
Whatever Happened to Karl Bühler?

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Abstract

The work of Karl Bühler is not particularly well known in English-speaking countries. If Bühler is mentioned at all in texts on the history of psychology, it is in connection with his early work at the University of Würzburg. This work represents only the start of Bühler's career in psychology. He subsequently produced important work on perception, Gestalt theory, developmental psychology, theoretical psychology and the psychology of language. Bühler's work has had a profound — though largely unnoticed — influence on later thinkers. It has also been the subject of a revival of interest in Europe in recent years. This article provides an overview of Bühler's life and work.

In a wide-ranging article on the historiography of psychology, Weimer (1974) has discussed what he calls "the suppression of psychological history" (p. 248). Weimer points out that 'history' is inevitably selective. Historians of psychology — particularly those who are practising psychologists — have some general idea of what psychology is and how it ought to be done. This will lead them to select out certain aspects of psychology's past and to ignore others. Weimer argues that this process is not always a conscious one. Few historians of psychology will deliberately suppress 'history'. They are simply not aware of its existence. Works which did not have a major impact on psychology will disappear from the 'collective memory' of psychologists.

Weimer illustrates these points with the

example of Karl Bühler (1879-1963). One suspects that Bühler was chosen because the example is such a striking one. If Bühler is mentioned at all in texts on the history of psychology, it is in connection with his early work as Oswald Külpe's assistant at the University of Würzburg (e.g. Hothersall, 1990; Brennan, 1991; Hergenhahn, 1992; Leahey, 1992a; Schultz & Schultz, 1992). It was Bühler's work on 'imageless thought' which sparked off the famous controversy with Wilhelm Wundt over the methods of the 'Würzburg School'. Boring (1950) wrote:

Bühler was severely criticized by Wundt, by Dürr, who was one of his observers, and by von Aster. Titchener, of course, criticized the entire movement. Bühler, however, left the total picture of thought without important change, and we may thus close our account of the Würzburg school and return once again to Külpe. (pp. 406-407).

Boring mentions Bühler only in the context of Külpe's students at Würzburg and as the editor of Külpe's posthumous "Vorlesungen" [Lectures] (Külpe, 1920). With regard to the latter, Boring only comments that "Bühler may even have introduced Husserl to Külpe" (p. 408). If this was Bühler's only work of any significance, then his minor role in the history of psychology would be perfectly justified. Let us take a closer look at this 'minor' figure in order to see why Bühler is such an interesting case.

Concept of Gestalt

Bühler's work as part of the 'Würzburg School' represents only the start of his career in psychology. He subsequently moved, together with Külpe, to the University of Bonn in 1909 and to the University of Munich in 1913. It was during his stay in Bonn that Bühler became interested in Ehrenfels' concept of 'Gestalt' and applied

this to the study of perception. The results of this work appeared under the title, *Die Gestaltwahrnehmungen* [The Gestalt Perceptions] (Bühler, 1913). This was one of the earliest attempts to experiment with Gestalt phenomena.¹ During his stay in Munich, Bühler turned his attention to developmental psychology. His major work on the subject — *Die geistige Entwicklung des Kindes* [The Mental Development of the Child] — appeared in 1918 (Bühler, 1918). This work was widely used in teacher-training institutes and had already reached its 6th edition by 1930 (Bühler, 1930a). An abridged version of the book — *Abriß der geistigen Entwicklung des Kindes* [Outline of the Mental Development of the Child] — appeared in 1919 (Bühler, 1919). This had reached its 5th edition by 1929 (Bühler, 1929a). An English translation appeared in the following year (Bühler, 1930b). These works helped to establish Bühler's reputation as one of Europe's leading authorities on developmental psychology. Bühler is one of the most frequently-cited authors in Vygotsky's *Thought and Language* (1934/1986).

