Studies in Critical Social Sciences

An Interdisciplinary Theory of Activity

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Part I. Introduction and Historical Excursus

1. Introduction

This work is a friendly critique of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), a current of psychology which grew up in the early Soviet Union, until it was suppressed in the mid-1930s, and only gradually became more widely known from the 1960s.[1]

It was the difficult conditions in the Stalinist USSR which restricted the scope of CHAT to psychology, and it is the aim of this work to resolve those features of CHAT which have prevented it from fulfilling its potential as an interdisciplinary approach to the human sciences in general. This is not a project for a science of everything. But it does point to a potential for a progressive, critical new approach across a range of disciplines, and an improved possibility for interdisciplinary work. But if this book achieves nothing else, then it will be to clarify a range of methodological problems for CHAT researchers themselves. Hopefully it will also create interest in CHAT among those not yet familiar with it. CHAT is today one of the most influential and progressive schools of thought in the domain of child development and elementary education, and is active in a wide range of other disciplines. With its emphasis on culture[2], it is also one of the very few currents of psychology which can effectively respond to reductionist neuroscience: one of the founders of CHAT, Alexander Luria, is also recognized as one of the founders of neuroscience.

The roots of CHAT lie in 19th century German philosophy, in particular Goethe's 'romantic science'[3] and some of the ideas he introduced in

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[1] 'CHAT' is a name invented only in the 1990s by Cole (1996: 104-5; 2007: 206-7) and Yrjö Engeström to promote the unity of what was by that time a diversity of currents all originating from the work of Lev Vygotsky. 'Cultural Psychology' came into currency in the early 1930s and 'Activity Theory' in the 1960s.

[2] In CHAT, 'culture' refers to the universe of artifacts created by and used in a society (Cole 1996: 144). Culture is meaningful in social life only in relation to the living people using it and to the place of artifacts in the various forms of activity in which it is used. Some researchers use the term in a wider sense as referring to artifacts, forms of activity and thought-forms characteristic of a way of life (Ratner 2008).

[3] 'Romantic Science' is an approach to natural science which grew up in opposition to dogmatic Newtonian science in the early 19th century, associated with Goethe, Sir

opposition to the dominant abstract empirical, or positivist approach to science at the time. Goethe's key scientific ideas were picked up by Hegel and more consistently developed, albeit on the foundation of absolute idealism. Marx's critique[4] of Hegel freed these ideas of their idealist shell, making individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live the sole premises (Marx 1975i: 31). In the cauldron which was the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, Lev Vygotsky was able to appropriate the key insights from this tradition in a completely original approach to psychology. Political conditions, which made it impossible to rationally discuss political or sociological issues, determined that his work would focus on education, child development and disability education.

'Activity' simply means what people do, but with his "Theses on Feuerbach" (1975g), Marx connected the concept with critique of a range of metaphysical conceptions, and made it the foundation of his own view of the world, at the philosophical level. In the work of CHAT writers, the concept of activity has accrued further connotations and nuances in the course of efforts to develop a rational foundation for psychology.

Central to the approach used here is the notion of immanent critique[5]. This means that the subject matter is criticized solely through its own voice, in the words of its own representatives. In an immanent critique, the writer follows disputes internal to the subject, observes how they are resolved and how each new step forward uncovers new problems, and so on, tracing the development of the subject matter as it develops according to its own logic.

Humphry Davy and Alexander von Humboldt. The term is tied to this historical juncture, and we will use the term 'emancipatory science' to indicate a contemporary development of the principles first proposed by Romantic Science.

[4] 'Critique' may indicate a variety of forms of engagement, but what is most important is that the word is not used here in any sense as a kind of 'attack', in fact, the best critique is one which speaks to the writer under critique and benefits them. Also, 'critique' is not necessarily a textual activity; 'practical critique' is an important part of critique, as per "Do as I do, not as I say," and so on.

[5] Although the idea dates back to Aristotle, immanent critique is generally associated with Hegel (1969: 31). In criticizing the ideas of some group of people, immanent critique uses the group's own basic principles against the group's claims, where possible in their own words, and by holding them true to their own principles demonstrates where these principles finally lead.

This allows the critic to build up a concrete understanding of the material and identify its main problems and possible ways forward. Immanent critique is contrasted with simply putting forward a counterproposal or finding fault with the subject matter, and arguing a counter-position. This latter approach will rarely succeed in the developing the subject matter itself, and can dogmatically harden differences.

What is meant by an 'interdisciplinary concept' of activity (Cole 1985) is this: when specialists in different disciplines or currents of science communicate with one another they must have recourse to a shared language and conceptual framework. This is usually the lingua franca and everyday common sense, as scientific concepts are generally limited to the theoretical framework to which they belong, in one or another discipline. This limits the depth of possible collaboration and mutual criticism and appropriation. The aim is to develop 'activity' as a *scientific* concept which is meaningful not only in the domain of psychology, but also in sciences such as sociology, political science, linguistics and so on. Irrespective of whether specialists in other disciplines take up the idea, CHAT needs access to ways of describing and grasping societal phenomena, because it is a basic tenet of CHAT that everything that may be found in the individual psyche was previously to be found in relations *between* people, and that artifacts and forms of social interaction originating in the social world constitute the *content* of the psyche. So an interdisciplinary concept of activity is necessary for its own purposes.

Throughout this book, the need to remain true to the original aims of Goethe's Romantic Science is affirmed. The term 'Romantic Science' is dated, and the expression 'emancipatory science' is preferred. The aim of this study in promoting a current of emancipatory science[6], comes more to the fore as the study is developed. Emancipatory science means an approach to science whose effect is to emancipate its subjects, rather than predict

[6] 'Emancipatory science' is a new term introduced here as a continuation in contemporary conditions of the project of 'Romantic Science', recognizing that accumulation of knowledge does not *per se* contribute to human freedom, and examining concepts indigenous to CHAT for their implications for human freedom. Jürgen Habermas's (1987) idea of 'emancipatory interest' was an approach to the same idea from within a different tradition.

their behavior or control them. It is not a simple matter to see exactly what it is about a science which qualifies it to be recognized as emancipatory. It is hoped that this work will shed a little light on this matter.

The book begins with a short historical narrative for the benefit of those who are not familiar with the story of CHAT. We begin our account in Petrograd in January 1924 at Vygotsky's first intervention in Soviet psychology, and follow the current up recent times. This chapter aims to simply introduce the characters, and does not touch on the content of their ideas.

The remainder of the book is made up of three parts.

The *first part,* chapters 1 to 13, is an historical excursus, exploring the 19th century origins of the key ideas which were deployed in the founding of CHAT. We begin with Goethe and trace the transmission and genesis of the key concepts of Goethe's approach to science through Hegel and Marx.

The *second part*, is an immanent critique of CHAT, working through Vygotsky's original work (chapters 14 to 18), Leontyev's Activity Theory, Yrjö Engeström's version of Activity Theory and the Cultural Psychology of Michael Cole (chapters 19 to 27. The immanent critique leads up to an impasse: a collection of serious problems have been drawn out which remain unsolved. At the center of the impasse is the problem of representing the relation between the psychological functioning of *an individual* and *their social situation*.

The *third part*, chapters 28 to 35, begins with a proposal to overcome the impasse and open up a route for the further development of CHAT. This proposal is then defended, and it is shown that the side-benefits of resolving the impasse include an interdisciplinary concept of activity, along with an opportunity to revive the project of an emancipatory science. It is also shown that the approach provides insights into problems of ethics as well as science. The key concepts in this proposal are 'project' and 'collaboration', or 'project collaboration'.

The key concepts which the historical excursus must gain from Goethe are *Gestalt*, *Urphänomen* and *Bildung*. *Gestalt* includes the idea that the representation of a phenomenon must begin from a conception of the whole, rather than being assembled from the parts. *Urphänomen*, also known as the

'cell' or 'unit of analysis' (these two terms are interchangeable), of a complex phenomenon is the most primitive form of the phenomenon which, through its visceral simplicity, can function as an explanatory principle; that is, the part contains the whole. *Bildung* is a concept of personal development which understands the process of growth as life-long maintenance and appropriation of the existing culture.

Hegel took up Goethe's ideas in philosophical terms, understanding the *Gestalt* as a 'formation of consciousness' and using immanent critique to write a *Bildungsroman* for European culture. For Hegel, a formation of consciousness is made up of *concepts*, and the concept represents Hegel's formulation of the *Urphänomen*. This led Hegel to a brilliant conception of the nature of science, which must begin with a concept of its subject matter, and unfold the content out of its concept.

Marx's critique of Hegel sought to appropriate[7] Hegel's insights while liberating them from their idealistic formulation, typified by the rendering a *social formation* as a 'formation of consciousness'. Marx used the notion of activity which he learnt from Moses Hess, to make a materialistic interpretation of Hegel's 'spirit'. But in large measure, Marx adopted Hegel's idea of how a science must begin, subject to the understanding that the subject matter is ultimately the developing activity of real people, not "thought concentrating itself" (1986: 37-39). Marx demonstrated his approach with the writing of "Capital," which begins from the 'economic cell form', the commodity (1996a: 8).

We begin our immanent critique of CHAT with an account of Vygotsky's speech (1997) in which he delivered an immanent critique of behaviorism to a hall full of behaviorists. He went on to make a critique of all the currents of Russian, European and American psychology, with the declared aim of writing the *Das Kapital* of psychology (1997b: 320-330). Vygotsky's take on Marx was quite different from that of his contemporaries, mainly based on a very deep understanding of Marx's "Capital." A

[7] 'Appropriate' means to take a concept from one conceptual frame into another, one's own, making such transformations as necessary to make it meaningful within the host frame, so as to retain the essential insights and efficacy which the concept had in its original frame.

central theme of his work was therefore concerned with forming a concept of the subject matter of psychology and determining the cell or 'unit of analysis' for the science of consciousness. Vygotsky's most famous work is his study of the relation of thinking and speaking, for which he determined that the unit of analysis was the 'meaningful word'. The unit of analysis for consciousness in general was the 'joint artifact-mediated action'[8].

Alexei Leontyev, one of Vygotsky's associates, took this work in a new direction after Vygotsky's death in 1934. Leontyev's approach bears the name of 'Activity Theory'. Leontyev claimed that Vygotsky's 'unit of analysis' did not take account of the societal activity of which a person's actions are a part, and which give meaning and motivation to a person's actions. Without understanding the activity of which an action is a part, the psychological significance of actions cannot be deciphered. According to Leontyev, there are three levels of activity: operations, which are normally executed without thought, like stepping over a curb, actions, which are executed to achieve personal goals, but which via the social division of labor, add up to the socially determined, usually institutionalized, activity, which is the third level.

It will be shown that a close examination of Activity Theory demonstrates that it is fraught with difficulties. Activity depends on the notion of every activity having an 'objective motive' which corresponds to a definite need of the society, the meaning of all actions ultimately being the meeting of the needs of the whole community. This will be shown not to be a coherent concept. Further, despite efforts by Leontyev, it cannot be squared with Marx's critique of political economy. In fact, Leontyev had abandoned the methodological foundations laid by Vygotsky. Activity Theory also fails to give a coherent description of identity formation, taking as given the very thing which has to be derived. Nonetheless, Leontyev had identified genuine problems in Vygotsky's approach which still need to be addressed.

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[8] This odd expression will be dealt with at great length in due time, but briefly, an artifact is any product of human labor – a word, a tool, a domestic animal, a walking stick, and mediation means to 'go between'. So an 'artifact-mediated action' is an action in which the person(s) uses an artifact to achieve their aim. Mediation can also refer to artifacts which form the substrate for interaction between people, such as words; 'joint action' means something that people are doing together, either immediately or as implied by social context. Saying something to someone is an example of a 'joint artifact-mediated action'.

The version of Activity Theory developed by Yrjö Engeström (1987) resolves a number of the problems with Leontyev's theory, but only at the expense of a move further towards an abstract-empirical[9] approach and abandonment of Vygotsky's Marxist framework.

Michael Cole is closer to Vygotsky and Luria than Leontyev, and like Vygotsky, Cole has eschewed the use of abstractions and structural conceptions like activities meeting social needs, and aims to develop the methodology of Vygotsky critically. Cole (1997) studied the problems of cross-cultural education, including the cross-cultural psychological research that has accompanied efforts to introduce schooling to societies in which schooling was formerly unknown. This brought to light the need to incorporate the social context of actions in the unit of analysis. How to incorporate context in the unit of analysis for the study of consciousness though? 'Context' is an open-ended totality, and to explicitly include an open-ended totality in the 'cell' undermines the very idea of the Gestaltist approach.

This problem brings us to the end of the immanent critique.

The proposed solution to the problems confronting CHAT begins with an exposition of two concepts: 'project' and 'collaboration'.

A project is a unit of activity, but it differs fundamentally from the concept of an activity found in Leontyev. A project is something projected [L. thrown forward] by the subject, rather than an object to which the subject is drawn; the subject may be an individual or many people who are united precisely in that they are pursuing the same project. A project is an on-going collection of actions and is both the aim of the actions and the process of attaining that object. A project is a concept, but every individual has a different concept of the project, these constituting the various shades

[9] 'Abstract empirical' and 'positivist' are terms used to describe the opposite, complementary approach to science, which regards its human subjects as objects to be predicted and controlled, which fails to see that the researcher is also part of the subject matter of research, which begins with the parts and assembles the whole out of parts without any concept of the whole, which regards the methods of natural science as the model for human science, which uncritically accepts the data of observation as fact and rejects any need for critical reflection on the theory implicit in the act of observation, etc., etc.

of meaning and connotations to be found in representations of the project. People may be fully committed to the project, or they may pursue the project for external rewards provided for their participation; people may 'own' a project, or be only barely aware of its existence.

So the notion of *project* is meant to replace the notion of an object-oriented activity in Leontyev's theory, or more exactly, Leontyev's concept constitutes a limiting case of project. The ambiguity in the word 'activity' as used in CHAT can cause confusion here. Project is a unit of activity, but it is not to replace the concept of activity as it is to be found in Marx and Vygotsky, as the general substance of human social life. It only replaces the concept of *an* activity, as a *unit* of societal activity, in Leontyev's theory.

The other concept is *collaboration*. The notion of collaboration is to give definite conceptual form to the notion of 'joint' when CHAT theorists talk about 'joint activity'. Collaboration is always and essentially working together *in a common project*. Equally, projects are always essentially collaborative.

Collaboration must be distinguished from two limiting cases of collaboration, management and cooperation[10]. Collaboration, management and cooperation constitute three alternative modes of interaction in the process of a project, but collaboration should be seen as the general case, with management and cooperation functioning as limiting cases.

Collaboration is a very rich concept, including an almost infinite range of human interaction in its scope. Collaboration is able to characterize social relations because the project in which collaboration is enacted constitutes the definition of 'we' relevant to the given relationship; if people have nothing to do with each other, then there is no relationship; the numerous ways in which different parties to a project interact with each other towards the project end give us a conceptual approach to the wealth of possible human relationships.

[10] 'Cooperation' is used in a specialized sense here, as a limiting case of collaboration in which people work independently, each in control of their own action, and the joint result is the sum of their separate labors. Cooperation may be effected by a traditional division of labor or via external coordination.

Collaboration includes both cooperation and conflict, which are also two limiting cases of collaboration. True collaboration always entails an element of dispute of the concept of what is to be attained, as well as conflict over how to get there. Sometimes the conflict completely overcomes the cooperation. But working together in a project which does not entail some element of reciprocal criticism is not collaboration: it is either division of labor, for example along traditional lines of gender and age, or according to a hierarchy in the line management arrangements, or it is simple cooperation, where the participants pursue their aims independently.

Joining together these two concepts – project and collaboration – which are in any case mutually constitutive, we have project collaboration as a new unit of analysis for activity. Projects are aggregates of artifact-mediated actions, which are always directed or mediated by relations to other people. Actions are always made up of operations, with operations and actions transforming mutually one into another. Nothing is changed here; only the conception of the whole, that is, the *context of action*.

So what this means, is that we conceive of the context as a cloth in which innumerable projects are woven together. This includes the project of the nation, of which there are multitude of different conceptions, the project of a particular family, science, art, sport, etc., etc., all of which are to be conceived of as projects, all of which are contested in one degree or another through differing concepts of the project. This is the context of psychological development.

A project is concrete in that it includes just those individuals, artifacts and material conditions of which it is composed in actuality, not any which it ought to include; only those people and artifacts which are empirically given. If we take collaborative project as the unit of activity, then activity is an *interdisciplinary concept*, because it is equally available for psychology as an orienting, motivating and contextual concept in psychology, and for sociology as a concept which reflects the motivational, cognitive and social aspects of collaboration in societal institutions, processes and movements.

Project collaboration also provides a sound foundation for ethics. A project is after all what gives meaning in an individual's life and what unites them with or opposes them to others. The idea of external rewards,

that is, pursuit of a project solely for fame or monetary rewards for example, typifies a core problem in modernity.

The idea of collaboration in a project allows us to concretize the idea of "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." While this Biblical maxim does express the need for empathy, familiarity with cultural difference has taught us that others may wish to be treated differently than we wish to be treated. Consequently, the Golden Rule, as it is called, is actually dogmatic; other people need to have a say in what is done to them as well! Project collaboration gives a precise definition of 'we' relevant to a specific interaction, so that with the maxim: "we decide what we should do," we can capture the ethical precepts of modern life.

Project collaboration also gives a new insight into political economy. Exchange of commodities is a limiting case of collaboration in which there is no common aim, and people simply instrumentalize each other to further their own projects. Division of labor mediated by commodity exchange is what constitutes the economy. But the economy rests on other spheres of life activity, such as family where people do collaborate and rather than exchange products with one another according to contractual obligations, and within firms, where the norm is management and direction, not collaboration.

This is the great strength of the notion of collaboration: it is both an ethical norm and a scientific concept of social life. The tension between concept and norm, between is and ought, description and proscription, is what makes project collaboration so rich.

Project collaboration is how people form an identity and how they become agents in the world. It is the link between an individual's private existence and their social life. It gives us insight into the fabric of modern life, when traditional collectivities no longer capture the complexity of our world, and social theory tends to reflect the isolation and powerlessness of individuals confronted by the mighty institutions and social forces of the global economy.

Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory, using project collaboration as a unit of activity, give us the opportunity for an emancipatory science basically because it is subject-centered; it recognizes and studies the

essential autonomy[11] and integrity of the subject, respects it in its practical investigations and regards the subject as a collaborator, not an object.

[11] 'Essential' is a word frequently used in this work; in the sense derived from Hegel, as the process of 'peeling the layers off an onion', getting below the surface of something to formulate a more stable concept of the thing. By 'autonomy' is meant 'self-determination' or 'sovereignty', consistent with the interdependence of all subjects as equal members of a community. Collaboration is mediated autonomy.

2. Soviet Cultural Psychology (1924-)

"The greatest discoveries are made
not by individuals but by their age."
(Goethe 1823)

It is Petrograd, 6 January 1924 at the Second All-Russian Congress of Psychoneurology. At the First Congress a year earlier, Konstantin Kornilov had deposed Georgy Chelpanov, the father of Russian psychology and Director of the Institute of Psychology, and dedicated the Institute to the creation of a Marxist psychology. Everyone looked to one or another variety of behaviorism in which the concept of 'consciousness' was understood variously as unscientific, illusory or an epiphenomena of behavior and/or brain physiology. All the sciences were in the midst of such cultural revolutions. There would have to be a revolution in art, in geology, in agriculture, in every domain of social life, including psychology. Russia already boasted world-renowned figures like Bekhterev and Pavlov, so the dominance of behaviorism[12] seemed assured.

To the rostrum steps an unknown young teacher from Gomel, Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky speaks with fluency and confidence, at length and without the benefit of notes (Cole, Luria & Levitin 2006; Kozulin 1990; Levitin 1982). He uses the language of Pavlov's and Bekhterev's Reflexology, but calls for consciousness to be given its place as the key concept of psychology (Vygotsky 1997). If everything was a reflex, then consciousness was not a reflex but the organization of reflexes, a process with a social origin, and which the subject themself can control. He advocated such a broadening of the subject matter of psychology which would make untenable the current practices of the science of psychology.

To many listening, this must have sounded very much like the restoration of Chelpanov's dualistic and idealistic psychology, but this was a young man "who would have to be listened to" (Luria 2006: 38). Vygotsky was invited to Moscow to take up a position at the Institute and soon formed a research group (the 'troika') with two of Kornilov's young

[12] I use "behaviorism" in a generic sense which will be further elaborated later.

assistants, Alexander Luria, at the time an advocate of psychoanalysis, and Alexei Leontyev.

The Russian Revolution was more than a regime change; every area of social and intellectual life in Russia was subject to protracted, traumatic and repeated transformation. It certainly transformed Vygotsky's life.

Lev Vygotsky was raised in Gomel, within the Jewish Pale in Tsarist Russia. He was a brilliant student, reading avidly in history and philosophy, running a reading group amongst his school friends around issues of Jewish history (Levitin 1982). His reading evidently included the writings of the founder of Russian Marxism, Georgi Plekhanov. Being a Jew, even as a 'gold medal' student, he was lucky to be admitted to university in Moscow to study law in 1913.

During his time in Moscow, Vygotsky was involved in ideological struggles within the domain of aesthetics and literary criticism, in which Symbolists and Formalists did battle with Futurists and Constructivists. Deeply engaged with problems of hermeneutics and semiotics as they were being fought out on the European stage, this was a formative period in his intellectual life, and culminated in the writing of "The Psychology of Art."

Graduating in 1917, and after taking a course in psychology and philosophy at the "People's University" of Shanyavsky, he returned to Gomel to teach literature and psychology at the school there. He also conducted classes at a drama studio and delivered lectures on literature and science. Moved by the plight of orphans and disabled children in the wake of the Revolution, he organized a psychology laboratory at the Gomel Teacher's College where he participated in the preparation of a new generation of teachers, and wrote a manual for teachers called "Educational Psychology," a somewhat eclectic overview of the main issues and approaches to the subject at the time.

Alexander Luria was born in Kazan in 1902. His father, Roman Albertovich, wanted him to become a doctor, but Alexander Romanovich preferred the law. Luria's family had compensated for the restrictions placed on Jews in Russia by frequent travel to Germany where they were able to obtain an education and imbibe European culture. German was the second language in the Luria household, and Luria retained a lifelong

interest in the 'Romantic Science' of Goethe, von Humboldt and others. To appease his father, Luria also continued medical training.

With the victory of the October Revolution, the professors were at an absolute loss as to how to teach their subjects as lectures were overtaken by chaotic student debates. University life came to a rapid end when Kazan found itself the site of the beginning of the Wars of Intervention, but in the meantime Luria's relentless enquiry into the human condition had led him to Freud. Luria started a psychoanalytic society, attempted some experimental work to test psychoanalytic ideas and in the midst of utter turmoil managed to publish a small book on his ideas using recycled paper. The experimental approach reported in this work caught the attention of Kornilov and Luria was invited to join the staff at the Institute in Moscow.

Alexei Leontyev, the youngest of the group, had only just graduated from Moscow University in 1924 and, attracted by the project of building a Marxist psychology, and displaying a gift for experimental work, had taken up a graduate position under Kornilov.

Among the three of them, only Vygotsky had prior knowledge of Marxism (Cole, Luria & Levitin 2006). But Vygotsky's Marxism was radically different from that of the people around him. Rather than inserting scraps taken from Marxist texts into existing theories of behavior, taken for granted as the materialist line in psychology, Vygotsky drew from Marxism a critical humanist ethos and a methodology, principally centered on his reading of "Capital." So Vygotsky began by asking: what was the subject matter of psychology.

Coming from the highly politicized pre-Revolutionary struggles over aesthetics, and the real problems of education in a country shattered by war and revolution, Vygotsky wanted a psychology which was up to its subject matter: the actual life of human beings, not just laboratory reactions. With early training in hermeneutics and literary criticism, rather than rat-racing and dog training, he approached the various currents of psychology he found around him in Russia *critically*[13], somewhat as he would have

[13] By 'critical' and 'critique', is meant, in addition to healthy skepticism, a willingness to test ideas on their own merits, rather than simply countering one idea with another, usually with the aim of learning what an idea has to offer, or at least disclosing its real foundations, rather than with discounting it.

approached a literary genre, the same way Marx approached political economy. And while everything connected with the old regime and the surrounding capitalist world was anathema, Vygotsky was *appropriating* European culture. People didn't know where to put him, he belonged to no-one's camp and defied categorization.

For all the problems, the old society had been shattered. The Soviet Union in the early 1920s was a cauldron of creativity. Physical and intellectual conditions were desperately inadequate. The entire resources of the country which had not been destroyed were mobilized in an ideological atmosphere which was highly charged. But nothing was impossible or out of bounds. History was being made everywhere. Thanks to the Revolution, these three young men found themselves charged with the task of revolutionizing the science of psychology.

Early in 1925, the troika expanded their group with the addition of 5 graduate students, 4 of them women, and began a critical review of the dominant trends in psychology around them in Moscow. Vygotsky took steps to set up an Institute for Defectology, i.e., for the treatment and education of disabled children of all kinds, in his home town of Gomel, and along with Luria became a student of medicine, side-by-side with teaching and research. This was interrupted however by a serious bout of tuberculosis, the illness which dogged Vygotsky's life and would ultimate take it from him.

On his return to activity, the group began to work their way through all the theories of psychology which were contesting the field on the world stage: Freud, Piaget, James, ... critiquing them and appropriating the insights each had to offer. The group worked collaboratively, discussing the problems in a group while one of them took notes. To this day it is not possible to be certain about the authorship of much of what the group produced in this period. Even graduate students were invited to experiment on their own initiative and sometimes made key breakthroughs.

They were making a name for themselves and earning respect, but they were never at any point a contender to be the leading current in Soviet psychology. And political conditions were changing. When Leontyev published a book in 1929, the publisher inserted a preface denouncing Leontyev's 'errors', and in 1930 he was forced to leave his post at the Krupskaya Academy of Communist Education. In 1931, the regime restored

the pre-revolutionary curriculum in schools and new ideas were not welcome. With Lydia Bozhovich and others, Leontyev set up the Neurosurgical Institute in Kharkov where they might be able to work more freely.

In the meantime, Vygotsky worked prodigiously, as if in a hurry (Davydov & Radzikovskii 1985: 39), and in the early 1930s gave lectures (transcribed by his students) and wrote the manuscripts[14] in which his scientific legacy, the foundations of cultural psychology, were set down, focusing mainly on child development, learning, 'defectology' and questions of methodology. The Institute for Defectology in Gomel provided a refuge for Vygotsky's students to continue their work as the political pressure continued to mount.

In 1931, with Vygotsky's help, Luria carried out an expedition to Uzbekistan to investigate the changes taking place in the thinking of people who were being drawn directly from a feudal lifestyle into a modern planned economy, a unique opportunity to observe cultural psychology in motion. They found that even limited schooling or experience with collective farming brought about dramatic changes in people's thinking. There were some serious flaws in Luria's methodology and his interpretation of the results which we will return to later, but he came under a public attack which missed the point entirely. The data was interpreted as in itself insulting to Soviet nationalities and Luria came under severe political fire as a result. The affair made cross cultural research in the Soviet Union politically impossible and cultural differences in how people learn and understand things could not be even discussed thereafter.

Vygotsky was overtaken by another bout of tuberculosis and died in 1934. During the following 12 months, some of Vygotsky's works were published, but political conditions rapidly deteriorated as the Moscow Trials got under way. Stalin had almost the entire leadership of the Soviet state, the Army and the Party denounced as saboteurs and shot (Sedov 1980; Khrushchev 1956). Terror penetrated every workplace, every family.

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[14] The main works are "Thinking and Speech," "The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology," "Lectures on Psychology," "History of the Development of the Higher Mental Functions," "Problems of Child Psychology," "Tool and Sign in the Development of the Child," and "The Teaching about Emotions."

First was the Pedology[15] affair, in which Vygotsky's ideas on the education of disabled children were denounced, and the works of the whole school were banned. Thereafter, there would be no psychological testing of children in Soviet schools and with a misconceived egalitarianism, all students were to be treated 'equally' in the Soviet education system, regardless of intellectual or sensory disability or cultural difference.

In 1936, S. G. Levit, Director of the Institute in Kharkov, was denounced and shot (Luria 2006: 215). Luria was lucky to slip away and departed the field of psychology, adopting medicine for his own health. Life was hardly risk free as a Jewish doctor in Stalin's USSR, but Luria concentrated his attention on the treatment of brain damage, and very soon, the Nazi invasion brought plenty of opportunity to contribute to the war effort while doing important research for which he would become world famous, even whilst remaining wisely unknown in his own country.

By end of the war, Vygotsky's legacy had been virtually eradicated. Ironically, in a 'socialist' country, scientific knowledge has been passed down along family lines and the children and grandchildren of the founding troika have been key vehicles for the preservation of their original ideas (for example, Lena Kravtsova, Vygotsky's grand-daughter and Dmitry Leontyev, AN Leontyev's grandson). The Institute of Defectology which Vygotsky founded in Gomel, provided a sanctuary where his students were able to continue his work. But in the social and political conditions created by the purges, these researchers no longer believed in Vygotsky's ideas, but as Alex Kozulin (1990) correctly points out, because they took his works as their founding documents, even though they criticized them, they nevertheless constituted a current of Vygotsky's ideas.

A brief thaw after World War Two which saw Luria made a full professor at Moscow University did not last long. Pavlovian 'psychology' was enforced as the compulsory norm along with Lysenkoite 'genetics' and there were widespread purges of scientists. Luria was dismissed from his position in an anti-Semitic campaign against 'cosmopolitanism'.

[15] Pedology was the study of physical and mental development of children, but it entailed a lot of testing, comparison and categorization.

After Stalin's death in 1953, things did loosen up somewhat. After 20 years of non-existence, Psychology got its own learned journal. In 1957, Luria was allowed to travel and Leontyev's work began to receive public appreciation. While Leontyev made a name for himself with 'Activity Theory'[16], which will be dealt with at length later on, and Luria made a name for himself in Neuropsychology, both men credited Vygotsky as their teacher. But Vygotsky's name remained unknown outside a small circle, and Cultural Psychology existed only in the memory of a few.

But in the meantime, a new generation had appeared. Alexander Meshcheryakov (1923-1974), a student of Luria's, took over the work of Professor Ivan Sokolyansky (1889-1960), a pioneer in the education of deaf and blind children. Meshcheryakov developed methods of education of deaf-blind children and opened a school for the deaf-blind in Zagorsk in 1962. He did ground-breaking work, evidently superior to anything to be found in the West in this field. The education of children born without sight or hearing involves the practical construction of human consciousness where it did not previously exist. This practice created a basis for a renewal of Vygotsky's legacy. Crucial to making this connection was a group of philosophers who recognized the significance of Meshcheryakov's work. First among them Evald Ilyenkov (1924-1979), taking up Vygotsky's ideas at an new level, based on a comprehensive critique of European philosophy and an original analysis of the writings of Karl Marx.

During the late 1970s, Leontyev's work began to come under some criticism, criticism generally basing itself on the work Vygotsky, of which Leontyev himself had been seen as the foremost authority. But more of this later. In the late 1970s, the leadership of an entire generation of Soviet psychologists died: Meshcheryakov died in 1974 Luria in 1977, Leontyev and Ilyenkov in 1979, Ilyenkov by his own hand.

Creating a Marxist cultural psychology in the post-Stalin USSR faced an almost insurmountable difficulty: Marx had plenty say about the social

[16] Differences between Activity Theory and Cultural Psychology should not be exaggerated; both form part of the same broad current of research and share common theoretical and historical foundations. Together they are referred to as CHAT (See Cole & Gajdmaschenko 2007: 207).

and psychological problems arising from bourgeois society[17], but the Soviet Union was supposed to be free of all such 'contradictions'. Even those who were wise enough to know that this was nonsense had no opportunity to theorize the pathology of Soviet life, being quite unable to talk or write about such things with other people. Science cannot be built without discussion. This meant that there was a firm line beyond which Soviet psychology could not go without descending into hypocrisy. Even a brilliant Soviet psychologist like Vasily Davydov (1930-1998) presaged his analysis of child development on 'really existing socialism' being a norm, against which the pathologies of other societies were measured (Kozulin 1990). Perhaps Ilyenkov's solution was the only way out?

But in those precious two decades between a thaw in the suppression of scientific enquiry and the death of the Vygotsky's continuers, contact was made with the West.

In 1962, a young psychology graduate on a student exchange from Indiana University, Mike Cole, arrived in Moscow for a year of research into 'reflexes' under Luria (APA 2006). Cole's aim in coming to Moscow was to have an overseas adventure and meet the formal requirements to enroll for a PhD, which included learning a second language. He frankly admitted that the significance of Vygotsky's work which Luria was urging on him utterly escaped his understanding. Nonetheless, Cole took on the task of translating and publishing Luria and Vygotsky's work in the U.S.

