Reflections on the Ethics of Process Consultation in the 21st Century

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To the memory of social critic Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979)

Abstract

In this paper, I am taking a critical, socio-historical perspective on what is presented today as "factual" insight into the structure of the development of adults, both social-emotional and cognitive. I intend to show that the scientific construct of "adult development" is actually an affirmative codification of a historical situation that gradually came into existence through the demise of the *uomo universale* of the Renaissance. We have come a long way since this individual of the early 16th century began to discover the enormity of the inner mental as well as outer geographical space. While the outer space has shrunk, the inner one has expanded but only at the price of very tight societal control of individuals, focused on safeguarding the availability of their labor power, on one hand, and of their --artificially expanded-- consumptive needs, on the other.

 What in the 16th century was represented by the Catholic church bent on the human "soul" is now represented by the more and more total administration of human life based on the profit motive of global organizations and the security concerns of national administrations. (Just take a plane.) In both cases, the higher intellectual faculties, often addressed as "reason", are held in check by instrumentalist strategic designs and goals that individuals internally reproduce as their own, in most cases without realizing that many of these goals and designs are not beneficial for the quality of their life. In this perspective, "scientific" information about adult development, while giving insight into the status quo of the individual simultaneously covers up the wounds of historical progress and the limits of the mental space reserved for individual development, and is thus a part of the affirmative culture by which present society reproduces itself in individuals.

The immanent critique of adult-developmental research formulated in this paper also refers to the author's *Constructive Developmental Framework* (CDF) that gives comprehensive insight into three dimensions of individual consciousness. If individual consciousness can be known to the extent CDF is demonstrating, the question becomes central of what is an ethical use of CDF, and what is the ethics of process consultation based on comprehensive assessment tools like CDF in general.

Science is Codifying the Social Status Quo

In dialectical thinking, historical outcomes are viewed as relative to earlier situations as well as future possible situations that may or may not be realized, and may be actively defended against by the society that gives rise to them. In this way, scientific research is seen as an instrument of society and its affirmative culture that makes appear as "fact" (factum = "made") what is really only what the actual dominant culture imposes on society's members. When adopting this perspective, we are obliged to try to understand in greater depth what is meant by saying that adults "develop over the life span" both social-emotionally and cognitively. By doing so, we can perhaps escape the naiveté of believing that the

facts of adult development, as brought to light by research, could not be different in a different society, redesigned to optimize human happiness. When we question the absoluteness of scientific findings and understand them as historical products, we re-gain a utopian mental space in which historical losses as well as gains can be contemplated anew objectively. In this sense, then, dialectical thinking indeed represents, as Bhaskar felicitously formulated (1993), the Pulse of Freedom in the sense of our Western civilization.

Theories of Adult Development are Children of their Time

In a paper written in German in 1937 (published in English in 2007), Herbert Marcuse reviewed ancient (Greek) and medieval idealism and what became of it after the Western Renaissance as bourgeois society increasingly came into its own under capitalism. He saw society itself as undergoing a development that we today ascribe to individuals, thereby making it clear that what we think and say of individuals in scientific research into adult development, is a reflection of the society we have come to live in. He singled out two concepts in particular, that of "soul" and of "art", and saw both as antidotes to the prevailing civilization in which both of these stand for what has not, or cannot, be realized in individuals' actual life. While making life in capitalistic society bearable from a need-fulfillment perspective, these two concepts simultaneously hold up a utopia that transcends present circumstances by which it tends to be obscured.

Marcuse, then at the height of his reputation, noted 30 years later that the discrepancy between the utopia of soul & art and present-day society is actually under assault, in the sense that present culture tends toward eliminating anything that could nourish utopia, and thus could be, or become, a potent critique of present circumstances. For him, this elimination leads to ever increasing guilt since the fulfillment of human needs in the broader sense of Eros was being withheld from individuals to whom it was signaled that they better forget what could be possible if society were to be restructured under a different notion of "reason" than the instrumentalist notion administered to our seeming benefit today.

Review of Main Concepts of Adult Development

When we discard the naiveté of accepting notions of adult development as factual truths and decide to see them are historical artifacts describing the human condition of 21st century individuals as it has come about, what comes to mind?

Here are some thoughts:

1. Social-emotional theory depicts a trajectory of increasing inner freedom of individuals without noting the sacrifices in need fulfillment that that freedom entails for those living at "higher stages". The theory does not specify where are the mental spaces in which what it calls "potential" can be realized other than in individuals' internal realm, largely constrained by society's reality principle in effect. The theory thus condones leaving actual social circumstances intact unchanged, by recommending that the transformations it refers to rather remain internal.

2. The theory of cognitive development, whether focused on logical or dialectical thinking, equally paints such a trajectory toward freedom, without truly noting the tension between (erotic) gain and loss that is entailed by developing one's thinking. The theory also predominantly abides by "reason" as formal logical thinking which has no known ability whatsoever to deal with transformation that is the core of development.