Bühler had become director of the Vienna Psychological Institute in 1922. With the help and support of his wife, Charlotte Bühler, he rapidly transformed it into one of the major centres of psychology in Europe. Like the Leipzig Institute many years earlier, it attracted students from all over the world. Charlotte Bühler (1965a) wrote that the Vienna Institute had students from 18 different countries at the 11th International Congress of Psychology in Paris. Some of the better known figures who studied there include: Hedda Bolgar, Egon Brunswik, Rudolf Ekstein, Herbert Feigl, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Heinz Hartmann, Marie Jahoda, David Klein, Paul Lazarsfeld, Konrad Lorenz, Neal Miller, Karl Popper, René Spitz, Edward Tolman, Goodwin Watson and Albert Wellek. Bühler's reputation as a lecturer was legend-

ary. Bolgar (1964) wrote:

Any account of Bühler's life would be incomplete if it did not convey his impact as a teacher. His curiosity was contagious, his language was vivid and rich in new terms, his arguments were vigorous and unexpected, whereas his obvious enjoyment of the business of thinking held his audience of several hundred students spellbound through many courses in general psychology. (p. 678)

Many of Bühler's students went on to become prominent in the United States. Egon Brunswik moved to Berkeley and established a close collaboration with Edward Tolman whom he had befriended in Vienna. Paul Lazarsfeld moved to Columbia and eventually became President of the American Sociological Association. Else Frenkel-Brunswik is perhaps best known as one of the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson & Sanford, 1950). The productivity of the Vienna Institute alone would merit Bühler an important place in the history of psychology (C. Bühler, 1965a; Welck, 1968; Weimer, 1974).

Possible Integration

Bühler turned his attention to theoretical and methodological issues in the 1920s. In *Die Krise der Psychologie* [The Crisis of Psychology], he examined the different 'schools' of psychology (e.g., Gestalt psychology, behaviourism, psychoanalysis) and outlined proposals for how their results might be integrated. The work originally appeared as an article in the journal, *Kant-Studien* [Kant Studies] in 1926 (Bühler, 1926b). It was reissued as a book in 1927 and again in 1929 (Bühler, 1927; 1929b). This work is regarded as a 'classic' in German-speaking countries. A third edition of the book was published in 1965 and a fourth edition in 1978 (Bühler, 1965a; 1978). In his review of the third edition, G. W. Allport (1966) wrote:

One wonders why some of the most important psychological treatises in the German lan-

¹ Bühler subsequently became involved in a dispute with Koffka over the originality of 'Gestalt' psychology (Bühler, 1926a).

guage have remained untranslated for decades. One thinks, for example, of Fechner's *Psychophysik*, of Brentano's *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, and of the work here under review, Bühler's *Die Krise der Psychologie*. The last named was published in 1927, reissued in 1929, and again in 1965. Recently, I have heard rumors that all three of these neglected classics are now in the process of belated translation. I hope that the rumors become realities. (p. 201).

Unfortunately, the work has still not been translated into English. This may explain why it is so rarely discussed by English-speaking theoretical psychologists.²

Bühler became one of the most eminent psychologists of the time. He lectured throughout Europe during his years in Vienna (Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Norway, Spain, Sweden). He spent academic 1927/8 in the United States where he gave guest lectures at Stanford, Johns Hopkins and Harvard Universities. He also spoke at the APA convention in 1927 and took part in the 'Wittenberg Symposium' on feelings and emotions (Bühler, 1928a; 1928b). Bühler returned to the United States in 1929 to give a series of guest lectures at the University of Chicago and to take part in the 9th International Congress of Psychology in New Haven (Bühler, 1930c). He was elected President of the German Psychological Society in the same year — a position which he held until 1931. Bühler's international reputation — as well as that of the Vienna Institute — was confirmed when, in 1930, he was offered the chair at Harvard University which had been vacated by William McDougall in 1927.

² Vygotsky wrote on 'the crisis of psychology' in 1927 but the work was not published until 1982. This work has also not been translated into English — though it is available in German translation (Vygotsky, 1982/1985). For a comparison of the two works, see Pléh (1988). Maicrs (1990) has argued that both these works are of relevance to the continuing 'monism-pluralism' debate in theoretical psychology.

