

# Conference report: Highlights and impressions from the first International Conference on Critical and Radical Humanist Work and Organizational Psychology

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## ABSTRACT

This article offers an involved account of the first International Conference on Critical and Radical Humanist Work and Organizational Psychology, held from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> of July 2022 at the University of Innsbruck. The objective of this report is to provide some background information and to give an overview of the most important conference themes, topics, and activities, as well as to briefly introduce main contributors to the conference and to provide some basic information and exemplary references regarding their academic work. After some general remarks on the conference organization and participants, the text is structured according to the main program features, specifically, pre-conference workshops, opening and keynote speeches, presentation sessions and workshops, poster exhibition, panel discussion, and farewell address. Ways to get connected with and become actively involved in the emerging movement towards „criticalizing“ work and organizational psychology are discussed.<sup>1</sup>

## Keywords

Critical and Radical Humanist Work and Organizational Psychology – The Future of Work and Organizational Psychology (FoWOP) – academic activism – conference report

## Introduction

The first International Conference on Critical and Radical Humanist Work and Organizational Psychology was held from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> of July 2022 at the Innrain Campus of University of Innsbruck. Initially planned for the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2020 and, subsequently, for the 30<sup>th</sup> of September to the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 2021, the event had to be postponed twice due to safety concerns in the context of the pandemic situation. Eventually, however, the tireless planning and networking activities of the organizers during the last few years did come to fruition. The main organizing body of the conference was the Applied Psychology Unit I at the Department of Psychology. Its members, Wolfgang G. Weber, Christine Unterrainer, Thomas

Höge, and (joining the group later) Severin Hornung, have been collaborating for many years as the research group on Organizational Democracy (ODEM; e.g., Weber, Unterrainer & Höge, 2020; Unterrainer, Weber, Höge & Hornung, 2022). Since its inception in the year 2018, they also constitute the Innsbruck Group on Critical Research in Work and Organizational Psychology (I-CROP; Weber, Höge & Hornung, 2020; Hornung, Unterrainer & Höge, 2022). Institutional cooperation partners were the Erich Fromm Study Center at the International Psychoanalytic University Berlin (IPU, Thomas Kühn and Rainer Funk) and the Critical Work and Organizational Psychology (CWOP) Division (e.g., Abrams et al., 2025; Bal & Dóci, 2018; Islam & Sanderson, 2022) of the international „Future of Work and Organizational Psychology“ (FoWOP;

<sup>1</sup> We thank Zoe Sanderson for a friendly reading of a previous version of this report and for the following vivid comment (personal communication, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2022), to which we – unfortunately lacking poetic skills – can only wholeheartedly agree: „If only there was some way of capturing the feeling of the event in words! I know this is impossible to do but I am sure you share my feeling that the event was more than the sum of the parts of the programme. For example, I read your words about listening to music in the courtyard quite objectively, thinking ‘yes, this is what we did’. Then I recalled the feelings of standing there in the strong wind and the fading light with a cold beer, laughing with friends, and felt the gap between the words and the experience. But I am being wishful and wistful – of course no words can capture such things!“

e.g., Bal et al., 2019) movement network, which has evolved out of several constitutive events under the auspices of the European Association for Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP). Financial support for the conference was provided by the Department of Psychology, the Research Area EPOS „Economy, Politics & Society“, and the Vice Rectorate for Research of the University of Innsbruck.

Altogether, the conference lasted for three days. The first (half-)day was reserved for two pre-conference workshops dedicated to activities by the CWOP division of the FoWOP network. During the main two conference days (day 1 and day 2), the event featured one introductory opening speech by the organizers (Wolfgang G. Weber) and four distinguished guest keynote speeches. Two of the keynote speeches were delivered in-person (Rainer Funk and Ruth Yeoman), while the other two (Thomas Teo and Martin Parker) were live virtual presentations, transmitted and broadcasted to the lecture hall via videoconferencing software.

As part of the main program, altogether 58 oral presentations were given, allocated to 12 themed presentation sessions (six each on day 1 and day 2). Additionally, three workshop sessions were offered on the second day. Another noteworthy feature of the conference was an attractive poster exhibition, displayed during the whole event, comprising altogether 20 scientific posters, the majority of which were based on student research projects. In addition to regular breaks, during which coffee, tea, refreshments, fruits, and other snacks were served, at the end of day 1, participants were invited to an outdoor reception in the campus courtyard against the backdrop of the mountain scenery and a selection of nostalgic leftist music, ranging from Jefferson Airplane and Bobby McGee, to anarchist anthems from the Spanish civil war, and German-language classic like „Ton, Steine, Scherben“ and „Die Schmetterlinge“. The conference concluded with a memorable panel discussion on prospects and contestations of Critical and Radical Humanist Work and Organizational Psychology, followed by a brief closing speech and farewell address by the organizers. These conference activities are documented in the conference program and abstract proceedings (Hornung, Unterrainer, Höge & Weber, 2022), available for download from the conference website (<https://www.uibk.ac.at/psychologie/tagung/icrop/>), and are elaborated in more detail below. Despite some ongoing travelling restrictions, occasional cancellations, and some