3. While preaching, as the voice of society, the renunciation present society requires of its members as workers, developmental theory is unaware that it belongs to, and contributes to, the affirmative culture by which society reproduces itself in its individuals. – psychologically, social-emotionally, and cognitively. It also shows no interest in understanding the relationship between the three dimensions in which its reproduction of the status quo occurs.

4. The stages and phases the theory assesses "empirically", are so many codifications of the status quo that is upheld as if it could not be otherwise, and that is used to make individuals fit for functioning in society as "human resources" (next to, and in an ambiguous relationship to, technological resources, which are typically valued more highly).

5. As a result, questions of ethics pertaining to society as a whole tend to be reduced to the ethics of individuals, leaving the common good forlorn; it is assumed that if single individuals act ethically, society as a whole will by necessity straighten itself out for the good of all (which is an illusion).

A Closer Look at the Social-Emotional Development of Adults

Social-emotional theory paints the process of individuation as a progression from need-based instrumentalism and convention-centered other-dependence to the identification of individuals with their own system of values which turns them into their own "institution" similar to large corporations. It sees the escape from Kegan-stage IV identity as a dissolution of a frame of reference that endorses the division of labor of present society and thereby leads to a kind of inner freedom that can initiate and uphold a compromise with the status quo, leaving the dominant political and economic structures of society untouched, or even affirming them.

By "being in the flow" as they move toward Kegan-stage V, individuals renounce the utopia as something that could be realized in the form of actual social existence, and move that utopia into an idealized inner space that remains opaque relative to actual hardship and injustice. This movement rather approaches the one denoted by the ancient concept of "soul" as something that cannot truly be given physical embodiment. The highest stage of social-emotional development thus acquires a spiritual halo that can be upheld as the utopian basis of "leadership", exercised by individuals who further affirm the present state of the world (if only out of impotence).

A Closer Look at Cognitive Development of Adults

When trying to decode how cognitive development is conceived by adult-developmental theory, one usefully distinguishes between formal-logical and dialectical thinking. As long as we restrict cognitive development to formal logic, we are essentially endorsing the social status quo whose hallmark is classification up to the meta-systemic level of individuals' life. Classifications easily develop into control schemes, which indeed is their main purpose. In a totally administered world such as we live in, such classification is of the highest value for suppressing any thought of what could be different. Classification assures us that everything is well and could not be otherwise. Formal logic and utopia do not go together. We are dealing with the conception of society as a static, closed, and self-sufficient system.

It is different when we consider dialectical thinking. Since the early nineteenth century, dialectical thinking (having re-emerged in Hegel's and "turned on its head" in Marx's work) has been a tool for those who have wanted to restructure people's social existence, not just their "thinking". Individuals' social existence is rooted in a "competence" based system of division of labor through which they are brought into a direct relationship to the market. Their most important legal right is the right to sell their labor power and act as consumers. Whatever might be their "soul", even their potential, has no value in this system. The only value proposition they are free to offer is their psychological, social-emotional, and cognitive profile relative to work they as asked to deliver. Whatever does not fit this proposition is, from society's point of view, incidental.

This narrow definition and regulation of social existence seems to overlook that the work requirement, now impressed upon all individuals at an earlier and earlier age (making children into mini-adults), could be much relaxed since technological advances have led to a level of productivity that makes superfluous much of the work that today is called for and delivered (Marcuse, 1937).

The "power of negative thinking" of dialectical thinking is of a rebellious nature since it is critical of the status quo, and is thus best kept under control. A totally administered world has no use for it. As this makes clear, the teaching of dialectical thinking is not in the interest of those supporting the social status quo, nor of those who fantasize a beyond of the status quo in some "spiritual" domain, present or future, that pays lip service to utopia under the rubric of "adult development". Both wish to avoid the concrete universal that would be embodied by the happiness of individuals able to unfold their potential in a far less restricted way than they presently are persuaded to do.

In short, conceiving of cognitive development in terms of formal logic alone lends ideological support to the present concept and division labor under which we live although the social need for it is long gone. In contrast to the theory's dictum, CDF views and teaches dialectical thinking as an activity through which individuals break out of their formal-logical prison, in a way commensurate with higher social-emotional development. Even this theory condemns the majority of individuals in a society to living in a hopeless tunnel in which the light at the end of it cannot be seen.