Bühler decided to reject the offer. He was now at the peak of his career. He had already made important contributions to the psychology of thought, perception, Gestalt theory, developmental psychology and theoretical psychology. The best was yet to come. Bühler went on to produce a series of important works on language and expression in the 1930s: *Die Axiomatik der Sprachwissenschaften* [The Axiomatization of the Language Sciences] (Bühler, 1933a); *Ausdrucks-theorie* [Theory of Expression] (Bühler, 1933b); *Sprachtheorie* [Theory of Language] (Bühler, 1934). The latter has been described as "the richest, most original and precise book that has ever been written on the subject" (Marías, 1967; p. 15).³ This work has had a profound — though largely unnoticed — influence on later thinkers. In their book on *Symbol Formation*, Werner and Kaplan (1963) wrote:

In this presentation, we shall draw considerably on the views of Karl Bühler whose *Sprachtheorie*, we believe, presents the most advanced psychological analysis of the general structure of language. (p. 52)

The authors add in a footnote:

It is regrettable that Bühler's book is neither discussed nor even cited in any of the recent works on language by American psychologists. (p. 52)

This situation has hardly changed today. Bühler's book is neither cited nor mentioned in modern textbooks on the psychology of language (e.g., Fodor, Bever & Garrett, 1974; Clark & Clark, 1977; Foss & Hakes, 1978; Aitchison, 1983; Garnham, 1985).⁴

Theory of Language

Bühler's theory of language was well known to Werner and Kaplan from Germany. It

³ "Esta *Teoría del Lenguaje* de Karl Bühler es tal vez el libro más rico, original y preciso que se ha escrito sobre el tema."

remained one of the best-kept secrets of the refugees from Central Europe who came to Britain and the United States in the 1930s. Bühler provided the theoretical basis for the Linguistic Circle of Prague. Two of its central members, Roman Jakobson and Jan Mukarovsky, were heavily indebted to him (e.g., Jakobson, 1960; Mukarovsky, 1977). Jakobson (1973) wrote that Bühler's work was "for linguists probably the most inspiring among all the contributions to the psychology of language" (p. 41). Bühler also had a profound impact on philosophy. One of the leading epistemologists of the 20th century, Karl Popper, studied with Bühler in Vienna and productively developed many of Bühler's ideas (e.g., Popper, 1963; 1971). In his autobiography, Popper (1976) wrote:

From my teachers at the Institute I learned very little, but I learned much from Karl Bühler, Professor of Psychology at the University of Vienna ... Most important for my own future development was his theory of the three levels or functions of language. (pp. 73-74)

Bühler also influenced the work of major philosophers such as Ernst Cassirer and Michael Polanyi (e.g., Cassirer, 1929/1957; Polanyi, 1958). There is now a growing literature which points to the striking similarities between Bühler's work and the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein (e.g., Toulmin, 1969; Bartley, 1973; Bloor, 1983; Eschbach, 1984a; Innis, 1988). This has led one biographer to conclude: "If any individual thinker can be said to have influenced Wittgenstein ... it must have been Karl Bühler" (Bartley, 1973; p. 144).⁵

Bühler is clearly one of the intellectual

giants in the history of psychology. Why is it that his work is virtually unknown to psychologists in English-speaking countries? This takes us back to "the suppression of psychological history". Weimer (1974) suggests that Boring may have felt 'snubbed' when Bühler rejected the offer of McDougall's chair at Harvard — an offer which had been tendered by Boring himself. He writes:

Boring proceeded to write Bühler out of the history of psychology after 1930. In the first (1929) edition of his history, there are half a dozen references to Bühler on ten pages: a considerable amount for a 'contemporary' figure who had not yet reached his peak influence. Köhler, in comparison, had fifteen, and Koffka and Wertheimer had six each. In the 1950 edition, by contrast, there were two references to Bühler (and two more citations of research), while Köhler had twenty-one, Koffka ten and Wertheimer seventeen. The only research of Bühler's cited by Boring was the early work at Würzburg. (p. 252)

A more charitable explanation would be that Boring had revised his opinion of Bühler's importance between 1929 and 1950. When Bühler was forced to leave Vienna in 1938, he had a frosty reception in the United States.⁶ Most of the available academic positions had already been taken by the earlier

⁵ This view has been challenged (Kaplan, 1984). The issue is difficult to prove since Wittgenstein does not mention Bühler in any of his published or unpublished works (Eschbach, 1988a). No one doubts, however, that there are some remarkable similarities between their ideas (Innis, 1988).

⁶ Bühler was arrested shortly after German troops entered Vienna in March 1938. On April 9, his name appeared on the first list of professors who were to be dismissed "for political and world-view reasons" (Ash, 1987; p. 157). Charlotte Bühler, who had one Jewish parent, held a visiting professorship in Norway at the time. Her name appeared on a later list of professors who were to be dismissed "on racial grounds" (Ash, 1987; p. 157). After intervention from abroad, Karl Bühler was released from confinement and given the choice of forced retirement or emigration.