virtual accommodations due to the pandemic, the conference, which was convened primarily as an in-person event, was well attended. Altogether, more than 60 participants from around 40 universities and other institutions, such as companies, government agencies and professional associations, from 11 countries participated. Notably, aside from Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, speakers and attendees were welcomed from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Canada, Brazil, South Africa, and New Zealand (virtual). Thus, the conference was a truly international event – and indeed the first of its kind.

### Pre-conference workshops

As mentioned above, the very first (half-)day of the event was dedicated exclusively to two pre-conference workshops related to current activities by the CWOP division of the FoWOP network. Specifically, these sessions centered around debating a „Proposal for the Handbook of Critical Work and Organizational Psychology“ (Pre-Conference Workshop 1; Organizers: Gazi Islam and Parisa Dashtipour) and „Visions and Values of Critical Work and Organizational Psychology“ (Pre-Conference Workshop 2; Organizers: Zoe Sanderson and Edina Dóci). As the second planned EAWOP FoWOP Small Group Meeting (SGM) in Brussels had to be cancelled twice (in 2020 and 2021) due to the pandemic, and as also the EAWOP Congress in Glasgow in early 2022 could not take place, this was the first in-person meeting of this group since the EAWOP Congress in Turin in 2019, which followed up on the first EAWOP FoWOP SGM in Breda in 2018 (Bal et al., 2019). Accordingly, the opportunity to reconnect with network members and welcome interested newcomers was timely and widely embraced. Among those present were core founding members of the FoWOP movement (Edina Dóci and Matthijs Bal), most of the CWOP steering group (Zoe Sanderson, Laura Röllman, Parisa Dashtipour, Franziska Köbfler, Matthijs Bal, Gazi Islam, Wolfgang G. Weber, and Severin Hornung), as well as representatives of the organizing committee of the (at the time) upcoming (and also twice rescheduled) second EAWOP-sponsored FoWOP SGM in Brussels (Franziska Köbfler, John Mendy, and Severin Hornung; Francesco Tommasi participated remotely)<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, both substantive and organizational as well as strategic issues of the movement could be addressed. Moreover,

<sup>2</sup> The FoWOP SGM in Brussels (Building the future of work and organizational psychology: Developing a practical toolkit) was held from the 21<sup>st</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 2022 and was a remarkably productive and successful meeting. In many ways, it provided welcome opportunities to continue and follow-up on discussions and projects started at our conference. We also want to mention the other members of the SGM organizing committee, Theresa Leyens, Yvonne van Rossenberg, and Tim Vantilborgh, and thank them for their contributions to this memorable event.

after informed consent of participants, designated sessions of the conference were used as data gathering sites for the action research of Zoe Sanderson on the development of the CWOP movement and the evolving subjective and collective understanding of its principles and practice as well as the visions and values shared among its proponents.

This extended forum for the FoWOP movement was made possible as the other pre-conference workshops were previously held in virtual format in December 2021 and May 2022 to maintain and build connections with registered conference participants and also open up these workshops to a wider audience. The first virtual pre-conference workshop on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 2021, included three modules, delivered by the Innsbruck group, namely: 1) „Critical Theory – The Frankfurt School Tradition“ (Presenters: Wolfgang G. Weber and Thomas Höge); 2) „Critical Organizational Research from the Perspective of Sociological Paradigms“ (Presenter: Severin Hornung); and 3) „Present Contributions to the Dialectical Sublation (in German: *Aufhebung*) of ‘The End of Utopia’: Economic and Organizational Democracy, Solidarity Economy, Economy for the Common Good“ (Presenters: Christine Unterrainer, Wolfgang G. Weber, and Thomas Höge). The second part of the pre-conference workshops, held on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2022, comprised another two sections: 1) „The Potential of a Psychodynamic and Biographical Approach for Critical Work and Organizational Psychology“; and 2) „‘Organizational Lifeworld’ (in German: *„Betriebliche Lebenswelt“*) – A Field of Qualitative Social Psychological Research“. The first section was presented by Thomas Kühn, assisted by Sebastian Bobeth, from the International Psychoanalytic University (IPU) Berlin (e.g., Kühn, 2015; Kühn & Bobeth, 2022); the second module by Sünje Lorenzen from the Neubrandenburg University of Applied Sciences, who is also an external lecturer at the University of Innsbruck (e.g., Lorenzen, 2019; Lorenzen & Specht, 2021)<sup>5</sup>. It is worth noting that both lecturers also held thematically related in-person talks presenting their research at the conference. Materials and recordings of the pre-conference workshops were made available to registered participants and interested colleagues in the broader network of critical scholars.