Meanwhile, Cole was engaged to investigate the reasons for the problems the education system in Liberia was having in mathematics teaching (Cole 1996). His search for a solution to this problem led him into the problems of cultural difference, problems which Luria had been unable to resolve since the attacks on his work in Uzbekistan 30 years earlier, and suddenly what Vygotsky and Luria had been talking about started to make sense.

Through Cole's collaboration with Soviet academics, his own research and teaching, and the steady flow of English translations, a current of

[17] The term 'bourgeois society' is intended in the technical sense of its meaning in Marx, that is, all those relations in which individuals confront one another as free and independent agents, that is, in the market, and aside from familial, political or traditional obligations in general.

Cultural Psychology grew up in the US. This was not at all strange, as Dewey and Mead's Progressive Movement which had been the major impetus for progressive educational theory in America, had also been present at the founding of the Vygotsky School as a result of a visit by Dewey to Moscow in 1928 (Prawat 2001). There were in fact considerable synergies between these two currents which continue to interact with one another in the U.S. today. Other Americans, such as James Wertsch also visited Russia and contributed to the work of interpreting, translating and exporting this conquest of the Soviet Union. Many, many others like Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, Jaan Valsiner, René van der Veer, Dot Robbins played important roles.

Finland has always enjoyed a close relationship with Russia, and Yjrö Engeström's group in Helsinki has been probably the main vehicle for the transmission of Activity Theory to the West. There has also been an outflow of Russian academics, schooled in Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory – now known as "Cultural Historical Activity Theory" (CHAT) – emphasizing the *whole* legacy of Soviet psychology, not just one of its streams.

The impossibility of critically examining the really existing modes of domination did not apply in the West. The civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, and other social movements dedicated to exposing various forms of oppression and social pathology had long since broken through the walls of the academy, and activists were already searching for a psychological approach that honored the role of culture in psychology. In the West it was possible to confront the real social basis of psychology, including problems of social subordination, cultural difference, inequality, fragmentation and social change.

There is a great irony here.

A Marxist theory of the mind was born in the cauldron of the 1917 Russian Revolution, but was suppressed precisely because of its revolutionary Marxist character, despite the fact that Marxism was the official state doctrine. After 30 years in hiding, it escaped only to take root in the bastion of capitalism and anti-communism, where in order to survive it had to keep its Marxism under wraps. But in a double irony, the crisis which befell Marxism in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union left

CHAT largely unscathed, because of the non-political shape it had adopted for the purposes of survival in the past.

So CHAT is now a worldwide current in the human sciences, largely overlooked by anyone going in search of Marxism, because it is located only in the professional lives of teachers and social workers, linguists and psychologists. Although most of Vygotsky's present-day followers are politically on the Left, they are diverse both in academic interests and intellectual training, and do not constitute a current of Marxism as such.

This is the story of Cultural Psychology, initiated by Lev Vygotsky.

The aim of the present work is to appropriate from the work of the Cultural Psychologists and Activity Theorists, some very important insights they have for the purpose of developing a new approach in the broader political and sociological domain. A critical appropriation is necessary because some of those insights which inspired the work at the beginning have been lost. So before we can begin a critical review of the theoretical legacy of Vygotsky, a digression is necessary, back into the roots of his approach in the nineteenth century.

The roots of Cultural Psychology lie in the Romantic Science of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, taken up in the philosophy of Hegel, appropriated and transformed by Karl Marx. The thread linking these figures with Vygotsky has lain largely unexamined for a long time, but the time is now very ripe for a revival of Goethe's struggle against the analytical, abstract-empirical science which has wreaked such havoc over the past century.

And it is to Goethe's science that we must first turn.

3. Goethe's Romantic Science

"What is the universal?
The single case.
"What is the particular?
Millions of cases."

In July 1794, both Goethe (1996) and Schiller had been attending a lecture at the Jena scientific society and as the audience filed out, the two poets found themselves embarrassed to be left facing one another. Embarrassed, because Goethe felt that since Schiller had "rapturously embraced" the Kantian philosophy, he had been betraying his art, approaching Nature subjectively, "from the standpoint of so many human traits," rather than "actively observing Nature's own manner of creating," and much to the frustration of their mutual friends, Goethe had been refusing to speak to Schiller.

Conversation could not be avoided however, and when Schiller remarked that the current "mangled methods of regarding Nature would only repel the lay person who might otherwise take an interest," Goethe readily agreed, adding that "there might be another way of considering Nature, not piecemeal and isolated but actively at work, as she proceeds from the whole to the parts"... And so the pair conversed as they made their way home together. By the time they reached Schiller's house, Goethe found himself expounding his observations of the metamorphoses of plants, and to illustrate a point made a quick sketch on a piece of paper. "But," Schiller retorted, "this is not an empirical experience, it is an idea," drawing upon Kant's distinction between the faculties of sensation and reason. Goethe fought hard to suppress his rising anger, and politely remarked: "How splendid that I have ideas without knowing it, and can see them before my very eyes." Thus Goethe drew Schiller's attention to the unsolved problem in the Kantian philosophy of the objective sources of conceptual knowledge. Then ensued a decade of close friendship and collaboration until Schiller's death in 1805.

Though 25 years his junior, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was already an acclaimed poet before Immanuel Kant first gained his reputation as a philosopher with his "Critique of Pure Reason" in 1787. And Goethe would

continue to nourish the education of German speaking people from Marx and Wundt to Freud and Jung. When Napoleon occupied Jena in 1807, the only German he wanted to meet was Goethe (Pinkard 2000). It is unquestionable that the importance of Goethe in European culture has been greatly underestimated in the Anglophone world.[18]

More than that, Goethe's views on science and nature are only now beginning to come into their own after two centuries of eclipse, a fate to which Goethe himself was fully resigned. Goethe was not just a poet who dabbled in science. The study of Nature was for him a practice, 'practice' in the sense with which a Buddhist might utter that word, to be pursued diligently throughout his life. Goethe died about the time Lyell published his "Principles of Geology" and a quarter of century before Darwin published "Origin of Species" and Mendeleyev the periodic table of elements. These were the discoveries which really demonstrated the interconnectedness of Nature as a process of development and change. Science in Goethe's day was engaged mainly in the collection and organization of data in botany, chemistry, zoology, etc., alongside the continuation of the Newtonian project, of rendering all the phenomena of Nature as the mathematical expression of metaphysical 'forces' and 'vibrations'.

It was this latter tendency to which Goethe was most hostile. It was not that he was opposed to the use of mathematics in science; he admired the precision of mathematics, studied it and used it. But his vision for science he compared to the multiplicity of religious sects to be found in New York, where the many churches tolerated each other, each allowing that there was more than one way to the truth. But he saw that the kind of science which was organizing behind the banner of Newtonianism would establish itself as the one true model of natural science and would ultimately eradicate other modes of understanding and relating to Nature. Much of what Goethe had to say 200 years ago, has become commonplace criticism of the practice of natural science in recent decades.

There were a number of reasons for Goethe's hostility to what I will call 'positivism', so as to avoid misuse of the name of Isaac Newton.

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[18] Not in Russia though; Vygotsky, for example, directly cites Goethe 35 times in his Collected Works, compared with 26 citations of Hegel, all indirectly.

Firstly, and above all, the description and supposed explanation of a phenomenon in terms of some imperceptible force or 'vibration' is a form of metaphysics in that it makes something beyond perception into the cause and explanation for what is given in experience.[19] The same criticism could be made of Kant's split between thing-in-itself and appearance. Goethe wanted to obliterate this gulf between idea and image because, as he saw it, understanding of Nature came from the study of Nature itself, not by looking for supernatural or metaphysical forces.

Secondly, mathematical representations of natural processes make the study of Nature the domain of a specialist elite. Goethe saw natural science as a public and collaborative enterprise, from which those who participated enjoyed a spiritual benefit. It was therefore important to use means of representation of nature which were accessible to the lay person and made sense to those without specialized training.

Thirdly, experience of Nature was, in Goethe's view, primarily about qualities, and quantities were obtained only by abstracting from these qualities. While there was a place for quantitative science, first place should be given to qualitative science. Goethe was concerned with the intensity and quality of our experience of Nature, therefore science required, not only training of the intellect and in the use of instruments, but training of the senses and the imagination.

Over and above his literary work, Goethe invented the science of morphology, and studied all the leading sciences of the time: mineralogy, geology, botany, comparative anatomy, osteology, psychophysiology, zoology, meteorology, and was at the cutting edge of the science of his day.

Goethe's critique of positivistic science was extremely rich, but there are a few aspects which are germane to our theme, and should be mentioned here.

According to Goethe, natural science was a *practice* rather than a collection of truths. He saw science as formulating the metaphysical

[19] For example, to say that an object falls with the acceleration *g* due to the force of gravity actually explains nothing, moving the explanation from the plane of observation to an invisible and hypothetical force. This criticism was ultimately vindicated by Einstein's General Theory of Relativity.

rationalization of a culture's idea of reality and truth. So science develops historically and he went so far as to say that the history of science is the science itself, demonstrating this in his "History of the Theory of Colors." "The greatest discoveries are made not by individuals but by the age," because the claims and methods of science are an integral part of the whole culture. Consequently, he regarded all claims about Nature as partial, relative and historical.

Goethe advocated above all the study of development as the path to knowledge of a thing. He was the inventor of the *Bildungsroman*[20] – a novel which thematizes the development of the central character, and he lived his own *Bildungsroman*, continuously and publicly transforming himself, a living demonstration of the struggle to lead a truly human life. This included, not just having an active interest in natural science, but seeking to maintain natural science as a practice in which everyone could participate.

Goethe argued against the conception of gaining control over Nature, promoting instead humility and a cooperative relationship with Nature. At the same time as fighting a battle against positivist science, he was also an opponent of religious superstition. Not a militant God-denier like Holbach or Maréchal, he claimed: "As a poet and artist I am a polytheist; in my nature studies I am a pantheist ... When I require one god for my personality, as an ethical being, this is provided for also."

But there are two of Goethe's ideas in particular on which we must focus, both of which bear on his struggle to overcome the disjunction between phenomenon and idea: these are his notion of the *Urphänomen*[21] or

[20] *Bildung* is a uniquely German word meaning the process of acquiring and maintaining the culture of one's times. Originally, *Bildung* referred only to the shaping, forming, cultivating of objects, but took on the meaning of 'education' in the 18th century, and it became a central concept for Herder, Hegel, Schiller and &c. So *Bildungsroman* = personal development story.

[21] *Urphänomen* is unique to Goethe; the prefix '*ur*' means primitive, original or earliest, and is usually translated as 'archetypal'. *Phänomen* means phenomenon, that is appearance or apparent thing. It is represented as 'abstract notion' in Hegel's *Logic*, and exemplified by the 'commodity relation' in Marx's critique of political economy.

archetypal phenomenon, and his insistence on proceeding from the whole to the part, captured in the word *Gestalt*.[22]

How was an understanding of Nature possible? How could Nature be intelligible? Goethe held that even though human beings were a part of Nature, the senses needed to be trained, and we had to learn to be as observant and unprejudiced as possible.

> "If the eye were not sun-like,
> How could we ever see light?
> And if God's own power did not dwell within us,
> How could we doubt in things divine?"
> – Goethe (Heller 1975)

Although hypotheses could be used provisionally as a means of sharpening observation, scientific perception of an object obliged the observer to hold off so far as possible from making hypotheses, whilst expanding so far as possible the field of observation. He was more than aware that 'every observation is already a theory' (Goethe 1996), and that in more than one sense: people saw what interested them and what they expected to see, but as he had remarked to Schiller, theories could also be objects of perception. The close connection between sensuous perception and understanding was crucial to Goethe.

He vigorously opposed the method of abstract induction[23], the crude empiricism which substitutes for understanding, the simple registration of patterns in the data. But he was also vigorously opposed to the hypothetico-deductive method in which a hypothesis would be made and then 'proved' by means of selective experiments, which, he claimed, simply reproduced in contrived circumstances what was already observed: "Nature does not tell the truth under torture," he said.

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[22] *Gestalt* is a very common word in German, usually translated as 'form' or 'shape' or 'formation', but in this context roughly means 'figure' as in the expression 'What a fine figure of a man!' The word is used in other languages in the sense of Gestalt Psychology, meaning 'an integral whole'.

[23] Abstract induction would be, for example, observing a correlation between parental social status and performance in IQ tests and drawing the conclusion that intelligence is hereditary.

Nature had to be understood in its own terms, as experienced by human beings. Ideas – principles, laws, and so on – are not something behind appearances, but are contained within appearances.

Goethe held that the whole was present in every part, and every part was connected to the whole. The whole must therefore be perceptible in every part. Nature was not assembled from parts, but began as a whole, and from the whole came parts, and the same principle applied to perception: "In an organic being, first the form as a whole strikes us, then its parts and their shape and combination."

Thus Goethe came to the idea of the *Urphänomen* or Archetypal Phenomenon.

Rather than the explanatory principle being some imperceptible force or energy, causing phenomena from behind, so to speak, the *Urphänomen* was itself a phenomenon, but it had to be the most easily understood, simplest, or archetypal form of the thing, a form which allowed the nature of the whole phenomenon to be understood. Despite a misunderstanding encouraged by Darwin himself, the *Urphänomen* is not to be confused with the first in time, the beginning of a Darwinian line; the *Urphänomen* is conceptually rather than genetically primitive. Every particular phenomenon is a manifestation of this one universal phenomenon, so the *Urphänomen* is a concrete unity, not a common ancestor.

And nor is the *Urphänomen* to be understood as a common empirical attribute shared by all manifestations, that is, as an abstract general category[24]. There may in fact be no shared attributes at all, for understanding goes to the essence of the thing, not its contingent attributes.

Goethe had observed that the progress of science made its great steps forward thanks to that rare perceptive insight, or *aperçu*, which somehow gets to the essence of a complex phenomenon. Such an insight was possible only on the basis of prolonged observation, but was neither a deductive or inductive process, but reliant on *Anschauung*[25] or active contemplation. The

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[24] An abstract general category is a grouping of things according to a common attribute, for example, "red heads," even though the common attribute may be incidental to the things being grouped.

25 *Anschauung* is usually translated as 'intuition'. The verb *schauen* means to see or view, and entered philosophy when Meister Eckhart translated the Latin *contemplatio*, the

key to understanding natural processes through such insights was the discovery of the *Urphänomen*, which allows Nature to be understood in its own terms, and in terms of common experience, something which is easily communicated and shared with others.

It is this radically different conception of how to understand some complex process, through discovery of what is called the 'cell' of the organism, its simplest unit, is the great contribution Goethe made to science. But it was not until the 1830s, a few years after Goethe's death, that advances in microscopy allowed Schleiden and Schwann to see and identify the cell as the basic unit of a living organism, already carrying within it all the characteristics of the whole living being. Goethe brilliantly anticipated this discovery and the word 'cell' is commonly used for the unit Goethe called *Urphänomen.*

As will be already clear, Goethe was adamant that understanding had to proceed from the whole to the parts, that in doing so scientific method emulated the processes of Nature itself, as well as ordinary human perception. In this context, we should further outline how Goethe saw this notion of the whole, usually referred to in English as the *Gestalt*:

In 1817, Goethe explained *Gestalt* as follows:

> "The Germans have a word for the complex of existence presented by a physical organism: *Gestalt*. With this expression they exclude what is changeable and assume that an interrelated whole is identified, defined, and fixed in character.
>
> **"**But if we look at all these *Gestalten,* especially the organic ones, we will discover that *nothing in them is permanent*, nothing is at rest or defined – everything is in a flux of continual motion. This is why German frequently and fittingly makes use of the word *Bildung* to describe the end product *and* what is in process of production as well.
>
> "Thus in setting forth a morphology we should not speak of *Gestalt,* or if we use the term we should at least do so only in reference to

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activity of contemplating something, especially the divine. Kant however took *Anschauung* to be exclusively sensory, rejecting the possibility of intellectual intuition, so the senses were the only source of form or shape.

> **the idea, the concept**, or to an empirical element held fast for a mere moment of time" (Goethe 1996, bold added).

So, *Gestalt* is a transitory, developing form, whilst the real whole is the *whole process of development*; to know something means to comprehend its whole process of development.

But it was the idea that human beings perceived a whole *Gestalt*, independently of and prior to the parts, which was taken up. At first Kant observed in his Third Critique, that we perceive natural things as having a purpose, and it was fundamentally this conception of the *natural purpose* of organisms which allowed us to perceive forms as a whole (Kant 1914: §77). If we perceive things as related merely by mechanical cause and effect, then no concept of the whole can emerge. Much later, Christian von Ehrenfels took up the idea in a series of investigations which later gave rise to Gestalt Psychology.

Since antiquity philosophers had been troubled by the source of *conceptual* knowledge. We acquire a certain kind of knowledge through the senses, but from colors and textures and noises, how could knowledge of causes, of categories, of reason, religion and law be acquired? Kant was proposing that human beings possessed a separate, innate faculty of reason with access to the logical categories, working side by side with a faculty of intuition accessing the data of sensation (Kant 2007). Goethe was not alone in his dissatisfaction with Kant's system, but Kant had posed the problem in a manner which retains its relevance to this day.

Late 19th century scientists wanted to resolve these problems by finding the source of concepts, or *at least form*, in sensation itself. In his influential "Analysis of Sensations," published in 1897, Ernst Mach went so far as to hypothesize additional sense organs which could acquire visual or auditory *forms*, alongside 'elements' like color, pitch and so on (Mach 1914). Drawing on Goethe's idea, von Ehrenfels proposed that the whole form of a thing could be represented to consciousness, not just separately and alongside its elements, but *prior* to its elements (Anderson 1980). The Gestaltists, such as Köhler, insisted that mind itself had to have gestalt properties in order to apprehend the gestalt properties of phenomena (Herrnstein 1965), but nonetheless, for Gestalt Psychology the problem remained within the framework of an individual organism analyzing a perceptual field. In the meantime, the problem of the source of *conceptual*

knowledge had been quietly reduced to that of perception of the *form* implicit in sensuous stimuli. The idea of a whole which is prior to its parts did lay the basis for a structural conception of consciousness, however, and a theory of development marked by structural transformations. But the general idea of the mind as a gestalt structure, and problems of perception remained the only domains where Gestalt Psychology made real progress.

Goethe was far more profound. Goethe was concerned not just with form, but with how the *understanding* of phenomena was inseparably connected with the perception of form, principally because the human body is a part of Nature, we need nature and we cooperate with Nature. The conception of the *Urphänomen* offered the prospect of a scientific approach to the problem of perceiving the whole in the part, of solving the riddle of the apparently unbridgeable gulf between sensation and conception, of building a scientific understanding without metaphysics and of promoting a style of scientific enquiry which is neither dogmatic nor elitist.

It must be granted that Goethe did not fully work out this idea as an approach to science in general. But as Daniel Robinson so aptly put it:

> "[Hegel] and Beethoven were born in the same year. One set Goethe to music, the other to philosophy" (Robinson 1995: 287).

Goethe was one of the first people to systematically develop what is known as "Romantic Science," but the problems to which Romantic Science addressed itself in the early 19th century by no means disappeared as science was inundated by the triumphs of abstract empirical and positivist natural science. Goethe was personally a direct influence on Hegel, Marx, Vygotsky and Luria, each of whom frequently cited Goethe in their own work. As will be demonstrated, what were with Goethe some brilliant insights and some generalities, through Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky developed into a rounded out and powerful approach to science with gains that stand on their own merits to this day.

In particular, Goethe's claim that complex phenomena could be understood only by means of a *simple prototypical phenomenon which captures the properties of the whole process of development*, was to be taken up by Hegel, and later by Karl Marx and Lev Vygotsky, each in turn giving it a more definite worked-out formulation. And what we must do now is trace the development of this idea through the work of these writers and up to recent times.

4. The Young Hegel and what drove him

> "I saw the Emperor – this world-soul – riding out of the city on reconnaissance. It is indeed a wonderful sensation to see such an individual, who, concentrated here at a single point, astride a horse, reaches out over the world and masters it." (Hegel 13 Oct. 1806)

At the time of the storming of the Bastille on 14th July 1789, the 18-year-old Hegel was a philosophy student at Tübingen, 500 km to the east of Paris. Soon after, he entered the seminary, sharing a room with the poet Hölderlin (Pinkard 2000). His earliest known writing was an essay (Hegel 1984) on the prospects for furthering the Enlightenment by launching a 'folk religion', penned in 1793, shortly before Robespierre launched his own manufactured 'religion of the Supreme Being'. This project fell flat and shortly afterwards Robespierre was himself sent to the guillotine. Mainly under the influence of Hölderin, Hegel abandoned his youthful disdain for the Christian religion and came to see that, for all its faults, it was Christianity which had ultimately opened the way for the Enlightenment and modernity (Pinkard 2000).

On 13th October 1806, Hegel mailed off the manuscript of his first book, "The Phenomenology of Spirit," from Jena, the day before the town was occupied by his hero Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon was born the same year as Hegel, but died in 1821 shortly after the publication of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right," which culminates in the section on World History in which Hegel describes the role of world-historic heroes as "living instruments of the *Weltgeist* (world spirit)" (Hegel 1952: 218). Napoleon smashed up Germany's feudal structures and introduced the *code civile*. But the first movement *from below*, the uprisings of the French proletariat depicted in the final chapters of Victor Hugo's "Les Misérables," began only in June 1832, after Hegel's death.

The industrial revolution in Britain roughly coincides with Hegel's lifetime, 1770-1830, but the Chartist Uprisings took place in the 1830s shortly after Hegel's death. So Hegel saw the revolutionary impact of capitalism, both the enlightenment and the misery it brought with it, but never saw a movement of the oppressed, a modern social movement. Also, some of the most brilliant women of the first wave of feminism were amongst his circle of friends (such as Caroline and Dorothea Schlegel),

including his mother, Maria Magdalena, and sister, Christiane Luise, but Hegel himself remained an inveterate misogynist.

Germany did not have a state. Until 1815, Germany was part of what was still called the Holy Roman Empire, and made up of a patchwork of over 300 small principalities, some Catholic some Protestant, each with their own class structure and traditions and with no solidarity between them. England to the North, Revolutionary France to the West, Imperial Russia to the East and Austria-Hungary to the South. The armies of these great powers marched back and forth across Germany, pushing the German princes around like pawns. And none of the princes could count on their citizens to take up arms in their defence. Whilst Revolutionary France made history with its armies and its agitators, and the English built an empire with their money and their inventions, Germany remained a spectator in history. But this was the Germany of Goethe, and Schiller and Beethoven. Hegel drew the conclusion that the German Revolution would have to be made with philosophy rather than with guns and mobs.

The Holy Roman Empire was brought to a close in 1815, just as the last volume of the "Science of Logic" went to press, and at the Congress of Vienna, in the aftermath of Napoleon's eventual military defeat, the German Federation was created with just 38 components. This situation suited Hegel, and generally speaking, the most creative period of Hegel's life was during the Napoleonic Wars, 1804-1815.

As was remarked in connection with Goethe, Hegel never knew Darwin, but he was familiar with the theory of Lamarck, and he positively rejected the idea that human beings had evolved out of animals. Although he learnt of Lyell's theory of geological formation and came to accept that the continents were products of a process of formation, he insisted that there was change but no development in Nature. He could know nothing of the pre-history of humanity or the natural history of the Earth, and as surprising as it may seem for the historical thinker *par excellence*, he claimed that:

> "even *if* the earth was once in a state where it had no living things but only the chemical process, and so on, yet the moment the lightning of life strikes into matter, at once there is present a determinate, complete creature, as Minerva fully armed springs forth from the head of Jupiter.... Man has not developed himself out of the animal,

> nor the animal out of the plant; each is at a single stroke what it is"
> (Hegel quoted in Houlgate 2005).

At the time, natural science offered no rational explanation for the appearance of organic life out of inorganic life or of the origins of the human form and language. It is to Hegel's credit that he did not try to resolve the problem of what he knew little about by appealing to what he knew absolutely anything about. He relied almost entirely on the *intelligibility of human life and culture* as it could be observed: no foundation myths or appeals to a natural order beyond human experience or appeals to Eternal Reason or Laws of Nature. In that sense, Hegel's is a supremely rational philosophy.

His misogyny and racism, which led him to exclude women and the peoples of uncivilized nations from being creators of culture, derived from his blindness to the fact of the cultural origins of the human form itself.

Hegel presents a contradictory figure. As a youngster, he saw himself as a foot soldier for the Enlightenment. Witnessing what Kant, Fichte and Schelling achieved as proponents of philosophical systems, together with awareness of the unsatisfactory nature of the these systems, he was impelled to construct a philosophical system of his own.

But although the Enlightenment essentially entailed the expansion of individual freedom, unlike other proponents of the Enlightenment Hegel was *not* a liberal[26]: he did not identify freedom with the 'negative' freedom of individuals from constraint, rooted in an individualist conception of the subject.[27] It was his experience of life in Germany which led him to a deeper conception of freedom. At best, an individual only has the power of the whole community of which they are a part. A citizen of a nation like Germany, which had no state, had no freedom.

So in order to understand Hegel we have to let go of the conception of the state as a power over society or as a limitation on individual freedom,

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[26] 'Liberal' is used throughout in the philosophical sense as the advocacy of the freedom of individuals from all kinds of restraint, economic or social, not the peculiarly American sense of the word.

[27] Using the word 'subject' in a consistent fashion in a Hegelian context presents formidable difficulties. In some context, 'subject' can be anything from an individual person to a subject of debate.

and see the sense in which the state is *also* the instrument of its citizens and an expression of their freedom. Hegel never knew of the idea of the state as an instrument of *class rule*, and he conducted a life-long struggle against all those theories which promoted a liberal, or 'negative' idea of freedom. For him, the state occupied the space that it occupied for the people of Vietnam and other nations which emerged from the national liberation struggles of the post-World War Two period: that of a *social movement*. But what he describes in his "Philosophy of Right," for example, is not a social movement, but a state, complete with hereditary monarchy and a public service. At the deepest level, though, his philosophy is that of a social movement, of people who have organized themselves around a common cause or 'project'.

Hegel wasn't simply a communitarian; he was deeply concerned with individuality and how the self-determination of an individual person could be realized in and through the appropriation of the culture of the community as a whole. His central concern was what later came to be called 'social solidarity', but only that kind of social solidarity which promotes the flourishing of individuality.

The real limitation on Hegel's conception of a social movement is that, as remarked above, he never saw nor ever conceived of a social movement of the oppressed. He saw no reason to believe that the 'rabble' could liberate themselves. Modern theories of self-emancipation are all presaged on the formation of collective self-consciousness and the state is the expression of collective self-consciousness *par excellence*. Hegel well understood that the agency of individual human beings can only be constituted in and through social movements and the institutions such movements create. He was deeply concerned with the role of individuals in bringing about social change, but the conception of the individual which he developed was a radical break from those of his immediate predecessors.

It was the concern to find a route to modernity for Germany which led Hegel to an investigation of the source of the differing spirit of peoples and the fate of each nation (1948, 1979). Hegel did not invent this study. Before him Immanuel Kant (Eze 1997) and Johann Gottfried Herder (2004), who coined the terms *Volksgeist* and *Zeitgeist*, had made investigations into the problem. By studying the history of a people, Hegel hoped to discover why

one people would make revolution or build an empire, while another people would wallow in disunity or slavery.

These ideas became important in the development of cultural anthropology and helped shape the ideas of people like Franz Boas (Stocking 1966), but modern nations are not homogeneous entities in that sense, and Hegel, whose interest was in the fostering of both social solidarity and modern individuality, understood this. At best the concept could be useful in characterization of an ancient city state or of an isolated community perhaps, or to explain particular *aspects* of the character of different nations. Nonetheless, the problem of *Volksgeist* asks a legitimate question, and it was a *first step* towards understanding the nature of modern social life and its relation to the psychology of the individuals who constitute a society, and a radical break from trying to understand the problem of freedom through foundation myths, social contracts or the faculty of Reason.

Hegel's early work, such as the 1802-03 draft, "System of Ethical Life" (1979), is particularly important because in it we see Hegel working out his conception of spirit in terms of practical daily life (1979: 102ff). Taking the lead of his predecessors Kant and Fichte, and Descartes for that matter, he aimed for a philosophy without presuppositions, but instead of turning inwards to the contemplation of 'clear ideas', or appealing to some kind of mathematical reasoning, he took as his given datum, ordinary, living people – reproducing themselves, their literature and their society and thinking about philosophy – albeit in mystified form.

Now it is true that this kind of consideration is absent from his later works, such as the Logic, which moves entirely in the domain of abstract thought forms, but there is no reason to suppose that he abandoned this view of the construction of consciousness through labor. Philosophy in general and logic in particular has to stand on its own ground and cannot appeal to other domains for its proof. But what Hegel's early investigations led him to was not a social psychology, to do with how people *acquire* an idea, but a radically new conception of what an idea *is*.

Somewhere between the writing of "System of Ethical Life" in 1803 and the next version of his system sometimes called the "Philosophy of Spirit" (1979), dated 1805-06, an important change took place in his idea of Spirit. Up till this time he had been interested in the spirit of this or that times or the spirit of this or that people, and looked for its origins in the

day-to-day activity of people. But, following the pressure which comes to bear on every builder of a philosophical system, he began to talk about 'spirit' as such. So instead of having the spirit of this or that people rooted in an historical form of life, forged through the experience of victory or defeat at war, through the raising of crops or trading of goods, we had *Spirit*. Spirit *manifested itself* in the activity of a people, grew as that people fulfilled their destiny, and then moved on to another people. Spirit came and went, entered into the affairs of a nation, and would leave it again. So with little change in the conception of spirit itself, spirit became something that pre-existed the form of life in which it was instantiated. And it was one and the same spirit which found a different form at a different time in a different people.

This move facilitated the construction of a systematic philosophy, but it moved his philosophy in a theistic direction. At the same time, it is a move which is rather easily *reversible*, for our secular times. You don't need to reify the concept of Spirit, as if it were something which could pre-exist human life, and only *manifest* itself in human activity. We can use Hegel's concept of spirit as something which is constituted by rather than manifested in human activity; we can refuse to make that move which Hegel made around 1803-4, and still appropriate what Hegel has to offer in his mature works.

The other implication of this conception of Spirit was that it really emphasized the unitary character of spirit; everyone shares in the culture of a people, its language, its forms of production and distribution, its institutions and its religion. It is this shared character of spirit as Hegel conceived it, which comes to the fore, rather than a concern with distinctions and difference. But the point is this: should we proceed like Fichte, beginning from the individual, and from the individual deduce the nature of the society, or should we on the contrary, begin with a conception of the society, a conception which rests on people's collaborative activity, and from there deduce the nature of the individual persons (Hegel 1955). Surely Hegel was correct. We all share, even if unequally, in the language, the science, the art, the productive forces, the social and political institutions which are produced in our society; we constitute and modify them in our own activity. We all have our own unique take on that culture, but it remains a cooperative and shared, cultural life. Then the same

approach can bring a magnifying glass to bear on the consciousness of different classes, subcultures or natural groupings within society. But at whatever level, we have to be able to deal with individuals constituting a shared form of life and constituting themselves as a part of that.

There is a basis for associating Hegel with notions of 'progress' and a 'cultural evolution' in which all the people of the world are subsumed into a single narrative. But the point is that Hegel worked out an approach which can illuminate the individual psyche and its structure at one and the same time as studying the dynamics of national institutions, politics, movements in art and philosophy and so on.

This brings us to the essential problem here, the 'problem of the individual' (Blunden 2007). Nowadays we commonly hear people talking about 'two levels', the level of the individual and the level of society, institutions and social forces. On one hand, we have individuals with ideas and consciousness and personalities of their own, able to decide what they do from one moment to the next, and on the other hand, we have impersonal social forces, such as the economy governed by the invisible hand of the market, large institutions run by an elite, public opinion and social and historical forces and laws. Sociology is located in one department of the university, whilst psychology is in another, and the conceptual apparatus we need to understand human beings is split into at least two incommensurable sets of concepts. But it is the same individual human beings when they act as members of an institution, or as an economic agent making market decisions, or when acting out social roles such as their family or community responsibilities.

Hegel's concept of spirit gives us a powerful set of concepts, all interconnected with one another in his Logic, to deal with this problem: "Spirit is the nature of human beings *en masse*," said Hegel (1952), and the study of spirit is nothing other than the study of the activity of human beings en masse. The only qualification is that once a people stops questioning its institutions and beliefs, which is a pathological condition, then Spirit leaves them, and the nation falls into stagnation and backward-ness.

