

## **Introduction to the special issue on Alfred Lorenzer**

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It goes without saying that readers of this journal will be interested in the unconscious and its relationship to the social. This preoccupation also lies at the heart of the work of the German psychoanalyst and social theorist, Alfred Lorenzer (1922-2002) – someone who, as Tobias Schaffrik (2002, p. 1) has written, worked with ‘the *Interpretation of Dreams* in ... one hand and ... *Capital* in the other’. Although never achieving the prominence of Habermas and others of his generation, Lorenzer was a

significant figure in post-war German intellectual debate. During the 1970s and 1980s, his work was widely read both in Germany and abroad (notably the Scandinavian countries) and, today, his ideas continue to inform a vigorous tradition of cultural analysis and social research (see, for example, Bereswill, 2007; Braun, 2010; Günther, 2008, 2009; König, 2006; Morgenroth, 2010; Prokop et al., 2009; Salling Olesen, 2004, 2006). However, Lorenzer is little known in the Anglophone world. None of his major works, and very few of his minor papers have been published in English translation (see, for example, Lorenzer, 1968; Lorenzer and Orban, 1978; Mitscherlich, 1970) and, with the exception of Schaffrik's previously cited web resource and the occasional brief discussion of particular ideas (see, for instance, Gilman, 1988; Hoppe, 1977), even introductory information on Lorenzer's work is in short supply. 'Depth-hermeneutic analysis' [*tiefenhermeneutische Analyse*] (the experience-saturated method of interpretative investigation that Lorenzer's ideas stimulated) has fared little better. Although various examples of the method are available in English (see, for instance, Bereswill, 2007; Salling Olesen and Weber, 2002), the tradition remains largely unfamiliar to Anglophone audiences.

Needless to say, Lorenzer is not the first intellectual figure to be overlooked by the Anglophone academic community. However, as this special issue attests, it is our contention that his work is of continuing relevance to a range of debates as these exist in the English-speaking world. For example, many of Lorenzer's ideas resonate with the current turn to affect and embodiment in the human and social sciences (see, for instance, Blackman et al., 2008). More pertinently, his concern to elucidate what might be considered unconscious in the social and social in the unconscious finds strong

echoes in contemporary ‘psychosocial’ debates in the UK (see, for instance, contributions to *PCS*, 13(4)). Equally, Lorenzer’s work shares with current UK debates a concern to develop psychoanalytically informed research methods appropriate for use ‘beyond the clinic’s walls’ (see Froggett and Hollway, this issue).

With this in mind, in compiling a special issue on Lorenzer we have sought not only to introduce some of the main dimensions of his thought but also to invite contributions that demonstrate his ideas in action and that reflect on his relevance to at least some of these current concerns. This does not, of course, imply that Lorenzer holds ‘the answer’ to the questions Anglophone debates are seeking to address. However, we hope readers will share our sense that Lorenzer’s work continues to shed new light on the relationship between psychoanalysis, culture and society.

### **Alfred Lorenzer: a biographical sketch**

Lorenzer initially trained as a medical doctor in Tübingen, qualifying in 1952. Two years later he gained a PhD in psychiatry (under the supervision of Ernst Kretschmer) and then, between 1954 and 1960, undertook psychoanalytic training in Stuttgart with Felix Schottländer as his training-analyst.

[PHOTOGRAPH TO FALL HERE. CAPTION TO READ: Alfred Lorenzer speaking at the Sigmund-Freud-Institut, Frankfurt am-Main (© Ulrike Prokop)]

Although some of the papers he published during this period prefigured themes in his later work, it was only with his habilitation, begun after he joined the Sigmund-Freud-Institut in 1963, that Lorenzer began to engage with questions that were to preoccupy the work of his intellectual maturity. Supervised by the Institut's celebrated founder, Alexander Mitscherlich, Lorenzer's habilitation addressed the question of traumatic neurosis. As he was subsequently to explain

Eager to resolve the conundrum that 'traumatic neurosis' poses for psychoanalysis, I soon found myself confronted by an insurmountable barrier. I became aware that a solution would only be found by opening up psychoanalysis to 'critical theory'

(Lorenzer, 1985, p. 53)

Lorenzer pursued this task in his first major academic job, a chair in Social Psychology at the University of Bremen, to which he was appointed in 1971. During his time in Bremen, Lorenzer worked intensively on questions of socialization, drawing on traditions as diverse as phenomenology, the philosophy of language, and linguistics. However, despite the range of ideas informing his work, Lorenzer maintained a commitment to psychoanalysis as an independent science of the unconscious, one encompassing a clear notion of the dynamics of contradiction. Moreover, he also continued to work with and treat patients. In consequence, his theoretical reflections remained closely connected to his own practical experience as an analyst.