### Opening and keynote speeches

On the first day, the conference was opened up by a passionate welcoming message from Marc Deiser,

representing the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) Tyrol. In his memorable speech, he outlined in drastic terms, the difficult and precarious work situations many employees currently find themselves in, emphasizing the importance of social critique, worker solidarity, and political activism for fundamental reforms to counteract the neoliberal redistribution of risks and responsibilities in society (e.g., Doellgast, Lillie & Pulignano, 2018). Next, Wolfgang G. Weber delivered an inspiring opening speech, entitled „Some Lineages and Resources of Critical and Radical Humanist Work and Organizational Psychology“, in which he elucidated the pluralist interdisciplinary heritage of this evolving movement, rooted in Dialectical Materialist Psychology and Activity Theory, Frankfurt School Critical Theory, Analytical Social Psychology, Critical Theory of the Subject and related schools of German Critical Psychology, Critical Management Studies, and society-critical streams of Action Regulation Theory and Self-Determination Theory (e.g., Weber, 2019, 2022). Democratic enterprises and the Economy of the Common Good were highlighted as applications of organizing work beyond domination, subjectification and social alienation.

Subsequently, Rainer Funk held the first keynote speech, entitled: „Productivity in Face of a “Pathology of Normalcy”. Erich Fromm’s Contribution to Critical Psychology“. Founder of the International Erich Fromm Society and Erich Fromm Institute Tübingen and Co-director of the Erich Fromm Study Center at the International Psychoanalytic University Berlin (e.g., Funk, 2010, 2011, 2019), psychoanalyst Rainer Funk was Erich Fromm’s last personal assistant and is sole literary executor, who has published extensively the collected writings by Fromm as well as own seminal contributions to a critical psychological theory of society, notably developing the concept of the ego-oriented social character. In his eminent speech, Funk eloquently demonstrated the continued relevance of Fromm’s thinking for contemporary approaches of critical psychology by analyzing the historical authoritarian character and the currently dominant market-oriented social character in advanced neoliberal economies and their detrimental effects on the development of genuine human productivity.

The second keynote of the first day was held virtually by Thomas Teo, a professor and core faculty of the Historical, Theoretical, and Critical Studies of Psychology Graduate Program in the Department of Psychology at York University in Toronto, Canada. Educated at the University of Vienna, Thomas Teo is a world-renown expert and prolific author with

<sup>5</sup> We congratulate Sünje Lorenzen on her new role as a professor for business psychology at the BSP Business & Law School Campus Hamburg.

special interest in critically analyzing the ontological, epistemological, methodological, and ethical problems of psychology (e.g., Teo, 2018, 2020, 2021). In his impressive keynote speech, entitled „Subjectivity and Work“, he outlined a distinctively critical theory of subjectivity with applications to the workplace, the political economy, and wealth inequalities, based on which he subsequently discussed specific aspects of neoliberal subjectivity, deglobalization and antiglobalization subjectivities, and fascist subjectivity with reference to current global political events, tendencies, and trajectories.

The first keynote speech of day 2 was delivered in-person by Ruth Yeoman, authoritatively speaking on the topic of „Meaningfulness and Organising for Sustainable Futures“. A fellow of Kellogg College at the University of Oxford, her research focuses on ethics, meaningfulness and mutuality in work, organizations and systems, including the philosophy and politics of workplace democracy (e.g., Yeoman, 2014, 2019, 2021). In her comprehensive presentation, she outlined meaning as the basis of a collective human capability for ethical organizing and value-based sustainable organizations, rooted in relational modes of being, suitable to counteract widespread problems of corporate alienation and organizational misconduct.

The fourth and last keynote speech was presented in a virtual format by Martin Parker, who is professor of organisation studies at the University of Bristol and, among others, author of several recent thought-provoking books (e.g., Parker, 2018, 2020; Parker, Stoborod & Swann, 2020), he currently acts as the lead for the Bristol Inclusive Economy Initiative and notably is one of the „founding (grand-)“<sup>4</sup> fathers“ of the Critical Management Studies (CMS) movement in the UK. In his highly inspirational talk, he discussed the institutionalization of CMS and critically examined its broader impact on political manifestos, practices in organizations, and public policy, thus deriving important lessons for the nascent CWOP movement, and ending with a both engaged and engaging questions-and-answers session.

