

## Special Thematic Section on "Decolonizing Psychological Science"

# Insurgency, Theoretical Decolonization and Social Decolonization: Lessons From Cuban Psychology

Insurgencia, Descolonización Teórica y Descolonización Social: Lecciones desde la Psicología Cubana

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### Abstract

This paper describes how Cuban Psychology is related to the longstanding process of social insurgency against colonialism in Cuba. The paper suggests that the emergence of critical ideas in Psychology does not depend only upon intellectual developments; rather, social struggles can be a driving force that catalyze the development of critical ideas in Psychology. The paper is divided in three parts. First, the text briefly touches the issue of the intrinsic ties between insurgent activity, decolonization, and critical social sciences. Second, the paper presents a general historical description of Latin America and the challenges faced during and after the Cuban Revolution. Finally, the last part the paper offers a general overview of the historical development of Cuban Psychology history in order to analyze the dialectical relations between social and theoretical decolonization. Four developments of Cuban Psychology are presented: (a) how patriotism changed studies of national identity and History of Psychology; (b) professional practices that developed to better address social issues; (c) theoretical debates about the "new human" and the active nature of subjectivity; and (d) the influence of Soviet Psychology and the turn to Latin American Critical Psychology. Concluding notes consider the dialectical relation between, on one side, struggles for socialization of power and, on the other side, theoretical production of Critical Psychologies.

*Keywords:* Cuban Psychology, decolonization, insurgency, Critical Psychology, Latin American Psychology

### Resumen

En este trabajo se describe la relación entre Psicología Cubana con el prolongado proceso de insurgencia social contra el colonialismo. El trabajo argumenta que el surgimiento de ideas críticas en Psicología no depende solamente del desarrollo de teorías, pues las luchas sociales pueden ser una fuente de fuerzas que catalizan o abren espacios para proposiciones críticas en Psicología. El artículo se divide en tres partes. En primer lugar, argumentase que hay relaciones intrínsecas entre actividad insurgente, descolonización y ciencias sociales críticas. En segundo lugar, el artículo presenta una descripción general de la historia de la Revolución Cubana y su inserción en América Latina. Finalmente, la última parte presenta una visión general del desarrollo histórico de la historia de la Psicología Cubana como ejemplo significativo de la relación dialéctica entre descolonización social y descolonización teórica. Se presentan cuatro desarrollos de la Psicología en Cuba: (a) como el patriotismo cambió las investigaciones sobre identidad nacional y la historia de la Psicología; (b) el surgimiento de prácticas profesionales creadas con el fin de cambiar problemas sociales; (c) el desarrollo de debates sobre el nuevo hombre y el carácter activo de la subjetividad humana; (d) la influencia de la Psicología Soviética y el giro hacia la Psicología Crítica Latinoamericana. En las consideraciones finales el autor presenta comentarios sobre la relación entre socialización del poder y la producción teórica de Psicologías Críticas.

*Palabras Clave:* Psicología cubana, descolonización, insurgencia, Psicología Crítica, Psicología Latinoamericana

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During the second half of the twentieth century, Latin American Psychology changed as a result of the efforts by intellectuals and professionals who took part in social movements that challenged intense social inequalities. While peasants, workers, students, and radical sections of the middle class developed insurgent activities against the establishment, Psychology was criticized and reconstructed in various Latin American countries, by projects of Liberation Psychology, Latin American Political Psychology and Social Community Psychology (Dobles, 2009; Góis, 2003; Martín-Baró, 1986/1996). In that context, the rejection of mainstream individualism by psychologists accompanied social upheavals in which various exploited social classes sought social liberation.

The link between social struggles and Psychology can be thought of as a link between social decolonization and theoretical decolonization. The constitution of a "Latin American Critical Psychology" that seeks to criticize and change unequal and unjust social realities was a process of theoretical decolonization that found an important departure point in social struggles of exploited and oppressed sections of Latin American societies (Dobles, 2009; Lacerda, 2013). This paper seeks to explore the relationship between social transformation and transformation of Psychology in colonial situations through a case study of Cuban Psychology after the Cuban Revolution.

In order to develop the proposed discussion, I have divided this article in three parts. First, I argue that insurgent struggles can pave the way for simultaneous processes of social decolonization and of theoretical decolonization. I then provide a historical discussion about colonialism and coloniality in Latin America and how the Cuban Revolution was a product of struggles seeking social decolonization. In the third section, I describe links between the history of Cuban Psychology and the social challenges faced after the Cuban Revolution. I conclude by explaining the possibilities and limits of theoretical decolonization in Cuban Psychology in relation to socio-economic-political practices of the current Cuban State.

## Insurgent Activity and Theoretical Decolonization

During the last 20 years of the twentieth century, Latin America was the stage of several struggles led by peasants, indigenous people, workers, and students. Facing a neoliberal offensive, these struggles overthrew presidents, reversed privatization processes, and prevented political coups. Similar social struggles continue today headed by impoverished masses of thousands of African, Asian, and Latin American workers (Solty, 2013). This wave of insurgent activities serves as a catalyst for questioning social colonization and simultaneously creates new points of departure to renew and intensify the critique of Psychology or to build Critical Psychologies against coloniality and colonialism.

The reciprocal relation between social struggle and psychological critique develops in many different ways. Situations of social conflict intensified by the struggle for decolonization can produce changes in everyday life showing that nothing is natural in societal life. Social instability shows the historical features of everyday life and this can be a source for the questioning of mainstream theories and concepts or for the development of new ideas and practices. This is precisely the case of Martín-Baró who, facing a society divided by a civil war during the 1980s, started to question himself about the need to change Social Psychology in order to turn it into a relevant device for understanding and producing liberation. On the other side, we can have the direct involvement of psychologists with activists or working as activists committed to using Psychology as a tool to produce social change. This is the case of many pioneer Community Psychologists who elaborated their first ideas *while* they were involved with grassroots work at poor communities seeking social mobilization (for example, [Dobles, 2009](#); [Góis, 2003](#)).

[Grosfoguel \(2006\)](#) defined *coloniality* as the entanglement of multiple hierarchies related to sexual, political, economic, spiritual, linguistic, and racial domination. In Latin America the imposition of these multiple hierarchies takes the form of Eurocentric domination by capitalist states. Hence, in this context, struggles against these hierarchies constitute struggles for decolonization that attempt to overcome unjust hierarchies and Eurocentric perspectives. Still according to [Grosfoguel \(2006\)](#), to decolonize in this context means to criticize Eurocentric epistemologies and, at the same time, to develop new positions from the standpoint of those who were excluded, silenced, dominated, and exploited in a capitalist, patriarchal, racist society. However, this theoretical task can be completely fulfilled only if tied to a practical task: to tackle power relations aiming to change the experiences of those who suffer with sexism, racism, exploitation, and poverty.

Another valuable source of discussions on the relationship between theoretical and social decolonization is Liberation Philosophy. [Dussel \(2001\)](#) argues that a critical social science is possible only if it is materialist, negative, and—effectively and practically—takes the perspective of victims (exploited working class and oppressed sections of society). In that sense, a critical social science produces discourses that justify praxis of liberation from a critical realist position that focuses the limit-situations experienced by the victims and unravels all the possibilities denied by existent social reality. [Dussel \(2001\)](#) also argues that the process of conquest, domination, and colonization of American indigenous people by European colonists always existed together with coloniality of knowledge. Accordingly, if one seeks to overcome domination and colonization in the Americas, it is necessary to overcome Eurocentric epistemologies. This is the defining rationale for a Liberation Philosophy.

Both [Dussel \(2001\)](#) and [Grosfoguel \(2006\)](#) underline the importance of understanding how social conflicts against coloniality are related to the production of knowledge in Latin America. [Löwy \(1989\)](#) also explored this idea. According to him, revolutionary groups and/or classes which seek to build human emancipation need a type of knowledge that supports social transformation. So, it is precisely among oppressed and exploited sections of society who are committed to insurgency that one finds better conditions for the possibility of building knowledge that aims not only to interpret, but also to change the world.

