CONFERENCE REPORT

The 14th Biennial Conference of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology (ISTP), Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece, 27 June to 1 July 2011

Werner Böhmke
Department of Psychology
Rhodes University
South Africa
W.R.Bohmke@ru.ac.za

The 14th biennial ISTP Conference was held in Thessaloniki, Greece in 2011. One of the chief aims of this conference, and indeed the International Society for Theoretical Psychology, has been to provide a regular platform for academic psychologists and researchers to meet, to share their ideas, and to work and engage with developing a wide range of theoretical traditions and approaches to the broad discipline of Psychology. Over the nearly 30 years since the first conference was held, it has been an important aim of the society to foster critical theoretical engagement with real-life social circumstances through the various themes of the conference. This year was no exception and the theme of “Doing Psychology Under New Conditions” was an invitation for ISTP members and presenters at the conference to reflect upon the state of the discipline, psychological theory and their own research, in the face of the difficult global social and economic circumstances currently being experienced.

These circumstances were thrown into stark relief during this year’s conference, since during our visit, the citizens of Greece embarked upon large-scale social protests against the implementation of a second round of economic austerity measures that would have far-reaching impacts on democracy, social welfare spending, and education in that country.
Against this background, the conference provided a space for delegates to engage in many informal discussions concerning the impact of the recent global economic crisis and recession on the shape of the discipline of Psychology in particular, and higher education institutions more generally within a climate of neo-liberal government economic policies and general belt-tightening. One such space that was created was an after-hours, informal meeting focused on Critical Psychology, where delegates from around the world were afforded an opportunity to say a few words about, and share their thoughts and experiences of, this particular theoretical tradition within Psychology in their home countries. This was a lively and informative discussion, hosted in a downtown community centre in Thessaloniki which serves as a shared space for a number of civil society organisations who work towards the promotion of direct democracy in their city.

As far as the more formal activities in the conference programme were concerned, this year’s conference adhered to the tradition of incorporating a very wide range of themes. A full and interesting week of presentations and symposia covered these themes. Some of these symposia included sessions on Dialogality, Contemporary Psychoanalysis, Postfeminism, and Subjectivity, while the paper presentations covered a wide range of subjects such as Sexuality, Neuropsychology, the History of Psychology and Technology, to name a few. Some of the highlights of the conference programme included the keynote addresses delivered by Silvia Federici and Dorothy Smith. Federici’s talk, titled “With Philosophy and Terror: Transforming Bodies into Labour Power”, provided a cogent argument for the inclusion of analyses of the economy, and specifically the relations of labour, into investigations of, and theorising about, contemporary subjectivity. Tracing the simultaneous histories of
industrialisation in European economics and the Enlightenment period in European philosophy, Federici argued that such an inclusion of aspects of the economy into our approaches to understanding subjectivity are crucial to the development of not only an understanding of the multiple and interwoven forces to which individuals are subjected in the current era, but also to the development of an appreciation of the role of academic disciplines and theorising in the facilitation of the transformation of human beings into labour power. Such an academic endeavour would also enable us to engage critically with the current trends and struggles being experienced worldwide under neo-liberal global capitalism.

Dorothy Smith’s keynote address, titled “Experiential Ethnographies of Text-reader Dialogue”, provided an insightful and though-provoking discussion of the ways in which an ethnographic approach to the analysis of social relations can open up critical avenues for reflecting upon the manner in which theory within social science disciplines operates to prefigure our interpretations of the lived experiences of others, often to the exclusion of the voices and experiences of those individuals. Her address, which drew on the anthropological tradition of symbolic interactionism, argued that the texts that researchers and academics produce from their research often operate in particular ways to shape and control the participation of their readers, resulting in particular meanings being more privileged than others. The challenge Smith issued was for academics to endeavour to incorporate a reflexive awareness of the ways in which the theoretical traditions we work with can be mobilised in our writing and theorising in order to proliferate the sets of social relations that structure and organise the texts we produce in particular ways.

Another tradition of the ISTP conference is the awarding of a monetary prize to the best student paper. This year, the award went to PhD candidate Rachel Liebert, whose paper “Psy-technologies, Risk and Freedom: Doing madness under securitization” presented a detailed Foucauldian discursive analysis of the construction of Bipolar Mood Disorder through diagnostic and treatment practices which, she argues, constitute a specific disciplinary apparatus and exercise of the Foucauldian notion of “biopower” that constitutes “madness” as a threat to the security of the communal social body. According to Liebert’s analysis, the diagnostic and treatment practices commonly utilised in Clinical Psychology and Psychiatry become mobilised as mechanisms of security for managing and excluding the “risks” posed by “madness”.

All in all, this year’s ISTP conference, as in previous years, proved to be a stimulating and thought-provoking experience. In conclusion, I would like to once again express my thanks to the organising committee in Thessaloniki – Athanasios
Marvakis and his team – for the effort and hard work that was put in to hosting this event. The next ISTP conference will be hosted in Santiago, Chile in 2013.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Werner Böhmke is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Rhodes University. His research interests include social psychological theory, discourse analysis, and the investigation of masculine subjectivities in relation to culture, socio-economic context and violence. He is currently working towards his PhD in psychology.