### **Presentation sessions and workshops**

Constituting the main body of the program and distributed across the two main conference days, overall, 58 oral presentations were given, allocated to altogether 12 (90 minute) topical presentation sessions (six each on day 1 and day 2). Oral presentation sessions typically featured three (exceptionally four)

presentations and were convened in two parallel tracks. Sessions were grouped around the following six topic areas: Radical Humanism in the Tradition of Erich Fromm; Positions, Prospects, and Problems of Critical Work and Organizational Psychology (I and II); Stratification, Marginalization, and Inequality at Work; Psychology and Ideology of the Neoliberal Workplace (I and II); Critical Perspectives on Meaning at Work; and Alternative and Emancipatory Organizational Practices (I, II, and III). Additionally, two themed symposia on „Precarious Employment“ (e.g., Seubert, McWha-Hermann & Seubert, 2023) and „The Living Wages Movement“ (e.g., Seubert, Hopfgartner & Glaser, 2021) were organized by colleagues from the Applied Psychology Unit II of the University of Innsbruck, Christian Seubert and Lisa Hopfgartner (married: Seubert), drawing on their professional connections with the international network for Humanitarian Work Psychology and the Global Living Organisational Wage Project.

In line with the planning of the event, the vast majority of oral presentations were held in-person, yet for inclusiveness and to accommodate for exceptional circumstances, typically arising on short-term notice and connected to the pandemic, the organizers also provided alternative options for virtual presentation, resulting in four live virtual presentations via videoconference software and two pre-recorded virtual presentations. With regular 30-minutes time slots per presentation, this congress offered more freedom to engage in debates and discussions than conventional academic conferences in the field of psychology. This feature was well made use of and apparently greatly appreciated by the participants. Moreover, day 2 included an additional parallel track in which three subsequent workshops were offered in collaboration with members of the FoWOP movement: 1) „Developing a Checklist-Tool for Criticalizing Research“ (see: Sanderson, Röhlmann, Hornung & Bal, 2019); 2) „What Can we Learn from Critical Management Studies?“; and 3) „Critical Work and Organizational Psychology – Outlook and Actions“. The second of these workshops included a hybrid question-and-answer discussion session with Martin Parker as a more interactive and informal continuation and extension of his virtual keynote speech, which was especially well-received and instructive.

### **Poster exhibition**

The conference also featured a poster exhibition, themed: „Emerging Perspectives in Critical and

<sup>4</sup> We congratulate Martin Parker on recently becoming a grandfather, which was the reason why he attended the conference remotely.

Radical Humanist Work and Organizational Psychology“ (Organizers: Christine Unterrainer and Severin Hornung). The poster exhibition comprised altogether 20 scientific posters, the majority of which were selected from student projects in various courses on critical perspectives in Applied Psychology at both the B.Sc. and M.Sc.-level, taught at the University of Innsbruck between 2020 and 2022. Foci of posters were managerial control strategies and alternative forms of organizing, critical views on sustainability in organizations and organizational research, neoliberal ideology and social character theory, critiques of the concept of self-actualization at work, as well as methods, issues, and theories of change for critical work and organizational psychology. Posters were displayed prominently for viewing in the main reception room, where coffee, tea, refreshments, fruits, and other snacks were served and participants gathered and socialized during regular breaks across the whole event. The poster exhibition not only provided a stimulating backdrop for discussions of the past, present, and future of critical work and organizational psychology, but also an illustration of how the critical perspective is integrated into teaching activities at the University of Innsbruck and how enthusiastically this offer is adopted by students and creatively applied to both academic discourses and real-world problems.

### Panel discussion and farewell

Core part of the closing ceremony and the last highlight of the conference was a panel discussion with the provocatively chosen theme: „Prospects and Contestations of Critical and Radical Humanist Work and Organizational Psychology: Are we Ready to Take Over?“. Moderated by Christine Unterrainer, eight panel members each started out with a short opening statement on the discussion topic, followed by an open discussion with the audience. Edina Dóci, associate professor in the Department of Management and Organization at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (e.g., Dóci, Knappert, Nijs & Hofmans, 2023), started off the panel with her opening statement, entitled „Deterritorializing and reterritorializing Work and Organizational Psychology“. Drawing on concepts by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, she provided an engaged account of the personal meaning, her hopes and aspirations for the field of work and organizational psychology and its critical reorientation. Second, P. Matthijs Bal, who holds a professorship for responsible management at the University of Lincoln (e.g., Bal, 2017), raised and discussed the issue of how to move the field forward by not only criticizing, but „Criticalizing our colleagues?“. On a related note, Johanna Lisa Degen, a critical