One can conclude from those ideas that insurgent activity opens possibilities for the emergence of critical theories or, at least, favors better institutional and social conditions for the spreading of non-hegemonic ideas that question the *status quo*. Insurgency also is an important moment of the history of Psychology. According to [de la Torre \(1995\)](#), commitment to social struggles facilitates processes where social scientists “better understand their reality and overcome prejudices and unscientific ideas sustained by reactionary tendencies working for the convenience

of the powerful” (p. 27). As an example of this process, [de la Torre \(1995\)](#) quotes the ideas and practices of José Martí. While fighting for national independence, Martí used European ideas to criticize common prejudices.

In the same way, [Parker \(2007\)](#) indicates that some of major reformulations in Psychology were produced within very specific social contexts: social revolutions.

Revolution shakes up the categories that we use to make sense of experience; it shows how artificial but compelling is the separation between the ‘individual’ and the ‘social’ under capitalism, and the activity of changing while interpreting the world reveals that our individuality is social through and through ([Parker, 2007](#), p. 147).

In other words, this paper discusses the idea that theoretical decolonization is impossible without social decolonization (or “socialization of power”). Insurgent activities and critical commitment can accelerate decolonization of psychological science. This paper will explore this idea through an analysis of the historical development of Cuban Psychology.

## Latin America as Dependent Periphery

Latin America appeared in history as a product of domination, conquest, subjugation, and exploitation. The process of European conquest and occultation of the Other—that is, the Indigenous Peoples who lived in what is called America—accordingly constitutes the birth of Modernity ([Dussel, 1992](#)). European Modernity organized a world consisting of a civilized “Center” (Europe) hierarchically separated from subaltern “Peripheries” that it created by violent conquest in name of Civilization. “America” was the first “periphery” that Modern Europe created, and it came to existence through conquest (i.e., a military, practical, and violent process of negating the Other) and colonization (i.e., a praxis of sexual, pedagogical, political, cultural, and economic domination). In this sense, Latin America was constituted as “a syncretic and hybrid culture, a colonial State, a peripheral and dependent capitalist from its beginning, since the origins of Modernity” ([Dussel, 1992](#), p. 50).

In another way, [Fernandes \(1975\)](#) raises the idea of Latin American history as a history of dependence, where multiple forms of external domination are the main feature. The author describes four patterns of external domination. First, external domination developed through *direct colonialism* implemented by Portuguese and Spanish colonial power structures that aimed to assure intense exploitation by colonizers. After struggles for independence in the colonies, a second pattern of indirect domination or *neocolonialism* converted Latin American countries into sources of primary products extracted through mechanisms of hyper-exploitation (especially of black and Indigenous people). This process assured the primitive accumulation of capital necessary to the Industrial Revolution. In the third pattern of *dependent capitalism*, the colonizer maintained exploitation of primary resources, but encouraged industrialization and the transfer of capital to colonies, seeking the production of an economic surplus that could be transferred to the imperialist capitalist “Center.” In this stage, many colonies witnessed the creation of docile “national bourgeoisies” endowed with self-interest, but always subordinated to foreign interests. The fourth pattern of *total imperialism*, closely related to military dictatorships, was marked by the deepening of dependence as huge monopolies extended control over industrial, financial, commercial, and social spheres ([Fernandes, 1975](#)).

All these patterns produced social and economic structures founded by hyper-exploitation of labor force, massive social exclusion, and suppression of basic political rights. Nevertheless, oppression and exploitation always coex-

isted with opposition and revolt in the continent. One special example of insurgency against external domination was the Cuban Revolution.

## The Cuban Revolution

Between the 1950s and 1980s, military dictatorships supported by North-American imperialism spread throughout Latin America. At the same time, a shocking event against external domination took place: the revolution of 1959 in Cuba. For many struggling against oppression and domination, this event was a practical example that even poor and underdeveloped countries could challenge imperialism and seek social liberation beyond dependency and social inequalities.

The roots of the 1959 revolution can be traced to the very beginning of colonialism in Cuba. The island was a military and commercial center for the Spanish Crown. National liberation in Cuba took place later than elsewhere in Central America, and it was quickly followed by North-American domination. The Second War for Independence at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the end of the system of direct domination by Spain, which was replaced by the system of indirect domination by the USA through such measures as the Platt Amendment, the creation of U.S. military facilities in Cuban territory, and the creation of many privileges for North-American entrepreneurs (Fernandes, 2012).

External domination led by the U.S. became more intense after the modernization of sugar production and exportation. North-American owners controlled not only farms, but also strategic sections of Cuban economy. Before the revolution of 1959, U.S. capitalists owned 90% of electric and telephonic services; 50% of general public services; and 40% of sugar production (Fernandes, 2012; Sader, 2001; Taaffe, 2000). In this context, two dominant social strata emerged: a weak but nationalist section that was jeopardized by North-American imperialism, and an oligarchy that felt that Cuban annexation to the U.S. would favor its economic interests and ties (Fernandes, 2012). However, the more important sector for social struggles against imperialism in Cuba was the role played by (1) a young working class that acted through strikes and independent organizations guided by socialist and anarchist theories, and (2) the nationalist layers of the middle class, especially intellectuals and students guided by humanist standpoints (Alonso, 1998; Fernandes, 2012; Sader, 2001).

In fact, it was the middle class layers that gave a radical feature to nationalism as expressed in the constitution of the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement (*Movimiento 26 de Julio*, M-26-7), which was an initial statement for patriotic, humanistic, and democratic aspirations. After the victory of the Rebel Army, M-26-7 sought to implement a program of democratic and anti-imperialist reforms in order to assure political and economic independence. It was the reaction of local oligarchies and U.S. imperialism that pressured M-26-7 to take more radical actions in order to transform Cuban society. These more radical measures included radical agrarian reform, nationalization of foreign and domestic industry, state monopoly of foreign trade and economy, and, finally, the adoption of planned economy (Alonso, 1998; Fernandes, 2012; Sader, 2001; Yaffe, 2009).

The Cuban Revolution was a process where insurgent struggles for national liberation—which successfully created a parallel social order in geographic regions liberated by the Rebel Army—subsequently encountered difficulties when guerrillas in power attempted to tackle the same challenges that many post-capitalist experiences of the twentieth century faced: to seek a socialist transition in a backward and underdeveloped country.

In order to tackle the challenge, Cuban revolutionaries tried to increase productivity while fighting for economic survival and reduction of social inequalities. The revolutionary government aimed to dismantle preceding social institutions and to transform the economy in order to create the material and ideological conditions to reach socialism (Fernandes, 2012; Yaffe, 2009).

Throughout this contradictory and complex economic history, a constant theme has been the existence of economic plans that prioritize social needs (Fernandes, 2012; Taaffe, 2000; Yaffe, 2009). In the field of education, illiteracy was eliminated in 1961, and more than 70 universities were created between 1959 and 1989 (Chávez, 2011; Guadarrama, 2005). In the field of health policies, the creation of a free, universal, and public health system (in tandem with other economic measures) contributed to the reduction of the infant mortality rate by 50% by the early 1970s, the eradication of diphtheria in 1971, and the eradication of tetanus among newborns in 1973. Between the end of the 1990s and early twenty-first century—and even during the Special Period<sup>i</sup>—Cuba maintained a health system that ensured the presence of a health care team in every community of the country (Knapp, 2005).

These accomplishments took place in a very poor country that still faces many economic difficulties aggravated by economic blockade imposed by the U.S. One can attribute these accomplishments to the virtues of the social system created after the revolution, the huge sacrifices made by people, and also to political and economic support from the so-called “Soviet Bloc” (Fernandes, 2012; Sader, 2001; Taaffe, 2000).