So "spirit is human beings en masse." But it is easy to miss some of what this entails. It is well known that a person left to grow up on their own, without contact with others, will not grow up to be a human being in any

real sense. But this is only the half of it. If you dropped a million people into the jungle to grow up *together*, but without the benefit of the *material culture* built up by preceding generations, the result would be even worse. When we are talking about human beings en masse, then we are talking not only about so many human beings, and the forms of organization and cooperation that they are involved in, but also the material culture[28] that they have inherited, recreated and use together. This includes language, whether spoken or written, means of production from factories and mines through to crops, and domestic animals and soils which are as much a product of human culture as are our own bodies and our basic needs. For Hegel, all these objects of material culture are *thought-objects*. It is true that they entail 'externality': a word cannot be spoken in a vacuum, a building cannot be erected without the help of gravity. But a word is what it is only in connection with its use by human beings and the same is true of a chair or a key or any artifact whatsoever.

One of the difficulties that Hegel had to overcome was the problem of *dualism*. Descartes operated with a mind-matter dualism, and Kant's philosophy got around mind-matter dualism at the cost of introducing a host of *other* dichotomies and the need to overcome these dichotomies in Kant's philosophy was one of the main drivers for Kant's critics, such as Fichte and Schelling and Hegel. For Hegel, it was all thought. We will presently come to how Hegel arrived at difference from this abstract beginning, but the idea of thought, of Spirit, shaping the world, served as a foundation upon which to build a philosophical system. Thought was not for Hegel something simply private and inward. Thought remains the activity of the human mind, but the content of thought is always objective things, existing outside the individual, and in turn, the objects around us which are the content of our perception and thoughts are the objectifications of the thought of other people, or ourselves. We live in a world not of matter, but of thought objects, which are, like all objects, also material things.

But what makes a key a key is not its shape or its substance, but the fact that there's a lock somewhere that it fits and people who know how to use it.

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[28] I use the term 'material culture' to include transient artifacts such as the spoken word and human body form, as well as the durable artifacts which are the business of archaeologists.

5. The Phenomenology and 'formations of consciousness'

> "It is this self-construing method alone which enables philosophy to be an objective, demonstrated science." (Hegel 1812)

Immanuel Kant was born in 1724, and published "Religion within the limits of Reason" at the age of 70, at about the same time as the young Hegel was writing his speculations on building a folk religion at the seminary in Tübingen and Robespierre was engaged in his ultimately fatal practical experiment in a religion of Reason.

Kant was a huge figure. Hegel and all his young philosopher friends were Kantians. But Kant's system posed as many problems as it solved; to be a Kantian at that time was to be a *participant* in the project which Kant had initiated, the development of a philosophical system to fulfill the aims of the Enlightenment; and that generally meant *critique* of Kant. We need to look at just a couple of aspects of Kant's philosophy which will help us understand Hegel's approach.

"I freely admit," said Kant, "it was David Hume's remark [that Reason could not prove necessity or causality in Nature] that first, many years ago, interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave a completely different direction to my enquiries in the field of speculative philosophy" (Kant 1997). Hume's "Treatise on Human Nature" had been published while Kant was still very young, continuing a line of empiricists and their rationalist critics, whose concern was how knowledge and ideas originate from sensation. Hume was a skeptic; he demonstrated that causality could not be deduced from experience. One could witness the fact that one event has followed upon another time and time again, but this did not prove that the first was the *cause* of the second, and that the second *necessarily* followed from the first. This skepticism shocked Kant. If this were true, then there could be no science. In an effort to rescue the possibility of science, Kant set about constructing his *critical* philosophy, a kind of 'third way' between dogmatism and skepticism, whose aim was to determine the limits of knowledge and draw a line between what was knowable and what was not knowable.

An important step in Kant's solution was his conception of the transcendental subject:

> "By this 'I', or 'He', or 'It', who or which thinks, nothing more is represented than a *transcendental subject of thought* = *x*, which is cognized only by means of the thoughts that are its predicates" (Kant 2007).

So the subject for Kant was a nothing, like a point which is defined as the intersection between two lines – it is determinate and you know just what and where it is, but it has no nature of its own. This device allowed Kant to avoid the contradictions which had plagued earlier philosophers, but it led to a new range of problems. What Kant had done was to escape the problems of the subject's interaction with the material world by in effect placing the subject outside culture and history. He had created an eternal changeless subject which could be analyzed by the methods of philosophy, without any empirical content, at the cost of reducing the subject to a *nothing*.

Hegel's proposal is to place the subject *back into culture* and history: the subject would be a product and part of culture and history, rather than standing outside of experience. One of the consequences of Kant's transcendental subject was the resolution of the problem he inherited from the rationalist-empiricist debate: there were two kinds of knowledge, knowledge derived from two distinct sources which had to be combined somehow. On the one hand we had sensation, or 'Intuition', which was the immediate basis for experience, the beginning of all knowledge, and on the other hand, we had Reason, or Concept. Reason was needed to process the data of experience and acquire the categories through which sense could be made of experience. So we had two faculties: the faculty of reason and the faculty of intuition, and through reason we could acquire knowledge of the categories, of time and space, logic and so on.

One of the other implications, an essential part of how Kant resolved the contradiction he had inherited from the empiricists and rationalists, was that the world was divided in two: on our side was the world of appearances, in which we have constructed some meaningful image out of the stream of data from intuition, using our capacity for reason. On the other side, beyond and behind appearances, lies the thing-in-itself, about which, in principle, we can know nothing.

In his endeavor to determine the limits of knowledge, Kant demonstrated that certain kinds of question, such as whether the world has a beginning or whether matter is infinitely divisible, are just silly questions which lead to self-contradictory conclusions. On the other hand, in common with everyone else at the time, he believed that sciences such as logic, mathematics and geometry *can* be given a sound basis in pure reason and are not just 'appearances'.

Hegel's response was to claim that *all* concepts were internally contradictory. And rather than this contradictoriness being a fault of thought transgressing its rightful limits, contradiction was inherent in the objective world itself, and only thanks to this internal contradictoriness did concepts have reality and depth.

Hegel's breakthrough sprung from his concept of the 'subject' (Blunden 2007). Most writers interpret Hegel by importing into their reading of Hegel Kant's concept of subject. This is wrong. The core idea that Kant has imparted to the word 'subject' is the coincidence of three things: the *cogito*, which is the bearer of ideas and knowledge, the *agent*, who bears moral responsibility for their actions, and *ego*, which is self-consciousness. All three of these entities coincide in the Kantian subject, and Hegel is true to *this concept*, but the subject is not an *individual personality*, as it is for Kant, and the three components of the subject do not immediately coincide.

The individual is just one moment of the whole entity constituted by a community of practice. Of course, only an individual human being can think or bear moral responsibility for actions, but they cannot do so as isolated atoms; the content of our thinking is thought-objects which are constituted by the activity of the entire community and previous generations. And our actions are vain and meaningless except insofar as they take on significance through the relation of the individual to the whole community. The point is, how to elaborate this idea of thought and moral responsibility as collective activities, and at the same time develop the conception of individuality as a characteristic feature of modern society.

In the "System of Ethical Life," Hegel approached the question of labor not so much from the standpoint of how individuals *acquire* knowledge, but rather as how the culture (the universal) itself is *constructed*. At the basic level, people work with plants, and then animals, and then machinery, and in doing so produce crops, herds and means of production which are passed

on to future generations, together with the possibilities for use that they enable. Likewise, using words recreates and passes language on to future generations, and finally, in abstracting the knowledge of culture and imparting it to a new generation in the raising of children, people are constructing and maintaining their 'second nature', the universals which are the content of all thought. When an individual thinks, they think with universals actively maintained by and meaningful only within their historical community.

So instead of an individual using universal principles of Reason to process their experience of unknowable things-in-themselves, the structure of thoughts is already built into thought-objects themselves, as products of collective human activity. The categories and regularities by means of which sensuous experience is interpreted are acquired through the same sensuous experience, in particular by participation in the *use* of culture. In other words, the categories are objective thought forms of the finite things and events given in 'intuition': not in passive contemplation but in active use of the thing.

So let's look at how Hegel solved this problem of human beings having two faculties and two kinds of knowledge, Concept and Intuition, which have to be stuck together somehow. Hegel spells out a solution in the "System of Ethical Life." The structure of this work is an alternation between the Concept being subsumed under Intuition and Intuition being subsumed under the Concept. Hegel did not eradicate the contradiction between Concept and Intuition, but traced the process of mutual subsumption which does not merely extract knowledge from the outside world, but creates objective thought forms in the world.

We perceive, describe, act upon and understand the world using our words, artifacts, institutions and so on, subsuming intuition under concept, whilst in practical activity, communication and experience generally we sensuously interact with thought-objects, subsuming concept under intuition. We have a view about how the world should be – either ethically or theoretically, but we find from experience that it is otherwise. The world is continuously at odds with how it should be and things continuously turn out other than we intended. The development of the individual person as well as the whole of history is the story of the resolution of this conflict.

When we use a tool, we sense it as an object, and using it constrains us to act with it in a certain way. It is a norm of labor. It might be a sledge hammer or a tack hammer or a claw hammer, and we have to use it in a certain way, and experience ourselves using it and adapt to it. The tool is the product of reflection and continuous modification in the past, it is an objectification of that thought, so when we use it, we sensuously apprehend a mode of activity, a concept.

But things are never quite satisfactory. We feel a need. Our needs are never given directly from nature, there is always a gap, a gap between need and its satisfaction, and that delaying of gratification is overcome, negated by labor. Labor arises from the gap between needs and their satisfaction. Labor itself generates new needs, needs met by new products. Thus intuition is subsumed under the concept. In the process the universal is being constructed. Nature is supplemented by a 'second nature' in the form of an artificial environment; along with the separation of consumption and production comes a *division of labor*, the possibility of supervision of labor – the differentiation of *theory and practice*, and a *surplus product*.

Hegel called the unity of Concept and Intuition, the Idea. But at any given moment, the Concept and Intuition are *not* in unity. So what does this mean? Hegel's central concept here is not a supreme, absolute kind of 'master signifier', but a deficient, internally riven, incomplete, broken concept; every move it makes to try to rectify this internal contradiction only generates new contradictions, new problems. Rather than the final *outcome* of a never ending historical process, the Idea is the *process*.

Consciousness always and only exists in and through individuals, but consciousness of oneself as an agent and creator of knowledge, and as a part of an historical process of knowledge, is the product of historical development. The opening up of a gap between the consciousness of an individual and the norms and practices of the community as a whole is a contradiction which is central to the kind of relations in which the Logic makes sense. The development of individuality is tied up with the development of culture as a whole, without which individuality cannot be sustained.

That material comes from the 1802-03 system. In the 1805-06 system, Hegel has moved to a conception of Spirit as something pre-existing society

and manifesting itself in human activity. The shift was a subtle one, and the same logical structure was still there.

This brings us to the final stage of introducing Hegel's mature philosophy as set out in the Logic, and that is the "Phenomenology."

The Phenomenology

In the "Phenomenology," Hegel shows how the normal, non-philosophical way of thinking and living rises to philosophy, in the form of his own mature philosophical system, which begins with the Logic. It is also the connecting link between his early work and his mature work. It is part of his mature work in the sense that it represents the completion of the series of transformations which he went through in his early work, but it is almost unreadable and was written in a rush to meet the publisher's deadlines. At the time of his death, 25 years later, Hegel was preparing a second edition of the "Phenomenology," but he had written on the original manuscript: "Characteristic early work not to be revised – relevant to the period at which it was written – the abstract Absolute was dominant at the time of the Preface."

It would take us far too far afield to get into the content of the "Phenomenology," but we need to understand what is the subject matter of the Logic, and for that we must understand what is the subject matter of the "Phenomenology." Hegel says it is about *consciousness*. It tells the story of the journey of consciousness three times; the first time is the story of *thinking* as it develops down through history, through a series of distinct stages; then he tells the same story again but this time instead of systems of thinking, we have *social formations*; and then the story is told again a third time from the standpoint of thought which *understands itself* to be that process and its outcome, genuinely philosophical thought that knows that it is the thought of an age.

The object whose development is being described is the same object, but from different perspectives. This object, whose change and development through history is described, Hegel calls a *Gestalt*, sometimes translated as "formation" or "configuration of consciousness." Goethe gave *Gestalt* the meaning in which is used in Gestalt Psychology, as an integral structure or indivisible *whole*, which is *prior to* its parts, and it is more or less in this same sense that we must understand the meaning of *Gestalt* in the

"Phenomenology." This is also consistent with Goethe's understanding that the practice of science is a part of the culture of its age.

Alongside Napoleon, Goethe would be the great figure in Hegel's life, and with Aristotle, his greatest philosophical inspiration. The admiration was not reciprocated however. Goethe never took an interest in Hegel's philosophy despite repeated efforts by Hegel to gain his attention for it. But Hegel certainly took from Goethe, describing himself Goethe's "spiritual son" and both publicly and privately declaring himself a follower of Goethe, and probably the only person to support his theory of colors (Pinkard 2000). Although the concept of Gestalt that we find in the "Phenomenology" is not identical to the concept of Gestalt we find in Goethe, taken together with Goethe's commitment to the centrality of development, including the *Bildungsroman*, Goethe's relentless struggle for a holistic science, the concept of *Urphänomen*, and Goethe's view of all the ideas of an age constituting a single whole, we can see the clear stamp of Goethe on the "Phenomenology."

For Hegel a *Gestalt* is a 'formation of consciousness' understood as the dissonant unity of a *way of thought*, a *way of life* and a certain *constellation*[29] *of material culture*. 'Dissonant' because at any given moment in the history of any given people these elements are not identical. There are laws requiring that people should act in a particular way, but people don't act in quite that way, fashions become out of date, and there are bad laws, and so on. So we have material culture and practical activity and subjective thought all aspects of a single whole or figure, that is *Gestalt*, but always moving, always with internal contradictions.

The "Phenomenology" is concerned with the *necessary* forms of development of formations of consciousness. In that sense that Hegel is not dealing with a real, empirical history in the "Phenomenology"; he is concerned with consciousness, but with consciousness as something which is objectively necessary, intelligible, not pathological or capricious. The natural sciences deal with their subject matter in this same way, concerning themselves with what is necessary and intelligible in phenomena.

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[29] The word 'constellation' is used to indicate an entire collection of material things (artifacts), which are constituted as a group and invested with structure and meaning in the perception of some social formation.

With that qualification, Hegel *is* talking about consciousness, an object which is empirically given and verifiable.[30] He starts with ordinary common, unphilosophical consciousness, and he leads the reader through a series of stages leading up to absolute knowledge, that is, the philosophical consciousness exhibited in the exposition of the "Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences."

To recap, what constitutes a *Gestalt* is a *way of thinking* which includes the meaning attached to different institutions and artifacts, including words and symbols, a *way of life*, or social formation, that is, a form of practical activity, including the social institutions, and forms of practical activity in production, communication, family life, government and so on, and thirdly, a constellation of *material culture* including the language, art, means of production, land, food and so on. Each of these aspects constitutes the others and mediates between them.

There is no mind/matter dichotomy here. Hegel never took up a position on epistemology or ontology; he took the various systems of epistemology and ontology as concepts part of this or that formation of consciousness and subjected them to *critique*. All those dichotomies which had tortured the minds of earlier generations of philosophers he simply made the target of critique. The question of whether and to what extent a thought-object corresponds to an object outside of and independent of thought, interested Hegel only in the sense of asking: under what conditions do people ask questions like that? For Hegel, subject and object always exist in a mutually constituting, more or less adequate, relation to one another. The question is not the correspondence of the subject to the object, but of the capacity of the mutually constituting subject-object, that is, the formation of consciousness, to withstand skeptical criticism. Under the impact of skeptical attack the subject and object will *both* change. The object changes because it is constituted by the subject, and vice versa.

And this brings us to some remarks on the main theme of the "Phenomenology." The dynamic in the "Phenomenology," the driver which pushes it on from one *Gestalt* to another, is this vulnerability to skeptical attack, and to be exact, skeptical attack *from within*, in its own terms. It was in this

[30] This is arguable, but let us accept for the moment that consciousness can be imputed from behavior.

work Hegel introduced 'immanent critique'. Instead of taking up a system of ideas and then standing to the side and pitting counter-arguments against it, testing it from a standpoint *outside* the *Gestalt*, Hegel enters into the *Gestalt*, adopts its way of thinking, and subjects it to plausible self-criticism, and in this way demonstrates how every one of the *Gestalten* at a certain point fails to withstand skeptical critique and collapses. Some new *Gestalt* which is proof against this line of reasoning and can withstand the type of attack which the previous *Gestalt* could not, is then able to develop. And so it goes on.

The way Hegel organized the "Phenomenology" was based on the thesis that in any formation of consciousness there would be a final arbiter of truth, some standard which skeptical attacks against any element of the whole would ultimately come up against. So each main stage in the "Phenomenology" is associated with a criterion of truth which characterizes it, and more than a thousand years of history is represented in the passage through the series of such schemes.

It is not necessary to go the whole way with Hegel on this. More importantly, it is also not necessary to confine ourselves to the grand historical stage on which this drama is played out. The fact is that in any project or science or paradigm or social practice, which exhibits the same basic features of a *Gestalt*, there will be just one *Urphänomen*, one relation, on which the whole project depends, which allows us to make sense of the whole and is what makes the project an integral whole.

We have formations of consciousness, which entail a certain line of thinking, a certain set of practices, which instantiate the project and correspond to the line of thinking – the self-consciousness of participants, the objectives and world view it entails – and the artifacts around which the project is organized, from specialized language to collective property, technology and so on belonging to the project. Within each project there are basic criteria and associated practices through which claims are tested, which underpin skeptical challenges to the project. Whether this works on the grand historical scale that Hegel claimed for it, is an open question – it is one of those 'in the last instance' questions may mean very little. But in the course of presenting a kind of combined history of civilization and history of philosophy, Hegel has presented a profound approach to the

understanding of human life, tied up in the notions of *Gestalt* and *Urphänomen* which he learnt from Goethe.

In a letter to Goethe on 24 February 1821, Hegel acknowledged his debt:

> "This spiritual breath – it is of this that I really wished to speak and that alone is worth speaking of – is what has necessarily given me such great delight in Your Excellency's exposition of the phenomena surrounding entopic colors. What is simple and abstract, what you strikingly call the *Urphänomen*, you place at the very beginning. You then show how the intervention of further spheres of influence and circumstances generates the concrete phenomena, and you regulate the whole progression so that the succession proceeds from simple conditions to the more composite, and so that the complex now appears in full clarity through this decomposition. To ferret out the *Urphänomen*, to free it from those further environs which are accidental to it, to apprehend as we say abstractly – this I take to be a matter of spiritual intelligence for nature, just as I take that course generally to be the truly scientific knowledge in this field" (Hegel 1984: 698).

Hegel goes on to speak of his appropriation of the *Urphänomen*:

> "But may I now still speak to you of the special interest that an *Urphänomen*, thus cast in relief, has for us philosophers, namely that we can put such a preparation – with Your Excellency's permission – directly to philosophical use. But if we have at last worked our initially oyster-like Absolute – whether it be grey or entirely black, suit yourself – through towards air and light to the point that the Absolute has itself come to desire this air and light, we now need a window position so as to lead the Absolute fully out into the light of day. Our schemata would dissipate into vapor if we tried to transfer them directly into the colorful yet confused society of this recalcitrant world. Here is where Your Excellency's *Urphänomen* appear so admirably suited to our purpose. In this twilight – spiritual and comprehensible by virtue of its simplicity, visible and apprehensible by virtue of its sensuousness – the two worlds greet each other: our abstruse world and the world of phenomenal being."

In response, Goethe wrote to Hegel on April 13:

> "Seeing that you conduct yourself so amicably with the *Urphänomen*, and that you even recognize in me an affiliation with these demonic essences, I first take the liberty of depositing a pair of such phenomena before the philosopher's door, persuaded that he will treat them as well as he has treated their brothers."

The two gifts were an opaque stained glass wine glass which Goethe had described in the *Theory of Colors* and a prism of the sort used in optics. The wine glass was dedicated:

> "The *Urphänomen* very humbly begs the Absolute to give it a cordial welcome."

Hegel replied on 2 August 1821:

> "... wine has already lent mighty assistance to natural philosophy, which is concerned to demonstrate that spirit is in nature" (1984: 699).

6. The Subject Matter of the Logic

> "There is nothing, nothing in Heaven, or in Nature or in Mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation."
> (Hegel 1816)

Hegel wrote a long time ago, and his views on society and nature, even the history of philosophy are somewhat dated. However, by its very nature, the Logic has little recognizably empirical content and as a consequence it has stood the test of time very well. The problem is, what is the Logic really about?

In the section of the "Science of Logic" entitled "With What must Science Begin?", Hegel explains that philosophy must make a *logical* beginning, without any presuppositions, but at the same time, he says that it is *mediated*, having as its presupposition the 'science of manifested spirit', that is, "The Phenomenology."

This is crucial. Without people capable of philosophical thought, you can't have a logic. So the Logic presupposes the "Phenomenology" which represents the movement of consciousness from ordinary, unreflective consciousness to philosophical consciousness. Hegel has taken us through the immanent development of consciousness, it's *own* internal movement, until it comes to know itself as the work of Spirit[31], and to know how Spirit moves. Consequently, the *truth* of the "Phenomenology," this *Bildungsroman* of civilization, is the pure essentialities[32] of manifest spirit, the Logic. Putting it another way, the Logic is what turns out to be the *essential phenomenology*.

So we can see the truth of Hegel's maxim: that 'there is nothing, nothing in Heaven, or in Nature or in Mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation' (1816: 68). The Logic,

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[31] 'Spirit' or 'Mind' [*Geist*] is used here to indicate Hegel's concept. Hegel cannot *define* Spirit, as it is the fundamental concept of his philosophy. To appropriate Hegel's work we have to make some interpretation of Spirit, namely, the nature of human activity, or at least what is general, necessary and purposive in human life. The idea of *Zeitgeist*, 'spirit of the times', is easy to understand as something undeniably real.

[32] 'Pure essentiality' means the inner workings of something, or a maxim which sums up the *modus vivendi* of some complex process or set of experiences.

even its very first concept, Being, 'the immediate', is mediated. The beginning of philosophy is mediated by the long drawn out process through which consciousness comes to philosophy, or at least to philosophy in its Hegelian form, "absolute knowledge," the realization of its own nature.

But two different processes are entailed in the Logic. On the one hand, the derivation or proof of the simple concept from which the Logic will begin, which lies *outside* the Logic, and on the other hand, the exposition of the internal development of that concept itself which is the *content* of the Logic.

The science of manifested spirit, of which the Logic is the truth, is a science which refers to an empirical content, manifested spirit, or consciousness. Like any other science, Hegel's Logic must have an empirical domain in which its claims can be exhibited and tested. The "Phenomenology" represents this empirical domain. That the narrative presented in the "Phenomenology" is an idealised or notional narrative does not take away from this fact; all sciences have as their object idealized or necessary (as opposed to contingent) forms of movement. In this sense what the Logic deals with is not only mediated, through the development of a science, but also immediate, in that it is given in experience.

This empirical domain in which the subject matter of the Logic is to be validated is thought, thought in the extended meaning which Hegel gives to it, inclusive of mutually self-constituting thinking, social practice and culture. Although Hegel introduced the idea of a *Gestalt* by means of a grand historical narrative, there is no reason to restrict the concept of *Gestalt* to entire social formations or historical epochs. In fact, such an interpretation cannot withstand criticism, because at no time in human history has the entire world been embraced in a single social formation. Even in his mature system with its theory of world history, he never proposed that the whole world constitutes a single configuration of consciousness.

So we take the *Gestalten*, which make up the object domain over which the Logic is validated, to be 'projects' or the self-conscious systems of social practice that make up a whole formation of consciousness.

Now the opposite thesis, that the Logic is the foundation for a presuppositionless philosophy, will be defended (Houlgate 2005).

Hegel expends a lot of energy emphasizing that philosophy cannot set off from arbitrary presuppositions or axioms. Any finite science is only a part of philosophy and therefore has a beginning and consequently, finds the content of is subject matter given to it from elsewhere. But philosophy cannot enjoy such a luxury; it forms a *circle*. It is self-construing, and must generate its own beginning.

Hegel says that "it can be only the nature of the content itself which spontaneously develops itself in a scientific method of knowing, since it is at the same time the reflection of the content itself which first posits and *generates* its determinate character" (1816: 27). Hegel's claim is that it is the internal skeptical self-criticism of the *Gestalten* given in the "Phenomenology" which constitutes the dynamics at work within it. The Logic is therefore the science of this immanent self-criticism which relies on nothing outside of itself.

So the Logic must be developed by beginning with an empty concept – just thought, not thought *of* something else already given, just thought – and then allowing the content to develop through the process of *immanent critique*, critique which at each step, draws only on the concepts already derived, in its own terms. This process is negative in that every concept that is taken up is shown to be true only up to a certain point and ultimately self-contradictory. But it is also positive in that the skeptical self-criticism of each concept also brings forward a new, more concrete concept which constitutes the truth of what has gone before.

So there is a sense in which we can agree that the Logic is to be a presuppositionless science. All that is required is a concept from which to begin which can be asserted without presupposition.

The claim that the Logic, as an internally generated, presuppositionless science which deals only with the relations between concepts, turns out to be the same as the claim that the Logic deals with the pure essentialities of the manifested spirit exhibited in the "Phenomenology," because Hegel's rather idealistic claim that it is the action of skeptical criticism of the ultimate rules of inference in a formation of consciousness which generates its destruction and eventual replacement by another.

The Logic presents a series of concepts which are shown, each in turn, to be untrue. What can it mean to say that a *concept* is internally

contradictory or untrue? Surely, in the context of logic, it is only *propositions* which can be true or untrue. Think of it this way: take any concept and put it in place of *x* in the proposition '*x* is the absolute'. So 'Money is the absolute' means 'everything comes down to money'. That's a proposition which can be subjected to criticism and tested against reality. This is what Hegel means by the critique of a *concept*: 'money' turns out to be untrue, because in any community where it is elevated to the absolute, it leads to destruction. So to say that a concept is *untrue* simply means that it is *relative* and not absolute, it has its limits, it is true only up to a certain point, it is not 'absolute'.

On the other hand, it is one thing to grasp what is meant by the truth of a concept, but what is meant by the truth of a *social practice* or project? Well, the object is a *Gestalt*, which is the unity of a way of thinking, a way of life and a cultural constellation, so whichever aspect of the *Gestalt* you have in mind, the question can be reframed as whether the given shape of consciousness is 'self-identical'. Does what people are doing correspond to what they think they are doing and how they represent what are doing? A social practice is untrue if the activity does not correspond to its self-consciousness and self-representation. So if we have a maxim like "Money is absolute," then the truth of this shape of consciousness is tested out in the reality of a form of life organized around the God of Money. Even in this example we can see that a vast field for social critique opens up around the concept, as soon as it is treated as something *concrete* in this way.

So a first approximation to the form of movement represented in the Logic is that Hegel puts up a judgment or a maxim, such as in the form of "*x* is absolute," and then, understanding that the claim in question corresponds to some form of life, he subjects it to critique. But corresponding to the basic idea of the "Phenomenology," that social life is intelligible, the critique of each concept is executed logically.

The brilliance of Hegel's discovery is that he was able to reproduce the character of formations of consciousness through an exposition which is entirely comprehensible as a logical critique of a series of claims for a concept as absolute truth. It's a kind of two part harmony, simultaneously logical and social critique.

A great deal of misunderstanding arises from reading the Logic through the kaleidoscopic lens of a Cartesian thought-space. The usual "Introduction

to Hegel" includes an exposition of Hegel's Logic as a presuppositionless philosophy, to the extent that not even spirit or consciousness is presupposed. Writers can believe that this claim is defensible because they do not see that anything need be presupposed in the existence of concepts, and believe that a concept can exist independently of there being a real person to think it. But *where* do concepts exist? For that we can only fall back on Descartes, to some extensionless thought-space inhabited by thought forms.

Typically[33] the first 3 or 4 categories of the Logic are elaborated (few writers ever go further than the first 3 or 4 categories, beyond just listing them) by claiming that if the reader thinks of a certain concept – so here we are talking about a subjective act of summoning up these thought forms out of their extensionless hyperspace into the awareness of a living human being – and then contemplates them, then the concept 'slides into', or 'disappears into' or thought (of an individual thinker presumably) 'leads itself to' or 'becomes' or is 'led by its own intrinsic necessity' to contemplate another concept. So we get a mixture of concepts which move and, without any distinction, the subjective attention of a thinking person which moves from one concept to another. And we are asked to believe that the thinker, in beginning to contemplate the word 'Being', will be led, by necessity through the 204 concepts of the "Science of Logic," of *necessity*. This is quite simply not believable. Without some empirical domain in which claims can be verified, such a claim in untenable.

So to reiterate, Logic is the study of the pure essentialities of shapes of consciousness, or *Gestalten*, the objects which were in turn the subject matter of the "Phenomenology." These *Gestalten* are the unity of a way of thinking (or ideology), a way of life (or social practice) and a constellation of culture (i.e., language, means of production, etc.). Each of these *Gestalten* is the concretization of a fundamental claim about the nature of truth. Hegel's Logic stands in the same relation to the social practices or projects of a formation of consciousness as formal logic stands to the propositions of a formal theory.

The presuppositions of the Logic are human beings who have come to absolute knowing, that is to say, to Hegelian philosophy, understanding that

[33] For example, Houlgate's "An Introduction to Hegel" (2005) from which the forms of words quoted in this paragraph are taken.

they are products of and participants in the whole journey of human kind to self-knowledge, and that the truth of that journey lies in the pure essentialities of manifest spirit. The Logic is able to present itself in the form of a self-construing method of logical critique, because this historical development of shapes of consciousness is intelligible and can be explicated in its essentialities, by means of what would be, in the context, reasonable arguments.

On this basis it is now possible to see why the Logic has an important place in the development of Hegel's philosophical system as a whole, and equally a place in the development of *each* of the sciences. For each science, inseparably from its object, has developed as a part of the unfolding of those same formations of consciousness. The sciences are *themselves* projects, or *formations of consciousness* and if it is valid, the Logic ought to give us guidance on the trajectory of each of the sciences under the impact of scientific skepticism.

This brings us to a few remarks on the scope and usefulness of the Logic. Hegel's Logic differs from other forms of logic such as the formal logic used in mathematics or the logic implicit in the rules of evidence used in court proceedings.

In a court of law, the point is to first discover whether a particular *factual* claim is true, and in very general terms, participants will endeavor to establish an agreed or compelling basis in fact, and call upon logic to be able to determine whether a given conclusion can be drawn from those facts. Mathematics is similar, but is not troubled by the need for agreed facts, which is the job of particular sciences, being concerned only with the rules governing consistent sequences of symbolic propositions within a theory beginning from an arbitrary collection of axioms.

The point is that each of these sciences (jurisprudence and mathematics) constitute a *Gestalt*. They are methods of arriving at truth which recognize certain criteria for reasonable belief, and the scope of questions which may be asked and answers given. As a result of historical and cultural change, and changes in the ethos of the societies of which they are a part, as well as the special, historically articulated institutions of which they are a part (legal practice, universities, and so on), these criteria will *change*, subject to revision and concretization. It is *this* process of change which is the subject domain of Hegel's Logic. So there is a strong sense in which Hegel's logic

is a *meta-logic* in relation to jurisprudence, mathematics, formal logic, natural science, or any other formalized procedure for determining the truth.

Secondly, formal or mathematical logic takes for granted the validity of putting outside of itself the facts and axioms which it uses. Formal thinking, that is to say, thinking with *forms* abstracted from their *content*, is able to do this, because like Kant, it operates with a transcendental subject in this sense. For formal thought, an entity is an *x* with *attributes*; in Aristotlean terms this *x* is called the 'subject', to which various predicates can be attributed. For modern formal thought, there is nothing left when attributes have been stripped away and logic operates simply with the dichotomous, binary logic of 'has/has not' any given attribute. But on the contrary, Hegel's logic is concerned with the *concept itself*, what it essentially *is*, and the method of considering an object from the point of view of its contingent attributes is just one, limited *Gestalt*, which is valid up to a certain point, but beyond that point it is untrue and bankrupt.

So finally, it can be seen from the above that the Logic is a meta-theory of science in the sense that it is concerned with the logic entailed in how sciences change what they take to be given and what kind of questions and answers they admit.

Also, it is not just science. The Logic deals with the logic underlying the trajectory of any project or social practice that is in some way organized around a shared conception of truth and shared aims, and that's a very wide domain: it concerns all genuinely human problems.

The Logic therefore suggests not only the dynamics of forms of consciousness, but a methodology for the development of a science, according to the nature of the thing itself, as opposed to a logic imposed on a sphere of knowledge from without.