researcher from the European University of Flensburg (e.g., Degen, 2022; Degen & Zekavat, 2022), who was participating remotely to accommodate for quarantine restrictions, chose the headline „Why a critical stance comes without didactics“ to argue against imposing any specific ontological and epistemological dogma in favor of cultivating tolerance and theoretical and methodological pluralism and multitude. Next came Thomas Kühn, who is professor of work and organizational psychology and the director of the Erich Fromm Study Center at the IPU Berlin (e.g. Kühn, 2015). In his contribution, fittingly titled „The urge for a revolution of hope in Work and Organizational Psychology“, he drew on the works of Erich Fromm to hold a passionate plea for a positive transformation of the academic field of work and organizational psychology based on humanistic values, goals, and principles of change. Next, Laura Röhlmann, a political activist and an educator and researcher at the University of Leipzig (e.g., Röhlmann, Weiss & Zacher, 2021), spoke on the topic of „Creating niches or intervening from within – How individual theories of change influence our strategies towards transforming Work and Organizational Psychology“. On a closely related topic, Severin Hornung, representing the critical group at the University of Innsbruck (e.g., Hornung, 2012), chose the headline „Or should we even aspire to? Dialectics of resistance and assimilation in times of crisis“, under which he discussed the tensions, trade-offs, and possible synthesis between more radical strategies of categorical critique, opposition, and refusal versus more moderate or subtle approaches of incremental reform and subversion. Subsequently, Gazi Islam, professor in the Department of People, Organizations and Society at Grenoble Ecole de Management (e.g., Islam, 2020; Islam & Sanderson, 2022), contributed an opening statement on „Critique of practice and critique by practice: collaborative possibilities in Critical Work and Organizational Psychology“, where he discussed the need for critical scholars to leave the „ivory tower“ to connect, collaborate, and coalesce with practitioners in various organizations and political institutions. The final opening statement was made by Zoe Sanderson, who is a main actor and organizer in the CWOP initiative and an action researcher at the University of Bristol (e.g., Sanderson, 2021), notably doing her PhD on the emergence of the CWOP movement. In her contribution, entitled „Building a house we want to live in: the importance of how we do Critical Work and Organizational Psychology“, she stressed the practical ways in which lived prosocial values and collegial collaboration, mutual support, solidarity, and caring set apart the professional social relationships in the emerging movement from conventional ways of working in the academic mainstream. Given the problematic ideologies, norms and practices of

academia in general, critical work and organizational psychology needs to be practiced and established as a counter-model not only with regard to „what“, that is, the critical content or perspective of research, but also with regard to „how“, that is, the research process and conditions of working life in academia.

After the opening statements, a number of comments or questions by the audience followed up on several of the discussed issues, notably, how to deal with academic performance demands and conventions while maintaining a critical perspective and position (e.g., Dóci & Bal, 2018); how to view and handle conflicts and tensions with and practice dissent or tolerance towards uncritical (or even unethical) mainstream positions (e.g., Weber, Höge & Hornung, 2020); and ways to get connected with and become actively involved in the emerging CWOP movement (e.g., Islam & Sanderson, 2022). For instance, exemplary activities that were discussed include connecting via social media, subscribing to the email newsletter, attending workshops, conferences, and other events, joining the steering committee or the working group on visions and values, or contributing to a publication project, such as planned special journal issues or the projected Handbook of Critical Work and Organizational Psychology mentioned above (as a starting point, contact any of the proponents mentioned above, or visit the website: [www.futureofwop.com](http://www.futureofwop.com)).

The conference closed with a farewell note by Wolfgang G. Weber, in which he humorously and entertainingly developed the parable of an adventurous quest of a group of mountaineers searching for Shangri-La, a mystical, utopian place, supposedly hidden somewhere in a vast mountainous area not unlike the Alps surrounding Innsbruck. The lesson of the (intentionally somewhat convoluted) story was that the mysterious promised land is not an external location or place to be found or arrived at, but rather an internal state of mind, which reflects both process and outcome of the search, according to the familiar saying that „the route is the goal“ or „the journey is the destination“. In this sense, the conference was at least an important milestone along the winding and rocky road towards a critical transformation of the field of work and organizational psychology. Moreover, participants and organizers agreed that this conference was indeed the first of its kind but certainly should not be the last. In fact, plans regarding a sequel are already taking shape – until then, we will stay connected and committed to our common cause.

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