Agreements with the Soviet Bloc began in the 1960s, became more important during the 1970s, and ended with the fall of the USSR. At the time of the fall, the USSR was responsible for 85% of Cuban foreign trade actions; consequently, it was no surprise that a serious economic crisis appeared when the “socialist” projects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ended. This crisis manifested itself in the scarcity of consumer goods and emerging difficulties to satisfy basic needs (Almendra, 1998; Yaffe, 2009).

The Cuban Revolution changed ideological struggles. Fernandes (2012) states that a radical ideological discourse emerged with the revolution and played two functions: (1) to mobilize Cuban people to support the revolution in order to defend the country against imperialist aggressions and to accomplish important sacrifices in order to satisfy social needs; and (2) to identify Cuba as one of the socialist revolutions that took place in 20<sup>th</sup> century and thereby to articulate Cuba with the historical process that began with the Russian Revolution and produced the Soviet Bloc.

The ideas of the *new human*, *work as a social duty*, and *socialist consciousness* are basic elements that were present in this radical discourse from the beginning of Cuban Revolution. The profound relation between Soviet Bloc and Cuba also was reflected in the ideological field. After becoming a member of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) led by the USSR, Cuba reproduced many aspects of the social-political structure that existed in the Soviet Bloc, started to give uncritical support to USSR actions (such as the invasion of Prague in 1968), and even started to persecute criticism of the Soviet Union.<sup>ii</sup>

Especially during the 1970s, this ideological influence resulted in the diffusion of conservative ideologies of Soviet societies. For example, authorities defined family as a space of prevention against behavioral “deviations” of youth and defined homosexuality as moral degeneration to be fought (Miskulin, 2009). After the first years of the revolution—a period of intense cultural, artistic, and scientific activities and debates—there emerged in the field of culture during the 1970s a period of subjugation of art, science, and culture to Stalinist dogmas such as “socialist realism” or “Marxism-Leninism” (Martínez Heredia, 1995; Miskulin, 2009). These ideological doctrines did not necessarily

entail the critical study of society or human praxis, but instead applied the Marxist brand to legitimate any policy developed by the Communist Party.

For instance, [Miskulin \(2009\)](#) studied how Stalinism in Cuba broke the period of great flow in Cuban literature that followed the events of 1959. During the first years of the Cuban Revolution there was a boom of editorial houses and publication of writings from marginalized communities. In subsequent years, the political influences of Soviet Union during the 1970s constrained the space for free and independent art and resulted in the persecution of cultural pieces of black and LGBT people.

[Miskulin \(2009\)](#) also studied every edition of the cultural magazine of the Communist Youth Union that was published between 1961 and 1975. After the study, she concluded that it was possible to identify two definitions of the “committed intellectual” in the magazine: (a) the intellectual as a subject who has a critical commitment to the Revolution (i.e., she/he can work as a “critical consciousness of the Revolution” and dedicates her/his energies to practical transformation of reality) and (b) the intellectual as a subject that stands together with the State and the Party. The first understanding was dominant between 1961 and 1968, while the second became stronger during the 1970s.

A parallel process took place in the field of Human and Social Sciences. After the 1970s, the ideological reproduction of the USSR regarded every deviation of official ideology (Marxism-Leninism) as divisionism or counter-revolution ([Martínez Heredia, 1995](#)). Only during the Period of Rectification was there space for critical evaluation and renewal of cultural conceptions. After the end of the USSR, the critical evaluation related to the negative influences of the Soviet Union became stronger ([de la Torre, 2009](#); [Martínez Heredia, 1995](#)).

The Cuban Revolution was one of the most important events of Latin American history in the last century. It strengthened anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggles in the continent, changed the tactics of social struggles, and opened space for new possibilities in art, science, and culture. However, the combination of such complex social processes as isolation, the need to organize the economy in order to satisfy basic needs, the defeat of other insurgent struggles in Latin America, and imperialist aggressions limited the revolutionary project in Cuba. These limits were both overcome and intensified after Cuba became a member of CMEA and received more direct support from the Soviet Bloc. On the one hand, this support made possible the survival and legacy of the 1959 Revolution. On the other hand, the Soviet Bloc limited the critical potential of social revolution by imposing the reproduction of dogmatic and bureaucratic ideas and practices of domination. As a result, both the Cuban Revolution and the associated process of social decolonization were incomplete.

## Cuban Psychology

Before 1959, Psychology in Cuba was just a subject in courses of Pedagogy, Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Publicity. The few psychologists working were trained in the USA, Europe, or Mexico, and generally reproduced the main theoretical trends of U.S. Psychology. Adaptation, application, and trading of psychological tests was one of the dominant professional practices. Psychologists rarely had contact with each other and their practices never focused on the social needs of poor Cuban communities ([Bernal, 1985](#); [Calviño, 1987](#); [Casaña, Fuentes, Sorín, & Ojalvo, 1984](#); [González Rey, 1995a](#); [Ortiz et al., 1992](#); [Rodríguez, 1990](#)).

The Cuban Revolution changed everything. The exodus of technicians and professionals that took place after the revolution (Yaffe, 2009) included many of the psychologists who worked in Cuba (Bernal, 1985; de la Torre, 1995). In the vacuum created by this exodus, authorities launched two pioneer training undergraduate courses in Psychology: one at *Universidad de Las Villas* in 1961 and another at *Universidad de La Habana* in 1962 (Bernal, 1985; Calviño, 1987).

The Cuban Revolution is identified as the most important determinant in every text focusing on the history of Cuban Psychology. In general, the texts agree that revolution propelled (1) a strong sense of commitment to social needs inside Psychology and (2) interest in the study of Marxism as a theoretical foundation for Psychology (Corral, 2011; de la Torre, 1995, 2009; González Rey, 1995a; González Rey & Mitjans Martínez, 2003; Knapp, 2005; Ortiz, Quesada, Pérez Brito, & Vázquez, 1993; Rodríguez, 1990; Solé, 2007).

Corral (2011) analyzed the history of Cuban Psychology and discussed the importance of the revolution in terms of both external and internal factors. External factors included (a) a social-political context marked by the existence of a socialist political project that demanded clear commitment of Psychology with social revolution; (b) cultural changes that resulted in the reclamation of national identity and culture; and (c) predominance of interdisciplinary relations, especially in the fields of health and education, which strengthened Psychology as a recognized relevant profession. Internal factors included (a) an understanding of Psychology as a public and collective service with a requirement for efficiency; (b) existence of institutions that fostered knowledge dissemination, publication of journals and books, and organization of scientific societies and meetings; and (c) an increase in the quantity and quality of psychological professionals through the creation of many institutions dedicated to psychological training.

These factors made it possible for Cuban Psychology to develop specific features, including greater attention to social needs; status as a state profession that is offered only in public spaces and free of charges (without space for market practices); hegemony of Marxist theories; and political clarity about the social role of Psychology (de la Torre, 2009; Solé, 2007).

De la Torre (2009) divided the history of Cuban Psychology into five important stages. The first stage was the institutionalization of Psychology that began in the 1960s with the creation of first courses of Psychology. At the time, the main tasks were practical: to serve the revolution, to develop studies of communities against illiteracy, and to work with health issues. At the same time, Guevara created a Psychology Section at the Ministry of Industries (MININD) and fostered the application of Psychology in the field of labor.

The second stage was dependence during the 1970s. After Cuba became a member of CMEA, many psychologists went to the USSR and started to study and work with Soviet Psychology. Sometimes this process resulted in the reproduction of sectarian debates of Soviet Psychology and a unilateral rejection of “bourgeois Psychology” without a critical evaluation of it. Health Psychology began to consolidate as a scientific and professional field with relative autonomy from Soviet Psychology, due to professional organization.