7. Being, Essence & the Notion

> "Each of the parts of philosophy is a philosophical whole, a circle rounded and complete in itself. Each circle, because it is a real totality, bursts through its limits and gives rise to a wider circle. The whole of philosophy resembles a *circle of circles*"
> (Hegel 1830)

The Logic is made up of three sections: The science of Being, the science of Essence and the science of the Notion. The structure of the Logic is important if we are to understand the process of finding the starting point for a science, and how that differs from the development of the science itself. It is also important if we are to understand Hegel's conception of subjectivity. Let's start with Being.

The science of Being is ontology, which normally means the study of the various kinds of thing which can exist and the nature of existence. Instead of building a dualistic theory about mind and matter, essences and appearances, and so on, Hegel replaced ontology with Logic, making a critique of the concept of Being the first section of the Logic.

For Hegel, the Logic arose as the truth of manifest spirit, the pure essentialities of "The Phenomenology" (1969: 28). For the Logic he needs a concept which presupposes nothing outside of itself, a concept which imports no content from outside, rests upon no axioms, which can form a starting point for philosophy. To achieve this he conducted a logical critique of the *concept of Being*, dialectically unfolding of the contents of the concept of Being out of itself. In this way philosophy can make its own beginning.

All Hegel's major works have the same structure: the simple concept or notion which marks the unconditioned starting point for the given science, arises as the truth of another science which has burst through its own limits. He then uses the method, the model for which is given in the Logic, to elaborate what is implicit in the given concept; he develops "the peculiar internal development of the thing itself" (1952).

In the case of "The Philosophy of Nature" (1970), he begins from the concept of space, and claims to unfold the science of Nature through critique of the concept of space. The truth of Nature is *Spirit*, which appears

in the form of Soul, that is, consciousness to the extent of the awareness of a living human creature which rests on its physiological nature as a human organism. This makes the starting point of the Subjective Spirit, and so on. This is how Hegel conceived of philosophy as a 'circle of circles': each science is self-enclosed, being the disclosure of the content of a single concept which forms its starting point; but the sciences taken all together constitute 'philosophy', and must make its own beginning, its own conditions of existence.

In the Science of Being, the First Book of the Logic, the Concept is still just 'in itself'. For Immanuel Kant, 'in itself' meant what the thing is independently of and prior to our knowledge of it. We are talking about shapes of consciousness, so we mean the concept under conditions where the shape of conscious has not *yet* unfolded and become conscious of itself. The 'yet' implies that should the shape of consciousness which is 'in itself' develop further, then it may become *self-conscious*. But it is not *yet* self-conscious.

So we have something possibly contradictory here: a shape of consciousness which is not consciousness of itself, but may become so. So this is an *observer* perspective, because if we are talking about a shape of consciousness which is not self-conscious, then the only terms we have in order to describe it are observer terms.

But what does it amount to? It is an idea or a form of social practice or a project which cannot yet even be described as emergent. People are acting in a certain way, but they are not conscious of acting in any such particular way. So we have for example, people who have been kicked off their land and have found a living by selling their labor by the hour, but they still think of themselves as farmers who have fallen on hard times, and have no concept of themselves as proletarians, for example.

So this is what Being is, and Hegel demonstrated this by a *critique* of the concept of Being.

If there is to be some thing amidst the infinite coming and going, the chaos of existence, the simplest actual thing that can be is a Quality, something that persists amidst change. And if we ask what it is that changes while the quality remains what it is, then this is Quantity. But a thing cannot indefinitely undergo quantitative change and remain still what it is, retain

the same quality; at some point, a quantitative change amounts to a change in Quality, and this Quantitative change which amounts to a Qualitative change. A certain quantity of qualitative change cannot help but be recognized and recognize itself as *something* and in that crosses the limits of the science of Being.

The thing-in-itself is not existent in some yonder, beyond the limits of knowledge, but rather is something which is *not yet* self-conscious. There is no hard line between appearance and the thing-in-itself. What is in-itself today, may make its appearance tomorrow. It's like what Betty Friedan (1964) called "the problem that has no name."

Next we come to the Science of Essence. For Hegel, Essence is this process beginning with the first glimmer of self-consciousness and proceeds through the 'peeling the layers off the onion', of searching for what is behind appearance, of probing reality. Hegel does not think that there was some fixed end point to that process; Essence is just that *process* of probing the in-itself and bringing to light what was behind it.

Essence is reflection. So if we have something going on in the world, some emergent project, some new form of social practice, or some new thought that is doing the rounds, maybe not yet corresponding to any apparent change in social practice, some new art form or change in fashion, then this may come to light in terms of meaningless observations, measurement of quantity and quality, but people try to make sense of it in terms of their *past* experiences, people *reflect* on it. It's like what Marx was talking about when he said how social movements "conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language" (1979).

Essence is the process of a new type of self-consciousness struggling to find itself, so to speak, still testing out all the old categories, trying to find a fit. The process of genesis is always the struggle between opposing propositions, like Empiricism and Rationalism, two opposite currents in the history of philosophy (or politics, or any other domain), which, although their struggle is characteristic of just certain periods of history, it never goes away; to this very day a new problem in science will have its rationalist and its empiricist proponents. The struggle between Empiricism and Rationalism was overtaken by the struggle between Dogmatism and

Skepticism, which moves into the limelight. And so on, each generation brings in a struggle along different axes. In the logic this is represented in the struggle of form and content, essence and appearance, possibility and actuality, and so on.

The third part of the Logic is the Science of the Notion (*Begriff*, also translated as 'concept').

The Science of the Notion begins with an *abstract* notion, and the process of the Notion is that it gets more and more *concrete*. By 'abstract' Hegel means undeveloped, lacking in connections with other things, thin in content, formal; as opposed to 'concrete', which means mature, developed, having many nuances and connections with other concepts, rich in content. He does *not* use the words abstract and concrete to indicate anything like the difference between mental and material.

Think of the abstract notion as a new idea, like at some point in 1968, somewhere in the US, a woman reflecting on the relation between the position of women and the position of Black people, coined the word 'sexism'. This was a new idea, in everything that had gone before since people like Mary Wollstonecraft talked about the impact of gender roles on women in the 18th century, this idea had been in gestation, but it hadn't quite crystallized. Or take Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity; when Einstein proposed it in 1905, it was a complete break from anything that had been talked of before, but it also resolved a heap of problems that physicists had been wrestling with. So these are examples of an abstract Notion: projects, simple ideas that correspond to a new shape of consciousness, a new form of social practice along with its representations and self-consciousness.

There is not a gradual shaping of this new abstract Notion in Essence; it comes as a complete break. It is like the judgment of Solomon, settling the argument with something that seems to come from left field. It is a breakthrough, a new connection, which launches a new science, out of the confusion that preceded it.

The Notion is the unity of Being and Essence, because it makes sense of the original observations, the facts of the matter, as well as all the disputes and alternative explanations and gives them a stable existence. In that sense

it is a negation of the negation, and immediate perception is reconstructed on the basis of the new conception.

The Notion is also the truth of Essence, in that it is the upshot of the series of disputes which make up Essence. The Notion, the *concept* of the thing, comes closer to what we normally call the 'essence of a thing'. 'Essence' is the *whole process* of reflection, and the truth or outcome of that process is the Notion. Being and Essence, together make up the *genesis* of the Notion.[34]

The first section of the Notion is Subjectivity, or the Subject. Here we get a glimpse of Hegel's conception of the subject: it is not an individual person, but a concept, a *unit of consciousness* connected to social practices implicating the whole community, reflected in language, the whole social division of labor and so on.

For Hegel, there is ultimately only *one* concept. But that *one* concept, the Absolute Idea, is the outcome of the whole, long-drawn-out historical process, a process in which different individual concepts are posited at first as abstract notions, and then enter into a process of concretization in which they merge with everything else, take on all the implications of their own existence. The Absolute Idea, which is the final product, is the result of the mutual concretization of all the abstract notions, the objectification of each one on every other.

In this context, it is often suggested that Hegel had a 'master narrative', a kind of philosophical colonialism. To get Hegel's whole system, then you do have to push this idea through to the extreme so you get the Absolute Idea externalizing itself as Nature and Spirit proving to be the truth of Nature and so on, all of which is a kind of philosophical theology. But we can get all we need out of Hegel's Logic without swallowing the Absolute Idea. The Absolute Idea can be taken not so much the end point, and

[34] Vygotsky scholars may note that there is a very rough parallel here in Vygotsky's (1987:121-166) idea of 'pseudoconcept' (=Being) and the emergence of concepts which Vygotsky (1998a:29-82) described in adolescents (=Essence); the unity of the two: pseudoconcepts rooted in sensuous perception and everyday experience, with abstract concepts learnt at school, for example, outside of personal experience, merging over time as true, concrete concepts (=Notion).

certainly not an existent thing, but as the process of concretization of activity and thinking.

The first section of the Notion, the Subject, is very complex and very important. Think of it for the moment in terms of the pure essentialities of a single *unit* of a shape of consciousness.

The structure of the Subject is Individual-Universal-Particular, which are referred to as *moments* of the Notion. That is, the subject entails an all-sided relation between the consciousness of finite, mortal *individuals*, the *particular* forms of on-going activity and relations entailed in the relevant social practice, and the *universal* products through which the Subject is represented.

The process of the Science of the Notion is the abstract notion becoming more and more concrete. This process of concretization takes place through *objectification* of subjectivity, that is, through the subject-object relation. The first thing to grasp about the Object, which is the second division of the Science of the Notion, is that the Object may be other subjects, subjects which are objects in relation to the Subject or subjects which have become objectified. Objectification is not limited to the construction of material objects or texts; it's also means being institutionalized, becoming taken for granted. The process of development of the Subject is a striving to transform the Object according to its own image, but in the process the Subject itself is changed and in the process of objectification becomes a part of the life of the whole community.

The subject-object relation goes through three stages, the *mechanical* relation in which the subject and object are indifferent to one another and impact one another externally, the *chemical* relation, in which there is an affinity between subject and object, and the object presents itself as processes rather than things. The third division of the Object is *Teleology* (or Organism), where the subject-object relation becomes a life process in which each is to the other both a means and an end.

The unity of Subject and Object, the third and last grade of the Science of the Notion, is the Idea. The Idea can be understood as the community as an intelligible whole or *Gestalt*, it is the summation of the pure essentialities of a complete historical form of life. It is the logical representation of Spirit, or of the development and life of an *entire community*, in the form of a

concrete concept. Again, it is not necessary to swallow this idea whole. If you don't accept that a community, at any stage in history whatsoever, can be encompassed in the single concept, this doesn't invalidate the whole of the Logic.

That in brief summary is the structure of the Logic. A couple of points should be noted.

Being and Essence (Volume 1 of the Logic) are the process leading to the birth of the Notion, its genesis, its pre-history. On the other hand, the Science of the Notion (Volume 2 of the Logic) is the process of development of the Subject itself, that is, its successive concretization, beginning from the first simple, undeveloped embryo of a new science or social movement or project or whatever.

So we should take note here of what each of the two volumes correspond to in Hegel's conception of science and history. Let us take the "Philosophy of Right" as an example. The concept of Right is here the *notion* of the science, corresponding to the starting point of the Subjective Logic, and it is from the notion of the science, namely, Right, that the science makes its beginning. The "Philosophy of Right" is the equivalent of the Science of the Notion. Hegel makes the key distinction by saying that in the "Philosophy of Right," he is concerned with "the peculiar internal development" of Right (1952: 14), and this means that he "must develop the idea [of Right], which is the reason of an object, out of the conception." So the "Philosophy of Right" is not constructed as a *history* of right, either positive or idealized; once history has brought the concept of Right into the world and it has implanted itself as the resolution of a range of pre-existing conflicts and conditions, then its future course is an unfolding of what is to be *found in the conception itself*. Further, Hegel says that the abstract concept of Right, the simplest archetypal form of right, is private property, and the "Philosophy of Right" begins with private property.

The three books of the Logic each constitute a distinct science – Ontology, the science of Being; Essence, the science of Reflection; Notion the science of the Concept. Each begins with a simple, abstract concept and unfolds the content from that conception.

This *unfolding* of what is in a conception, is quite distinct from the process of *genesis* which led up to the creative leap in which the conception

is born. Once the situation has produced a conception, it is relatively unimportant how it came about. So this is a very important corrective to the conception of Hegel as an historical thinker. Hegel did not commit the genetic fallacy[35]. It is one thing to understand the various conflicting forces which lie behind a thing coming into being, but the scientific study of *the thing itself* means to grasp it as a *concept* (which a study of its historical origins contributes to but is not equal to) and then to determine what follows from, or unfolds from the concept. For example, to interpret a treaty that ended some war, it is necessary to know about the conflict it settled, but it is only the terms of the treaty which finally matter, and these may, for example, have unforeseen and perverse consequences.

So the starting point of a science is the Notion which forms the subject of the science, not Being. This is worth mentioning because there is a widespread fallacy about the relation between Marx's "Capital" and Hegel's Logic. Some writers (e.g. Smith 1990) have put "Capital" up against the Logic, and in an effort to match them, start by equating the commodity relation with Being, on the basis that the commodity relation is the 'simplest relation' (Marx 1986) or on the basis that the commodity relation is 'immediate'. But the first thing to be done in a science, according to Hegel (and Marx followed Hegel in this), is to form a *concept of the subject matter*, the simplest possible relation whose *unfolding* produces the relevant science. In the case of "Capital," this abstract notion, the *germ*[36] of capital, is the commodity relation (Marx 1996). In the case of the "Philosophy of Right," it was the relation of Abstract Right or *private property* (1952: 37). The problem of the *origins* of value or of the commodity relation is a different question, and Marx demonstrates his familiarity with the Science of Essence in the third section of Chapter One, where the money-form is shown to emerge out of a series of relations constituting historically articulated resolutions of the problem of realizing an expanded division of labor (Marx 1996a).

Each of the three books of the Logic constitute a self-standing science, beginning with an abstract concept, and unfolding what is contained in that

[35] The genetic fallacy is where a conclusion is drawn based on where something originated, rather than its current meaning.

[36] "Germ" is used by both Marx and Hegel in this context synonymously with "cell."

notion. The three sciences are the science of being, the science of reflection and the science of the concept. Each of these three sciences manifest a distinct form of movement (Hegel 2009: 50).[37]

In Being, the form of movement is *seriality*. That is, a concept passes away and has no more validity, it is then replaced by another, which in turn passes away, with no reference. It's just one damn thing after another, a transition from one to another to another.

In Essence, in the passage from one relation to another, the former relation does not pass away but remains, although pushed to the back-ground, so the form of movement is *diversity*. Movement takes the form of a series of oppositions each referring to its other, essence and appearance, form and content, positive and negative, which are overtaken and sublated by still more oppositions, each problem probing more deeply, but without disposing of the foregoing problem.

In the Notion, the movement is *development*, with each new relation incorporated into the concept and all the former relations merged with it. Movement therefore takes the form of concretization as successive aspects of the thing are incorporated into the concept.

Having reviewed the outlines of Hegel's very complex philosophy, we are now in a position to pick up our the thread of our narrative and look at how Hegel rendered Goethe's idea of *Urphänomen* and *Gestalt* as the foundation for a Romantic Science.

[37] This illustrates what a great error is the Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis myth, which imposes only one form of movement on the whole of the Logic, while corresponding to none of the three forms Hegel recognizes.

8. Subjectivity and culture

> "Here and there in this mesh there are firm knots which give stability and direction to the life and consciousness of spirit."
> (Hegel 1816)

We are now in a position to understand the unique solution which Hegel worked out for the problem originally posed by Goethe.

The subject matter of the Logic is the shapes of consciousness exhibited in the "Phenomenology," or rather, the pure essentialities of the "Phenomenology." To be quite precise, the subject of the Logic is the simplest unit of a shape of consciousness, namely, a Concept.

So in relation to a whole shape of consciousness (simultaneously a way of thinking, a system of social practices and a constellation of culture), the concept is its simplest unit, its *Urphänomen*. The form of the development of a concept is its successive concretization as it develops from a newly emergent social practice to being an integral part of a whole way of life.

We will look at this process of development presently, but first – and this is the most important thing – we must see how Hegel presents the abstract concept itself in the Logic. He says that a concept is the identity of the Universal, Particular and Individual, otherwise known as the 'moments' of the concept.

To illustrate this in logical terms, consider any word. Taken in itself, just as such, it can have no meaning; if you'd never seen it before, and you came across it out of context, it would mean nothing. Whether it is taken as an audial or lexical entity or any kind of material symbol or representation, as such it is meaningless. It's like the flag of an unknown country or the image of a long-forgotten God. This is the universal. Let's suppose you know the meaning of the word, it being part of a language already known to you, so it is a real universal, such as 'king', referring to any and all kings, and yet no particular king. You know the meaning of the word, only because in the past it has been connected with individual things or events in the context of particular activities and relationships. But the word still has no real referent. If I say 'tree' that in itself indicates no material thing, even though 'tree' is meaningful only because people have used the word down the centuries in reference to actual woody, leafy plants, not to mention all

kinds of metaphorical or hypothetical senses, such as ‘family-tree’ or ‘One Tree Hill’.

I can bring the universal to an individual tree by a process of particularization. This particularization can take the form of a social practice like pointing, or incorporating it in any system of marking out space and time in some socially meaningful way, describing the location or type of the tree, or which country at what time, according to whose authority, etc. Particularization, the subsumption of an individual under a universal, is always a social practice or some kind. Meaningful action is always the social use of some element of culture by an individual.

To put it another way, how does the word ‘trade union’ come to be meaningful for a person other than through interaction with some particular union, and how can a person interact with a trade union other than through specific individual trade unionists? Of course, in reality, that knowledge may be mediated not by actual interactions with a union, but perhaps by hearsay or journalism. But the point is hardly affected by that. Even hearsay involves social interactions with individuals, and the understanding gained is as good as the forms of mediation though which it is gained.

A concept is meaningful only insofar as it is a unit of a ‘formation of consciousness’, so meaning can only be created in and through the forms of social practice constituting the formation of consciousness. A dictionary definition, determining the word in relation to other words, does not suffice. That is, an interconnected system of universals remains meaningless until at some point it interconnects with social practice. Such definitions are meaningful only insofar as they are read by people who live their lives and have a consciousness formed in the activities of the relevant formation of consciousness. Imagine a lay-person reading a definition from an encyclopaedia of molecular biology: it would mean nothing, because meaning arises from participation, directly or indirectly, in a formation of consciousness, in this case, the practice of the science of molecular biology.

So the simplest possible concept involves some representation, symbol or artifact of some kind, being particularized through its social use by someone in some form of practice.

The next question is how this abstract concept develops, and this involves two distinct types of process. On the one hand we have the

development of the *subject itself*, which Hegel treats in terms of the process of identification of the individual, universal and particular, and on the other hand, the process of merging of the concept with the entire social formation of which it is already a part, which Hegel treats in terms of the *subject-object relation*. Each process is a response to the other. We will take these in turn.

Hegel treats the development of the subject in terms of the relations between the universal, individual and particular. The identity between these moments which constitutes the concept is not posited immediately. Initially in fact, they are posited independently and the notion is only fully realized when the identification is complete in the mature concept, the concept which is the outcome of exhaustive experience and manifold insight into its relations and ramifications.

Hegel presents this process of development of subjectivity in three processes which he calls the Notion, the Judgment and the Syllogism. In the Notion, each of the moments is posited independently. The Judgment is a series of judgments made about the subject, it is ascribed a single quality, it is given in connection with other things, it is brought under some genus or whole, or finally all three of these judgments. The Syllogism is a series of lines of reasoning in which one of the moments mediates in the relation between two of the moments. Each of these lines of reasoning is defective in some way and 'misses the notion' and only when all the possible relations between individual, universal and particular are fully brought under the true Notion of the thing, is the concept fully developed.

In this way, Hegel expounds his understanding of the mature concept and how it develops from its first, abstract expression, in the form of a logical critique. The kinds of logical issues that he deals with are the typical erroneous lines of thinking you will hear perhaps from a youth, or from someone who has an imperfect idea of something; for example, relying for their judgment on just one attribute of thing, while in fact the concept itself always escapes characterization in terms of contingent attributes.

This exclusive reliance on logic may be a weakness of Hegel's system, but it is also its strength. Nature and social life is always ultimately intelligible, and nothing which is irrational can remain a social reality indefinitely. 'Logical necessity' has its way of coming out in the end. It may have taken thousands of years for the irrational belief that women must be

subordinated by men, to be exposed as irrational, but ultimately it did. A person may take irrational prejudices with them to their grave, but individuals are only finite beings, and if there is truth at all, it lies in the totality.

So in summary, the subjective process of the Notion is realization of the unity of individual, universal and particular, a process within the subject itself, reflecting the infinite complexity and depth of social life. This conception is absolutely crucial to understanding how Hegel avoids dichotomies like whole/part, individual/social, mind/matter and so on.

Together with the process of becoming internally more all-sided and mature, the subject also develops in its relation to the object, that is, to others in the community, and to social life beyond its own sphere of activity. This is the process of objectification which is the 'other side' of the process of development of the subject just described.

Objectification, for Hegel, does not just mean the creation of 'thought-objects' (artifacts), although this is the origin of the idea. Objectification in the Logic is more like *institutionalization* of a concept. This does involve the creation of new artifacts, or the modification of existing ones, but that is only one side of the process, because after all, any artifact is meaningful only insofar as it is used or otherwise implicated in social practice. So objectification means the incorporation of the concept in the whole way of life of the community.

We have mentioned that Hegel identifies three types of subject-object relation: mechanism, chemism and organism. One way of explaining these relations is in terms of conceptions of multiculturalism.

Mechanism is like the 'ethnic mosaic' metaphor in which self-sufficient communities, are *mutually indifferent* and have only an external impact on one another, neither community modifying its own nature, just adjusting its activity to accommodate or resist the impact of another community.

Chemism is like the 'melting pot' metaphor in which subject and object have an *affinity* with one another and are not wholly external to one another, but recognize a relation within themselves, like social movements that recognize that they are each fighting a common enemy, for example, and make common cause, an ethnic group which finds a niche in the division of labor of the host community.

In Organism, the subject finds in the object (i.e. other subjects) its own End, or as it is sometimes said, the Subject finds its own essence outside of itself, and makes as its own, in its own way, the projects of the host community.

This level of development lays the basis for the final stage of the subject-object relation, which Hegel calls the Idea, in which a transformation of both subject and object takes place and a common form of life is developed, integrating the aspirations of all the constituent forms of practice, which are in turn transformed through merging in a common form of life.

This conception allowed Hegel to finally transcend all forms of dichotomy including the whole/part dichotomy which was at the center of Goethe's challenge. In fact, it is *only* by means of the individual-universal-particular trichotomy in which each moment mediates the relation between the other two, that the whole/part dichotomy can be overcome.

In so far as two different concepts exist within the same community, and there is a real subject-object difference, then what Hegel describes is the real, social-historical process of the transcendence of that dichotomy through the development of specific, shared forms of social practice. And that transcendence takes place not finally through likeness, affinity or interdependence, but through the joint construction of a new common conception.

Hegel has thus given definite shape to the idea of a concept as the *unit* of a whole social formation. One of the claims of this work is that Hegel's conception still suffers from idealistic limitations, inevitable for his times, and cannot be given a satisfactory form in the shape of a Logic. It can be developed rationally only 'materialistically', thanks to the empirical content provided by practical efforts to transform the conditions of human existence. Psychology, insofar as it is an emancipatory science, for the purpose of liberating people from the domination of social forces beyond their own control, must constitute one of the components of such an effort, alongside a number of other human sciences.

Before turning to the development of Hegel's idea for the purposes of psychology, let us look at Hegel's own psychology.

9. Hegel's Psychology and Spirit

> "There is nothing, nothing in heaven, or in nature or in mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation."
> (Hegel 1812)

Before saying anything about Hegel's psychology, we have to clear up a widespread misunderstanding which has overtaken the reception of Hegel in the past few decades, concerning the place of the master-servant[38] narrative in Hegel's philosophy.

The "Phenomenology of Spirit" (1910) was Hegel's first published book, and he retained an affection for the book for the rest of his life. But it was an immature work, hurriedly composed and almost incomprehensible. Of its 808 paragraphs, only 18 paragraphs concerned the master-servant narrative, albeit at a crucial point, the emergence of self-consciousness.

The narrative is the only point in Hegel's entire corpus in which he uses the device of a foundation myth or a narrative of any kind. The reason he used the device on this occasion was to respond to the social and political theories of Rousseau (1754), Hobbes (1651) and others who supported their social theories with a foundation myth[39] presupposing a 'state of nature' from which free and equal individuals came together to form society. Hegel radically disagreed with this whole approach methodologically, and with the conception of an original equality from which humanity fell into slavery as a result of civilization.

Consistent with his method of immanent critique, Hegel used the same device as those he was critiquing, making the point (to invert Rousseau's aphorism) that "man was born in chains but everywhere he is free," at least

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[38] Master-servant is a translation of Hegel's *Herr-Knecht*'. 'Master-slave' is an erroneous translation, common among those following Kojève. Hyppolite's 1939 French translation correctly has '*maître-serviteur*', but Hyppolite also notes that this translation is somewhat anachronistic, and servant somewhat understates the degree of subordination implied in *Knecht*, while 'slave' overstates it.

[39] This is not to imply that Hobbes, Rousseau or Hegel believed that their foundation myth was historically true. It was more the case that it functioned as a natural law argument like Rawls' 'veil of ignorance'.

in countries where there is a state; servitude is *natural* and freedom is an achievement of civilization.

This passage is indeed a florid and engaging piece of literature and I will come to an interpretation presently. But in the meantime it is necessary to look at how one eccentric interpretation of the master-servant narrative has overwhelmed the reception of Hegel in recent decades.

Neither Marx nor any of his followers, none of the English Hegelians, nor anyone else ever had more than a word to say about the passage until Alexander Kojève's seminars beginning in 1933. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, French philosophy had been dominated by analytical philosophy concerned with problems of mathematical logic (France had long been a leader in mathematics), with its sources in Descartes and Kant. The only Hegel that was available to the French in their own language were the mid-19th century translations of the "Encyclopaedia" by the Italian Hegelian, Augusto Vera. These were poor translations and notwithstanding the efforts of Alexandre Koyré, the French focus on analytical philosophy and disdain for all things German ensured that Hegel's reception in France was a deafening silence. But in 1933, the Russian emigré Alexander Kojève began a series of seminars in Paris in which he presented his eccentric reading of the master-servant narrative, at that time unavailable in French. Beginning in 1937 there was an explosion in new translations of Hegel, including Hyppolite's excellent translation of the "Phenomenology" in 1939 (Barnett 1998). This explosion of interest continued after the war, including the publication of Kojève's lectures. Hyppolite was a very sober philosopher and his translations are regarded by many as the best Hegel translations in any language, but Hyppolite's care could not stand up against the sparkle of Kojève's reading, which made it appear as if this long-forgotten passage of Hegel's early work was not only typical, but all that Hegel had ever written. Even Hyppolite focused much of his work on the "Phenomenology." The result was a generation of French philosophy arising in the midst of the social movements of the 1960s and '70s which merged Kojève's version of Hegel with a powerful social critique.

So it was that the English-speaking world discovered that Hegel was a philosopher of unmediated struggles to the death. In America this reading was received into social theories having their origin in James, Mead and

Dewey, which as remarked above, have some synergies with Cultural-Historical Activity Theory. This American reception took the form of the theory of *intersubjectivity*, a pragmatic reading in which metaphysics is avoided by exclusive reliance on *unmediated* interactions between individual agents (Williams 1997). This pragmatic conception of intersubjectivity (not Peirce's) has since been re-appropriated by Critical Theory (Honneth 1996) under the banner of Recognition (*Anerkennen*).

So, before we can present Hegel's psychology we must dispose of these two interpretations, both of which have merit in their own right, but which are problematic for our purposes and misrepresent the legacy of Hegel.

Kojève's (1969) interpretation is very rich and the influence it has had is well deserved, but what is especially problematic is that it is based on the hypothesis that human beings have some kind of innate drive to dominate and subordinate others which can only be tamed by fear of death. A social theory based on such a claim doubtless had a certain appeal at the time Kojève was speaking, and in the shadow of World War Two, colonialism and the national liberation movements of the post-World War Two period, and from there it is easy to see how all forms of status subordination started to look like the outcome of some kind of innate drive to dominate.[40]

But this was never Hegel's idea. The point of the master-servant narrative is to enquire into what happens when two subjects (self-sufficient communities, forms of social practice or individual strangers) come into unmediated contact with one another, that is to say interaction not mediated by law, language, custom, trade or whatever. This situation is easily visualized if you imagine a wild beast or an escaped convict entering your home. If you choose to subdue the intruder it is not because you are subject to some innate drive to subordinate others. It is a simple matter of survival. A powerful stranger who neither knows nor respects your property rights, including the integrity of your body, *will* either trample you or eat you for dinner.

Hegel's point was to show how even in the event of apparently unmediated interaction, two subjects find within themselves the means of mediation. This takes the form of a system of needs and labor in which the

[40] This is exactly the conclusion drawn by Francis Fukuyama (1992) for example.

labor of one is subordinated to the needs of the other and the needs of the other subordinated to the labor of the one. The beginning of civilization is thus the substitution of bonded labor of some form or another for the previous alternatives of driving away the enemy, killing them or marrying them; and constitutes the first step towards modern society. Or in psychological terms, absent any other mode of mediation, individuals are able to interact with one another only to the extent that one of them has something to offer which the other needs. Having something to offer and having needs are preconditions for meaningful interaction with other people and participation in the community. Recall that ancient people only ceased the practices of killing or marrying their prisoners when they developed productive forces capable of exploiting labor.

The intersubjective reading of Hegel can trace its roots to George Herbert Mead, to whom little has since been added. Mead (1934), the social behaviorist, came very close to the ideas of cultural psychology with his idea of the *gesture* as the archetypal communicative act. A gesture is an action directed at another person which is not carried through, functioning therefore as a signal of one's intentions. In turn, the gesture which is not carried through could constitute the physiological basis of thinking. Mead also famously introduced the dialectic of I/Me, that is, the idea that I get to know myself only by perceiving how others interact with me. Our self-knowledge or identity is thus constructed through perception of those others with whom we interact, or more exactly by the image of ourselves which the others project on to us based on our behavior. Both of these ideas come very close to Hegel's claim, benefiting by the clarity and simplicity of Mead's exposition, but limited by the scope of Mead's pragmatic individualism.[41]

In particular (and the same goes for all the intersubjectivists) Mead subsumes a person's body along with their thinking into a single

[41] Mead acknowledged his debt to Hegel in a 1925 letter to his daughter-in-law, Irene, describing his social psychology as "an attempt to do from my own standpoint what Hegel undertook in his 'Phenomenology'" hoping "that it won't be as inscrutable." (Markell 2007: 107n)

undifferentiated subjectivity.[42] To the pragmatist this seems eminently scientific since the whole idea is to do away with the need for metaphysical conceptions[43] like 'thought' and 'transcendental subject'. The problem is that, as Hegel showed, all social interactions are mediated, and in the archetypal interaction (gesture) which the intersubjectivists used to construct their theory, it is overlooked that the body functions as an artifact, *used* by the individual subject, being instead simply subsumed into or equated with the subject. The result is a concept of intersubjectivity as unmediated. This is all very well so long as we stick to individuals belonging to the same culture making already-conventionalized gestures to one another, but if you use a simple unit like gesturing as the archetype upon which a theory of social action is to be constructed, then the unit must include all the essential components of the whole. Mediation is absolutely essential to the human condition, and the notion of gesture elides mediation.

Consequently, intersubjectivity, whether in the form of an American Hegelian like Robert Williams, a Pragmatist like G. H. Mead or a Critical Theorist like Axel Honneth, fails to provide a foundation for a non-metaphysical social theory capable of understanding developed communities. This is because, along the lines of a misunderstood master-servant narrative, it is based on unmediated interactions between individuals. By excluding mediation, it is left with an inadequate unit of analysis for the human behavior.

Having dealt with these misunderstandings, we can now look at Hegel's psychology.

We have already established that Hegel has a holistic conception of Mind, that is, Hegel regarded a social form of life as a 'formation of consciousness', without concerning himself with a dichotomy between something deemed to exist inside an individual's head, and the 'thought

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[42] Identity is an aspect of consciousness, is an ideal moment of the intersection of social behavior and human physiology, but cannot be identified with either material process alone.

[43] This is a controversial claim, more reflective perhaps of the epigones of Pragmatism than its founders. Both C. S. Peirce and Wm. James were members of the "Metaphysical Club" in the 1870s, from which Pragmatism originated, casting itself as the American opponent of European metaphysics.

objects' constituted in social action and existing outside the head. Mind was made up of concepts which are shared products of the entire historical community. So the question is: what could Hegel mean by 'Psychology'? And what could *we* mean by 'Hegel's psychology'?

Hegel's psychology

Hegel's psychology is part of his Subjective Spirit (1971), so we must first clarify Hegel's distinction between subjective spirit and objective spirit, a distinction Hegel had not made at the time he wrote the "Phenomenology."

