latin America at least.

SW: So, what do you think? What can we contribute as researchers, as psychologists to change society in a more solidary way?

FGR: Remember that I am a person that participated in one utopia. That was the Cuban revolution. I gave my young period to cut cane, to make everything that my generation did in that time. We have found an ideal of society. We believed that we are working to advance a new project of society. You know which movement was very important for the Cuban revolution? The process of alphabetization. All the population was taught to read and write. And I participated at the age of eleven. I left my home. I went out in the countryside and I lived with a family of agricultural workers for four months. I was their teacher. Many young Cubans participated like me in different places in the country. It was a fantastic experience for me. And really the levels of social quality that we achieved in the first ten fifteen years of the Cuban revolution were impressive. Really impressive. Even in my family I am the first intellectual. I proceed from a very working-class family. My father was a strong supporter of the Cuban projects. But the human subjectivity is very complex. There is narcissism and ambition; power is very seductive for human beings. For example, I have no doubt that Fidel Castro was a very good intentional young man. But in power he changed a lot. And we are humans. Subjectivity is part of our condition. And ideal processes are impossible for being humans. For example, one discussion that we had in the Latin American critical psychology. I am against the concept of emancipation because the emancipator becomes a dictator. It has been like this throughout history. The perfect society does not exist, but we can work for making our society better than it is at this moment. It is an important step forward. But we don't know how the next generation will carry on the process of which we were cup holder to advance a new path.

SW: Can we learn something from the Cuban revolution or from your experiences?

FGR: I don't know because the kind of social problems that you have here are different. For example, I don't know if poverty exists in the German population – the levels of absolute poverty. I don't know. You have many programs that cover. But I was surprised when I treated myself in Heidelberg. There is an internationally very important center for research in cancer. And I was impressed because when I was trying to get some advantage. I have a passport from Brazil, from Cuba and from Spain. I said I am citizen of the European Community. Is there not any advantage for me? And the person answered me: no. This kind of technology doesn't even have any advantage for the German population. The people who don't have the money for being attended there are not allowed access to this level of technology. They get different treatments. But you know that in one moment that treatment doesn't function anymore. I was impressed – not for me – that the German population in general has no access to certain levels of health attention that is only private. Because I perceive that this society that functions

very well unfortunately suffers from neoliberalism. The search for lucrative business and so on is at this moment dominant all over the world.

SF: Unfortunately, we have to come to an end already, because the next meeting is about to start. Thank you very much for sharing your views with us!

FGR: Oh, yes, it's late. It is very nice to talk with you. It was a good conversation. Thank You!

Literatur

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