The third stage was elaboration of autonomous identity during the 1980s. During the Period of Rectification, Cuban psychologists started to criticize the reproduction of external debates and started to propose original studies related to the role of individual in society. Cuban psychologists opened a dialogue with critical psychologists and psychoanalysts from Latin America through organization of important national and international conferences.



The fourth stage was crisis and the emergence of everyday life as a subject during the 1990s. Within the Special Period, Psychology suffered along with others in the economic crisis that produced reduction of wages, worsening of working conditions, and appearance of new social problems. Discussions related to everyday life and subjectivity became more important. Many psychologists abandoned either Cuba or Psychology (and started to work with more profitable activities, such as Tourism).

The fifth stage was the ongoing complex social situation during the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Professional activities started to focus especially in the fields of health, education, counseling, therapy, publicity, and activities with women. Studies on poverty, corruption, sexual exploitation, values, and other issues started to grow. With the liberalization of the economy, some fields of Psychology related to the private sector also started to grow, such as Organizational Psychology.

It is possible to develop many critical analyses of this complex history. Here, I will focus on four issues that can highlight the complex articulation between social decolonization and theoretical decolonization, especially in a country with a history marked by contradictions, advances, and setbacks.

### **Patriotism, National Identity, and a New History of Cuban Psychology**

Social insurgency made it possible for revolutionaries to come to power in 1959, but the aftermath of the revolution was defined by huge efforts trying to build conditions that would complete a socialist transition. In a context of political and economic isolation, the revolutionary government focused on endogenous resources and the development of a patriotic ideology that could mobilize the people to defend the country against imperialism (Fernandes, 2012; Guevara, 1971; Yaffe, 2009).

One way that Cuban Revolution attempted to empower Cuban people against difficulties was to reconstruct national culture and identity. In fact, studies of identity showed that this reappraisal was successful in changing the subjectivity of Cuban people (Corral, 2011; de la Torre, 1997). The reappraisal of national culture had a double impact on Cuban Psychology. It changed how Cuban psychologists understood the history of psychological science on the island, and it changed the subjective representations that Cubans had about themselves. Studies in the field of History of Psychology and empirical studies about national identity document this double impact.

Many empirical studies on how Cubans described themselves documented the experience of empowerment and patriotic feelings (de la Torre, 1995, 1997; Díaz Bravo, 1993; Sorín, 1987). The first study of national identity in Cuban Psychology was developed by Bustamante (1960), who, just a few months after the Revolution of 1959, published a book that described the traits of Cuban people and the impact of revolutionary events. According to the author, feelings of insecurity and inferiority governed “Cuban basic personality” before the revolution. After the revolution, one could identify a radical change in the basic personality suggesting the emergence of a “New Cuban:” “The insecurity and feelings of inferiority that were conducive to exaggerated humor, criticism, and narcissism were replaced by insuperable faith in the future destinies of homeland” (Bustamante, 1960, pp. 100-101).

After this pioneering study, many empirical investigations of the identity of Cuban people followed.<sup>iii</sup> Studies during the 1980s using questionnaires, tests, action research or hermeneutical analysis of dreams or cultural products indicated the existence of a national identity that was qualitatively different from other countries in Latin America. While national identity in major sections of Latin American settings was associated with feelings of inferiority, investigations of national identity among Cubans highlighted national pride or descriptions underlining happiness,

confidence, solidary, and cooperation (de la Torre, 1997; Díaz Bravo, 1993; Sorín, 1987). These features endured until the beginning of Special Period, when the growing economic and social issues reduced the feeling of national pride (de la Torre, 1997, 2009).

Cuban patriotism was also reflected in the way that writers discussed the history of Cuban Psychology. First of all, investigations about the History of Psychology raised severe criticism of the narratives present in classical textbooks of Psychology. Calviño and de la Torre (1986), for example, identified important flaws in the historiographical approaches of mainstream Psychology textbooks. These include: (a) an arbitrary fragmentation of history; (b) a lack of understanding of the dialectical relationship between “external” and “internal” in the history of sciences; and (c) ideological one-sidedness whereby textbooks reinforced mainstream approaches and ignored Marxist trends or the type of Psychology produced by the Soviet Bloc.

Beyond the criticism of traditional textbooks, Cuban discussions of the History of Psychology produced new narratives that emphasized and reappraised indigenous contributions to the history of psychological ideas. It is possible to find studies identifying psychological ideas of Cuban intellectuals (José Agustín Caballero, Félix Varela, José de la Luz y Caballero, José Martí, and others) who took part in the movements of independence. These studies usually show how psychological ideas produced in other countries were critically assimilated by Cuban intellectuals who, in an original and eclectic fashion, discussed such subjects as human psyche, processes of knowing, the relationship between biology and psychological phenomena, and the psychological groundings of education, mental health, and Folk Psychology (Bernal, 1985; de la Torre, 1995; Guevara, 1984; Ortíz, Aguilera, Franco, & Torres, 1992).

González Serra (1994, 2003a, 2003b), for example, argued that the writings of José Martí could be an important source of renewal for Marxism and Psychology in Cuba. For González Serra (2003a) there are many similarities between the ideas of Vygotsky and Martí, because both underlined the social and historical nature of the individual and the unity between individual and social, external and internal, nature and nurture, and emotion and cognition. González Serra (1994, 2003b, 2003c) also argues that Martí is important to critically overcome Marxist theses developed inside Soviet Marxism. That is, the work of Martí might provide a foundation to criticize the shallow objectivism of Marxism-Leninism, since his writings express the centrality of subjectivity and moral education to create a new, self-determined, and creative human being (González Serra, 1994, 2003b, 2003c).

Historical studies in Cuba also identify the role of the psychologists who remained in Cuba after the revolution. The role and contributions of Alfonso Bernal del Riesgo, Aníbal Rodríguez, Gustavo Torroella, José Angel Bustamante, Juan José Guevara and others in the first institutions, investigations, studies, and practices are evident in many discussions (Bernal & Bernal, 2013; Casaña et al., 1984; de la Torre, 2009; García, 2013; Rodríguez, 1990).

In summary, patriotism changed both subjective experiences and studies developed by psychologists. On the one hand, investigations focusing on identity demonstrated a rupture in Cuba from feelings of inferiority to national pride. On the other hand, patriotism fostered the writing of new and alternative historical narratives about Psychology in Cuba. Instead of books showing how Psychology started with a laboratory founded by Wundt, writers described how Cuban intellectuals developed psychological ideas.

## Building a Useful Psychology for a Socialist Experience

After the Cuban Revolution, the task of giving professional answers to social issues became one of the most important topics in Cuban Psychology. In every field (training, research, and professional practice) debates about the social relevance of Psychology appeared (de la Torre, 1995, 2009; González Rey & Mitjans Martínez, 2003; Rodríguez, 1990; Solé, 2007). This concern with social relevance to the revolution was present since the beginning of the first Psychology course: "We did not create a Faculty of Psychology just to have psychologists, but a Faculty of Psychology to have professionals who are capable of solving and giving answers to the problems of conducting a new society" (Calviño, 1987, p. 63).

Students from the first courses of Psychology had to take part in social policies developed by the post-revolutionary government including activities in rural communities, school inaugurations, centers of sugar production, and the National Health System (de la Torre, 2009; Rodríguez, 1990). After institutionalization, psychologists were present in multiple fields working with a wide range of issues:

Psychologists work with health and disease, with disabilities, with children, adolescents, with law transgression, with elders, with cancer patients, with paraplegic, asthma, heart disease, Down syndrome, drugs addiction, and sexual workers (Solé, 2007, p. 374).

One can easily identify many studies that discuss the social commitment of Cuban Psychology. I discuss here three somewhat arbitrary examples to indicate how the concern with social relevance appeared in Cuban Psychology.