⁴ Arthur Blumenthal's historical work, *Language and Psychology*, contains a partial translation of one of Bühler's early articles on language (Blumenthal, 1970). Bühler's theory of language is far too complex to summarize in a few lines. The most detailed account in English can be found in Innis (1982). Of course, this is no substitute for reading the original works (Bühler, 1933/1982a; 1934/1990).

wave of refugees who had left Germany after 1933. His major works had never been translated into English. The dominant trend in American psychology and linguistics was behaviourism. Garvin (1964) wrote:

With the end of Bühler's career in Europe came also the end of his contact with the mainstream of linguistic thought. In the United States both psychologists and linguists were at the time too strongly committed to behaviorism to receive the newly arrived representative of a school of thought considered 'mentalic'. (p. 634)

The only academic position which Bühler could obtain was at the tiny St. Scholastica College in Duluth, Minnesota. Cut off from his culture and language — as well as the facilities and stimulation of a large university — he found it very difficult to adapt to American psychology or to life in the American Midwest. He continued to do research but his work was rejected by publishers and has never appeared in print.⁷ After several unsuccessful attempts to find a position at a more prominent institution, Bühler left academia in 1945 and became a clinical psychologist at the Cedars of Lebanon Hospital in Los Angeles — a position which he held until 1955. After his retirement, he helped his wife with her psychotherapy practice in Hollywood (Eschbach, 1990).

Shackles of Behaviourism

Bühler had never been forgotten in his native Germany. He was invited to attend the 1960 International Congress of Psychology in Bonn and was made 'Honorary President' for the occasion. An expanded version of his address was published in German as a book

(Bühler, 1960). The German Psychological Society took the opportunity to award him its highest honour — 'The Wilhelm Wundt Medal' — for distinguished contributions to psychology (Ungeheuer, 1984). Bühler returned to the United States where he spent his final years. Certain changes were taking place which might have helped to prepare the way for a greater appreciation of his work. Psychology had begun to throw off the shackles of behaviourism and there was a growing interest in language and thought. It is no accident that the works of Piaget and Vygotsky from the 1920s and -30s were suddenly 'discovered' around this time.⁸ There was no corresponding interest in Bühler's work. His major works had never been translated and were known to only a few. Bühler was invited to take part in a conference of linguists at the University of Indiana in 1962 but he was already 83 years old and too ill to attend. He died in Los Angeles on October 26, 1963 having never held a university appointment in the United States or a position commensurate with his status in Europe (Garvin, 1964; Wellek, 1968; C. Bühler, 1972).⁹

This whole episode has been virtually ignored by American historians of psychology for whom Bühler is still a relatively 'unknown' figure.¹⁰ Apart from the need to introduce Bühler to an English-speaking audience — and to explain how one of Europe's leading psychologists could suffer such isolation and neglect in United States — there is another reason why Bühler's life and work should be re-examined. The last few years have seen a revival of interest in Bühler's theories in Europe. Some writers have begun to speak of a "Bühler-Renais-

⁷ Bühler had been a prolific author before 1938. Quite incredibly, he published nothing at all in the United States after this date. The only works that he published in English were two articles which appeared in the Dutch journal, *Acta Psychologica* (Bühler, 1952; 1954). These were on human and animal navigation systems — topics which were far removed from his interests in Vienna.

⁸ Some writers have seen the 'cognitive revolution' of the 1960s as evidence of a Kuhnian paradigm-shift (e.g., Palermo, 1971; Gardner, 1985; Baars, 1986). As Danziger (1992) pointed out in a recent CPA address, this view is highly ethnocentric. It can only work if one looks no further than the United States. There was no need for a cognitive revolution in Europe. Psychology had never gone 'behaviorist' in the first place (Brock, 1991; Leachy, 1992b).

sance" (Koerner, 1984; Eschbach, 1988b). The start of this interest can be traced back to the reissue of *Die Krise der Psychologie* and *Sprachtheorie* in 1965 (Bühler, 1965a; 1965b). These were followed by new editions of *Abriß der geistigen Entwicklung des Kindes*, *Ausdruckstheorie* and *Die Axiomatik der Sprachwissenschaften* (Bühler, 1967; 1968, 1969a). A collection of unpublished manuscripts — accompanied by an intellectual biography — also appeared around this time (Bühler, 1969b). These publications led to a growing interest in Bühler's work.¹¹