In 1976 Lorenzer moved back to Frankfurt as Professor of Social Psychology at

Frankfurt University. Over the next fifteen years or so, his efforts were concentrated on developing a psychoanalytically informed approach to cultural research – the so-called depth-hermeneutic method. This marked a decisive move away from his previous focus on individual suffering to one that addressed the collective and societal dimensions of unconscious processes, the place of the unconscious in collective and social life, and the role of these phenomena in reproducing and challenging social relations of power. Sadly, during his last decade, severe ill-health prevented Lorenzer from engaging in intellectual work. He died in 2002 at the age of 80.

### **Some major directions in Lorenzer's thought**

As the preceding paragraphs have suggested, perhaps the most obvious feature of Lorenzer's work is its fundamental adherence to both psychoanalysis and Marxism. Profoundly influenced by the Frankfurt School (he maintained a mutually appreciative if sometimes prickly dialogue with Frankfurt School contemporaries, see, for example, Habermas, 1985), Lorenzer viewed psychoanalysis and critical theory as sharing a number of important concerns. These included, as he saw it, a mutual focus on the conduct of everyday life, in particular, moments of social conflict; the attempt to identify that which in human subjectivity has the potential to inhibit or realise emancipatory practice; and the ambition to move beneath the surface appearance of things in order to effect change in both individuals and the wider society (Lorenzer, 1986a).

However, for Lorenzer, psychoanalysis in its classical guise was insufficiently materialist in orientation to be brought fully into alignment with critical theory. In

consequence, in one of the central strands of his work, he sought to reread psychoanalysis through a materialist lens (Lorenzer, 1972). Given his Frankfurt School orientations, it is not surprising that, for Lorenzer, subjectivity – including its pre- and unconscious dimensions – emerges within processes of socialisation and, therefore, in the context of wider societal relations and conflicts. As Henning Salling Olesen (2006, p. 40) has put this, from a Lorenzerian perspective, ‘psychic dynamics [are] produced by societal relations and represent[] an inner psychic modality of culture’. It is equally unsurprising that, although viewing subjective experience as being formed by and through the societal relations and processes, Lorenzer saw these two levels (the social and the subjective) as non-identical, that is as, in some sense, irreducible and in tension. An important implication of this is, of course, that a dimension of subjective experience remains in excess of the social and cannot be assimilated to it. As we say in the article that opens this special issue, it is this something – what Lorenzer understood as the unconscious, including the drives – that provides the grounds for human resistance, creativity, change and, just as importantly, destructiveness (Bereswill et al., this issue).

If Lorenzer’s emphasis on the dialectical relation between social conditions and the mental structures of individuals is familiar, what is arguably innovatory about his work is his detailed account of the routinised *processes* by which subjective experience emerges within socialisation (central to which is his notion of ‘interaction forms’ [*Interaktionsform*]) and his theorisation of this experience as profoundly embodied and affective (see, in particular, his concepts of the ‘scenic’ [*Szene*] and the ‘engram’ – for a full discussion of these and other Lorenzerian concepts see Bereswill et al., below). Much of what is interesting about Lorenzer lies in this emphasis on the multi-dimensional and non-reductive character of subjective experience. For Lorenzer,

subjective experience – including its pre- and unconscious aspects – is *simultaneously* individual, embodied, relational and social. None of these dimensions precedes the others, each element is always implicated in the others' constitution, and all remain irreducible and in tension.