### Studies of Cuban Reality

The first example of social relevance in Cuban Psychology is empirical studies by Cuban psychologists about Cuban social reality. From the beginning, this kind of study was a primary concern for the revolutionary government as it tried to combine heterogeneous scientific studies of Cuban society in order to have reliable grounds for political and economic plans (Yaffe, 2009). In partnership with other disciplines, Psychology coordinated studies on multiple subjects. These included studies on public opinion and political life in Cuba (e.g., political support for the revolution, political participation of different social groups, social representations of leading public politicians, and reactions of different social groups to policies). These also included studies with large population samples in different communities exploring multiple demographic dimensions (e.g., housing conditions, education, physical and mental health) or attitudes related to such issues as the social role of women, religious practices, voluntary labor, and leisure time (Rodríguez, 1990). According to Casaña and colleagues (1984), the first community studies in Cuba were conducted at the request of the Cuban government and ruling party. Between 1964 and 1968, psychologists conducted empirical studies in nine sugar mills, seven rural communities and four cities. These studies resulted in reports that presented recommendations to the State and to the party. Tovar (1993) identified this kind of investigation as the beginning of Community Psychology in Cuba.

De la Torre (2009) states that the concern with Cuban society after the beginning of the Special Period appeared as a concern with "everyday life." In fact, Sorín (2006, p. 80) defines the study of everyday life as "objective, scientific and committed analysis of social reality." To study everyday life means, at the same time, to study social relations that regulate the daily life of individuals and to criticize contradictions in the execution of revolutionary aspirations and treatment of basic social needs.

Martín, Perera, and Díaz (2006) use the definition proposed by Sorín (2006) to analyze social issues that emerged during the Special Period, including scarcity of consumer goods, medicines, and electricity; concessions to the laws of market and to foreign capital; reduction of public jobs; increase in the tax of illegal emigration; and social problems related to tourism. According to the authors, the study of everyday life reveals how these social issues are a product of individual and social processes of Cuba. Martín and colleagues (2006) also identified some of the most important tendencies in contemporary Cuban everyday life. These included processes of deprofessionalization (i.e., workers abandoning their field of expertise to seek better opportunities in areas such as tourism and private entrepreneurship); strengthening conceptions that assign responsibility for satisfying basic needs to the family, and the presence of subjective experiences of insecurity and uncertainty (together with behaviors of flexibility, evasion, paralysis, immobility, or transgression).

### Labor, Industry, and Organizations

A second example of social relevance in Cuban Psychology refers to the psychological practices in the field of labor. During his first days at the leadership of MININD, Ernesto “Che” Guevara created a Psychology Section responsible for providing evaluation and counseling services for young workers and cadres; enhancing personnel selection; using performance evaluation techniques (e.g., to assess stress tolerance, work motivation, imagination, and creativity of candidates for administrative positions); planning psychological research and interventions to gain a science-based understanding of the labor force and thereby to increase productivity; improving human relations between cadres and managers with workers; assessing mental states in order to prevent production sabotage or damage; and for improving working conditions, enhancing workers’ efficiency, and for elevating workers’ self-esteem (de la Torre, 1995; Rodríguez, 1990; Yaffe, 2009).

The topic of productivity was a central concern of all economic policies in Cuba (Yaffe, 2009). Different studies point to the importance of research on productivity in small groups or on the styles of leadership influence as central themes of Cuban Social Psychology (Casaña et al., 1984; Fuentes, 2005; Rodríguez, 1990). The importance of the theme is also evident in the emergence of the field of Labor Psychology (or Labor Social Psychology). This field is similar to Industrial Psychology in its concern with the rationalization of production in order to increase productivity. However, Labor Psychology diverges from Industrial Psychology in its concern for health and personal development of workers (Prado, Vázquez, Smith, Martínez, & Oca Días, 1984; Smith, 2000; Vázquez, 1989). The tasks of Labor Psychology are to improve external and internal working conditions, to promote cooperation in labor, and to enhance leadership activities (Prado et al., 1984). In order to accomplish these tasks, Labor Psychology studies subjective and objective dimensions of production, knowledge, and abilities of workers; work motivation; and wellness at work and during leisure (Vázquez, 1989).

The field of Labor Social Psychology also included investigations about psychological effects of voluntary labor. Rodríguez (1990) investigated whether Cubans joined voluntary labor activities and how they perceived these activities. The author identified many changes in the attitude of those who took part in voluntary labor activities, including a “therapeutic effect” that produced wellness and positive changes in interpersonal relations, reduction in the conflicts between administrative managers and manual workers, and increased dedication to regular work.

Beginning in the 1990s, Labor Psychology began to change. Together with theoretical changes related to the end of the hegemony of Soviet Psychology, the new economic policies that opened space for private entrepreneurship also opened space for theories and practices related to mainstream Organizational Psychology (de la Torre, 2009). These ideas and practices (e.g., organizational diagnosis, entrepreneurship, and innovation) appeared as

important advances for Cuban Psychology (Casales, 1999; Díaz Pérez & Lugo, 2003; Smith, 2000), but without any critical evaluation of how they relate to exploitation of labor. In a similar fashion, tourism became a focus for some psychologists who started to discuss how Psychology can support the activities of those who work with tourists (Dueñas, 2003).

### Contributions to the National Health System

A third example of social relevance in Cuban Psychology is the field of Health Psychology. Since 1959, public health always was a main concern for Cuban governments. Even during the period of economic crisis, public health policies remained a priority. Psychology was a part of the Ministry of Public Health since its first days (García Averasturi, 1981, 1986; Morales, 2011; Pérez, 1999).

Before the Cuban Revolution, health care was a private question and the few existing institutions were philanthropic. Only after 1959 did clear public policies emerge. This started with the creation of the Ministry of Public Health, which was responsible for nationalization of private clinics, creation of polyclinics for prevention and treatment, and planning and constituting the National Health System. Another meaningful change was the introduction of community health practices in the 1980s. Multi-professional health teams started to work in the same communities where they lived, thereby providing better health services (García Averasturi, 1981; Knapp, 2005; Pérez, 1999).

According to Knapp (2005), noteworthy features of the National Health System include its status as the only health system in Cuba; a conception of health as a universal human right and duty of the state; attempts to plan health services according to national reality and to provide conditions for political participation of those who use health services; a duty to offer primary, secondary, and tertiary health services focusing on specific needs of multiple social groups; a focus on the development of both preventive and curative medical activities; priority to training of health workers and development of research; and production and distribution of medicines and technical equipment.

Also in 1959, authorities created a Psychology National Team within the Ministry of Public Health, and many of the first psychologists who graduated in 1966 were employed by the National Health System. In 1969, the Cuban Society of Health Psychology was created (Knapp, 2005; Pérez, 1999). The centrality of public health to Cuban government, the close connection of Health Psychology with the Ministry of Public Health, and the early professional organization of the field made it possible for Health Psychology to develop as a relatively autonomous field. In this way, Health Psychology was an exception, as it developed apart from the hegemony of Soviet Psychology that otherwise existed in Cuban Psychology (de la Torre, 2009; González Rey, 1995a).

In Cuba, Health Psychology was defined as a field that spans the health-disease *continuum* pursuing both promotion of health and prevention of diseases. The main features of the field include the attempt to understand health as a process, instead of a state; a focus on social determinants of health; attempts to foster teamwork, especially in public health institutions; attention to educational processes and promotion of social research; and a commitment to the working class and political participation of the people (García Averasturi, 1981, 1986; Knapp, 2005; Morales, 2011).