Subjective Spirit is the form of life which rests on people's relations with their immediate environment: social, artificial and natural, unmediated by law or the state, in a 'natural' division of labor rather than a market economy. Objective Spirit on the other hand, is the form of life corresponding to rights-bearing, property-owning citizens, with relations between people regulated by law, under the protection of a state. When I say 'form of life', such forms are to be understood not as mutually exclusive, but on the contrary as mutually constitutive. That is, for example, how a person acts in relation to the institutions of modern society will be formed in the habits and attitudes developed within a family or local community. Conversely, an individual's immediate social environment will be largely prescribed by property and law.[44]

It is important to note that both subjective spirit and objective spirit are understood by Hegel as forms of life-activity; it is not an inside/outside distinction. We all participate in both subjective and objective spirit; in the family and amongst our peers, subjective spirit prevails, and people interact with one another without regard to contracts, legal obligations or professional commitments.

Subjective Spirit unfolds out of what Hegel calls Soul, by which he meant the nature-given but characteristically human drives and capacities with which we are born. Hegel did not have the benefit of modern biological science and developmental psychology, and ascribed more to

[44] Carl Ratner (2008) renders this distinction as micro-cultural and macro-cultural, and demonstrates how researchers in Cultural Psychology tend to adopt either one or the other domain of explanation.

nature than a cultural psychologist would today, but nonetheless Hegel well understood that the drives and capacities manifested in modern social life are not at all those given by nature, but are on the contrary, cultural products. What he had in mind was the physical form of homo sapiens, human sense organs, the capacity to learn a language, form social bonds, etc.

The development of the Soul brings awareness of the self as a separate body, and creatures bearing this nature-given Soul construct a material culture, including language, tools, education of children, crops, domestication of animals and so on, conceived in terms of evolving forms of life, communities of practice, and a whole range of culturally-produced needs not to be found in Nature.

Hegel divided Subjective Spirit into three grades: Anthropology, the science of the Soul, Phenomenology, the science of Consciousness, and Psychology, the science of the Mind. But these terms can be confusing. In Hegel's day, 'Anthropology' saw its subject matter more in terms of the racial and physiological diversity arising from geographical features, upon which cultural differences were presumed to rest. 'Phenomenology' was defined by Kant as the science of appearances, i.e., here the appearance of spirit in human consciousness, and this actually comes closest to what we would understand today as 'Psychology', with the important proviso that Hegel meant it inclusively of both social action and what is usually called consciousness. 'Psychology' Hegel restricted to forms of activity in which the person acts as an independent, individual subject, implying the differentiation of theoretical and practical activity – in other words, exhibiting the preconditions for participation in a modern state.

When we are talking about 'Hegel's psychology' we are generally referring to 'Phenomenology', the science of Consciousness. The three grades of Consciousness are (a) Consciousness proper, (b) Self-consciousness and (c) Reason. Hegel describes the movement here as follows:

> "§334 (a) consciousness in general, which has *an object* as such; (b) self-consciousness, for which *the self* is the object; (c) the unity of consciousness and self-consciousness, where the spirit sees *itself as the content of the object* and as in and for itself determinate; – as reason, the concept of the spirit" (Hegel 1990).

I read this as the movement from (a) a naïve realist or dogmatic orientation to the existence of an world independent of and indifferent to oneself, to (b) the recognition of oneself in terms of social relations with others with whom one has affinity, and (c) the unity of these two, recognizing others as part of the same community but independent of oneself.

Most attention generally goes to the second stage, Self-Consciousness. The final version of the "Encyclopedia," defines the development of self-consciousness as: (i) Appetite or Instinctive Desire, (ii) Recognitive Self-consciousness, and (iii) Universal Self-consciousness.

The grades of consciousness is determined by the kind of need pursued: (i) the pursuit of immediate enjoyment or desire, be it satisfied directly by an object or mediately a person, (ii) the pursuit of affirmation and recognition as a sovereign subject in one's own right, and (iii) the affirmative awareness of oneself in another inasmuch as the other's freedom and enjoyment is the expression of one's own subjectivity. This third grade is described as the unity of (i) and (ii) in that recognition is meaningful only when given freely by another free and equal sovereign subject and therefore the desire for recognition presupposes the freedom of the other and such freedom becomes itself the main need of the subject.

Attention again goes to the second division, Recognition, which is the well-known master-servant relation. This transformation *does* involve a struggle, because it concerns the relation of an individual, social practice or collective subject to another independent person, and therefore involves a moment of fear and danger, and simultaneously the possibility of positive affirmation. What is involved here is the building of social bonds where none existed previously, *not* necessarily a struggle for domination, and certainly not the satisfaction of some biological drive to dominate. The relation becomes clearer if we have in mind not an individual person but a *subject* – a self-conscious social formation – which undoubtedly endeavours to incorporate foreign forms of practice into itself. Whether we have in mind a self-sufficient community contacting outsiders for the first time, teenagers finding their place in the community outside the family, the bearer of some belief or style, any kind of *subject* in the Hegelian rather than Kantian meaning of the word, then this idea of a 'fight to the death' makes a lot more sense.

That said, George Herbert Mead's (1956: 228) exposition of the 'I/Me' dialectic is as good an explanation of this moment in the development of Subjective Spirit as anything to be found in Hegel himself.

But it is not Hegel's psychology which is what is most important in his legacy. A great deal is needed to build a science of psychology which Hegel was in no position to carry out. It is Hegel's Logic and his holistic conception of 'formation of consciousness' and the concept as a unit of social consciousness which can contribute most to the building a scientific psychology today. But to complete this sketch of Hegel's ideas on the topic of psychology I will just mention how he completes this system.

In the final stage of Subjective Spirit, we have the differentiation of Practical Mind and Theoretical Mind and their unity, Free Spirit. The independent development of Practical and Theoretical Spirit is the foundation for a fully developed modern social division of labor. But Free Spirit also gives rise to the concept of Right as a *human need*; that is, the need for rights to be universally respected, and not called into question at every moment, having to be fought for and defended again and again. Thus, according to Hegel, the need for rights arises in Subjective Spirit, but can only be fulfilled by the transition to life in a modern state, that is, Objective Spirit.

Hegel claims that the entirety of modern history and culture is ultimately traceable to this need for Rights, for a form of life governed by private property and the rule of law. Everything else – science, industry, travel, modern technology, politics, trade, the justice system, parliaments, corporations, modern warfare, etc., etc., unfolds out of Right. His "Philosophy of Right" therefore takes the form of an exposition of all these institutions up to and including world history.

In summary, this review of Hegel was aimed at showing how Hegel responded to Goethe's challenge for a genuinely humanistic science, which Goethe expressed in terms of *Gestalt* and *Urphänomen*.

Key features of Hegel's response are:

- the concept as the unit of a social formation,
- an understanding of human life which begins from the whole rather than the individual,

- the abstract concept of the subject matter as the foundation for a science, and
- the conception of the *Gestalt* through the individual, universal and particular, mutually constituting and mediating one another.

Hegel wrote a long time ago. Even a few years after his death, the world had entirely changed. Although it is universally accepted in CHAT, that Hegel is an important source of our ideas, the reception of Hegel within CHAT is invariably mediated by Marx. So it is to Marx that we must now turn to follow the genesis of these founding concepts of Cultural Historical Activity Theory.

10. Marx's Critique of Hegel.

> "[For Hegel] the movement of the categories appears as the real act of production – which only, unfortunately, receives a jolt from the outside – whose product is the world."
> (Marx 1857)

"Ask anybody in Berlin today," announced the *Telegraph für Deutschland* of December 1841, "on what field the battle for dominion over German public opinion ... over Germany itself, is being fought, and if he has any idea of the power of the mind over the world he will reply that this battlefield is the University, in particular Lecture Hall No. 6, where Schelling is giving his lectures on the Philosophy of Revelation" (Engels 1975). The new Prussian King, Friedrich Wilhelm IV had appointed a Minister of Culture with instructions to "expunge the dragon's seed of Hegelian pantheism from Prussian youth," and Hegel's roommate and friend from his student days, Friedrich Schelling, had been summoned to Berlin to do the job (Beiser 1993).

The 21-year-old Frederick Engels continued: "An imposing, colorful audience has assembled to witness the battle. At the front the notables of the University, the leading lights of science, men everyone of whom has created a trend of his own; for them the seats nearest to the rostrum have been reserved, and behind them, jumbled together as chance brought them to the hall, representatives of all walks of life, nations, and religious beliefs. In the midst of high-spirited youths there sits here and there a grey-breaded staff officer ...," and Engels himself, one of the founders of modern communism, Mikhail Bakunin, founder of militant anarchism, and Søren Kierkegaard (2001), precursor of Existentialism ... "then the signal for silence sounds and Schelling mounts the rostrum. A man of middle stature, with white hair and light-blue, bright eyes, whose expression is gay rather than imposing and, combined with a certain fullness of figure, indicates more the jovial family-man than the thinker of genius, a harsh but strong voice, Swabian-Bavarian accent, that is Schelling's outward appearance." Engels responded to Schelling's denunciation of Hegel: "We are not afraid to fight. ... we shall rise confidently against the new enemy; in the end, one will be found among us who will prove that the sword of enthusiasm is just as good as the

sword of genius." And it would not be long before Engels would find one who could indeed match enthusiasm with genius.

Since Hegel's death, Hegelianism had broken through the walls of the academy and, unrestrained by their teacher, Hegel's young followers had been drawing revolutionary conclusions.

The world had completely changed since the death of both Hegel and Goethe in 1831. In 1830 France was hit by a recession, causing widespread unemployment and hunger; an invasion of Algeria organized to divert attention failed and on May 29 masses of angry workers came into the streets, and to their own surprise, took control of Paris. Their spokesmen were liberal-democrats, and a deal was done. But when the king dissolved parliament on July 26, the proletariat of Paris set up barricades again, the soldiers refused move against them, and the King was forced to abdicate. The July 1830 Revolution not only brought about a constitutional monarchy in France, a regime which would be in constant crisis until falling in 1848, but the repercussions of the Revolution spread across Europe, with a democratic movement growing quickly in Germany. In England the Chartist movement grew rapidly during this decade. The Birmingham Political Union was formed by Thomas Attwood in 1830, to press for parliamentary reform, Wm Benbow was advocating armed struggle to secure a workers' holiday and in October 1831 mobs burnt and looted in Bristol, demanding parliamentary reform. The 1832 Reform Bill, far from assuaging democratic demands, only spurred on the Chartist movement.

During the previous decades, there had been many barricades erected in Paris and many battles between police and workers in Britain, but during the 1830s, these movements of the oppressed were increasingly choosing their own leaders, pursuing political demands of their own and were actually driving the reform agenda. *This* was completely new.

Political struggle over the preceding centuries could be broadly characterized as the progress of bourgeois liberal reform against the resistance of the privileged classes. To Enlightenment thinkers like Hegel, outbursts of anger by the rabble fell into the same category as degradation of the environment. Apparently arising directly out of material conditions, such events could not be understood as an expression of an idea, as political movements. Ideas and progress grew out of the culture and institutions created by the enlightened elite, not at the hands of the uncultured rabble

who were, on the contrary, excluded from the political process and culture in general.

Under these new conditions, Hegelianism was untenable without radical transformation. Such a transformation of the philosophy of the radical Young Hegelians, into a genuinely emancipatory idea began around 1841, coincidently with the move by the Prussian Monarchy to suppress it, and the publication of Ludwig Feuerbach's "Essence of Christianity" (1881).

The rabble placing a claim for political leadership of society made the kind of totalizing idealism of Hegel's system unusable as an emancipatory doctrine, even whilst the masses would continue to be inspired by utopian ideals. Hegel would not be the last to produce such systems, but this kind of all-embracing systematization has to be accompanied by a retreat from the rough and tumble of political life. The followers of Comte's system of positivism for example, never went beyond proselytizing and the great Auguste Blanqui, who was to be found on any barricade in France when not in prison, turned to a cosmological system in his dotage.

Hegel's commitment to his system routinely led him into serious errors in his history of philosophy. Increasingly, the significance of people and events were distorted in order to fit them into a pre-existing schema. Once a philosophical system begins to act as a barrier to critique, rather than drawing its nourishment from critique, it is dead for the purposes of emancipation. The move from spirit as the product of human activity to Spirit as pre-existing and *manifested* in human activity, was suggestive in this respect. It is for this reason that emancipatory readings of Hegel invariably return to his early works for an interpretation of Spirit. As Marx put it: "*History* does *nothing*, it 'possesses *no* immense wealth', it 'wages *no* battles'. It is *man*, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; 'history' is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve *its own* aims; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims" (Marx 1975f).

This was and remains a problem with Hegel's system, and in the process of its appropriation the architecture of his system was generally discarded by all those who sought to use it for emancipatory purposes. These points are relatively straight forward, and not a lot of heat need be generated in criticizing Hegel for totalizing and systematizing. Exactly what was appropriated from Hegel's philosophy, his *method* as it is said (Engels

1990), is the subject of the next two chapters, but first we must look at some serious questions of principle which blinded Hegel to certain social issues.

Firstly, Hegel held that in Nature "there is nothing new under the Sun" (Hegel 1956: §60). Neither the modern day physicist nor Hegel suggest that nothing *changes* in Nature, and even the physicists who theorize about the Big Bang assume that they can determine the laws of physics applicable at *that time* on the basis of a logical deduction from what they perceive *now*. Hegel knew that the continents were the products of a process of geological development, but he thought that human beings appeared on new continents, complete with a characteristic physiology, as if springing from the ground (Houlgate 2005: 173).

So Hegel shared an idea which is still very common today, that the development of human life can be sharply divided into two stages, firstly the natural process which produced the human physiology (which Hegel took to be more or less as per the Old Testament), and secondly the cultural process, which begins only after the human form has been completed. Hegel did not see any overlap or interpenetration between nature and culture in the production of the human form and uncritically accepted the nature/culture dichotomy. Consequently he took the relations between the sexes and between the peoples of different cultures to be more or less *given by Nature*, rather than being products of *culture*. So even though cultural critics today rely on Hegel's critical method, Hegel himself underestimated the extent to which human beings are themselves products of labor.[45] The point is that what is made by culture can be unmade by culture.

It was Feuerbach who first raised the criticism against Hegel, that he failed to appreciate that people were natural, sensuous, suffering human beings, not just thinkers. Feuerbach made "*man, together with nature* the basis of man, the *exclusive, universal, and highest* object of philosophy – *anthropology*, together with *physiology*, the universal science" (Feuerbach 1990). But in making human beings products of their physiology rather than their culture, Feuerbach duplicated Hegel's error of an absolute separation of nature and culture, though from the other side.

[45] Merlin Donald has shown in detail how homo sapiens evolved out of a protracted period during which our evolutionary predecessors created and used culture (Donald 1991).

In his critique of Hegel in the "1844 Manuscripts," Marx makes much of the fact that Hegel gives no recognition at all for human beings as *natural* beings, with needs that have their source in Nature, i.e., outside of all human labor processes. And as if that were not enough, Hegel places the figure who is furthest removed from Nature, the philosopher, at the pinnacle of the whole process. The strength of Hegel's philosophy is that he makes human life a product of Mind. After Darwin published "Origins of Species," Marx and Engels were able to claim the human species was itself the product of labor (Engels 1987).

It is not possible to resolve the nature *versus* nurture argument by declarations of principle (Blunden 2007). It can only be resolved by empirical investigation, but it can be said definitively now that the human form as we find it today is the product of *overlapping* and interpenetrating processes of biological evolution and cultural development. Because Hegel did not see this, in his efforts to demonstrate that social life was intelligible, Hegel had to *prove by logic* the inferiority of women and the right of civilized nations to exploit their colonies (Hegel 1952). These efforts are now seen as transparently racist and misogynistic apologia.

Hegel constructed his "Philosophy of Nature" as a logical critique of the concept of Space. This is not as wrong as it appears to be at first sight. Human activity is continuously under development, producing ever new and diverse forms of practical interaction with Nature. Only that activity as it is at any given time can form the basis for a critique of concepts of Nature, i.e., of the world beyond human labor processes. Hegel mistakenly thought that Nature can be completely understood by thought alone. He overlooked the fact that he did *not* live at the end of history, that any theory of nature is essentially incomplete, because time always brings new forms of activity, bringing to light new problems with our conceptions of Nature. In other words, natural science is a cultural practice, not solely a process belonging to the domain of the philosopher. Hegel should have listened to Goethe on this point.

Einstein resolved the question definitively with his critique of Euclidean geometry, which can be validated by a careful examination of the *practice* of measuring distance and time. So Hegel's error in his approach to the problem of the intelligibility of Nature was also a result of the move he made around 1804/5, from Spirit being the nature of human beings en

masse, to being something which pre-existed human history and manifested itself in human history, from being human activity itself to being an extramundane driver of activity.

Next, we come to a key innovation made by Marx. For Hegel, 'objectification' means making one's activity into something objective. All production is objectification. In his system of 1805/6 he claimed that the circulation of the products of one's labor on the market was an important mode of recognition, practically demonstrating that one's mode of life is valued by others (Hegel 1983: 120). But in this conception, Hegel elides the distinction between an individual's identity and the social formation within which their production is carried out. This elision is consonant with Hegel's conception of social class. Hegel divided society into three classes, agriculture (the immediate class), business (the particular class) and public service (the universal class) (1952: 131). He lumped poor peasants and agricultural laborers into the agricultural class, along with rich farmers and the landed aristocracy; he lumped wage workers along with their employers into the business class, and low ranking civil servants into the 'universal class' along with powerful state officials. Hegel cannot see that an servant does not necessarily take pride in and identify with his master's wealth and power even though it is his labor which produced it.

The positive construction Hegel places on production for exchange, even when production is based on wage-labor, cannot be defended even within Hegel's own terms. A wage worker is not simply a person engaged in manufacture, but part of a class of people who have been *separated from* the means of production they need in order to live, and must sell their labor-power to those who own the means of production. The product of their labor is not their own property. The product belongs to the capitalist and is a form of capital put into circulation for the sole purpose of the self-expansion of capital. Consequently, the proletarian does not express his or her own subjectivity in the labor process, but on the contrary makes a rod for their own back.[46]

[46] This was certainly Marx's position, but even in Marx's day there were tradespeople who, despite working for a wage, had considerable control over their own labor and would have seen themselves as engaging in a 'profession' irrespective of their status as wage workers.

As soon as the proletariat came on to the scene of history in its own right, Hegel's subsumption of the laborer's subjectivity under that of the employer became unsustainable.

We will return to this later, suffice it to say that consideration of the labor process as an objectification of subjectivity in isolation from the determination of an individual's identity in the social relations of production is untenable for an emancipatory social theory. Under what conditions is this *my* product, *my* achievement, an objectification of *my* labor? On the other hand, Marx's focus on the production process in his later work is an unnecessary limitation of the scope of the concept of activity. However, if we see 'production' as all those activities which are *necessary for the reproduction of the community*, for which production narrowly understood is the microcosm, then Marx gives us an approach to *whole* social process.

Finally, we come to the question of the state. As remarked above when we discussed the young Hegel's motivations in taking up philosophy, the creation of a German state was a necessary step for the liberation of the German people in a Europe dominated by Great Powers. He never knew a modern social movement. In his "Philosophy of Right," he affirmed the need for forms of collaboration mediating between the state and the individual; an individual could not identify with the state without mediating forms of activity. But Hegel never doubted that it was both possible and necessary for the state to mediate the social conflicts between its citizens, such that *all* citizens would see the state as the expression of their own subjectivity. This entailed a rationalization of hereditary monarchy and the divine right of kings. Again, once revolutionary movements of the oppressed took up the banner of social progress, such a philosophy was untenable for an emancipatory social theory. And Marx saw no need at all for a state placing itself above society for the purpose of mediating its conflicts, since in his experience, the state was always an instrument of whichever class dominated in civil society.

So much for the fate of Hegel's theory and those aspects of his philosophy which became outmoded once emancipatory movements of the oppressed entered the historical stage. In the next section we will turn to those aspects of Hegel's philosophy which were appropriated by Marx for an emancipatory social theory.

11. Marx and the Foundations of Activity Theory

> "Feuerbach consequently does not see that the 'religious sentiment' is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual that he analyzes belongs in reality to a particular social form." (Marx 1845)

Once the Prussian government placed the *Rheinische Zeitung* under especially severe censorship in 1843 and radical journalism became impossible, the young Marx took the opportunity to improve his education, and after marrying his childhood sweetheart moved to Paris: "the old university of philosophy and the new capital of the new world!" he wrote to Ruge (Marx 1975a). Here he could take up the study of French socialism under the direction of the League of the Just, secret societies of French workers, the mystical Christian socialist Pierre Leroux, utopian communists like Victor Considérant and Étienne Cabet, the poets Lamartine, Heine and Herwegh, the anarchists Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin, as well as other German refugees like Karl Grün and Arnold Ruge (Wheen 1999).

In August 1843, he met up with Engels, and after a trip to London to study political economy, returned to Paris, but unable to restrain his *lèse majesté*, Marx soon found himself exiled again, and with family and friends took up residence in Belgium. Here they published the bitterly polemical "Holy Family" (Marx 1975f) attacking the Young Hegelians, and moving on to Feuerbach, Marx put down on a scrap of paper what became known as "Theses on Feuerbach" (Marx 1975g). Engels described this document as "the first document in which is deposited the brilliant germ of the new world outlook" (Engels 1990a), but he wrote this only when publishing it for the first time, 5 years after Marx's death. In "The German Ideology" Marx used a critique of Feuerbach to further elaborate these ideas, and then continued with gusto the polemic against the Young Hegelians, but as Marx later remarked: "We abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of the mice all the more willingly since we had achieved our main purpose – self-clarification" (Marx 1987).

Marx wrote very little on philosophy, and published even less. He worked long and hard in thinking through the philosophical foundations of his practice, but what his activity and writing was the outcome of his reflections, and anyone interested in recovering that initial philosophical

work has to dig for it. What philosophy he wrote tended to be *critique*; even his political writings are either commentary on events or polemical works actually part of a political struggle. Rarely does Marx generalize and rarely does he make predictions – though there are rather charming predictions here and there which betray a revolutionary optimism of most irrepressible stamp. In the main, Marx allowed events themselves and the voices of the various actors to do his thinking, but in the odd page of manuscript or marginal note, he allowed us a glimpse of his inner thinking process.

Activity

"Theses on Feuerbach" (Marx 1975g) is surely the founding document of Activity Theory, even though it remained unknown until after the author's death. A few words are necessary to place it in the context of Hegel critique in Germany at the time it as written.

Hegel had become more conservative since he left behind the materialistic enquiry of his youth, and although still subject to censorship and still critical of the regime, he had actively dissuaded his pupils from involvement in agitation. After his death, Hegelianism was taken directly into political application criticizing existing institutions. But the Young Hegelians were still very idealistic in philosophical terms, as reflected in the phrase of Engels quoted above about "the power of the mind over the world."

Feuerbach, himself a Young Hegelian, had broken with this kind of idealism, and made real, physiological, anthropological human beings the foundation of his philosophy; ideas *reflected* a social and material reality, not the other way around. He illustrated this in "The Essence of Christianity" by demonstrating that a range of Christian ideas – eternal life, the Holy Trinity, the Personal God, etc., etc. – had their origin in earthly relations: the holy family was only a reflection of the real, earthly family, projected on to the heavens in order to give it supernatural justification. But as Marx saw it:

> "§4. ... He overlooks the fact that after completing this work, the chief thing still remains to be done. For the fact that the secular basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this worldly basis. The latter must itself be understood in its contradiction and then, by the removal of

> the contradiction, revolutionized. Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must itself be annihilated theoretically and practically" (Marx 1975g).

So Feuerbach is deluding himself if he thinks that his clever argument to the effect that the story of Mary and Joseph is nothing but a rationalization for the really existing bourgeois family is going have any impact on the believer or on Christian institutions. On the other hand, were the economic basis of the family to be changed, such that women could find good paying work and an income to pay for child care, housework and so on, then the religious rationalization of the family may well be undermined.

Hegel was right in conceiving of a 'formation of consciousness' in which ways of thinking, constellations of culture and ways of living mutually constitute one another. But if the claim that a criterion of truth or rule of inference lay at the heart of a formation of consciousness meant that changes in the form of life were driven by problems in this logical kernel, then he is quite mistaken. Feuerbach was repeating this mistake. Even though he could show that the form of activity was the real foundation reflected in the form of thought, he seemed to think that the form of thought could be changed by rational criticism alone, without first changing the form of activity and the material conditions on which it rested. On the contrary. Marx made this point in the Preface to "The German Ideology" when he ironically suggested that people only drowned because they believed in the law of gravity. "If they were to knock this notion out of their heads, say by stating it to be a superstition, a religious concept, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water" (Marx 1975h). The forms of activity which are reflected in religious consciousness have a real, material foundation, they fulfil a need, and cannot be changed by convincing people to think differently. Activity is not an arbitrary or voluntaristic expression of thought, but has its foundation in the material conditions and the satisfaction of needs.

At a time when for everyone else Hegel was a 'dead dog' (Marx 1996a), it is remarkable that the first thesis praises Hegel (a.k.a. idealism) as against materialism:

> "§1. The main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the Object, actuality, sensuousness, are

> conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence it happened that the active side, in opposition to materialism, was developed by idealism ..." (Marx 1975g)

Natural science was developing by leaps and bounds. By definition, *natural* science, that is, the science of Nature, is reflection on experience from the standpoint that the object being studied is an object existing independently of human activity, according to laws given independently of the human will and perceived by means of passive observation of the object.

The project of natural science, whose philosophical spokespeople were descendants of Descartes and Galileo, was a central pillar of the Enlightenment and a lever for social progress as well as technical progress during the nineteenth century. Idealism, by definition, did not accept the idea of a universe existing independently of human thought and activity, but on the contrary emphasized that aspect of experience which is the product of the subject's own activity.

But:

> "... idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, differentiated from thought-objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity" (Marx 1975g).

So here is the concept which both idealism and 'hitherto-existing materialism' had not grasped: human activity is real, sensuous and itself *objective*, that is to say, in activity human beings are engaged with and constrained by a world which exists independently of their own consciousness, a material world; human activity is not just a thought; activity manifests properties of things existing independently of the individual actor, while at the very same time it is the objective, practical form of a thought.

> "... Hence he does not grasp the significance of 'revolutionary', of 'practical-critical', activity" (Marx 1975g).

The very idea of sensuous contemplation of the world is illusory; 'sensuousness [is] *practical*, human-sensuous activity' (§5) a point that Marx had made in his "1844 Manuscripts" (Marx 1975e). Our knowledge

of the world is our generalized experience of activity in the world.[47] The world is only known to us through such 'practical-critical' (as opposed to contemplative) activity. 'Practical-critical' is here counterposed to theoretical-contemplative activity. Feuerbach 'regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude', and he overlooks the centrality of practical change, not just for its own sake (he thinks that change in the object will result from his ideological exposé), but because 'practical-critical' activity is the only way of changing *or* understanding the object. Nothing in the "Theses" may be taken as belittling thinking or philosophy. Theoretical work is an indispensable *part* of changing an object, which is in turn the *raison d'être* of all genuine theoretical work.

When Marx said that "The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question" (§2), he is making practice the *subject-matter*, *not just the criterion* of truth. "The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question" (§2).

As remarked above, Einstein could have been taking his lead from §8: "... All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice," when he solved the mystery of the apparent lengthening of objects according to their relative speed by a careful study of the practice of measuring length, rather than by reformulating Maxwell's laws of electrodynamics which were after all, only 20 years old at the time. Ideas and theories constitute a reality which can be understood as given by Nature only up to a point; beyond that point, we have to discover the basis in human practice for a given theory or mode of thought, and its limits.

Emphasizing that activity is not simply itself an object of contemplation, but is also the process of formation of the *subject*, Marx said: "... The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-

[47] Marx says of Feuerbach that "... he therefore regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and defined only in its dirty-Jewish form of appearance." This is an allusion to a debate in Germany at time in which the Jewish God had to demonstrate his reality by "getting his hands dirty" making the world, whereas the Christian God could be known by thought alone. That is, Feuerbach has fallen unwittingly into this Christian prejudice which elevates theoretical thought above practice.

change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*" (§3). His remark that "the materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, ... is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society," demonstrates how central this active conception of reality is to emancipatory politics.

In the "Theses," Marx is setting out a position from which it will be possible to appropriate Hegel, as well as the entire tradition of classical German philosophy standing behind Hegel: the *ultimate substance* of the world for the purposes of a humanistic, emancipatory social science and political practice is *activity*. Activity is the purposive actions of human beings, understood as social beings, all of whose sentiments and ideas are social constructs. Human beings are not just 'like' other human beings; they are essentially *part of the ensemble* of social relations which are mobilized in activity, part of a larger social and historical process. Activity is simultaneously subjective and objective; activity is the 'middle term' mediating between subject and object.

Marx says very little about 'activity' after 1845, but his attention is directed everywhere to the "rational solution [of problems] in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice" (§8). And when he says: "The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society or social humanity" (§10), this is a clear indication that the *whole* of social life is to be taken as the domain of a humanistic social science, not any subordinate part of society.

A word on terminology. In the context of reading Marx, 'practice', 'praxis' and 'activity' are formally synonymous. But there are differences in connotation which have developed over time. 'Practice' forms a mutually constituting pair of terms with 'theory', with theory and practice mutually constituting one another. 'Praxis' is sometimes used in the sense of a unity of theory and practice.

Marx did not intend a precise distinction or use the words in a specialized way, and it is Marx's idea which is of interest to us here. We will come to a precise definition of 'activity' (*Tätigkeit*) later when considering those writers who gave it a precise meaning. But in general, it is fair to say that Marx did not include within the ambit of the term 'activity' or 'practice' the physiological processes through which our actions are realized, but whether he meant to include those things we *can* do consciously, but generally do

without thinking, such as stepping over a curb, is an open question. The word 'action' is generally reserved for those things we do to achieve an immediate aim, such as 'go to point A'. 'Activity' and 'practice' refer to combinations of actions whose meaning is culturally mediated. 'Practice' is generally reserved for those activities in which the reference to theory is more explicit, whilst 'activity' includes practices in which the actors have never reflected on *why* they do it, even though they do it purposively. But it is unlikely that Marx meant such distinctions to be explicit when he penned the "Theses on Feuerbach."

One more thing to clarify the conception of activity with which Marx grounded his theoretical work. The first section of "The German Ideology" which is formally directed at Feuerbach, but which is transparently a work of self-clarification, includes the following passage:

> "The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the *real individuals*, their *activity* and the *material conditions* under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way" (Marx 1975i: 31, my emphasis).

This formulation constitutes a further development of the claim made for activity in the "Theses"; Marx added "the real individuals" and "the material condition under which they live." This could be taken simply as a clarification of the term 'activity' – after all you can't have activity without real individuals and material conditions. But it is not just that. I take this as the a materialistic transformation of Hegel's claim that the subject is the unity of Individual, Particular and Universal. In fact, this was always implicit in Hegel's philosophy, but it was mystified and idealistically distorted. "The *real individuals*, their *activity* and the *material conditions* under which they live" is not only exhaustive, but absolutely precise in specifying a foundation for a social theory in terms of well-defined mutually constituting concepts. It plays the equivalent role to that which in natural science is played by the philosophical concepts of matter, movement and natural law. We see that nothing like these conceptions is posited by Marx when he says that his premises are real individuals, their activity and the material conditions. Note also that these conceptions are at a more

fundamental level than concepts like 'forces of production', 'economic structure' or 'ideological forms' and so on, which Marx used later on.

Marx is not setting out the explanatory principles or axioms of a science in these passages. Such ideas can only be the outcome of a lengthy process of criticism and study. What he has created in these manuscripts, in the first months of his collaborative work with Engels, is the foundation of a world view, in particular a conception of *substance*[48].

Social Formations

During these early years, Marx also formulated his understanding of 'social formation' or 'Gestalt' in the sense we have been using the word, especially in his analysis of the 1848 Revolution and subsequent events in France. There has been a lot of Marxist social theory since 1852, but I just want to draw attention to a few points from "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte."

The actors in history are corporate subjects, 'personages' (*Personen*) who play out a role in a drama that they participate in creating, the conditions for which already exist. The tragedy that they are acting out is only then unfolding and Hegel had a point when he said that "The owl of Minerva, takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering" (Hegel 1952: 13). The conditions are only in the process of formation but people must act. "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx 1979: 103). Part of those conditions are the literature and mythology available to the various strata of people through which they understand their own circumstances and history.