Equally interesting is Lorenzer's account of the ways in which socially-mediated affective and embodied experience get excluded from conscious awareness in the course of everyday 'language games'. Although, for Lorenzer, the processes by which something becomes unconscious (or perhaps never reaches conscious awareness in the first place) have significant biographical and dimensions specific to the localised interactions in which they occur, these are never independent of wider societal relations and arrangements. Indeed, Lorenzer argues that wider societal relations and arrangements result in the patterned exclusion from conscious awareness of particular configurations of socially-mediated, affective and embodied subjective experience, including those that have a 'utopian potential' (i.e. that might provide the basis for a better world). For Lorenzer, these processes of exclusion are largely language-based, although always occurring within the social practices of everyday life. Over time, Lorenzer argues, that which is socially excluded from conscious articulation within a given language game comes to constitute an unconscious configuration in the individual, if in ways that are always biographically inflected. Importantly, he also argues that, in turn, such configurations reappear in and help constitute language games in the present (in the form of transferences, somatisations, disavowals, enactments, projective identifications and so forth). In consequence, for Lorenzer, what is unconscious in a language game (its 'autonomous level of meaning' Lorenzer, 1986b,

p. 29) has an essentially 'in between' and processual character. The language game has folded within it pre-existing unconscious configurations that help constitute it and what is and is not consciously available to its participants but, at the same time, that which is excluded from consciousness in the present, adds to and remakes pre-existing unconscious configurations.

This brings us to a third noteworthy aspect of Lorenzer's intellectual project. He was not only interested in theorising the processes through which affective and embodied experience is excluded from (and reappears in) conscious awareness and everyday life, he wanted to explore these processes empirically. For Lorenzer, this could not be achieved simply by importing psychoanalytic techniques developed for the clinic into a non-clinical setting. Instead, through tools such as 'scenic understanding' [*Szenisches Verstehen*] (a process by which researchers reflect on their affective and embodied experience of their data), Lorenzer sought to rethink clinical techniques in ways appropriate for cultural and social research. Lorenzer himself applied his psychoanalytically informed, 'depth-hermeneutic' method to the analysis of literary texts but, as this special issue demonstrates, the approach has subsequently been applied in a wide range of cultural, social and social psychological studies.

### **Contents of the special issue**

Given Lorenzer's relative unfamiliarity to an Anglophone audience, we begin this special issue with an extended essay, written by ourselves (Bereswill et al., this issue), which introduces a number of his central concepts and, by means of a brief case vignette, illustrates the ways in which these have been taken up in the depth-

hermeneutic research tradition. These themes are developed in the issue's second contribution, Katharina Liebsch's exploration of the belief system of a young Evangelical Christian. Liebsch's detailed analysis of her respondent's biographical narrative account, demonstrates the value of a Lorenzerian approach to language-based sociological studies. In the issue's third article, one of the current authors (Morgenroth, this issue) explores the case of a young woman enrolled in a psychotherapy-based drug rehabilitation programme and investigates what she terms 'counter-transference' responses in depth-hermeneutic data analysis. The fourth article, by Lynn Froggett and Wendy Hollway, uses a detailed reading of video data, generated as part of a creative writing activity in a young offenders' project, to reflect on ways in which Lorenzer's concept of the 'scenic' resonates with current debates in UK psychosocial research. Although representing a rather different theoretical tradition and research method, Froggett and Hollway's analysis highlights many productive areas of overlap between British psychosocial studies and Lorenzerian work. The special issue concludes with an interview with Ulrike Prokop, one of Germany's leading media researchers and a long standing exponent of the depth-hermeneutic approach. As Prokop's description of their recent audience research indicates, the version of the depth-hermeneutic method she and her colleagues have developed (which involves researching the same programme with multiple audience groups) provides a powerful insight into the social and collective dimensions of audiences' pre- and unconscious responses to media content.

As we hope these contributions demonstrate, work in the Lorenzerian tradition seeks to think about the unconscious through the lens of the social and the social through the

lens of the unconscious. It also seeks to address the significance of affective and embodied experience not only to unconscious processes but also to social practices and relations. Lorenzer himself viewed his work as an attempt to recast the ‘hard and provocative work’ (1986b, p. 16) of psychoanalysis in terms of a critical social and cultural science. It is this attempt, and its legacy, that this special issue aims to explore.

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