

A HUNGARIAN BERGSONIAN PSYCHOLOGIST: VALÉRIA DIENES

CSABA PLÉH

Department of General Psychology
Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

The person

Even among the many psychologists characterized by longevity, it is rather rare for someone to miss a century long life but with one single year. Yet the person I want to call your attention to managed this impressive achievement, by covering a century between 1879 and 1978. Furthermore, she had lead a really rich and varied life with several turning points and shifts of interest. On the contemporary Hungarian intellectual scene, psychology belongs to the lesser known of her activities which is understandable since her most important psychological works mainly belong to the pre-first world war period when she was an advocate of the new, functionalist psychologies.

She had started her career as a characteristic Hungarian intellectual at the turn of century. She was among the first to graduate as a woman at the university of Budapest, in a rather peculiar combination of mathematics, aesthetics and philosophy. She was part of those intellectual circles that were characterized with a combination of social responsibility, progressive social science and political reformism. She had lectures in the Galilei Circle, a Hungarian freethinker society, widely published in the review *Huszadik Század* (Twentieth Century) and the *Galilei Füzetek* (Galilei Monographs) the two leading organs of the new generation of social scientists.

The combination of political, social and scientific progress, a sensitivity towards everything new in science and a passionate protest against all signs of oppression characterized this circle. The beginnings of Hungarian psychology organically fit into this progressive movement. From the radical freethinker Gyula (Julius) Pikler who besides being a progressive legal philosopher also produced an interesting outline of psychology in the German tradition to Jenő Posch whose radical Spencerian motor theory of mind had become a case of political debate in parliament due to its alleged "atheistic materialistic empiricism" (see Kende, 1974; Bárkán, 1985). The work of the young Dienes as a psychologist fits into this framework. She was a philosophically trained theoretical psychologist. In contrast to Paul Ranschburg or Géza Révész she never did laboratory work. Another characteristic that differentiates her early work from that of the older generation of philosophically oriented psychologists is her French orientation. In order to get a framework for this, one has to take into account the fact that at that time one of the general features of Hungarian progressive intellectuals was an attempt to look beyond the German speaking world for new ideas, hence the Spencerian inspiration of Posch. Dienes came under the influence

of French philosophy and psychology. After graduation she has had the opportunity to visit France and she became a personal student of Bergson. The French functionalist thought and especially the philosophical ideas of Bergson became the leading motives in her attempts to overcome the limitations of academic positivism. The functionalist side of this inspiration was the organic use of pathology and child development in her psychological thought. In the period between the two wars she became personally involved in the New School movement in Hungarian education that attempted to introduce new child centered ideas into education.

Bergson had an important ideological influence on the thought of Dienes. She herself talks about this in her posthumous spiritual autobiography:

It was Bergson who created the decisive turn of my life. When I had come back from Bergson and I have met Ervin Szabó and Oszkár Jászi (two leaders of the Hungarian progressive intellectuals) again I have them: Well, fellows, I am no more going to write in your review *Husadik Század* since you are materialists and I can't subscribe to this any more because I have become entirely converted to the spiritualistic world view.

(Dienes, 1983, p. 26.)

The Liberally minded progressivists of course encouraged her to continue publishing in their reviews, which she did. Bergson caused similar intellectual troubles for her again after the First World War when (probably) due to deep personal and social disillusion she turned to engaged spiritual catholicism. She did not know how to reconcile her interest in Bergson with her religious conversion until bishop Ottokár Prohászka personally encouraged her to go on with her Bergsonism.

Space limits us to detail her varied further activities. In the between war period modern dancing became central to her life as a follower and personal student of Isadora and Raymond Duncan. She made her living practically as the instructor of a modern dancing system she called *orchestrics*. The system in its theoretical foundations had some Bergsonian overtones and an acknowledged inspiration from Pierre Janet (Dienes was also a student of his) in that it emphasizes the internal parallel between movements and mental content. As late as the early eighties (Dienes, 1981) she even given a modern semiotic foundation for this theory.

At the same time she continued translating. To name one single example besides her favorite Bergson she published in 1964 the first complete Hungarian translation of Locke's *Essay...* (Locke, 1964). Quite an achievement in itself. from some one over 80! She also became a respected writer on catholicism (e. g. Dienes, 1983).

Dienes on the state of the art of psychology at the turn of the century

Besides journal articles Dienes published two major works in psychology. The first of these (Dienes, 1914) is a short but very well organized overview of the state of the art of psychology at the beginning of our century. It was written for the main

progressivist monograph series and was based on lectures at an intellectual "free school". The monograph starts with a characterization of psychology as a non-unitary discipline divided by methodological divergences as well as controversies concerning the proper topic of psychology. The work characterizes the contemporary German experimental psychology (including the Würzburg school and the debates concerning introspection), the beginnings of comparative psychology, child psychology and psychopathology. Is there a possibility for a unifying principle behind this diversity, raised Dienes the seemingly rhetorical question. Her answer was the following:

The developmental view of the formation of mental life, its constantly created and unfolding events ... would provide for a new science of psychology, the facts of which would be true while its unity would still be natural since unity would not follow from more or less arbitrary principles or leading experiences but ... from a respect towards the genesis of the realities providing its substance."