Marx used a dramaturgical metaphor in which individual figures – 'historical personages' – don the costumes of a hero from the past or from literature and mythology. Others, who share the same attitudes and aspirations identify with the historical allusion, and recognize the actor as speaking for them. The "world-historic personage" together with the groups and individuals supporting them, then play their role in a drama in which the players improvise on a known script as the narrative unfolds. Marx is

[48] The concept of 'substance' will be dealt with later, in Chapter 18.

pointing to political subjects in the form of some prominent individual acting as a corporate individual, to speak on behalf of a group which is thereby constituted as a political agent.

Social activity is possible only thanks to the use of artifacts of some kind (including words and images, but also land, etc.) with which people identify themselves and each other. Symbols and icons are invariably used in this way to constitute social groups; *there is no 'natural' form of political association*. All these symbols are meaningful because of their connection with certain concrete concepts, associated with certain modes of life. Just as Feuerbach demonstrated in relation to Christian imagery, all social formations represent themselves symbolically.

Social conflict takes the form of a clash of differing concepts, concepts belonging to different forms of practice and ways of living, represented using signs or artifacts of various kinds. Thus, large numbers of people organize themselves around different concepts of the world. Marx mentions mainly but not exclusively economic class fractions – the peasantry, the lumpenproletariat, the petit-bourgeoisie, and so on, but also groupings formed around religion, region or even degrees of radicalism and so on.

To one degree or another, the material conditions limit or foster different groupings according to their relation to the economic structure, much as the terrain plays its part in the fate of contending armies on the field of battle.

Marx never worked out a 'theory of the state' and nor did he formulate a theory of politics, but his political commentaries like "The 18th Brumaire" give us an insight into how he understood the formation of social subjects, and social processes generally. The real actors, for Marx, are corporate subjects, self-conscious to one degree or another. Marx talks of the actions of the proletariat even at a time when they have only the barest glimpse of self-consciousness, when they are 'in-themselves'. Social subjects are entities which develop in the way described by Hegel in his Logic. They are developing 'configurations of consciousness' or *Gestalten*.

So, on the basis of a conception of the world as 'real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live', Marx was able to appropriate Hegel's conception of Gestalt or 'formation of consciousness' in his analysis of the social process.

Finally, we must review the work that absorbed most of Marx's life-time: the critique of political economy.

12. Marx's Critique of Political Economy

> "In bourgeois society, the commodity-form of the product of labor is the economic *cell-form*." (Marx 1867)

As editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1842-43, Marx found himself in the 'embarrassing position' of having to discuss 'material interests', and felt his knowledge of such questions did not allow him to express an opinion (Marx 1987). In January 1844, Marx wrote his "Comments on James Mill," in which he elaborated a somewhat moralistic critique of bourgeois society, including passages like the following:

> "When I produce *more* of an object than I myself can directly use, my *surplus* production is cunningly *calculated* for your need. It is only in *appearance* that I produce a surplus of this object. In reality I produce a *different* object, the object of your production, which I intend to exchange against this surplus, an exchange which in my mind I have already completed. The *social* relation in which I stand to you, my labor for your need, is therefore also a mere *semblance*, and our complementing each other is likewise a mere *semblance*, the basis of which is mutual plundering. The intention of *plundering*, of *deception*, is necessarily present in the background, for since our exchange is a selfish one, on your side as on mine, and since the selfishness of each seeks to get the better of that of the other, we necessarily seek to deceive each other. ..." (Marx 1975d: 225-6)

Marx played with turning Hegelian ideas against themselves, while exploring the implications of private property, inequality of wealth, credit and particularly exchange of commodities, on the quality of human relationships. This was at the very beginning of the development of his communist ideas, but even here one can see elements of the critique of political economy which Engels was still knocking into shape 50 years later. Even before Marx left Paris in January 1845, a publisher had given him a down payment on his soon-to-be-completed critique of political economy. And this work was soon-to-be-completed for another 22 years, until the pressure of involvement in the work of the newly-formed International in 1864 forced Marx to honor his promissory notes. Not that Marx was idle during these years; Engels inherited a mountain of manuscripts from which to assemble the second and third volumes of

"Capital" and if time had not run out for him, a fourth volume on theories of surplus value.

The "Grundrisse," a draft written in 1857-58, begins with the words: "The object before us, to begin with, *material production*" followed up with a Hegelian exploration of relations between production, distribution and exchange (1986a). On 2 April 1858, Marx wrote to Engels that he would soon begin work on his *Critique of Political Economy* and the first of 6 books would be on Capital (followed by Landed Property, Wage Labor, etc.); this first book fell into 4 sections: Capital in general, Competition, Credit and Share capital, and the first section on Capital in general would be 1. Value, 2. Money, 3. Capital.

A few months earlier he had written the famous passage known as "The Method of Political Economy" which says in part:

> "It would seem right to start with the real and concrete, with the actual presupposition, e.g. in political economy to start with the population, which forms the basis and the subject of the whole social act of production. Closer consideration shows, however, that this is wrong. Population is an abstraction if, for instance, one disregards the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn remain an empty phrase if one does not know the elements on which they are based. e.g. wage labor, capital, etc. These presuppose exchange, division of labor, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage labor, without value, money, price etc. If one were to start with population, it would be a chaotic conception [*Vorstellung*] of the whole, and through closer definition one would arrive analytically at increasingly simple concepts [*Begriff*]; from the imagined concrete, one would move to more and more tenuous abstractions until one had arrived at the simplest determinations. From there it would be necessary to make a return journey until one finally arrived once more at population, which this time would be not a chaotic conception of a whole, but a rich totality of many determinations and relations. The first course is the one taken by political economy historically at its inception. ... The latter is obviously the correct scientific method" (Marx 1986: 37).

So here we see that Marx has appropriated from Hegel, the idea of science developing from an initial 'chaotic' stage which leads to the production of an abstract concept of the subject matter; and then a second,

genuinely scientific process in which the whole subject matter is reconstructed from this abstract concept(s). The point is: with what concept or concepts to begin?

Abstraction

Marx went on to make the following criticism of Hegel:

> "Hegel accordingly arrived at the illusion that the real was the result of thinking synthesizing itself within itself, delving ever deeper its own depths, and moving by its inner motivation; actually, the method of advancing from the abstract to the concrete is simply the way in which thinking assimilates the concrete and reproduces it as a mental concrete" (Marx 1986 continued).

Marx grants that Hegel has described how thought appropriates its subject matter, but according to Hegel this is *also* the process of production of the subject matter. ("The sequence of the conceptions, which arise in this way, is at the same time a sequence of realizations." Hegel 1952: 35). The theorist may reconstruct the concrete whole out of its concept, but this is not the way the concrete whole comes into being historically, i.e., a simple relation first appearing and then followed by its successive concretization. Marx claims:

> "This is, however, by no means the process by which the concrete itself originates. For example, the simplest economic category, e.g. exchange value, presupposes population, population which produces under definite conditions, as well as a distinct type of family, or community, or state, etc. Exchange-value cannot exist except as an abstract, one-sided relation of an already existing concrete living whole" (Marx 1986 continued).

The theorist can acquire an abstraction and theorize with it, but this theorizing can go only so far without empirical support. It is only with the creation of social conditions in which the relation can develop its content, that the real meaning of the abstraction becomes clear. The theorist can then recognize this content, but it was the process of social life not the theorist which 'drew the conclusion'. So an abstraction can only be understood as part of the whole social formation, something which is not produced by thought but by social life. So what appears to be a product of thought, is actually a product of social life, apprehended in thought.

Scientific theories develop out of abstract concepts, but historical forms of human life do not. But as social life develops, abstract concepts take on new, more concrete, practical content.

> "As a category ... exchange value leads an antediluvian existence. Hence, [to the philosopher] the movement of the categories appears as the real act of production ... this is true in so far as the concrete totality regarded as a conceptual totality, as a mental concretum, is in fact a product of thinking, of comprehension; yet it is by no means a product of the self-evolving concept whose thinking proceeds outside and above perception and conception, but of assimilation and transformation of the perceptions and images into concepts. The totality as a conceptual totality seen by the mind is a product of the thinking mind, which assimilates the world in the only way open to it, a way which differs from the artistic-, religious- and practical-intellectual assimilation of this world" (Marx 1986 continued).

Marx does not proceed from the standpoint of natural science, i.e., the independent existence of the object, as is the case with *merely* theoretical thought, although the subject matter nevertheless remains objective in relation to any individual:

> "The real subject remains outside the mind and independent of it – that it to say, so long as the mind adopts a purely speculative, purely theoretical attitude. Hence the subject, society, must always be envisaged as the premises of conception even when the theoretical method is employed" (Marx 1986 continued).

Marx contrasts the historical production of the categories and their reproduction in science. In the "Philosophy of Right," Hegel claimed that "The series of concepts which this development yields is therefore at the same time a series of shapes of experiences, and philosophic science must treat them accordingly" (§32). But in 1833, Hegel's editor, Gans, agreed with Marx, making an addition to §32 referring to the anomaly of treating property prior to the family, even though it is obvious that the family is prior to property in time. Marx concedes that it is from 'possession' that Hegel begins the "Philosophy of Right," and possession develops into property, a juridical relation, in and through the formation of civil society. The family likewise, as it appears in the "Philosophy of Right," is a juridical relation, even though it has its roots in subjective spirit. So *contra* Hegel, the sequence of categories as they are produced in history, is not the same

as the logical sequence of categories as they are reproduced in science. As Gans explains in his addition, the historically earlier conception becomes more concrete according to the Gestalt within which it exists.

Marx observes that even though all the fundamental categories of political economy have existed for thousands of years, they had little practical significance until a fully developed market economy arose.

> "The simplest abstraction which plays the key role in modern [political] economy, and which expresses an ancient relation existing in all forms of society, appears to be true in practice in this abstract form only as a category of the most modern society" (1986).

The abstractions known to science come into existence through the development of the subject matter, forms of social activity. It was only when the entire society was reorganized in accordance with capital, that abstract[49] wage labor and money as a purely abstract relation came into being and could become a subject for scientific study. That is, abstract social relations are the product of the development of modern society, and it is the objectively existing abstract social relations which make it possible for science to apprehend these relations in their practical significance. Hegel deplored factory labor, the destruction of social fabric, the growing power of wealth and other aspects of the development of capitalism, but he never saw that these were aspects of a process of *abstraction* located not in thought but in practical activity.

This idea of 'abstract' forms of activity underlying the formation of abstractions in the head is a novel discovery of Marx. Abstraction is not just a process of thought reflecting upon activity, but a product of activity itself. This insight did not receive a lot of attention before Evald Ilyenkov (1960) took it up and developed the idea within the tradition of Cultural Historical Activity Theory. We will return this later.

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[49] A new shade of meaning to the word 'abstraction' is being introduced here. 'To abstract' means to tear something out of its interconnections with other things; thus an abstract idea is one lacking in nuances of meaning, depth and interconnections. 'Abstract' labor means labor of a uniform type sold on the market by the hour; in abstract social relations people count as numbers, reduced to isolated individuals in anonymous collectives, lacking all the complex interconnections which mark real communities.

At this point Marx knew that he had to build his critique of political economy around the simple categories which 'come into their own', so to speak, in the developed social conditions found in bourgeois society, but at this point (1857) he saw these 'simplest relations' as being Value, Money, and Capital.

In January 1859, Marx produced his "Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy" which was published the following June, and the sequence of categories to be dealt with had completely changed. The first book is indeed to be on Capital (in the final form, the *entire* work is "Capital"), but the first section deals exclusively with the *Commodity*. It would be a further 8 years before Volume I of "Capital" went to the printer.

His letters during these 8 years show that the work he intended to publish covered the entire scope of the 3 volumes of "Capital," of which the 1859 work was to be the first part. In November 1866 he became aware that "even intelligent people did not properly understand the question" of the commodity as presented in the 1859 work, and the first chapter of "Capital" would have to deal with this afresh (Marx 1987b) and only a couple of months later, the proofs were off to the printer for Volume I.

So it seems that Marx only formulated the famous first chapter of "Capital" a few weeks before going to the printer. With good reason, we read a considerable amount of wisdom into this chapter, but it seems that this wisdom found its form only in the process of dialogue with his closest comrades, who just could not understand it. This is all we have to help us understand the process by which Marx came to these ideas, we must simply take what he has written for what it says.

In the Preface to the first edition of "Capital," written on 25 July 1867, Marx explains:

> "Every beginning is difficult, holds in all sciences. To understand the first chapter, especially the section that contains the analysis of commodities, will, therefore, present the greatest difficulty. That which concerns more especially the analysis of the substance of value and the magnitude of value, I have, as much as it was possible, popularized. The value-form, whose fully developed shape is the money-form, is very elementary and simple. Nevertheless, the human mind has for more than 2,000 years sought in vain to get to the bottom of it all, whilst on the other hand, to the successful anal-

> ysis of much more composite and complex forms, there has been at least an approximation. Why? Because the body, as an organic whole, is more easy of study than are the cells of that body. In the analysis of economic forms, moreover, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both. But in bourgeois society, the commodity-form of the product of labor – or value-form of the commodity – is the economic *cell-form*" (Marx 1996: 8).

– the *Urphänomen* of political economy.

The Commodity Relation

Marx began his defining and most famous work, "Capital," with the commodity relation. Not the most developed, characteristic and dominant relation of contemporary society, capital; not with the most ubiquitous and pervasive relation, money; not with the most fundamental and determinative relation, production; or the triad of production, distribution and exchange with which he began the *Grundrisse*; not with the source of all wealth, labor; not with the individual economic agent.

He began with a relation which is hardly ever to be seen in a modern, developed society, the commodity relation, i.e., exchange of commodities, the relation which, in a explicit reference to Goethe's concept, he acknowledged as the 'cell-form' of bourgeois society. It turns out, of course, that money is a commodity, the 'universal' commodity, that labor is the use-value of the commodity, labor-power, that capital is a specific form of commodity, and in fact, all the phenomena of bourgeois society are shown to be species of the commodity relation.

It took 20 years of critical study of political economy and philosophy, and an unremitting determination to resolve what "the human mind has for more than 2,000 years sought in vain to get to the bottom of." But Marx discovered that exchange of commodities arises out of very basic and widespread conditions of human life, and once people start producing for exchange, and appropriate conditions are present, a series of interconnected processes is set in motion. The conditions for each part of this process can be readily understood, and what is more, a tendency can be observed for capital accumulation to foster the very conditions that it itself requires for its own life-process, establishing the conditions characteristic of a Gestalt.

So, even though capital is a very different and much more developed relation as compared with exchange of commodities, with the commodity relation Marx has grasped the *concept* of bourgeois, i.e., capitalist, society. Exchange of commodities is the germ-cell, the seed, which once planted in suitable conditions, will grow into capitalism. And to really understand a social formation is to grasp its concept in this way. It is not enough to know all its attributes – revolutionizing of the forces of production, rapid accumulation of capital, expansion of wage labor, colonization, growing inequality, and so on – we have to grasp its concept.

The commodity relation cannot form an explanatory principle for *everything* to be observed in modern society because even in the most developed capitalist society, not *everything* is subsumed under capital, yet. The nuclear family for example, which harbors unpaid labor as well as love and familial solidarity, may be penetrated by commodity relations, but in essence the nuclear family neither originates in the market nor is it a species of commodity exchange, yet. There are many things we do which are not motivated by the production of commodities or the accumulation of capital.

Over the past 200 years, an undeniable tendency for the market to penetrate more and more aspects of human life has manifested itself wherever it is not firmly suppressed. But this tendency can never be absolute for if there is nothing external to the market, no Nature providing the conditions for human life, no working class communities reproducing the next generation of workers, no public bodies restraining the ravages of the market, then human life would be extinguished. But Marx did discover the germ of capitalism, to which all aspects and relations of bourgeois society can be traced.

Marx was frustrated that "Capital" was simply not understood by recognized authorities in political economy; even Engels wanted to skip over the first chapter in his review (Marx 1988). There is no doubt that Marx wanted "Capital" to be accepted as a work of science, not ethics, or politics – he even emphasized to Kugelmann that "Contribution to the critique of political economy" was "merely a subtitle" (Marx 1985) though it can well be argued that it *ought* to have been the main title. Despite Marx's own hostility to any discussion of ethics (for example Marx 1987a), "Capital" is as much a work of ethics as it is a work of science. "Capital" is replete with words which have no place in a work of science: 'egoism',

'exploitation', 'estrangement', 'degradation', etc. Marx tries to deny it, but one cannot avoid the conclusion that "Capital" is a premier work on ethics (Brenkert 1983). When Marx observes:

> "The secret of the expression of value, namely, that all kinds of labor are equal and equivalent, because, and so far as they are human labor in general, cannot be deciphered, until the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice. This, however, is possible only in a society in which the great mass of the produce of labor takes the form of commodities, in which, consequently, the dominant relation between man and man, is that of owners of commodities" (Marx 1996a: 70).

then we can see that Marx has provided us with a social basis for the development of ethical principles. A struggle for the emancipation of the working class and the abolition of private property in the means of production, to which Marx is committed, clearly pose a range of ethical problems. As Marx has already explained the dramatic and contradictory impact of the market in ethical terms in the *Communist Manifesto*:

> "The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation" (Marx 1976a: 486).

With the commodity relation, as the germ-cell of bourgeois society, Marx not only grasps the concept of the matter *scientifically*, but also *ethically*. In the market "the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice" while "resolving personal worth into exchange value, etc., etc." Just what relation will *transcend* the "popular prejudice" of "universal human equality" and create the ethical foundation

for a better form of society? These are open questions, which we will return to later.

One cannot discuss Marx and psychology without touching on fetishism, the idea of Marx which is most often associated with psychology. This idea was elaborated brilliantly in the fourth section of the first chapter of "Capital" (Marx 1996a: 81), where Marx turns inside out Hegel's idea that wage laborers gain recognition through the valuation of their products on the market. Marx observed that people have long since lost sight of the idea of products circulating on the market as products of the labor of definite people, and do *not* see their relation to the other people in the market as human relationships *mediated* by commodities; on the contrary, people ascribe human powers to commodities. So if a product of their labor is valued at a given amount, people do not see this as a relationship between their labor and the labor of the person whose needs are met by their labor, but rather that the product exercises greater or lesser social power.

This idea has very broad application; it is not only in the production of commodities that human relationships are mediated by artifacts. *All interactions between people are mediated by artifacts*. Human beings create and maintain their relationships with each other by means of the production of artifacts and vesting these artifacts with meaning and value.

Thus Marx shows how 'fetishism' – the naïve religious belief in the power of icons and other objects of religious significance – is by no means the preserve of societies governed by priests, but is ubiquitous in modern bourgeois society. This is most striking in the form of value – something which exists not in the eye of the beholder, something merely subjective, but is embedded in real social relations sustained by the market. Value adheres to products, while at the same time, value expresses nothing more than the relation between the consumer and producer of the commodity.

To a great extent, the aim of Marx's work is to *expose* the deception and mystification involved in commodity fetishism as a result of the dominance of commodity production. In the "Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction," he said: "For Germany, the *criticism of religion* is in the main complete, and the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism" (Marx 1975c: 175), and went on to illustrate his approach to the critique of religion, in line with the ideas later expressed in "Theses on Feuerbach" and discussed above. The use of the *motif* of fetishism, a

form of religious consciousness, to describe the ideological hold that commodity production has over us, allowed Marx to tie the issue of critique of ideology to its 'secular' foundation in activity. "The base of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. ... *Religious* distress is ... the *expression* of real distress ... The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions*. The criticism of religion is, therefore, *in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears* the *halo* of which is religion" (Marx 1975c: 175-6). Thus Marx makes it clear why a *critique* of political economy must at the same time be a *science*: commodity production meets real needs, it is a necessary illusion, an illusion with real content; it is the mode of existence of bourgeois society. Commodity fetishism is not an illusion so much as the ideal aspect of a specific mode of life.

Marx showed how, in bourgeois society, objectification of labor leads not to self-affirmation, but to alienation and enslavement, and likened the power of the ideology in bourgeois society to religious fetishism. In recovering the notion of social life as a Gestalt, in place of Hegel's 'society of mutual reconciliation' (Marx 1975b: 87) Marx found a social formation based on deeply antagonistic contradictions.

13. Conclusions from this Historical Excursus

Our narrative began with Vygotsky in 1924, but the ideas which are crucial to our analysis of the story of cultural psychology could not be described in clear outline without an excursus into their nineteenth century German origins. This is particularly true not so much of their sources in nineteenth century psychology, but rather in the whole notion of science which makes Vygotsky's work so important for us today, well beyond the boundaries of psychology. So before returning to the Congress of Psychoneurology in 1924, let us summarize what we have learnt from Goethe, Hegel and Marx.

The key insights for a critical appropriation of Hegel's philosophy Marx learnt off his early teachers, Ludwig Feuerbach and Moses Hess. Instead of throwing out Hegel's absolute idealism and opting for an anthropological materialism such as Feuerbach's, Marx was able to interpret and appropriate Hegel's Spirit through the notion of *activity*: "All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice" (1975g). And instead of taking history to be the work of Spirit, Marx took as his only premises: "the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity" (1975i), and "men make their own history, ... but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (1979). This is how Marx understood Hegel's Spirit. As a result, we can read the work of Hegel in a thoroughly modern way, without appeal to an extramundane spirit or Hegel's arcane idealistic terminology.

Marx affirmed that the comprehension of a complex whole, such as bourgeois society, had to begin with a simple concept, but not just any concept. As Goethe has proposed, the foundation for the understanding of a complex whole is the discovery of its 'cell-form', its *Urphänomen*. The great philosophical significance of the *Urphänomen* is that it is not just some abstract principle or law or mechanism, but an empirically observable unit of the whole, and the logical prototype of the whole phenomenon. The *Urphänomen* is thus simultaneously a sensuously given thing *and* an explanatory principle. With this idea, Goethe cut the Gordian knot of Kant's dichotomous philosophy.

As Hegel further showed, this cell-form from which the subject matter of an entire domain of phenomena unfolds, itself originates from *outside* the science in question, and in that sense, while being the prototype of the complex whole it is also 'antediluvian'. Marx explicitly acknowledged his debt to Goethe in the Preface to the first edition of "Capital," in which he described the commodity relation as "the economic cell-form of bourgeois society." Although exchange of commodities is something which rarely happens in modern capitalist society, Marx was able to show that money, credit, shares, capital, etc., and even wages were species of commodity, and unfolded his entire theory of political economy out of the concept of the commodity relation. Vygotsky would later characterize his task as to write 'the "Das Kapital" of psychology' (1997b: 320-330), clearly taking Marx's lead on the problem of making a beginning in a science.

In his focus on the commodity relation as the cell-form of bourgeois society, Marx understood that the social and political problems of his time had to be approached through the understanding of bourgeois society as a 'social formation', and definite species of activity, and for this purpose he appropriated Hegel's idea of a 'formation of consciousness'.

Goethe had insisted that Nature and its organisms had to be understood as a whole, as *Gestalten*, and his notion of *Urphänomen* was the crucial step in working out how to do this. It is to this day somewhat of a cliché to say that processes have to be understood 'as a whole' or holistically – the point is: how to do this? The notion of the single cell or unit which contains in embryo all the properties of the whole organism provided a conception of the formation, but it was left to Hegel to develop this idea philosophically, so that it could form the basis for the development of theoretical science. The *Urphänomen* which Goethe took to be a product of Nature, Hegel took to be a *concept* within some formation of consciousness, and in Marx's materialistic interpretation, this became a system of actions, within some social formation.

It was Hegel's understanding of concepts which made the real break-through here. Mostly, a concept is seen as simply something identified with a name, or as a collection of attributes characterizing something. With such concepts, a complex process cannot be grasped as a whole, it can only be named or described. The structure of the concept in Hegel's system is the coincidence of three moments: Individual, Particular and Universal. In

Marx's materialistic interpretation, this means real human beings, their activity and the material conditions. By 'material conditions', we mean the objectifications of human activity, "both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity." More specifically, in understanding a specific system of actions, the unit of 'material conditions' is some artifact. A social formation is certain human beings, their activity and their culture (i.e., the sum of artifacts used in the activity). The smallest unit of such a social formation is the system of actions organized around one artifact. Understanding a concept in this way turns out to offer a way of grasping a *Gestalt* which lives up to what is required to understand some complex process 'as a whole'. The commodity relation, in which two human subjects exchange a product of human labor, is a case in point, capturing the concept of bourgeois society as a whole. Hegel's entire corpus testifies to the power of this understanding of concept, and translated into materialistic terms by Marx, this approach unleashes powerful tools for holistic analysis.

This was Goethe's aim – an approach to science in which "the light of the Sun is reflected in every droplet of water." Goethe saw this as part of 'Romantic Science', a practice which promoted human development and the cooperation of human beings with Nature, because the social fabric can only be enhanced and strengthened with habits of thought and practices which are grounded in a holistic approach to understanding. We call this emancipatory science. Marx did not attempt to assemble an analysis of capitalism from bits and pieces. Like Goethe, he knew that he needed a concept of the whole, and it was only such an approach which would open the way to mass participation. Analytical, abstract-empirical science is ideal for fragmenting science and allocating it to academic departments, but it is not useful for mass participation and social transformation.

The other key element which was developed mainly by Hegel is the practice of *immanent critique*. Hegel demonstrated this method in "The Phenomenology," and elaborated it in detail in the "Logic." Marx embraced it, and his *opus magnum*, "Capital," showed how immanent critique allows a writer to 'get inside' a social formation, bring out its dynamics and discover its limitations and its inner contradictions, scientifically, without dogmatism and sectarianism.

Marx never had the opportunity to develop his scientific work beyond his study of political economy, but building on the gains of classical German philosophy, Marx[50] was able to give us foundation for a genuinely emancipatory science, stripped of idealistic mysticism, and the model for such a science, in "Capital." This was the model, in terms of which Vygotsky defined his own project for a critique of psychology (Vygotsky 1997b: 330).

As will be seen, these issues arising from Goethe's *Urphänomen* have been a consistent theme of discussion within Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory up to the present day. What we have presented above is the first treatment of the issue which goes back to the *origins* of the idea in Goethe and Hegel, and thereby lays the basis for dealing with unresolved issues in the current.

[50] The fact that some of the most oppressive systems of rule and closed systems of thinking ever known have justified their existence with gestures to Marx is neither here nor there. A good idea on its own is not enough to determine the course of history. The best we can hope for is that a good idea will survive history.

Part II. Lev Vygotsky

14. Vygotsky's Critique of Behaviorism

> "A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality." (Marx 1867)

Let us return to Vygotsky's speech to the Congress of Psychoneurology in 1924. Vygotsky spoke in the language of reflexology, building up to a point where he declares:

> "Consciousness[51] is only the reflex of reflexes. To claim that consciousness too has to be understood as a reaction of the organism to its own reactions, one has to be a bigger reflexologist than Pavlov himself. So be it" (1997: 46).

The conventional wisdom about this speech is that it represents *the reflexologist stage* in Vygotsky's development, that is, that he was at this time a reflexologist, and later he became a reactologist and then ... (Veresov 1999). But a close look at this speech, taking account of Vygotsky's experiences over the preceding decade, may lead to a different conclusion.

Vygotsky began by declaring that "the methods of the reflexological investigation of man have now reached a turning point ..." explaining that "outside the domain of the elementary and primitive, reflexology was left only with its general bare claim – equally well applicable to all forms of behavior – that they constitute systems of conditional reflexes." Continuing with a damning characterization of the poverty of reflexological research, Vygotsky claimed that if reflexology was to become a general science of behavior then its methods would have to merge with those of 'subjective

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[51] Later, Vygotsky (1997b:327-8) used a mirror metaphor to explain the ontological status of consciousness as follows: the image in the mirror arises as the result of the intersection of two objective processes, the object itself and the optical process, but itself it does not exist, it is an appearance. Likewise, consciousness arises from the intersection of two objective processes: human behavior and human physiology, but itself it is an *appearance*; consciousness is not matter, and it is as wrong to identify consciousness with the physiological processes in the brain as it is to identify the thought of something with the thing itself. But being an appearance does not prevent consciousness from being the subject of scientific investigation and the proximate cause of human behavior.

psychology', that is, methods which hinge around talking to the experimental subject.

He established this with a beautiful line of *immanent critique*[52]: he quotes an eminent reflexologist to the effect that the most sensitive reflexes should be used in experiments; the most sensitive reflex is the 'speech reflex', therefore reflexology should focus on the 'speech reflex', rather than poking pins into someone's foot and measuring how long it takes the person to withdraw it.

He then points out that reflexologists already continuously use speech interaction with experimental subjects: "Please sit down," "Did you feel that?" and so on, but do so *unscientifically*, whereas in fact it is essential to recognize this interaction with the subject as *part of* the experiment and examine it scientifically.

He then takes up the objection of the reflexologists that self-observation is inherently unscientific by pointing out that the claim that an experimental subject's utterance constitutes self-observation is an unwarranted and unscientific interpretation: such utterances are simply experimental data to be subjected to scientific analysis. According to reflexology, thought is a speech reflex which is inhibited before it is manifest, and he asks "why it is allowed to study complete speech reflexes ... and why it is forbidden to take account of these same reflexes when they are inhibited? ... either we refrain from the study of human behavior in its most essential forms, or we introduce the obligatory registration of these non-manifest reflexes into our experiment." If manifest reflexes are objective, then inhibited reflexes, i.e., thoughts, are also objective. The question is only the methods to be applied to study them.

Vygotsky goes on to talk about "the capacity of the reflex (the experience of an object) to be a stimulus (the object of an experience) for a new reflex (a new experience) – this mechanism of awareness is the mechanism

[52] Vygotsky never mentions the term 'immanent critique' and indeed the expression originated at about the time he is speaking, with Lukács, subsequently to be taken up by the Frankfurt School. Prior to this time it was just called 'critique', which is a word he *did* use to describe his work. But it is very unlikely that any of his audience were familiar with the idea which would have been quite foreign to them.

of the transmission of reflexes from one system to another," and offers a reflexological explanation of consciousness:

> "the act of thought, the act of consciousness is in our opinion *not a reflex*, that is, it cannot also be a stimulus, but it is the transmission mechanism between systems of reflexes" (1997: 41).

This speculative definition avoids both reductionism and dualism, allowing Vygotsky to ask rhetorically: "Is a scientific explanation of human behavior possible *without* the mind?" In fact, even the most extreme reflexologists, Pavlov and Bekhterev, accept that consciousness exists and that it forms an essential component of human behavior. They simply refuse to admit the study of thought into science on the basis of the unsustainable claim that the study of thought is possible only by self-observation, which is by definition subjective and therefore unscientific. This locks them into an inflexible dualism, with two sciences, reflexology and psychology, under conditions where psychology seems to be altogether impossible, whilst reflexology is able to make only the most banal claims from their research.

Vygotsky accepts the claim by Pavlov that reflexology is building the physiological foundation on which psychology will later be able to build, but points out that as soon as any attempt is made to build on this foundation, reflexology falls into crisis.

Bekhterev admits, says Vygotsky, that it would be inadmissible to make consciousness into an epiphenomenon of physiology, but Vygotsky shows by their own words that Bekhterev and Pavlov are committed to a dualism: "two sciences with the same subject of investigation – the behavior of man – and that use the same methods, nevertheless, despite everything, remain different sciences" (1997: 45). The problem is that the reflexologists can only conceive of consciousness as subjective states understood in a dualistic way, excluded in principle from interaction with the material world. But "is it not clear now that [subjective states] can be completely and fully reduced to reactions of the organism." Vygotsky concludes with the paradox:

> "Psychology has to state and solve the problem of consciousness by saying that it is the interaction, the reflection, the mutual stimulation of various systems of reflexes. It is what is transmitted in the form of a stimulus to other systems and elicits a response in them. Consciousness is a response apparatus. ... Consciousness is only the reflex of reflexes. ... to study the behavior of man without mind as

> reflexology wishes to do is as impossible as to study mind without behavior" (1997: 46).

Finally, to the supposed inaccessibility of subjective states to scientific investigation, Vygotsky points out that the geologist, the historian, ... all scientists in fact face the problem that the object of their science is not open to 'direct' *unmediated* observation. In every case, methods must be worked out to reconstruct the relevant facts from observation and experiment. These facts include the mind and the methods for reconstructing the facts include talking with the experimental subject whilst participating with them in the experimental activity.

So what we see is that Vygotsky has managed to argue exclusively from within the framework of reflexology to a point which completely *negates* reflexology. Without disturbing the universal claim that 'everything is a reflex', Vygotsky has turned the concepts and methods of reflexology against themselves and proved that reflexology, that is to say, the study of the physiology of the nervous system, must merge itself with the methods and concepts of subjective psychology, its opposite.

Vygotsky was applying the method of *immanent critique*, the method of critical development of science worked out by Hegel and applied by Marx in the writing of "Capital." Instead of counterposing his own theory to reflexology, Vygotsky entered into reflexology and argued in its own terms to disclose its inner contradictions and lead it through to its own negation. This allowed Vygotsky to recover the insights utilized by reflexology, understand the limits of their validity, and maintain them, whilst laying the basis for a practice which transcends the limitations of reflexology.