Health Psychology developed in tandem with the National Health System as an applied discipline used in different fields (Knapp, 2005) including (a) health promotion, care, and maintenance (through practices of health education, change of attitudes, and empowerment in pursuit of wellness); (b) prevention through control of risk factors, vulnerability reduction, and early intervention; (c) diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation of chronic and infectious

diseases; (d) critical analysis and enhancement of the National Health System as well as the creation of psychosocial factors that produce health; and (e) improvement of relations between the National Health System, health professionals who work within the system, and the people whom the health system serves (García Averasturi, 1981, 1986; Rial, Rego, & González Debén, 2003). Describing the role of Health Psychology at the polyclinics, García Averasturi (1981) emphasized development of training activities with health professionals, focusing especially on a biopsychosocial definition of health; execution of intervention plans regarding wellness promotion and prevention of psychopathology; conduct of community health care services; and research of immediate social reality in order to produce knowledge about cultural dimensions that are related to health among specific communities.

In brief, the constitution of Health Psychology as an independent field in Cuban Psychology made possible the systematization and theoretical analysis of professional practices related to one of the most important subjects in Cuban society: human health. The relatively autonomous development of Cuban Health Psychology made possible more independence from Soviet Psychology and the creative appropriation of many foreign studies, including the theoretical and empirical studies of Health Psychology produced by Division 38 of the American Psychological Association and many studies conducted within the field of Health Social Psychology in Spain. At the same time, one must note that an uncritical appropriation of mainstream Health Psychology could introduce epistemological and ontological manifestations of coloniality via imported ideas.

### **Decolonizing Ontology: Subjectivity and the New Human**

Every victorious revolution that aimed to arrive at a socialist society tried to do so in sociohistorical conditions completely different from those proposed by Marx. Because of that, the experiences of socialist transition that took place during the 20<sup>th</sup> century propelled debates and theoretical discussions about the possibility for socialist transition in conditions that Marxist theorists did not envision (Mészáros, 1995; Yaffe, 2009).

The experience of the Cuban Revolution intensified these debates. Just a few years after the revolution, the “Great Debate” began in the country about the possible courses of Cuban economy. Guevarists emphasized consciousness as a central foundation to increase productivity while nurturing socialist social relations in Cuba. In this sense, concerns with the formation of new humans were not just an abstract issue, but a political concern with producing an accelerated transition to Communism (Löwy, 1999; Sader, 2001; Yaffe, 2009). Guevara (1971) raised multiple issues related to the new human, including a definition of socialist consciousness and humanistic values as basic foundations of revolutionary activity; an argument for the priority of social relations over productive forces; questioning the political and economic principles that guided USSR economic plans; an emphasis on voluntary labor and active political participation as basic processes in the constitution of new humans; and a recognition of Psychology as one of the scientific disciplines that could accelerate the emergence of a new socialist consciousness (see also: Yaffe, 2009).

The centrality of consciousness was not an exclusive feature of Guevarist theoreticians or politicians, but also was present in Cuban society (Fernandes, 2012). In Psychology the centrality of consciousness appeared in many papers that highlighted how Psychology could help to shape a new social consciousness to constitute a new human.

García (2013) reviewed ideas of different Cuban psychologists who underlined individual potentialities and the possibility to go beyond given social conditions. For example, the work of González Serra (2003b, 2003c) criticized the economism of Soviet Socialism and instead laid emphasis on the role of subjectivity in social transformation. González Serra (1994, 2003b, 2003c) argued that Martí is important precisely because he argued for a recognition

of individual action as a force in social change. Another author, [González Rey \(1995b\)](#), also criticized the Soviet political system and Marxist-Leninist philosophy, arguing that the main problem of economism is to underestimate the importance of individual needs and of subjective senses in social life. Similar arguments appear in the papers of many psychologists who highlighted the need to overcome individualist, ahistorical, or sociologist definitions of the individual; to take into account the active nature of personality or subjectivity as well as the autonomy of human subjects; and the need to analyze how individual trajectories and decisions change society ([D'Angelo, 1990](#); [Domínguez & Fernández, 1999](#); [Fuentes, 1988, 2000, 2001](#); [González Rey, 1986](#); [Petrony, 1992](#)).

The main concern for many psychologists was how the individual, with a new morality and subjectivity, could propel changes in social relations of production. Psychological debates reflected this concern in different ways. Some discussed how work not only could be related to production, but also could enrich workers' personality ([Prado et al., 1984](#)). Others considered how to relate free time to the building of communism ([González Valdés, 1986](#); [Rodríguez, 1990](#)) or how groups and education could be a space for development of new personalities ([Fuentes, 1985](#); [Mitjás & Fariñas, 1993](#)). Two examples illustrate well how the concern with the new human was influential in Cuban Psychology.

The first example is social psychological studies that proposed the development of personality or subjectivity in specific social contexts as the subject matter of Social Psychology ([Casaña et al., 1984](#); [Fuentes, 1988](#)). Fuentes defined subjectivity as “a particular construction that is produced by the permanent interpenetration between the individual, the group, and the social that manifests itself in specific social contexts” ([Fuentes, 2000](#), p. 281). Fuentes argued that subjectivity is the most important concept of Social Psychology and that the main goal of Social Psychology is to guide professional practices that promote an enriching and fulfilling social integration of each individual. In order to accomplish this, Social Psychology requires the study of the concrete individual, the existent objective psychosocial conditions, and the kind of individual a social formation requires.

Another example of how personality and subjectivity are important concepts for Cuban Psychology is the work of González Rey. In his papers about “Marxist Psychology,” [González Rey \(1986, 1988\)](#) emphasized the centrality of personality studies. For example, in a review of the theoretical contributions of Soviet Psychology, [González Rey \(1986\)](#) criticized Leontiev for being objectivist and presented other Soviet psychologists (such as Lomov or Bozhovich) who made original contributions to the study of personality—including the conception of personality as a historical and social construct, an emphasis on the role of human self-awareness, an understanding of the unity between emotions and cognitions, attention to the comprehensive nature of higher psychic processes, and highlighting the active intervention of the subject.

González Rey also wrote about the potential political implications of a focus on the active and autonomous role of subjectivity. In a paper published in the international bulletin of the Revolutionary Left Movement (*Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria*, MIR), [González Rey and colleagues \(1989\)](#) argued for a reappraisal of Guevara's discussions about Marxism, socialism, and the new person to empower socialist transition in Cuba. According to their argument, the Cuban road to socialism demands a special emphasis on cultivating individual contributions to the victory of the socialist project. Since the transition to socialism in Cuba is an experience that demands heroic actions and sacrifices, self-determined individuals willing to go beyond individualism constitute the central core for the building of a new society. In other words, the study of the self-determination of subjectivity is something valuable for Cuban socialism, because it prepares individuals for heroic sacrifices ([González Rey, Machado, Luiz Martín, & Sánchez, 1989](#)).

In another paper, [González Rey \(1995b\)](#) discussed possible relations between the social and the subjective in socialism, starting from the thesis that intellectual production in Eastern Europe and the USSR undervalued subjectivity and proposing that a reappraisal of subjectivity could empower Cuban socialism. To include subjectivity in Cuban society and political structure would mean to open political space for the plurality and diversity of political active subjects, to train leaders for political work that tries to produce unity in diversity, to assure all the means necessary for free debate, to learn from the failure of the socialist experience in the USSR, to free social and human sciences from ideological and political control of the Cuban Communist Party, and to use these sciences as political tools to help cope with social issues ([González Rey, 1995b](#)).

Later, [González Rey \(1997, 2002, 2003\)](#) started to conceptualize subjectivity as a process related to personalization, intentionality, and singularity of the subject. He understood subjectivity as a complex, multifaceted, and undetermined process that expresses itself in a non-linear and unpredictable fashion. It has an autonomous dynamic and can acquire multiple forms that grant to social life its diversity and complexity. In his words, “subjectivity represents the system of subjective senses and meanings that distinguishes social existence of man, a system that is permanently produced both in the individual level, as the social level” ([González Rey, 2000](#), p. 31).