The genetic slogan is not entirely original at this time. The two examples selected by her to represent the genetic point of view, however, are rather extravagant especially in their combination. Dienes describes the early Russian reflexology of Bechterev and Pavlov on the one hand, and the intuitionism of Bergson as the two most clear examples of the new genetic psychology. What are the parallels between the materialistic reflex conception and the metaphysical intuitionism of Bergson? Both schools deny classical psychophysical parallelisms: the Russians starting from the brain (brain events may be unconscious), while Bergson by showing that the same neural events may have several conscious counterparts. Another parallel is the Bergsonian conception of perception and memory where perception is selective, not a mere copy of reality and remembering is an active reconstructive process. Both ideas, claimed Dienes, preceded Russian reflexology and are consonant with its results. (Note that the unprejudiced early admirer of reflexology sees in it a rather dynamic conception of behaviour rather than a mechanistic one! The only similar contemporary conception was that of Kostyleff, 1911, who tried to propose a combination of reflexology and refined introspectionism.)

Bergson as the exponent of a schema driven approach to cognition

This reading of Bergson that promotes him as a philosophically based solution to the problems of traditional introspectionism and elementarism is further elaborated in her preface to the Hungarian translation of Bergson's (1923) first major work. This monograph length essay is the most detailed exposition of the prophetic vision of Dienes on the importance of Bergson for psychology and in a way the most detailed exposition of the psychological presuppositions and implications of Bergson at large.

Bergsons ideas are set in antagonism (inversion) to the leading ideas of traditional psychology.

Perception, rather than being registration, is selective. Movement is its basic selective principle. Movement fragments initiated by sensory events activate memories connected to similar movements thereby enriching recent perceptions. Full perceptual experience is not a mere agglomerative combination of elements but rather an enrichment by schematic tendencies. This view is further elaborated into an anti-associative conception of mental life. The machinery of mind is like a stream of consciousness *à la James* rather than a mere arithmetic of fixed, stable mental elements.

Concerning the famous dual memory system of Bergson, Dienes gives a characterization of the habit (bodily memory) – real souvenir distinction in terms that are partially similar to the contemporary distinctions between skills and rote memory on the one hand (lack of temporal and personal reference) and autobiographic memory on the other. This distinction, however, is generalized by her into an overall dual mental system. “Our conscious activity moves between two extremes: between the dated personal past preserved with all its details and momentary action” (Dienes, 1923, p. 26). The “uncontrolled” extreme is the dream. Regular, everyday experience is a constant organization of the “raw data” provided by the personal memory system according to the momentarily valid action schemata.

Thinking is not a combination of thoughts but an active effort based on a general schema. “Mental effort goes from schemata towards images, from abstraction towards the concrete” (*ibid.*, p. 35). In this respect the interpretation Dienes gives of Bergson is rather similar to the early schema conception of thought proposed by Selz (1922).

In this dual system consciousness, the cornerstone of traditional psychology, becomes but a transitory phenomenon in the ocean of unconscious automatized movements and personal memories. It is but a momentary phasic event, a sequence of “controlled” rather than “automatized” information processing steps.

Fortunately space limits us to actualize these ideas. Let us be satisfied with the concluding remark that Dienes is a counterexample to the well known but rather critical receptions of the Bergsonian theory of memory within mainstream psychology (Bartlett, 1932; Piaget, 1968): in her presentation the antiassociative and schema oriented aspects of Bergson constitute his message for psychology rather than his metaphysical dualism.

Notes

- Bárkán György (1985): *A pszichológia szerepe a századelő magyar társadalomtudományi megújulásában* Magyar Pszichológiai Szemle, 42, 471–494.
- Bartlett, F. (1932): *Remembering* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bergson, H. (1913): *A nevetés* (Le rire. Together with essays on psychology) Budapest: Révai.
- Bergson, H. (1932): *Idő és szabadság* (Essais sur les données immédiates de la conscience.) Budapest: Franklin.
- Bergson, H. (1930): *Teremtő fejlődés* (L'évolution créatrice.) Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia.
- Borus Rózsa (1978, ed.): *A század nagy tanúi* (Great witnesses of our century) Budapest, RTV Minerva.
- Dienes Valéria (1914): *A mai lélektan főbb irányai* (Main trends in contemporary psychology.) Budapest: Haladás, Galilei Füzetek 7–8.

- Dienes Valéria (1923): *Bergson lélektana. (The psychology of Bergson.)* In: *Bergson*, 1923, 7–49.
- Dienes Valéria (1981): *A szimbolika főbb problémái (Basic issues in symbolics.)* In: I. Gráfik and V. Voigt (eds.): *Kultúra és szemiotika* Budapest: Akadémiai 15–27.
- Dienes Valéria (1983): *Visszaemlékezés (Souvenirs.)* In: *Hajnalvárás*, Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 16–51.
- Kende, Zs. (1974): *A Galilei Kör megalakulása. (Foundation of the Galilei Circle.)* Budapest: Akadémiai.
- Kostyleff, N. (1911): *La crise de la psychologie expérimentale*, Paris: Alcan.
- Locke, J. (1964): *Értekezés az emberi értelemről* Budapest: Akadémiai.
- Piaget, J. (1968): *Sagesse et illusions de la philosophie* Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.
- Selz, O. (1922): *Zur Psychologie des produktiven Denkens und des Irrtums*, Bonn.