A Closer Look at the Psychological Profile of Adults at Work

It is not so long ago that empirical psychology as a science was considered an impossibility, and a comprehensive anthropology was equally unthinkable, for instance for Kant. When this discipline came

into being in the middle of the nineteenth century, its representatives declared emphatically (e.g., Herbart) that "soul" had no part in it since it remained beyond the ken of empirical approaches. Dilthey saw psychology as a historical discipline; he understood individuals' psychology as unique to the period in which they lived, not as something beyond culture. Freud then took the audacious step to suggest psychological profile could be, if not measured, at least treated "on the couch" as something that had a person-specific history that could be remembered through verbal language. In this way, he began dismantling the soul deemed inscrutable, and added it to the *res extensa* that in Descartes' philosophy is the measurable material world in contrast to the ego as *res cogitans*. When empirical psychology fully emerged after World War II, it went much further and, in the DSM, mapped out disease syndromes that could be treated with chemical drugs under the rubric of "mental health". Today, individuals' mental health is administered with the support of large chemical concerns from early age on. As a psychological assessment tool, CDF, focusing on quality of delivery of work in the administered society, is part of this world.

Where do we find the Soul today?

If through use of CDF one is able to give a complete empirical account of an individual's consciousness (at a certain point of his or her lifespan), what becomes of the individual's soul? "Soul " used to have a place in affirmative bourgeois culture in which especially art held out the hope that the utopia of a work culture less repressive of Eros (psychological needs) than today's society might be realized some day. For this utopia to be effective in guiding people's life and critical stance, a clear discrepancy between "culture" (as an expression of soul) and "civilization" (everyday existence) is crucial. But as Marcuse began to see already in the 1960s, the gap between "culture" and everyday social existence has begun to be increasingly eliminated. This was first signaled in art by Warhol and today is visible in "entrepreneurial art" and "pop-up shows" that leave gallery and museum systems behind.

In the absence of any thought about a life that could be different from what is, soul is at risk of vanishing. Can it be saved other than in a spiritual beyond not of this earth? Or in the limitless development of individuals' potential, announced by theories of adult development? Or have the sciences of adult development, now "scoring" not only individuals' psychological, but also their social-emotional and cognitive profile, laid the issue of soul to rest entirely? And where are we led by "presencing" in which individuals join a virtual mental space for the sake of surpassing their state of isolation, leaving the societal status quo largely intact?

The View from the Constructive Developmental Framework

CDF, which clearly distinguishes between the three profiles affecting delivery of work, and indirectly the composition of one's life, is a child of its time. It would be useless to deny this. Its advance over theories that cannot, or do not care to, deal with, the tripartite nature of individuals as workers that it assesses, is perhaps a dubious one. Important, however, is the question of what obligations arise in the use of CDF given that it might simply become a tool for safeguarding the status quo of the administered world. Is

the use of CDF adding individuals' souls to the "res extensa" of fully measurable qualities of the world as envisioned by Descartes?

As with all technologies, it is important to distinguish their existence from their actual use in a particular society, whether the one it stems from or another one. It is the use of CDF which will decide whether it will be pressed into supporting the social status quo or will contribute to building a potential transcending it. In this, the burden will fall not only on the users of CDF but also of on their clients whose economic and social power is typically much greater.

Among the three dimensions of CDF, it is, I think, the cognitive dimension of dialectical thinking, that comprises resources potentially hindering CDF users from being pressed into supporting the social status quo, either directly or through following "what my clients want"(by which one escapes one's own responsibility). Dialectical thinking, "the power of negative thinking" (Marcuse), points to the negativity that underlies social reality, -- the fact that that reality could be structured in a different way and for the common good.

All quadrants of dialectics together point to what in social reality is absent and could be otherwise, a more or less concrete utopia. A further element of utopia lies in the potential of dialectical thinking to make its users aware of their own untrammeled thought process, and thus assist them in escaping the social world by now thoroughly administered through social media.

CONCLUSION

If as suggested adult developmental theory is not a neutral theory, but a codification of what historically has become of members of Western society, then it might be timely to begin thinking about what its social-emotional stages and cognitive phases really indicate, and whether the human potential the theory espouses is more than what an individual can realize within its own limited mental space, in an ideal world, rather than supported by social reality at large.

Is the potential we as users of the theory tell people they "have" an abstract utopia in a world "beyond", or is it something individuals can actually realize given the constraints of the society they internally reproduce and live in? Are we doing harm to them by making them *fit for society* through coaching as was once said of psychoanalysis? How can we be "helpers" if we are not guided by the utopia of restructuring social reality in terms of stopping or modifying the endless "progress" we seem to be caught up in, which, ultimately, amounts to nothing (or very little) a soul can be nourished by? Can we actually give our clients critical resources that transcend optimal work performance by which the status quo is realized?

These are central questions for process consulting in the 21st century. Since behind every work assignment there stands a life task far surpassing the existence and profits of organizations, is the accomplishment of individuals' life tasks benefitting from what we, as process consultants, do for them

in the workplace? If not, perhaps we should think twice about whom we are actually supporting, the individuals or the systems they are, for better or worse, embedded in, that, by definition, care little about the souls hidden in the workers they employ as adjuncts to technology?

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