These examples illuminate how the ideological climate of socialist transition motivated studies of the new human and subjectivity. In particular, Psychology contributed to debates about individual political participation in socialism, the need of individual commitment in order to overcome Cuban backwardness, and the pursuit of subjective routes that could help to solve political and social contradictions in the new society. From the dilemmas related to the “Cuban road to socialism” emerged answers rooted in subjectivity that objective conditions appeared to deny.

## **Soviet Psychology, Marxist Psychology, and the Latin American Turn**

The important forces in the development of Cuban Psychology were the social needs created after social revolution and the desire to build a Psychology that rejected mainstream approaches from the U.S. or Europe. Some psychologists in Cuba criticized the emphasis on the practical relevance of Cuban Psychology. In that sense, [González Rey \(1995a\)](#) noted that Cuban social sciences, dominated by a pragmatic use of theoretical tools and a concern about practical results, needed to develop deeper theoretical debates.

However, if it is true that some trends of Cuban Psychology focused on the usefulness of Psychology to the detriment of theoretical reflections and development, one cannot state that theoretical debate was not at the center of Cuban Psychology, especially in the field of Marxist Psychology ([Calviño, 2000](#); [González Serra, 2002](#)). The issue is not the presence or absence of theoretical debates, but instead whether the ideas and practices are relevant to a process of theoretical decolonization.

Political isolation and economic dependence towards the Soviet Bloc opened space for a contradictory Stalinist legacy. On one side, this situation favored a critical stance about the potential for imperialism in work coming from USA. On the other side, the same critical process turned an uncritical eye toward a certain type of Soviet colonialism in theoretical debates of Cuban Psychology. As the Soviet economy conditioned development of Cuban economy, so too was the cultural and scientific heritage of Soviet Psychology reproduced in Cuban Psychology. This reproduction took different guises: printing of Soviet Psychology books, development of academic interchange programs with countries from the Soviet Bloc, and deep studies of Soviet theoretical work ([Calviño, 1987](#); [de la Torre, 1995, 2009](#); [Solé, 2007](#)).



In many psychological courses, one finds emphasis on the importance of “Marxism-Leninism” to a truly scientific Psychology (González Serra, 1984; Ortíz, Díaz Fernández, & Grimal, 1987; Triana, 1992). Even during the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many textbooks introducing Psychology to Cuban undergraduate students are translations of Soviet Psychology textbooks. Introductions to the study of psychological processes or Social Psychology are, in fact, books filled with texts written by Petrovsky, Leontiev, Hiebsch and others from Soviet Psychology (e.g., Campa & Orosa, 2004; Casales, 2006).

De la Torre (2009) argued that while Cuban psychologists criticized Latin American psychologists for reproducing the Psychology made in the USA, they were repeating the same error with the Psychology made in USSR. Calviño (2000, 2013) also states that the pursuit of building a Marxist Psychology in Cuba almost always meant to study Soviet Psychology. An introductory book about philosophical problems of Psychology written by González Serra (1984) is a meaningful example of the issue raised here. The author argued that he sought to present “a system of categories and principles that will be the methodology of theoretical research in our science” (p. 1441), using as the starting point the “partisan Marxist Leninist philosophy.” The book starts with a discussion of the laws of the dialectics according to Marxism-Leninism, followed by a description of basic problems of Psychology according to Soviet Psychology: the social determination of psychical processes and the dialectics between social and biological or individual and society. In other words, to build a Marxist-Leninist Psychology means to build a Soviet Psychology (González Serra, 1984).<sup>iv</sup>

Personal reports of the history of Cuban Psychology written by Cuban psychologists also indicate the importance of Soviet Psychology in the country. For example, González Rey and Mitjás Martínez (2003) described the existence of two dominant theoretical trends in Cuban Psychology: “Leontiev’s Activity Theory, which results in a more objectivist and experimentalist view of psychological knowledge; and the position of Bozhovich, which highlighted the subject and the personality, and also proposed a qualitative approach in psychological research” (González Rey & Mitjás Martínez, 2003, p. 77).

While González Rey and Mitjás Martínez (2003) presented a more sympathetic stance towards Bozhovich against Leontiev, Solé (2007, p. 372) criticized subjectivist positions in Cuban Psychology: “During the 1980s, prevailed positions that ... disguised as Marxist were, in fact, introducing subjectivist idealism through the emphasis on the autonomous and independent role of human personality divorced from its historical roots.”

So, it is possible to state that, before the end of the USSR, the debate about Marxist Psychology in Cuba was a debate about Soviet Psychology. On the one hand, this was important because it made available the theoretical and empirical work of many psychologists that never before was published in Latin American Psychology. On the other hand, this focus on Soviet psychology afforded rejection of theoretical trends that constituted mainstream Psychology. The problem was that this rejection many times was not a product of critical evaluation, but a byproduct of the mechanical labelling of mainstream Psychology as a capitalist or bourgeois Psychology (Calviño, 2000, 2013; de la Torre, 1995, 2009).

During the 1980s, this process changed. Cuban Psychology started to criticize itself for reproducing Soviet debates and proposed a renewal of Psychology in Cuba through a turn to Latin America. At this moment, Cuban psychologists started to develop closer ties with critical psychologists in Latin America, especially those who worked with Psychoanalysis, Social Psychology, and Political Psychology. Since the 1980s, Cuba became an important space for a critical dialogue between Latin American psychologists. Together with the publication of texts by Cuban psychologists in other Latin American countries, Cuban psychologists hosted several important conferences, in-

cluding the XXI Interamerican Congress of Psychology (1987) and seven meetings of Marxist Psychology and Psychoanalysis. These conferences opened spaces for academic, theoretical, and political debates about the political function of Psychology; the need to overcome mainstream Psychology; and the need to build a Latin American Psychology that would be critical of all inequalities and injustices in the region (de la Torre, 1995, 2009; Quintana, 2013).

The turn to Latin America promoted critical evaluation of Soviet Psychology and its contradictory relation with Marxism. For example, Calviño (2000, 2013) criticized flaws of Soviet Psychology, including its overestimation of theoretical and abstract principles while it underestimated professional practices; the concern to justify itself through the repetition of a certain epistemology, rather than defining the study of the real world as the most important matter for psychological science; the tendency towards academicism and a deep split between theory and practice; and the application of Marxism as a simple set of abstract principles, instead of a guide for interpretation and transformation of the world. Therefore, Soviet Psychology was

an academic science branded with empiricist concerns that always repeated the same theoretical problems and always used the same experimental devices in different guises; that, added with the rationalized feeling of perfection, adequacy and correctness, produced essential problems, lack of historical memory, and elitist conceptions between their paradigmatic contemporaries (Calviño, 2013, pp. 19-20).

To overcome these problems, Calviño (2013) proposed to treat the subject of Marxist Psychology differently. Instead of abandoning the idea of a Marxist Psychology, one must understand that Soviet Psychology is only one of the many possible products of the theoretical articulation of Marxism and Psychology. Moreover, one can understand Marxism as a methodological tool to improve the understanding of human psyche and to critically evaluate mainstream knowledge produced by Psychology.

González Rey (1995b) also developed a critical evaluation of Marxist Psychology. The author criticized the trend of Marxism that was hegemonic in Cuba because it reproduced the mechanical and positivistic Marxism-Leninism from Eastern Europe. But, following a different road than Calviño (2013), González Rey (1995b) proposed that the challenge is not to overcome a specific kind of Marxist Psychology, but instead to better develop the idea of a Marxist Psychology. For this purpose, he proposed a Qualitative Epistemology: an epistemology that can understand properly the ontological centrality of subjectivity. According to González Rey (2004), this approach has important roots in Latin American Critical Psychology.

Smith (2000) is another psychologist who underlines the importance of dialogue with Latin American psychologists in order to enrich Cuban Psychology. According to Smith (2000), the possibility of creating an authentic Cuban Labor Psychology was nonexistent before dialogue with Latin American Psychology due to the theoretical hegemony of Soviet authors. Smith (2000) argues that dialogue with Latin American Psychology (e.g., the idea of Institutional Psychology proposed by José Bleger, 1966) paved the way for new ideas in Cuban Labor Psychology.