This is the same way a literary critic is supposed to approach a work of art, not counterposing their own aesthetic sensibilities and preferences to those of the artist, but drawing out of the work of art the insights it offers and exploring where it might lead. It is the method Marx used in his critique of political economy: he did not counterpose a socialist idea to the capitalist idea, but simply entered into political economy as the general theory of bourgeois society itself, and disclosed its contradictions.

Vygotsky's Hegelianism

We know that Vygotsky had studied Marx – he quoted the passage in "Capital" about the architect and the bee to support the validity of

consciousness as a concept in Marxist psychology, and Luria (2006) reports that he was a competent Marxist at the time they met in 1924. But the evidence is that Vygotsky never studied Hegel. Conventional wisdom holds, on the contrary, that Vygotsky studied Hegel while at school, but this claim is based exclusively on a 1970s interview with his school friend, Semyon Dobkin:

> "We wanted to find answers to such questions as 'What is history?' 'What distinguishes one people from another?' 'What is the role of the individual in history?' In other words, we studied the philosophy of history. Vygotsky was at the time very enthusiastic about the Hegelian view of history. His mind was then engaged by the Hegelian formula 'thesis, antithesis, synthesis', and he applied it to analyzing historical events" (Levitin 1982: 17).

Despite widespread claims to the contrary, Hegel never used the formula, 'thesis, antithesis, synthesis', and anyone who had read Hegel would know this. After Hegel's death, a popularizer of philosophy, Heinrich Chalybäus (1796-1862), imputed it to Hegel, and is generally regarded as the source of the myth. Via Chalybäus, the founder of anarchism, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, for example, took up the formula in lieu of an actual study of Hegel, and Marx ridiculed Proudhon for this in his critique of Proudhon's "Philosophy of Poverty." The English Hegelian W. T. Stace used it in "The Philosophy of Hegel," and before he abandoned Hegelianism, so did John McTaggart, thus infecting the English-speaking world with the myth. Even Karl Kautsky, the leader of international Social Democracy up to 1914, referred to this formula, but Hegel didn't.

Lenin's predecessor as leader of Russian Marxism, Georgi Plekhanov was the chief popularizer of Hegel in Russia prior to the Revolution. In one of his most popular works, "The Development of the Monist View of History," Plekhanov ridicules N. K. Mikhailovsky, the liberal anti-Communist who used the formula as the butt of his attacks on Hegel and Marx (Plekhanov 1961). Another well-known work of Plekhanov's to which people in Vygotsky's home town of Gomel would have had access to was "The Role of the Individual in History" (1961a). Presumably the youth of Gomel were not alone in their interest in these questions! Plekhanov sometimes used the phrase "laws of history" though this expression only

became widespread under Stalin. Certainly, it was not a term that Hegel ever used.

So the import of Semyon Dobkin's evidence is that Vygotsky had *not* read Hegel in those days, but his interest in Hegel may have been sparked by his reading of Plekhanov and he may have heard about 'thesis-antithesis-synthesis' from other sources. Time has done nothing to diminish the strength of this myth.

We know from Alex Kozulin (1990) that when Vygotsky attended university in Moscow, 1913-1917, he moved in a milieu of intense ideological struggle between Symbolists, Formalists and others schooled in the philosophical problems of aesthetics. It was during this period that Vygotsky wrote "The Psychology of Art" (1971). But the only references to Hegel in this work is a dismissive jibe at the Hegelian, Rosenkranz for using the formula, and a passing reference to it in connection with Darwin, which suggests that Vygotsky had heard of it, but he is clearly unimpressed with it. In the same work, Vygotsky quotes Plekhanov's views on art 10 times, six times in the first chapter alone. So Vygotsky's authority in matters of aesthetics as well as history, would be Plekhanov, not Hegel. Between 1917 and 1918 he took courses in psychology and philosophy at the People's University of Shanyavsky, before returning to Gomel and dedicating himself to teaching and teacher-training. According to Wertsch (1985) it was during *this* period that Vygotsky studied Hegel; this is plausible, but there is no evidence for it.

A search of all of Vygotsky's works published in English for references to Hegel finds no reference to Hegel in writings prior to 1929. Of the 36 references after that date, 15 are generalities which reflect no first-hand knowledge of Hegel; of the remaining 21 specific references to Hegel, in 16 of these Vygotsky is directly citing works by Marx ("Capital"), Engels ("Dialectics of Nature" and "Anti-Dühring"), Lenin ("Philosophical Notebooks"), and apparently Deborin and Lewin. This leaves 5 mentions of Hegel which *could* reflect a reading of Hegel. Three points concern the senses which could just as easily have been culled from Goethe or Marx's "1844 Manuscripts" as from Hegel, one concerns language, which could as easily have come from Marx's "German Ideology," and one is an extended description of Hegel's psychology along the following lines: "All cultural development of the child passes through three basic stages that can be

described in the following way using Hegel's analysis: object-oriented, other-directed, self-directed" (Vygotsky 1997g: 104). This appears to come from some edition of Hegel's Subjective Spirit, which includes his psychology, but unlike the allusions mediated by the writings of other Marxists, none of these 5 references can be traced to a specific source in Hegel. None of Vygotsky's allusions to Hegel reference the "Phenomenology" and there is no reason to believe that Vygotsky had read or knew anything about the "Phenomenology."

It is impossible to say with certainty how much if any Hegel Vygotsky had read. He is remembered as a prolific reader, so it is hard to believe that he did not read Hegel at all. But the evidence points to Vygotsky having appropriated Hegel in and through his interaction with other writers and co-workers, not through private study, apparently after 1928, certainly not as a youth in Gomel or as a university student in Moscow before the Revolution.

The claim by Valsiner (1991: 26) that Vygotsky used the method of 'thesis, antithesis, synthesis' by which Valsiner actually means something approximating 'immanent critique' is of no significance as both ideas are quite foreign to Valsiner himself. The claim by Kozulin (1990: 119) that Vygotsky used the master-slave[53] narrative is supported by no evidence whatsoever, and Kozulin is unaware that the master-servant narrative only received widespread attention after 1947. Yaroshevsky's biography says that while still in school Vygotsky started a debating society: "Hegel became his idol in philosophy; under Hegel's impact, he attempted to apply the general schema of thesis-antithesis-synthesis to explanations of the course of historical events" (1989: 34). These claims are transparently an elaboration of Dobkin's report already quoted, combined with uninformed guesses about Hegel's ideas.

With Levitin, Wertsch, Kozulin, Valsiner and Yaroshevsky all testifying to Vygotsky's study of Hegel, this myth has been elevated to the status of established fact, but we are forced to the conclusion that even though, as we shall see, Vygotsky proved to be a consummate Hegelian and Marxist, beginning with his immanent critique of Reflexology, he *never actually studied Hegel*. And it can be well imagined that the idea of immanent

[53] This is the word that Kozulin uses.

critique went right over the heads of his audience at the Congress of Psychoneurology. In those days people addressed themselves to theoretical questions more or less by affiliating themselves to the position of this or that political or scientific leader, and to this day this is the dominant approach, in science and especially in the case of politicized questions. But on the other hand, all his life, including his school days with Semyon Dobkin, Vygotsky worked *collaboratively*, so immanent critique came naturally to him. Collaboration in theoretical projects *is* immanent critique, because commitment to a common project with others obliges one to collaborate within a shared system of assumptions, whether you agree with them or not, until the limits of the shared frame are visible in its own light. Also, in the wake of the October Revolution, it was still an environment in which Hegel, Marx, Engels, Lenin and other Marxist writers *were* being read and their ideas were transmitted everywhere through the collaborative kind of work to which Vygotsky was committed, even under the darkening pall of Stalinism.

The idea of a 'Marxist psychology' to which *everyone* was committed was thought of in the way of a psychology 'affiliated' to Marxism. The dominant understanding of Marxism at this time was 'dialectical materialism', with emphasis on 'materialism'. Claims by Marx such as: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their *social being that determines their consciousness*" (Marx 1987: 263), and claims of Engels like "In the last analysis, the material life conditions of the persons inside whose heads this thought process goes on determine the course of the process" (1990: 394) and Lenin's (1962) highly politicized defence of a reflection theory of the mind, seems to have been widely taken to indicate that a 'Marxist psychology' would be one or another variety of Behaviorism. This expectation combined with the fact that Russia was already home to two of the most eminent physiological behaviorists in the world, Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936) and Vladimir Bekhterev (1857-1927), whilst Ivan Sechenov (1829-1905), the founder of Russian physiology, was also a physiological behaviorist. Behaviorism was also the dominant trend in the US at that time.

Behaviorism

By 'Behaviorism' I mean those approaches to the study of the mind which *exclude consciousness* as a legitimate category within the science.

This is an intentionally broad definition of behaviorism, and includes a diversity of currents, whilst there are currents of behaviorism, such as that of Konstantin Kornilov, which do *not* exclude consciousness, but either reduce consciousness to an epiphenomenon or admit some form of dualism into the science. But the essence of Behaviorism is the study of observable behavior to the exclusion of consciousness; it's *unit of analysis* is the reflex: S → R (Stimulus → Response). The nervous system may be conceived of as a network of such links, or for some writers, Stimulus and Response may be referred to the whole organism.

American and Russian behaviorism developed over the same period, in parallel with one another, but it is J. B. Watson who is generally recognized as having defined behaviorism:

> "Psychology as the behaviorist views it is a purely objective experimental branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is the prediction and control of behavior. Introspection forms no essential part of its methods, nor is the scientific value of its data dependent upon the readiness with which they lend themselves to interpretation in terms of consciousness. The behaviorist, in his efforts to get a unitary scheme of animal response, recognizes no dividing line between man and brute" (1913).

Let us recapitulate these four linked characteristics of behaviorism: (1) Its aim is the prediction and control of people's behavior, (2) It excludes the use of evidence offered by the experimental subject, (3) It excludes the notion of consciousness and (4) It is a part of *natural* science, dealing with human beings as uncultured animals.

All four of these characteristics are incompatible with an emancipatory human science.

The aim of controlling human behavior answers to the needs of capitalist, prison guard, interrogator, marketer, politician and bureaucrat, but an emancipatory psychology aims to *free* people from manipulation so that they can have voluntary control over their *own* behavior.[54]

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[54] Controlling the behavior of others, resorting to physical force or pharmacological means is sometimes made necessary by circumstances, as a means to maintaining or restoring control of one's own behavior, but the difference in principle remains.

An emancipatory science aims at *self*-emancipation, the point Marx made in "Theses on Feuerbach" ("... human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice" for example), and an emancipatory science has the consciousness of the participants in history at its heart, and rejects the idea of a God's eye view which pretends to view society from outside and above. As Vygotsky showed in his 1924 speech, the idea of excluding consciousness from the study of human behavior is ineffectual, unscientific and self-deceptive. The consciousness of both the researcher and their experimental subject *always* participate in scientific experiments, and experiments are only scientific to the extent that the researcher understands the role played by their own consciousness.

A psychology which is only interested in those forms of behavior which human beings share with the animals misses just those forms of behavior that prevent human life from descending to the level of animal life, and except in instances of neuropathology or injury, are actually the subject matter of interest. Treating people like animals is useful only to those who already discount people as without rights or dignity.

Most of these points were taken up in Vygotsky's speech, at the end of which, he made reference to William James, suggesting to his audience an alternative to the *physiological* behaviorism which was (and remained) dominant in the Soviet Union. There are two broad lines of development of behaviorism: physiological behaviorism and social behaviorism. Pavlov and Bekhterev are representatives of physiological behaviorism, in that their aim is to predict and control behavior through an understanding of the physiological substratum of thinking and behavior. So, if you can manipulate a person's physiology, inclusive of presenting subjects with verbal or other sensory stimuli, then you can predict the resulting behavior, and thereby ultimately *control* people's behavior. Social behaviorists share the conviction that consciousness is inaccessible to scientific observation. But unlike the physiological behaviorists, they prefer to study $S \rightarrow R$ relations in a sociological context and do not consider that study of the biological processes mediating between an external stimulus and observable response contributes to an understanding of behavior. Social behaviorists are more likely to turn to functionalist or structuralist descriptions of social processes for the systematic understanding of behavior.

William James (2005) and the other American Pragmatists, such as George Herbert Mead (1956) and John Dewey (1993), are the founders of social behaviorism. Social behaviorists recognize that people's behavior is generally a response to stimuli which have social origins. From this standpoint, one thing leads to another, and there is still no place for the presumption of consciousness. Social behaviorists like Mead did not absolutely exclude consciousness, leaving open the possibility for indirect observation of consciousness. They recognized that a person's 'attitudes', the earliest phase of the production of actions, lie *within* the organism, and cannot in general be revealed by physiological investigation, but play a crucial role in social interaction and behavior generally. Vygotsky seems to have drawn on these ideas in the preparation of his immanent critique of reflexology.

B. F. Skinner (1904-1990), had the most consistent elaboration of Behaviorism, studying the S → R relation with the experimental subject as an absolute 'black box' or blank 'input-output' device. Skinner would not admit *any* characteristics of the person into science, not only excluding consciousness and physiology, but even character and motivation, which he saw as nothing but social constructs, invented for the purpose of the control and prediction of behavior, and fully reducible to behavioral analysis (Robinson 1995).

So it is only (3) above, the rejection of consciousness as a scientific category, that all lines of development of behaviorism share unambiguously. But the exclusion of consciousness necessarily implies the denial of *agency* to the experimental subject, so even though only indirectly, social behaviorists share the full range of characteristics of behaviorism, because they deny to human beings the main determinant of behavior, consciousness, and therefore the capacity for self-determination, effectively equating human beings with animals, regarding culture as nothing more than a system of devices for conditioning behavior.

Vygotsky showed however, that there is no basis for the exclusion of consciousness on the assumption that consciousness can only be accessed by self-observation. Noam Chomsky (2006: 57) quipped: "It is as if natural science were to be designated the 'science of meter readings'." – we infer consciousness from behavior, and in so doing we act in exactly the way that

all sciences act, reconstructing the facts of the science from the available evidence.

Within physiological behaviorism, different schools also competed with one another.[55] Bekhterev and Pavlov were Reflexologists, that is, they regarded the basic unit of psychoneurology as the reflex. Reactology, the current led by Kornilov, was to be the subject of Vygotsky's next critique: "Consciousness as a Problem for Behaviorism" (1997a). Reactology used a 'bio-social' concept of reaction, which differed from one society to the next. Kornilov tried to overcome weaknesses of reflexology with gestures to Marxism. A reaction is a response of the *whole* organism (both subjective and objective) not just a single organ and is acquired by social means. Instincts, simply based in physiology, are overridden by socially-acquired *reactions*. Kornilov included the concept of consciousness in his system, but only by means of mind-body dualism.

But behaviorism is not to be simply cast aside. Vygotsky demonstrated that while *self-observation* is rightly excluded for the purposes of science, we *can* and must infer consciousness by objective observation of the behavior (including verbal behavior) of the experimental subject, based on their participation in the experiment as a shared project along with the researcher. This means that the researcher's behavior is treated with the same rigor as that of the experimental subject, denying the subject a privileged insight into their own consciousness, and the researcher an illusory God's eye view.

Likewise, the physiological behaviorist, who studies the S → R relation by physiological investigation, has a legitimate place in the work of psychology, but because the central and most important process determining behavior – consciousness – can only be inferred from behavior, including speech, in most cases physiological investigations play a secondary role. In cases of trauma or other types of physiological pathology, the role of physiological investigation obviously becomes more important.

[55] See van der Veer (2007) for an overview of all the currents of psychology active at the time.

So from his very first entry onto the stage of psychology, Vygotsky posed the problem of working out an objective, scientific study of consciousness, declaring that this meant appropriating the work of both physiological and social behaviorists and well as that of 'subjective' (or 'empirical') psychology.

Vygotsky's Sources and Influences

Having pointed to the Hegelian quality of Vygotsky's work, while claiming that Vygotsky seems not to have read Hegel, a few words are necessary on Vygotsky's influences and sources.

His early introduction to linguistics came from a reading of A. A. Potebnya (who also figured in the development of Russian Symbolism, and Sergei Eisenstein's aesthetics) and his introduction to educational theory from Wilhelm von Humboldt, architect of the Prussian public education system which was a model for a number of other countries. Von Humboldt was also a linguist and a friend of Goethe, whom Vygotsky also admired. His introduction to Marxism came in his youth via Plekhanov and he read everything available by Marx and Engels. His understanding of Hegel seems to have been mediated by Plekhanov, Marx, Engels, Lenin, and later Deborin, Kurt Lewin and Dewey, all Hegel scholars.

Vygotsky himself testified to his familiarity with and fondness for Spinoza. Like Plekhanov, Lenin, Marx, many others, Vygotsky admired Spinoza's efforts to develop a naturalistic monism, in opposition to Descartes' dualism, his refusal of the dichotomy between thought and feeling and his secular humanism. He frequently quoted Spinoza and wrote a book on Spinoza's theory of emotions. However, it cannot be said that Spinoza was an "influence" on Vygotsky. Spinoza represented a struggle which manifested itself in philosophical struggle for holistic, humanist science over the span of 300 years separating him from Vygotsky. One must look closer to Vygotsky for proximate influence.

What can be said with certainty is that *Vygotsky was a product of the Russian Revolution*, and the Revolution was his "influence." The writers who may be credited with the intellectual content of the Revolution are Marx, Engels, Plekhanov and Lenin, at least up to 1923. Apart from that, Vygotsky appropriated the entire intellectual culture of Europe for the purposes of writing the "*Das Kapital* of psychology" (1997b: 320-330).

15. Vygotsky and Luria on Romantic Science

> "Consciousness is reflected in the word like the sun is reflected in a droplet of water." (Vygotsky 1934)

Vygotsky joined Luria and Leontyev at the Moscow Institute of Psychology, and they began work under Kornilov, resulting in a stinging critique of Kornilov's own theory, Reactology, along lines not dissimilar to Vygotsky's Congress speech. Vygotsky visited his home town of Gomel, married Roza Smekhova, and took steps to set up the Institute of Defectology, where he created conditions for continuation of his research somewhat out of the spotlight of Moscow. Early in 1925, five new students were recruited to the 'troika' in Moscow, swelling the team to eight, all of them young, and four of them female. In 1926, Vygotsky suffered another bout of tuberculosis, but once he returned to work, the group began to work their way through the literature of all the currents of psychology at the time, in Europe and America as well as in the Soviet Union, and at the same time, they worked out their own methods of experimental work.

The chief characteristic of their work was *collaboration* (Stetsenko 2004).

There is an imperative in publishing nowadays to ascribe every text to a specific author, and this is frustrated by the manuscripts left by the Vygotsky School from this period, because they often failed to ascribe authorship to works which may have been written by one person, but describing the research of another, or may have been written collaboratively or left unsigned. The group met frequently and discussed issues while someone took notes. They had a thoroughly collaborative method of work inasmuch as they all shared a common project, and their individuality was immersed in that common project. At that period, the Bakhtin Circle was also working collaboratively, with little attention to attribution of authorship; it seems that the collaborative approach was embedded in the collectivist ethos of the whole social system.

Also, their experiments entailed a collaborative relationship between the researcher and the experimental subject.[56] Elsewhere, psychological experimentation was founded on the positivist principle of 'scientific objectivity'; this meant that the researcher must create a documented and repeatable experimental set-up and procedure, and then record the subject's response without any 'interference' or 'influence' by the researcher, which would 'corrupt' the data. Nowadays, thanks to the impact on science of a number of anti-positivist currents in philosophy and social theory, there is widespread recognition of the validity of a variety of approaches to psychological testing and experimentation (Chow 2002), and the psychoanalytic tradition never accepted this stricture either. Nonetheless, the multiple-choice questionnaire, statistical sampling, double-blind trials and standardized test procedure are as ubiquitous in psychological research today as ever. For almost as long as psychology has existed as a science in its own right, students of psychology have been inculcated with the idea of statistics as their principal research tool. Such methods have their place, but they are presaged on the assumption of indifference of the target population to the research objectives, the indifference of the researcher to the interests of the experimental subjects as individuals, and of a conception of the person as a social atom, whose normal condition is in isolation from others. Under these conditions, collaboration between researcher and subject is ruled out. The experimental subject is just a black box which converts input stimuli to output responses by some unknown means.

If experimental subjects understand the idea of scientific research and what it means to be a research subject, they usually participate willingly as required by the researcher. When set a task, subjects will genuinely try to complete it. There are limits to this relationship to which we will return later on, but in the simplest case, all that is at issue is whether the researcher stands back and observes the efforts of the subject in isolation, or on the contrary, intervenes in some way so as to help the subject complete the task, these efforts then becoming *part of the subject matter* of the experiment.

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[56] In line with convention, I will use "experimental subject" to refer to the person whose behavior is the subject-matter of the experiment, but who is in a certain sense the "object" of the experiment.

So if the question is: how do people remember things? and how do people improve their memory? how do people attend to something? or how do people overcome fears? then the researcher can set the subject a task, and then assist them, and in that way learn about the relevant psychological function, be it memory or attention, or whatever. Talking to a person is an example, but speech is an exceedingly developed form of artifact, with multiple psychological ramifications, and there are many circumstances where such uncontrolled intervention would undermine research objectives. The simplest possible way of assisting someone in some task is to offer to them some useful artifact: a simple object, perhaps something of a certain shape or color or some kind of symbol or tool.

Thus arose the *double-stimulation* experiment (Sakharov 1994, Towsey & MacDonald 2009). It is called a 'double stimulation' experiment because the task the researcher presents to the experimental subject is the first stimulus, e.g., to remember something, and the second stimulus is the researcher's action to assist them in solving the task, e.g., a reminder cue. This scenario in which a person uses an artifact offered by another person in order to complete a psychological task is the simplest imaginable set up in which the use of culture in the formation of the mind can be represented.

In Vygotsky's words:

> "[In] the functional method of double stimulation ... we study the development and activity of the higher mental functions with the aid of two sets of stimuli. These two sets of stimuli fulfill different roles *vis-à-vis* the subject's behavior. One set of stimuli fulfills the function of the object on which the subject's activity is directed. The second function as signs that facilitate the organization of this activity" (Vygotsky 1987: 127)

The double-stimulation experiment[57] opens up a wide range of possible research strategies to investigate the complex foundation on which human psychological functioning rests. As a broad generalization, the higher

[57] As an aside, it should be noted that the author of one of the most renowned descriptions of such an experimental procedure, Leonid Sakharov, was a graduate student of the Vygotsky group, whose subsequent career has unfortunately been lost to us. But it is a measure of the collaborative nature of the work of the Vygotsky School, that an otherwise unknown student authored this seminal document.

psychological functions, that is to say, the modes of psychological functioning which are peculiar to human society, all rest on *combinations* of the lower psychological functions, which are shared with our primate cousins. Learning to use cultural products in collaboration with others develops the range of psychological functions normal for adult human beings. There is a general form to this process: it begins with the use of an *external* object, such as a spoken word or a written numeral or 'training wheels', and gradually the external element of the process fades away, and the person is able to complete the relevant task 'under their breath' so to speak, apparently substituting something which exists only internally, subjectively, but nonetheless facilitates a mode of psychological functioning for which they formerly needed some kind of prop. While the subject's behavior goes through this process of transformation, a researcher is able to observe the various stages of its 'internalization' and the conditions which facilitate or obstruct the learning process.

Without elevating it into an epistemological absolute, the simple truth that in order to understand something one must be able to bring it into being out of its conditions (Engels 1990: 367) has obvious merit. Vygotsky observed that the typical 'objective' experimental procedure 'deals with the result of a previously competed process ... with a finished product, but does not catch the dynamics of this process, its development' (Sakharov 1994), but when instead experimental work is designed to recreate the conditions under which psychological functions can develop, and to practically trace, step by step, the formation of the function and its successive transformations from the use of an external prop to an internally regulated function, then it is meaningful to say that one understands the function itself (Vygotsky 1994).

It should be observed that the double stimulation experiment requires collaboration between the experimental subject and the researcher at two levels. Not only will the researcher collaborate with the subject to assist them in completing a task which they cannot complete unaided (e.g. by offering a mnemonic cue), but the experimental subject must understand and collaborate in the researcher's project. The People Living With AIDS experience in the 1980s brought out the fallacy of double-blind testing and placebos, competition for patents, and so on, and the fatal impact of disregard for the views and interests of the experimental subject (Epstein

1996)[58]. It is not a question of 'ethical standards' but of *ethos*; only if the experimental subjects understand and solidarize with the research project can the research succeed; people resist manipulation.

Behaviorists also claim to study behavior by bringing it into being, that is, by *controlling* behavior (Chow 2002), but there is a profound difference between controlling another's behavior and fostering the subject's ability to *control their own* behavior. The two research strategies result in two different kinds of knowledge, relevant to different social relationships in the world outside the laboratory.

By helping the experimental subject complete a task, the researcher gains immediate insight into the psychological processes at work and it is not necessary to repeat the experiment a thousand times and generate statistics. Statistics do not deliver understanding.

And there was a third way in which the work of the Vygotsky School was collaborative. Participation in science is *always* collaboration, inasmuch as every scientist participates in the common project of creating and documenting a shared corpus of scientific knowledge. However, this essentially collaborative relationship which embraces everyone who has contributed to scientific knowledge over the centuries, is often undermined by the ethos of professional competitiveness. Where science is dedicated to competition for funding, accumulation of intellectual property, rivalry over promotion, accolades and academic status, then cooperation is merely an unintended side-effect. On the other hand, where participants in the scientific project, review each others' work and use the results and methods acquired from other towards the common objective of understanding, then science is genuinely a collaborative project. And this was the kind of work to which the Vygotsky School was dedicated. The large-scale theoretical collaboration took the form of *immanent critique* of all the existing currents of psychology at the time and appropriation of the insights provided by each. The irony is that world politics dictated that they would be banned

[58] Epstein's book reports a comprehensive critique of the practice of medical research; for example, he reported how people with AIDS joined double-blind placebo trials with the deliberate intention of gaining access to the drug and avoiding the placebo, thus destroying the scientific value of the test.

and suppressed in their own country and isolated from the rest of the world by the 'Iron Curtain'.

So collaboration was integral to the Vygotsky School's method of work at three levels: amongst the research team, between researcher and experimental subject, and in relation to other researchers in the field. As we shall see, collaboration was not only central to their way of working, but also to the content of the theory of psychology that they developed.

Before moving on to review some of the psychological ideas and theories which are relevant to our project, we should take a moment to review the work of Vygotsky's close collaborator, Alexander Romanovich Luria..

Luria

Luria (2006) was an advocate of what he called, in an explicit reference to Goethe, 'romantic science'. Luria saw romantic science, in contrast to classical science as follows:

> "Classical scholars are those who look upon events in terms of their constituent parts. Step by step they single out important units and elements until they can formulate abstract, general laws. These laws are then seen as the governing agents of the phenomena in the field under study. One outcome of this approach is the reduction of living reality with all its richness of detail to abstract schemas. The properties of the living whole are lost, which provoked Goethe to pen, "Gray is every theory, but ever green is the tree of life."
>
> "Romantic scholars' traits, attitudes, and strategies are just the opposite. They do not follow the path of reductionism, which is the leading philosophy of the classical group. Romantics in science want neither to split living reality into its elementary components nor to represent the wealth of life's concrete events in abstract models that lose the properties of the phenomena themselves. It is of the utmost importance to romantics to preserve the wealth of living reality, and they aspire to a science that retains this richness" (Luria 2006: 174).

Along with his commitment to romantic science, Luria developed an interest in *idiographic* as opposed to nomothetic science, an interest which he claimed was shared by Vygotsky. Nomothetic science seeks to make generalizations from a large number of individual cases, formulating laws

and explanatory principles on the basis of an exhaustive mass of data, but presumes that the explanatory principle is categorically different from the data itself. Following Kant, the principle or law itself is deemed not to be given in perception, but nonetheless governs the phenomenon to a greater or lesser degree of significance alongside other forces and principles. This is the approach which is most typical in classical science and often involves statistical validation.

Idiographic science on the other hand, entails the sustained and exhaustive study of just *one* case, or class of cases, which function as an archetype. During his career, Luria followed over decades, the development of certain individuals who possessed exceptional psychological characteristics, such as a photographic memory, and developed his understanding by a thorough familiarity with their development and all the associated characteristics of the personality of this individual. This approach is most common in 'clinical' medicine, that is, research which is closely connected to the care and healing of patients, rather than the use of experimental subjects. Rather than compiling a statistical survey of 10,000 people having variable mnemonic ability, ideographic science makes a really in-depth study of the whole personality of just one eidetic.

This is an interpretation of Goethe's concept of *Urphänomen*, different from that of Hegel or Marx, but it does help to give us a feel for the shape of a 'romantic science', which is similar to the idea of an emancipatory science which is suggested here. The word 'idiographic' was coined by the Kantian philosopher Wilhelm Windelband, and introduced to psychology in the English speaking world by Gordon Allport (1897-1967) (Frank 1986). Vygotsky and Luria worked very closely together, so it is safe to assume that Vygotsky was familiar with the origins of this approach to science in Goethe and other German writers such as Verworn, Freud and Windelband.

A similar kind of knowledge is developed by self-help groups, in which people suffering from a particular medical condition accumulate in-depth knowledge of just one condition with which they are connected by personal experience. The medical specialist or scientist is required to have expertise across a range of conditions and can never develop the kind of knowledge acquired by self-help groups and never know a condition and the pros and cons of its various treatments as deeply as a member of the patient self-help

group (Borkman 1999). People with AIDS had similar experiences (Epstein 1996).

It is worth recalling that Luria's first love in psychology was psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis's claim to science is questionable, but the young Luria's very first idea was to design experiments to test it. Psychoanalysis has some claims to being an emancipatory approach to psychology. Firstly, it is a talking-cure which takes the patient's own insight as central; secondly, it is based on the idea that the cure is to be the work of the patient themselves, and the psychiatrist's job is to help the patient gain insight; thirdly, its ideas – the subconscious, interpretation of dreams, defense, repression, sublation, etc – entered the public consciousness and gave the mass of the population tools for gaining insight into their own psychological problems. These are elements that an emancipatory science, true to Goethe's original idea, ought to emulate (See Zaretsky 2004).

16. Vygotsky on Units and Microcosms

> "To study one single thing, one subject, one phenomenon *until the end*, exhaustively, means to know the world in all its connections."
> (Vygotsky 1927)

The idea of an exhaustive study of just one case which characterized Luria's idiographic science also underlies another approach which stimulated Vygotsky's methodological reflections. Vygotsky praised Pavlov for his study of *just one reflex*:

> "Pavlov is studying the activity of the *salivary gland in dogs*. What gives him the right to call his experiments the study of the higher nervous activity of *animals*? Perhaps, he should have verified his experiments on horses, crows, etc., on all, or at least the majority of animals, in order to have the right to draw these conclusions? Or, perhaps, he should have called his experiments 'a study of salivation in dogs'? But it is precisely the salivation of dogs *per se* which Pavlov did not study and his experiments have not for one bit increased our knowledge of dogs as such and of salivation as such. In the dogs he did not study the dog, but *an animal in general*, and in salivation *a reflex in general*, ... his conclusions do not just concern all animals, but the whole of biology as well. The established fact that Pavlov's dogs salivated to signals given by Pavlov immediately became a general biological principle ... Pavlov *maximally abstracted* the phenomenon he studied from the specific conditions of the particular phenomenon. He brilliantly *perceived the general in the particular*" (Vygotsky 1997b: 318).

In contrast to the idiographic approach, which studies one individual in all its concreteness, here the object is a particular process or relation abstracted from everything connected to it. Pavlov saw that the susceptibility of a particular reflex to training offered to science a general principle of biology, now famously known as the conditional[59] reflex. The dog's conditional salivary reflex differs somewhat from the concept of

[59] 'Conditional' because the reflex is conditional upon the organism's previous experience, rather than being innate. When Pavlov's idea was adopted by the American behaviorists, the term became 'conditioned' reflex, so 'conditioning' took on the connotation of controlling a subject's behavior.

Urphänomen, since it remains a particular alongside innumerable other particulars. Nonetheless, it functions in biology as a universal archetype as it readily suggests a model relationship for all living organisms, which is represented in the concept of 'conditional reflex'.

On the other hand, Vygotsky was sharply critical of Pavlov; in the words of his inaugural speech:

> "... outside the domain of the elementary and primitive, reflexology was left only with its general bare claim – equally well applicable to all forms of behavior – that they constitute systems of conditional reflexes. But neither the specific details of each system, nor the laws of the combination of conditional reflexes into behavioral systems, nor the very complex interactions and the reflections of some systems on others, were clarified by this general, far too general statement and it did not even prepare the way for the scientific solution of these questions. ... [He] reduces everything to a common denominator. And precisely because this principle is too all-embracing and universal it does not yield a direct scientific means for the study of its particular and individual forms" (Vygotsky 1997: 35).