Collected Works

The year 1984 is of particular importance since this was the 50th anniversary of the first edition of *Sprachtheorie* (Bühler, 1934). A number of publications were prepared to coincide with this date. These include two volumes — entitled, *Bühler-Studien* [Bühler Studies] — which contain 25 essays on different aspects of Bühler's life and work (Eschbach, 1984b). Another volume of essays appeared in the same year (Graumann & Hermann, 1984). Two conferences devoted to Bühler's work — one in Austria and one

9 It was around this time that Brandt (1963) wrote to the *American Psychologist* to complain of "linguistic isolation" (p. 70). He noted that, in the most recent issue of that journal, he could not find one single reference to a foreign-language publication. It should be noted that the insularity of American psychology goes beyond the problem of linguistic isolation (Brandt, 1970). A survey of members of the Society of Experimental Social Psychology — "an élite organization of American social psychologists" (Rosnow, 1981; p. 34) — found that 33% had never read the *European Journal of Social Psychology* and 43% had never read the *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* (Lewicki, 1982). It is hardly surprising that American psychology has been described as "our monocultural science" (Kennedy, Scheirer & Rogers, 1984).

10 Charlotte Bühler is much better known than her husband in the United States. After the initial difficulties of the 1940s and -50s, she experienced moderate success. She lived until 1974 and became a prominent spokesperson for 'humanistic' psychology in later years (e.g., C. Bühler, 1965b; 1969; 1971; Bühler & Allen, 1972).

in Germany — were also held in 1984. A selection of papers from both these conferences was subsequently published in the Netherlands (Eschbach, 1988c). Bühler's works are still being published in Europe. A group of researchers at the University of Essen (Germany) and the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (Netherlands) is currently preparing a ten-volume edition of 'Collected Works'. Half of these volumes will contain previously unpublished material (Emrich, 1990).

Bühler continues to be a relatively neglected figure in English-speaking countries. The main reason for this is that his major works were never translated into English. This situation has begun to change. An English translation of *Die Axiomatik der Sprachwissenschaften* appeared in 1982 (Bühler, 1933/1982a). More recently, an English translation of *Sprachtheorie* has appeared — 56 years after it was originally published (Bühler, 1934/1990).¹² One suspects that it will not be long before *Die Krise der Psychologie* is translated into English. It is this work which exemplifies Bühler's constant desire to reflect upon the theoretical foundations of psychology. The issues which he discussed have never been resolved and his work continues to be of interest to psychologists in German-speaking countries. A translation of this work — together with the recent translation of *Sprachtheorie* — could help to spark off a revival of interest in the English-speaking world. It seems safe to predict that

11 Bühler's works continued to be reissued. A fourth edition of *Die Krise der Psychologie* appeared in 1978 and a third edition of *Sprachtheorie* in 1982 (Bühler, 1978; 1982b).

12 The work was translated by a Canadian, Donald Goodwin. In his translator's preface, Goodwin (1990) writes: "Though it is a historical work and must be read as such, in translating the *Theory of Language*, I have hoped it will become a contemporary work as well, for it addresses topics of considerable contemporary relevance" (p.xlv). It should be noted that the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy and the social sciences has helped to prepare the way for this revival of interest in Bühler's work.

Bühler will eventually receive the recognition that he was unable to obtain during his own lifetime.

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Résumé

Les travaux de Karl Bühler ne sont pas très connus dans les pays anglophones. Si on y fait allusion dans certains textes portant sur l'histoire de la psychologie, on parlera surtout de ses premiers travaux à l'Université de Würzburg. Mais cette époque n'était qu'un prélude au reste de la carrière de Bühler en psychologie. Il a par la suite enrichi le domaine par des travaux importants sur la perception, la théorie de la forme, la psychologie génétique, théorique et du langage. Ils ont eu une influence profonde, mais en grande partie passée inaperçue, sur les penseurs qui suivirent ses traces. Au cours des dernières années, en Europe, on a constaté un regain de popularité des travaux de Bühler. Cet article brosse un portrait de sa vie et de son oeuvre.

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