Other Cuban psychologists (de la Torre, 1995, 2009; Fuentes, 2001; Quintana, 2013; Tovar, 1993) also indicate the importance of Latin American Psychology to build a Psychology from indigenous resources and towards the understanding and transformation of Latin America. Tovar (1993), for instance, states that Cuban Community Psychology would be weaker without the contribution of other Latin American psychologists, while Quintana highlights how Liberation Psychology is an important source to renew Cuban Psychology. In short, there is a wide recognition of the importance of Latin American Critical Psychology as a source to intensify theoretical decolonization in Cuban Psychology.

However, while many Cuban psychologists recognize the importance of the turn to Latin America, psychologists from other countries who took part in important moments of this turn raise some contradictions in this process. [Guinsberg \(1997, 1998\)](#), who was member of the International Committee that organized the meetings of Marxist Psychology and Psychoanalysis, identifies an incomplete rupture with Soviet Psychology. According to him, the turn to Latin America helped Cuban Psychology to develop a less dogmatic climate, but it did not result in deep and critical analysis about the social and political processes that paved the way for the hegemony of Marxism-Leninism or Soviet Psychology in Cuba. [Quintana \(2013\)](#) also states that it is important to value the fact that Cuban Psychology started a critical dialogue with Latin American Psychology, but it is more important to recognize that Cuban Psychology still ignores Latin American Psychology texts in the training of Cuban psychologists.

The turn to Latin America was part of a critical reappraisal of Soviet Psychology and political dogmatism in pursuit of an independent road in Psychology. In this context, the contact with Latin American critical social theories helped Cuban psychologists to develop new frameworks in the understanding of emergent social issues. However, [Guinsberg \(1997, 1998\)](#) suggests contradictions in this incomplete project. More importantly, changes in theoretical debates of Cuban Psychology have to be more critically evaluated. Is the reappraisal of the ontological centrality of subjectivity a product of a critical and creative turn or simply a function of the influence of individualistic post-modern theories? Does the ongoing effort for a Marxist Psychology (e.g., [Calviño, 2013](#)) or a materialist standpoint in Psychology (e.g., [González Serra, 2002](#)) indicate ongoing critical engagement or the incomplete nature of the critical evaluation started after the turn to Latin America? These and many other questions remain.

## Final Considerations

My purpose in this paper was to use the case of Cuban Psychology to discuss how insurgent struggles opened a space for building a Critical Psychology in a Latin American country. It is possible to identify and describe three tendencies in Cuban Psychology.

A first tendency in Cuban Psychology is the application of Psychology as a device in the service of social and political needs. The main concern of post-revolutionary psychology was not to develop theory, but instead to use psychological ideas and practices to overcome social issues and satisfy social needs. Eclecticism is a feature here; one can find appropriations of psychological tests from Industrial Psychology or other concepts taken from mainstream Psychology with the clear aim of solving problems in different social domains. While the pursuit of social relevance is important, it is necessary to question whether the eclectic use of mainstream Psychology, irrespective of its intellectual origins, reflects faith in the neutrality of science or an uncritical stand towards the implicit assumptions that constitute traditional psychological theories and society. It is clear that the use of some techniques can support the social research of Cuban society, increase productivity, and promote health and wellness. But will the use of these techniques result in a new and decolonized Psychology? Can one consider the socially relevant use of mainstream Psychology as a step forward towards the creation of a Psychology that overcomes coloniality?

The second tendency in Cuban Psychology is the reproduction of Soviet tutelage in the scientific field. On the one hand, the social, political, economic, and cultural interchange between Cuba and Soviet Bloc facilitated the diffusion of Marxist theses and critiques of capitalism and imperialism in intellectual production. On the other hand, Soviet tutelage meant ongoing external domination of a Latin American country by another country. The main

problem here is not the assimilation of theories and ideas produced abroad, but instead the maintenance of hierarchical relation between Center and Periphery. Instead of a U.S. "Center", Cuban psychologists faced a Soviet "Center" that defined the terms of theoretical development in the "Periphery". Although the Center changed as a result of the Cuban Revolution, the status of Cuba as Periphery persisted. The fall of the Soviet Bloc disrupted this pattern, and prompted debates about the need to renew or reappraise Marxist Psychology versus overcome Marxism (and, consequently, the Marxist Psychology enterprise).

The third tendency in Cuban Psychology is one that was qualitatively reinforced by the victory of the Rebel Army in 1959. Social struggles have always represented to some psychologists a positive pressure both to question the conservative role of Psychology and to transform psychology into a tool to eliminate unjust social conditions. This tendency appears in every effort dedicated to search for the eradication of social injustices and to challenge Psychology to tackle unequal social realities. For this purpose, [de la Torre \(1995\)](#) argues for a "critical assimilation" as a device to overcome coloniality in Psychology. Instead of simple importation of external knowledge or the mechanical rejection of foreign theories, "critical assimilation" entails a conscious search for critical recovery of any theoretical and practical contribution that can be useful to Cuban Psychology. It is not about unreflexive reproduction, but conscious incorporation of products of humanity that can support an independent and autonomous path in Cuban Psychology ([Calviño, 2000, 2013](#); [de la Torre, 1995](#)).<sup>v</sup>

While many psychologists in Cuba sought theoretical decolonization, the paths they took sometimes led to reproduction of coloniality via an uncritical stance towards mainstream or imported knowledge. While the movement towards social relevance by Cuban Psychology resulted in the development of practices that aimed to be a tool to social liberation, some of these practices did not automatically result in the liberation of Psychology. The contradictions and challenges faced by Cuba opened space for new contradictions and challenges for Psychology. Maybe efforts that synthesize the first and the third tendencies that I have described can reveal more blind spots and pressing contradictions of Cuban Psychology while simultaneously paving the way to renew the effort to create a Psychology beyond coloniality.

However, if one cannot reduce the social and historical production of critical psychologies that tackle domination and coloniality to mere theoretical entrepreneurship, then what are the social, institutional, and material conditions that support this effort? Critical standpoints and renewals in Cuban Psychology resonate with the critical standpoints and renewals of social struggles taking place in Cuba and Latin America. If there is a relation between social decolonization and theoretical decolonization, then the third tendency of Cuban Psychology – the struggle to eradicate social injustices and to tackle unequal social realities – will have to find strength in every effort that seeks socialization of power in Cuban society.

## Notes

- i) The "Special Period" began during the 1990s, after the end of Soviet Bloc and increasing isolation of Cuban economy. Poverty, social inequalities, and liberalization of certain economic sectors increased ([Yaffe, 2009](#)).
- ii) Illustrative examples are the persecution of Trotskyist militants, and the ideological closure for many heterodox voices inside Cuban society ([Taaffe, 2000](#); [Tennant, 1998](#)). Even manuscripts written by Guevara criticizing the political economy of USSR were made public only decades after his death ([Yaffe, 2009](#)).

iii) However these studies are relatively recent. According to de la Torre (1995, 1997), studies of national identity appeared only in the 1980s for two reasons. First, Cuban Psychology in its early days was focused on practical matters and not empirical studies. Second, the hegemony of Soviet Psychology blocked the emergence of such political subjects as national identity.

iv) It is important to note that the book on philosophical problems of Psychology appeared in 1984, while González Serra (1994, 2003a, b) wrote the texts that I quoted earlier after he developed a critical evaluation of the negative influences of Marxism-Leninism.

v) The idea of critical assimilation is remarkably close to the thesis that a Psychology of Liberation demands liberation of Psychology. In order to do that, Martín-Baró (1986/1996) highlighted the need to critically review mainstream Psychology using Latin American social realities as a reference point for evaluation.

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