Negative Dialectics of Civil Liberties and Critical Psychology

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Negative dialectics (Adorno) refers to a philosophy that does not assume synthesis as the outcome of a dialectical movement but rather contends that pathologies could crown conceptual development. The negative dialectics of civil liberty are discussed from a critical-theoretical point of view: (a) Free speech turns into hate speech: The topic is analyzed in the context of the public sphere as well as psychology. What constitutes hate speech in psychology and should such speech be restricted? It is suggested that ethical codes in academic disciplines such as psychology do not address hate speech in published research even if such speech does harm to individuals or groups. (b) Liberty, equality and solidarity: An outcome of the French Revolution was the solidification of the tripartite motto "liberté, égalité, fraternité," and although the primacy of each was debated, revolutionaries had an intuition of the importance of how they complement each other (Prilleltensky). It is suggested that the United States invokes primacy for positive liberty, neglecting negative liberty and solidarity, whereas some European countries have achieved a much better balance among the three. Topics and differences among American, Canadian, and European approaches to civil liberties are discussed and pathologies are analyzed. (c) From liberty to solidarity and equality in psychology: It is argued that American psychology reproduces the Zeitgeist and the values of a culture and time and that the focus on individual liberty and individualism leads to a neglect not only of solidarity but also equality. Evidence for this argument is provided by discussing research on inequality and its implications for mental health. Mainstream American psychology is compared with the varieties of critical psychology that embrace the values of equality and solidarity. Consequences of how these values are embedded in critical traditions around the world are analyzed.