The Reflexologists mistook their concept of the *substance*[60] of organic life (the reflex) for an explanatory principle of universal scope. The conditional reflex can operate as a 'unit of analysis' and explanatory principle along the lines suggested by Goethe, only so long as the scope of the domain is limited in such a way that the conditional reflex remains an empirically verifiable entity. Once 'everything is a conditional reflex', the quite concrete concept is transformed into a general principle, independently of its empirical verification. In this form, the idea fails as an explanatory principle, even in a domain where it is applicable. Vygotsky showed in his 1924 speech that consciousness cannot be a stimulus and consequently the conditional reflex cannot act as an explanatory principle for human behavior. The reflexologists turned the idea of conditional reflex into an *empty abstraction*.

However, taking his inspiration from Pavlov's idea, Vygotsky developed the idea of *microcosm*. Vygotsky referred back to his study of *Hamlet*

[60] By 'substance' is meant the conception of the underlying reality of the science. The concept of substance will be dealt with in greater detail in chapter 18.

in his University days for "The Psychology of Art," in which he tried to "deduce the laws of the psychology of art on the basis of the analysis of ... one tragedy," quoting Marx's aphorism that "the anatomy of man provides the key to the anatomy of the ape" (Vygotsky 1997b: 319). The idea here is that a science must address itself not to the most primitive but the *most developed*, since in the most developed particular or individual, phenomena can be studied in their purest and most independent formations:

> "When our Marxists explain the Hegelian principle in Marxist methodology they rightly claim that each thing can be examined as a *microcosm*, as a universal measure in which the whole big world is reflected. On this basis they say that to study one single thing, one subject, one phenomenon *until the end*, exhaustively, means to know the world in all its connections. In this sense it can be said that each person is to some degree a measure of the society, or rather class, to which he belongs, for the whole totality of social relationships is reflected in him" (Vygotsky 1997b).

This could be taken as an argument for the *idiographic* approach, but he goes on in what is the final paragraph of his most famous work:

> "The consciousness of sensation and thinking are characterised by different modes of reflecting reality. They are different types of consciousness. Therefore, *thinking and speech are the key to understanding the nature of human consciousness*. If language is as ancient as consciousness itself, if language is consciousness that exists in practice for other people and therefore for myself, then it is not only the development of thought but the development of consciousness as a whole that is connected with the development of the word. Studies consistently demonstrate that the word plays a central role not in the isolated functions but the whole of consciousness. In consciousness, the word is what – in Feuerbach's (1972: §12) words – is absolutely impossible for one person but possible for two. The word is the most direct manifestation of the historical nature of human consciousness.
>
> "Consciousness is reflected in the word like the sun is reflected in a droplet of water. The word is a microcosm of consciousness, related to consciousness like a living cell is related to an organism, like an atom is related to the cosmos. *The meaningful word is a microcosm of human consciousness*" (Vygotsky 1987: 285).

This quote comes from "Thinking and Speech," the most well-known and influential of Vygotsky's works, published in Russian for a short time just after his death, and then in several translations outside the Soviet Union beginning in the 1960s. He asks, in the context of a discussion of the subject matter of the title:

> "What then is a unit that possesses the characteristics inherent to the integral phenomenon of verbal thinking and that cannot be further decomposed? In our view, such a unit can be found in the inner aspect of the word, its meaning. ...
>
> "Is word meaning speech or is it thought? It is both at one and the same time; it is a *unit of verbal thinking*. It is obvious then, that our method must be that of semantic analysis. Our method must rely on the analysis of the meaningful aspect of speech; it must be a *method of studying word meaning*" (Vygotsky 1987: 47).

We will come to what precisely Vygotsky meant by 'unit' and a more detailed explanation of his idea of 'unit of analysis' presently, but to be clear about what Vygotsky is claiming here, we need to clarify the distinction between 'microcosm' and 'unit of analysis'.

He says that word meaning is both 'a microcosm of human consciousness' and a 'unit [of analysis] of verbal thinking'. It would be easy to make the mistake of equating 'microcosm' and 'unit of analysis' and equating 'consciousness' and 'verbal thought' as if these two statements were making the same claim. Such a conclusion would be wrong. Verbal thinking is the highest development of consciousness, arising in human beings only at a certain point in ontogenetic and phylogenetic development, but consciousness is more ubiquitous and multifaceted; verbal thinking is tied up with the act of verbal thought; "its reflection of reality differs radically from that of immediate sensation or perception" (Vygotsky 1987: 47). Verbal thought also differs from affect, from physical activity such as sport or dance, the visual arts and music and so on, in how it reflects reality. The point is that because verbal thinking is arguably the highest conquest of the development of consciousness, the *sine qua non* of human society, its study sheds light on the *entire* problem of human consciousness: "the sun is reflected in a droplet of water." But contrary to the belief of the enthusiastic

linguist, we do not live in a world of texts[61]; human beings are suffering, feeling, laboring material organisms, and an understanding of human consciousness presupposes a study of *all* modes of human activity, not just verbal thought. But if – like Pavlov with his salivary reflex – we study this one phenomenon *to the end*, then we will unlock the entire domain of human consciousness for analysis. (The same idea goes to some extent also for Luria's eidetic, in relation to memory, even though these are not quite the same idea.)

So although Vygotsky's research covered every imaginable domain of psychological research, he came to the conclusion that verbal thinking was "*the key to understanding the nature of human consciousness*." But word meaning is not a unit of analysis for human consciousness in general, but a *unit of analysis for verbal thinking*.[62]

What did Vygotsky understand by 'word meaning'?

> "... word meaning is an act of speech. In psychological terms, however, word meaning is nothing other than a generalization, that is, a *concept*. In essence, generalization and word meaning are synonyms. Any generalization – any formation of a concept – is unquestionably a specific and true act of thought. Thus word meaning is also a phenomenon of thinking" (Vygotsky 1987: 244).

So even though we have good reason to believe that Vygotsky never studied Hegel, in coming to the conclusion that the unit of analysis for verbal thinking is the *concept*, he is in complete agreement with Hegel. We will later explore how far from verbal thinking this observation can be taken, but let us move on to the very important concept of unit of analysis.

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[61] If we expand the meaning of 'text' to include all artifacts including the human body itself, then the false statement becomes true, but all artifacts are not words. Words *do* have a special place in human life, but they do not exhaust it.

[62] The formulation above (Vygotsky 1987: 285) is admittedly ambiguous. Vygotsky also compares the relation to that of cell to organism (the classic metaphor for unit of analysis), and atom to cosmos, and his claim that every person is a microcosm of their whole society sounds like a positivist conception of unit of analysis. But taking everything into account, I believe the distinction I am making here between unit and microcosm correctly reflects Vygotsky's approach. Vygotsky was breaking new ground everywhere he went, so often words were not available for what he needed to express; as a result he is often ambiguous and inconsistent in his use of words (See Zinchenko 2007).

Unit of analysis

Vygotsky approached the problem of the concept of a science through the contrast between analysis by *elements* and analysis by *units*. For Vygotsky, word meaning, or concept, is an integral whole – a molecule in the sense of being a unity of elements just like water is a unity of the elements hydrogen and oxygen, H_2O. Hydrogen and oxygen taken on their own demonstrate none of the properties of water, which can on the other hand, be observed in the water molecule, which is the smallest unit of water to exhibit the properties of the whole. Word meaning has two elements: the semantic and the lexical/phonetic. His claim is that verbal thinking, the highest development of human consciousness cannot be understood through the study of phonetics and semantics, the 'elements' of verbal thinking:

> "In our view, an entirely different form of analysis is fundamental to further development of theories of thinking and speech. This form of analysis relies on the partitioning of the complex whole into *units*. In contrast to the term 'element', the term 'unit' designates a product of analysis that possesses *all the basic characteristics of the whole*. The unit is a vital and irreducible part of the whole. The key to the explanation of the characteristics of water lies not in the investigation of its chemical formula but in the investigation of its molecular movements. In precisely the same sense, the living cell is the real unit of biological analysis because it preserves the basic characteristics of life that are inherent in the living organism" (Vygotsky 1987: 46).

In order to explore this unit of verbal thinking, Vygotsky traced the origins of speaking and thinking:

> "1. As we found in our analysis of the phylogenetic development of thinking and speech, we find that these two processes have different roots in ontogenesis.
>
> "2. Just as we can identify a 'pre-speech' stage in the development of the child's thinking, we can identify a 'pre-intellectual stage' in the development of his speech.
>
> "3. Up to a certain point, speech and thinking develop along different lines and independently of one another.
>
> "4. At a certain point, the two lines cross: thinking becomes verbal and speech intellectual" (Vygotsky 1987: 112).

Thus the designation of the semantic and the phonetic/lexical as *elements* of verbal speech was established by a painstaking experimental investigation of the development of speech and the development of thinking as children acquired the practice of verbal thinking, through a series of distinct stages in which the relationship between speech and thinking goes through transformations. The discovery of the different roots of thinking and speech and the distinct trajectories of the development of each, and thus the creation of verbal thinking as a unique conjunction of two distinct psychological functions, was uniquely Vygotsky's, a discovery which made possible the founding of the scientific study of verbal thinking.

The claim that verbal thought is a unique mode of behavior alongside *other* types of speech and *other* forms of intelligence, was established experimentally. Thus, unlike the reflexologists' claim that 'everything is a reflex', it cannot be said that word meaning as a unit of verbal speech 'reduces everything to a common denominator ... because [it] is too all-embracing and universal' (Vygotsky 1997: 35).

One final methodological point: all of Vygotsky's observations, both theoretical and experimental, are focused on interactions between *individual persons*. The sociological aspect of these interactions is implicit in the artifacts used (words of the national language for example) and the way they are used, by people already experienced in their use. The only way in which generalized sociological conceptions play a role in his theory is in and through the cultural products (such as words and concepts) figuring in the practices of and interactions between individual people, and how these products are used. This gives Vygotsky's work a particularly concrete character resting on *real* premises "the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity" (Marx 1975i: 31).

17. Vygotsky on *Gestalt* and *Bildung*

"Я готов"
[I'm done!]
(Vygotsky 11 June 1934)

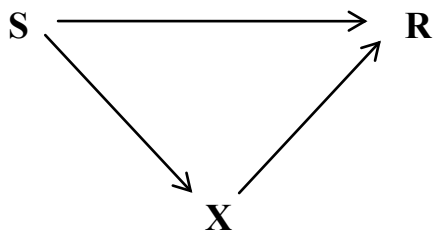
The victory of Hitler in Germany in 1933 and the crushing of the powerful German Communist Party heralded a turn away from the insane optimism of earlier Soviet foreign policy, but inside the Soviet Union it meant a ramping up of political repression. Everyone was in danger, and fear of denunciation by one's enemies prompted pre-emptive denunciation of potential enemies. The various trends of Marxist psychology soon came under political 'criticism' under conditions in which only the most deadening conformism could hope to survive. The writing was on the wall.

Vygotsky's creative life-time in psychology was very short. After bursting on to the scene in 1924, it was only in 1928 that he could be said to have shaped his own approach, tuberculosis was undermining his ability to work, and by the early '30s, the dark clouds of Stalinist repression threatened to make scientific work impossible. During the last years of his life Vygotsky worked frenetically, knowing that his time was running out, he prepared books, often in disconnected and unfinished chapters which would not see the light of day for 50 years, whilst students took notes of his lectures. The Moscow Trials condemned to death as saboteurs, all the leaders of the October Revolution and the Red Army. Although he died before they began, Vygotsky's private papers show that he was preparing for an uncompromising defence of his work. In reading his papers from this period, we are presented with a comprehensive vision of psychology, but only in a series of glimpses, which the author had time only to illustrate, summarize and suggest principles and directions for further work.

How is human freedom is possible? How is it that human beings can subject their behavior to *their own* control, while at the same time they remain *natural* beings, subject entirely to the laws of biology, physics and chemistry?

The early physiologists of the nervous system established that the basic unit of the nervous system is the stimulus-response reaction ($S \rightarrow R$), including both unconditional and conditional reactions, a network of which

forms the natural, physiological foundation for the psyche, in turn rooted in the basic laws of physics, chemistry and biology. Nothing in the human nervous system can contradict these laws.[63] The artificial or constructed aspect of the human nervous system arises from the *insertion* of 'artificial' mediating links between stimulus and response, illustrated schematically with the diagram:



Both S → X and X → R are stimulus-response reactions just like S → R, but have been *introduced into* the natural system artificially. X is a *means* of achieving the object R, which entails the use of an element of culture, an artifact of some kind.

Just as every single component of a machine obeys the laws of physics, the machine nevertheless acts according to human purposes for which it is designed and operated. In just this same way, the human body is obedient to the laws of nature while at the same time serving human purposes. The human body is a natural organism, and at the same time an element of culture, and just as human beings are able to control material objects and subject them to their will, so also, we learn to master our own behavior and our own nervous system, by the inclusion of cultural products in our behavior.

In general X can be visualized as an artifact of some kind, with S → X meaning the use of the artifact[64], and X → R meaning the indirect

[63] Not even thanks to "the absence of causal sufficiency of the quantum level," as suggested by John R. Searle (2005: 162).

[64] More precisely S → X is not the *use* of the artifact, but a stimulus acting on the nervous system through its capacity as a norm or its meaning within some symbolic system, etc., evoked through the context.

achievement[65] of the object. The subject (S) confronts two objects; one, the object (R) to which the act of behavior is directed, and the other (X) a means of achieving R. Both are material objects, but our relation to them is different. This mediating element can be visualized as a tool or symbol.

While 'tool' and 'symbol' have different meanings, there is no sharp line separating them. Consider the following series of cultural means of opening a door: crow-bar, handle, key, swipe card, PIN code, password, smile to the doorkeeper. Isn't it clear that all are artifacts used as a means of gaining access, and psychologically speaking play much the same role? At one end of the series the relation between the *material* properties of X and R is most pronounced, at the other, the *ideal* properties of X are more prominent. So tool and symbol form a continuum. Whether tool or symbol,[66] the artifact always entails a relation, direct or indirect, to other people, in the example, a relation between the person responsible for controlling access and the person seeking access.

Vygotsky introduced the idea of a 'psychological tool', a tool used for the purpose of indirectly realizing some psychological operation – a map or diagram, a calculation or word, a smile or gesture. The inclusion of the tool (X) in the behavioral process modifies the mental processes which were formerly mobilized around S → R and reconstructs the entire process, now mobilized around S → X. For natural science, the unit of analysis remains S → R, but the 'instrumental act' illustrated by S → X → R, "is the simplest piece of behavior with which [behavioral] research is dealing: an elementary unit of behavior" (Vygotsky 1997d: 87).

So here we have the 'unit of analysis' for *behavior*, *in general* – an 'instrumental act'. Clearly enough, the word is the most important, developed and typical of all 'psychological tools' but a gun or a telescope is also just as much a psychological tool, through the use of which the psychological structure of a human being is transformed, though not *only* the subject's behavior and psychology. The use of any artifact has the effect

[65] More precisely X → R is an action directed at the object; achievement is of course another matter.

[66] Vygotsky *did* make reference to the binary tool/symbol classification but Peirce's classification of signs according to how they are connected to their object, viz., index, icon and symbol, works much better.

of restructuring the nervous system, turning the natural nerve tissue into a product of cultural development, bearing the stamp of human activity, while obedient every moment to the laws of nature.

Thus the human psyche is shaped *from the outside*; individual human beings learn to control their own behavior only by using the tools introduced to them by those around them. The behavioral act is normally directed at some external state of affairs, but in using the artifact a person changes themself in a way consonant with the culture they draw upon. So human beings acquire freedom by appropriating it from other people, who, as Fichte put "summon us to exercise our freedom" (2000: 41) and give us the means of doing so.

The Higher Psychological Functions

We are born with a range of psychological functions which are rooted in biology and function according to the law of the conditional reflex, S → R: visual perception, vocal ability, practical intelligence, and so on. These psychological functions are rooted in distinct biological systems that we share with the animals. A human infant, when confronted, for example, with a task calling for the exercise of practical intelligence will approach the problem just like a chimpanzee, captive to the visual field, with eyes only for the object ... *until they begin to talk*. Once speech enters the scene, children use speech to control their own behavior just as they would use it to control the behavior of others. Luria describes the following auto-dialogue recorded by Levina of a child who was endeavoring to reach a jar of candy:

> "That candy is up so high. [Here the child climbs up on the divan and jumps up and down.] I have to call Mommy so she will get it for me [jumps some more]. There's no way to get it, it's so high. [Here the child picks up the stick, looking at the candy.] Papa also has a big cupboard and sometimes he can't reach things. No, I can't get it with my hand, I'm too small still. Better to stand on a stool [climbs on a stool, waves the stick around, which bangs the cupboard]. Knock, knock. [Here the child laughs. Glancing at the candy, she takes the stick and knocks it off the cupboard.] There! The stick got it. I'll have to take this stick home with me" (Luria 2006).

So we see that the child mobilized speech to structure her perception of the entire field and instead of asking Papa and Mommy to fetch the candy

for her, or doing what Mommy and Papa tell her, she turns this ability to solving the problem through her own behavior. Speech – the use of a word-tool – here mediates between the child's existing practical intelligence and the object, and in the process her own practical intelligence is being restructured.

Vygotsky pointed out that speech develops in two directions at this point; in its communicative use speech is becoming more sophisticated, but as it enters as an element into an internal psychological function, it becomes at first more primitive, reduced to the level of the infantile practical intelligence. Thus a child's egocentric speech like that above, gradually becomes more abbreviated and ultimately incomprehensible as it becomes a subordinate part of practical intelligence, a psychological function of the child which rested hitherto on very primitive faculties. In the process, the child's practical intelligence is restructured and transformed, no longer relying just on the visual field.

This is a general pattern: psychological functions develop by subordinating and incorporating other psychological functions so that they operate in a mediated way. The S → X → R relation illustrated above then applies to whole *systems* of reflexes.

Here Vygotsky appropriates the conception of the psyche promoted by the Gestaltists. The psyche cannot be conceived of as a set of independent functions but from very early on in its development it is a whole, a *Gestalt*; when the faculties of speech and visual-practical intelligence merge with one another, visual perception is changed as is the intellect. Similarly, at a certain age, children 'think' by remembering; but at a later stage, they remember by thinking. There is a faculty of memory, a natural faculty not dissimilar to that of any other mammal, but 'natural memory' is inferior in its capacity and operates by quite different laws as compared to the memory of a normal adult human being. The mnemotechnique doesn't 'improve' natural memory, which in fact remains just as it was, but incorporates it into a new function of intellectual/verbal memory. Thus even though we can talk of memory or intelligence as distinct human faculties that an individual may exercise independently and with greater or lesser skill, both faculties are remote from the common endowment with which we were born, and can only be understood as different aspects of a single *Gestalt*. But every function within that Gestalt is a cultural product.

But how does the infant grow up to be not a clone, but a self-determining adult citizen of this or that culture? Born utterly dependent on those around it, physically, biologically, psychologically, materially, socially and culturally dependent on its immediate system of support, and in that sense an undifferentiated and subordinate part of that system, how does a dependent child grow into an independent adult?

The Social Situation of Development

At the time of his death, Vygotsky was working on a new book on child development (Vygotsky 1998), in which he sketched the dynamics of development through a series of stages from birth to adulthood. We are all born much the same, and as independent adults we differ from each other along the axes of culture and character, but in between, the whole structure of the path from newborn to adult differs markedly according to cultural and historical conditions and the person's social position. Understanding how it is that a child grows up to fit a certain social position in a certain society and not some other, surely contributes a great deal to understanding why the world we live in is like it is. Only the general idea can be indicated here.

The key concept that Vygotsky presented in this work is the *social situation of development*. In the context of cultural psychology it would be a truism to state that the social situation determines the course of child's development, but what does this mean? what attributes of the social situation are important? and is the process of development determined solely by the social situation or does the child herself determine the course of development in some way? Vygotsky resolves this problem brilliantly and in the spirit of Goethe, Hegel and Marx as follows.

At any given moment, the social situation in which the child finds themself constitutes a *predicament*, a predicament from which the child can only emancipate themself by making a development, that is to say, by a qualitative transformation of their own psychological structure and the structure of their relationship with those who are providing for their needs, a transformation which frees them from the constraints in which they were trapped. The new type of psychological functioning which the child attains is not implicit in the (former) social situation of development; on the contrary, development towards the new formation is actually an *escape*

from and termination of the former social situation. This self-emancipation is only possible if the child manifests a need which transcends the limits of its situation; absent this need, and there can be no development.

This is the basic concept of the *social situation of development*: a *predicament* from which the child *emancipates* itself by *making a development*. Note that this concept is radically different from the conception of social advantage/disadvantage used in positivist social science, made up of a list of factors to be added up for and against development. Rather than a list of attributes, Vygotsky gives us the *concept* of the social situation.

At any given point in the child's development, the child's needs are met in and through a system of social relations and activity which constitutes a *Gestalt*: a concept of the child which is embedded in both the expectations of the adults around the child and the level of development of the child's physical and psychological functions, together with some gap between the two and the actions in which this relation is objectified.

For the members of any society, reproduction of its culture and institutions from generation to generation is an imperative and historical experience ensures that the norms to which a child is subject are to some degree rational with respect to the developmental capacities of a child of the given age. All societies to some degree build age-level expectations into their institutional practices, and the children of a society are motivated to conform to these yardsticks. So the developmental process is conditioned by cultural-historically inherited expectations which the adults bring to the social situation of development: the concept of a child of such-and-such stage of maturity.

The fact of development of infants into adult citizens can be made intelligible only by the fact that beginning with birth itself, individuals strive to emancipate themselves from barriers to their self-determination, barriers to their full participation within the horizons of their own expectations. Although this drive takes on uniquely human forms which are culturally constructed, it is reasonable to presume the existence of such a drive even in a newborn child. That is to say, at *any* stage in development, the child will normally strive to emancipate itself from whatever frustrates or threatens control over their own conditions of existence insofar as they are capable of perceiving them.

Broadly speaking, Vygotsky's approach to development is that any given social situation of development, meeting the child's needs in a manner consonant with the level of development of the various physical and psychological functions of the child, is also a *constraint* on the child's self-determination and so can be described as a kind of *trap*. Once a key psychological function has developed beyond a certain limit within a social situation of development, the child finds that it has outgrown the situation and the role it is obliged to play in that situation. This faces the child with a predicament: it does not yet have the capacity to adopt a different role, nor can it really conceive of such a role, but it finds its present position a continual insult and offence (Bozhovich 2004). The result is a period of crisis where by an exercise of will, at whatever stage of its development, the child refuses the role in the only way open to it and thereby creates conditions for a new social situation of development in which its needs can be met in a way freed of the former constraint and free of the threats suffered during the transitional period of crisis, thus opening up a new period of stable development. The period of crisis is often traumatic for both the child and its carers; the child has no aim in mind, just a blind refusal, or rebellion against the confinement of its activity within oppressive bounds; its carers have to construct a new concept of the child and accommodate themselves and the child to a new set of relationships. If the adult carers fail to make an appropriate adjustment, then there may be a developmental pathology.

The child starts life with very little of what it needs to become a fully participating citizen of the society into which it has been born. Each of the *Gestalten* through which the child and its social situation pass constitutes a viable form of life, and at each step along the way different psychological functions develop in response to the social situation of development, building on what has been constructed in previous phases of development and each with different psychological functions playing a central role.

The child's mental and physical life entails numerous psychological functions which are successively differentiated from one another and gain increasing independence from each other in the course of development. For example, although speech and intellect rest on distinct biological bases, they cannot be mobilized independently by the child. To the extent that the child develops cultured forms of speech and intellect, it is able to mobilize them

as independent faculties. The psychological functions become independent only insofar as they remain aspects of a unitary psychological structure in which the biological bases are subordinated to the whole *Gestalt*.

The social situation of development is generally unitary; the child is treated by adults as a single, unitary individual and the social arrangements through which the child's needs are met are normally though not necessarily integral. (As the child's horizons broaden, such as when the child attends school, the social situation of development may become internally differentiated and even contradictory.) The child's development takes place along a number of different lines of development at any given age, all within a single system of relations through which the child's needs are met, and in which at each stage, one line of development is *central*, central to the completion of that stage of development and the initiation of the next.

In general, the social situation of development presupposes a certain mode of dependence of the child, namely, the way in which the child's needs are met. During a period of stable development the central function develops to a point where the child senses that it is capable of transcending this mode of dependence; but the mode in which their needs are being met entails restrictions presaged on the immaturity of the given function. So it is the child, by an act of will, who responds to its frustration by refusing the existing relations of dependence, often displaying a characteristic kind of negativism. There may be no intention on the part of the child to change the social situation; it is just that the child now finds the situation insufferable.

The general schema of development from newborn to adult is that the child begins life physically, biologically, psychologically, materially, socially and culturally dependent on their immediate social system of support and mode of life, and in that sense they are an undifferentiated and subordinate part of the *Gestalt*. Equally, the child's psychological structure begins as an undifferentiated whole, and in passing through a series of *Gestalten*, the psychological structure of the child undergoes a series of differentiations in which a given psychological function and role within the *Gestalt*, differentiates itself and gives rise to a new formation. This process continues up to adulthood, the child gaining independence along successive axes, and once the process of development is successfully completed, the person is fully socialized and qualifies as a free agent operating within the norms of the culture. Only as a fully *independent* citizen does the young

person become a fully *integrated* member of the society. Internally, this process of socialization corresponds to the successive differentiation of psychological functions, articulated within the individual's psychological structure: perception is freed from handling, thinking is freed from remembering and vice versa, intelligence is freed from speech, and so on.

The mode of *social interaction* and the corresponding mode of *psychological functioning*, created by the child's exercise of will during a period of critical development which marks the transition from one period of stable development to another, reshapes the relationships of the social situation of development and normally the child demonstrates to its carers and itself its capacity to play a different role, around which a new social situation is constructed, new expectations and a new role for the child, and an entirely new kind of development ensues.

Thus we see that Vygotsky captured the developing individual as a *Gestalt*, in which the individual and their social situation is perceived as a *concept*. Vygotsky does not begin from an inside/outside dichotomy, but on the contrary, the self-conscious and independent individual confronting an external world of social structures, emerges as the *outcome* of a protracted process of differentiation of modes of social interaction and psychological functioning constituting *Gestalten*. The *Gestalt* hinges around the interchange of needs and the means of their satisfaction through an unfolding system of social practices and a developing psyche which is at the heart of the process. The individual is constituted by the expectations of those around them in unity and conflict with the emerging will of the growing personality. The raising of the child is a joint project in which the child is both project and participant, both subject and object.

Vygotsky's approach to a child's social situation of development, which entails forming a *concept* of the situation, may be fruitful when we come to look at the problem of social situation more generally.

Vygotsky on concepts

From the point of view of both the methodology and the content of his psychology, concept-formation was central for Vygotsky, and it is a mistake to counterpose Vygotsky's methodological work and his psychological work (Toomela 2008a: 298; c.f. Davydov & Radzikovskii 1985: 50). In his experimental study of the development of conceptual thought (1987: 121),

Vygotsky characterized the attainment of conceptual thought in adolescence as the completion of cognitive development. And in outlining ten different pre-conceptual thought-forms from infantile syncretism to true concepts, he made it abundantly clear that he knew what a true concept is. In his idea of 'unit of analysis', Vygotsky reconstructed Hegel's idea that the founding of a science means the formation of a concept of the subject matter; he solved the problem of the relation of thinking and speech by the formulation of a concept of intelligent speech; he resolved the problem of child development by the formulation of the social situation of development as a *true concept*, rather than a list of attributes of the context of development. But he never actually used the word 'concept' to characterize this aspect of his methodology. Nonetheless, concept-formation is a connecting thread of his work, tying together the central idea of both his psychology and his methodology.

Vygotsky was insistent that children could not attain true conceptual thought until "the intellectual functions which form the mental basis for the process of concept formation are constituted and developed" in adolescence (1987: 130). "The tasks that are posed for the maturing adolescent by the social environment – tasks that are associated with his entry into the cultural, professional, and social life of the adult world – are an essential functional factor in the formation of concepts. Repeatedly, this factor points to the mutually conditioned nature, the organic integration, and the internal unity of content and form in the development of thinking" (1987: 132).

Insisting that true concepts are a unique mode of conception, utterly distinct from the abstract general conceptions or 'empirical concepts' commonly mistaken for concepts, he said concepts (1) arise as solutions to problems, (2) are social in origin and (3) exist only within a general structure or framework of judgments. This is consistent with the explanation we have given in the earlier treatment of Hegel, namely, that concepts arise in the development of 'formations of consciousness', that is, systems of social practice, which become objectified in a wider culture. The genesis of concepts in ontogeny which Vygotsky describes cannot be brought into one-to-one correspondence with Hegel's description in the Logic, but there are abundant parallels.

According to Vygotsky (1987: 121-166), the first phase of concept development in infancy is *syncretism*: objects are united only by subjective

bonds and not by anything pertaining to the objects themselves. Syncretism begins with *trial-and-error* or pure "syncretism"; next *egoistic selection* based on the child's visual field, and then *combinations* of collections previously made by trial-and-error and/or egocentrically (See Towsey & Macdonald 2009).

The second phase of concept development is *complexes*: objects are united not only by subjective bonds but also by facts. Any factually present connection may lead to the inclusion of a given element into a complex, but at first, not consistently the one attribute. Complexive thinking goes through the *associative complex*, in which the association linking one object to another is quite unstable. Then the *collection complex*: the collectives are "families" or sets, collections of things having *different*, complementary attributes. Then the *chain complex*, in which each object is related to the next and thus to the next, like members of an extended family, and although sharing a family name, there is no one attribute uniting all the elements. Then the *Diffuse Complex*: marked by the fluidity of the attribute connecting one object to the next, which is not yet fully stable. Finally, the *pseudoconcept*, in which the child is able to abstract from objects, events and situations relevant abstract attributes, to the exclusion of others, and subsume them under a common name so that the things it refers to match exactly with the things that are referred to by adults with the same word. When the child is able to freely transfer this pseudoconcept to different fields that are empirically distinct but share the relevant relations, then this is called a *potential concept*.

Up to this point, the child has not grasped a true concept. A child cannot grasp a concept because such an understanding is accessible only to someone who has become or is in the process of becoming a member of a whole adult community, with its history, its literature, its laws and the variety of institutions and social positions.[67] Within the confines of its family and school support system, in general, the developing child cannot progress further than the ability to recognize, isolate and abstract relevant

[67] Studies (Gabarino 1991) of children forced to 'grow up before their time' by the intervention of war or disaster demonstrate the tendency to acquire conceptual thought in the form of a rigid ideology. This coincides with Vygotsky's description (1998a: 42-52) of an adolescent's earliest use of true concepts.

attributes of the things in their environment, and learn to manipulate these attributes according to logical rules of some kind while enacting actions and 'scripts' which they have acquired in their situation of development.

But through the use of complexes, both in their speech and in commanding their own behavior, they are able to understand adults and communicate with adults without the adults being aware of the difference in the thought forms they each are using. "The child and adult understand each other with the pronunciation of the word 'dog' because they relate the word to the same object, because they have the same concrete content in mind. However, one thinks of the concrete complex 'dog' and the other of the abstract concept 'dog'" (Vygotsky 1987: 155). This also means that as the adolescent begins to find their way in the wider world and master conceptual thought as participants within institutions and systems of social practice, with pseudoconcepts gradually acquiring nuances and associations and gradually generalizing their ties to sensuous, inessential attributes. This insight into how the *leap* to the concept, which originates from an entirely different source in social history, is supported by the *gradual* release of the pseudoconcept, resting on sensuous attributes, is a brilliant rendering of Hegel's aphorism: "The Notion is the truth of Being and Essence" (Hegel 2009: §159).

Vasily Davydov (1990) criticized Vygotsky on the basis of the experiment on concept development, originally designed and reported by Sakharov (1994). Frankly, Davydov's reading finds ample support in Sakharov's report. According to this reading, a child forms a series of preconcepts as described above, leading up to a true concept, as the culmination of the series. In fact, the experiment dealt with *artificial* concepts (such as 'red-square'), instantiated in colored blocks of various shapes which the child was invited to sort into sets. In this artificial scenario there is no opportunity for the child to demonstrate conceptual thought and Vygotsky quite clearly excluded the possibility. Vygotsky shared Hegel's way of using a word usually applied to the *outcome* of a process to refer to the *process itself* and all its intermediate formations. Because of this, Vygotsky can mistakenly be read as claiming that all the thought-forms encountered in the experiment are concepts. Thus, according to Davydov, Vygotsky does not understand the nature of a concept, seeming to think that a concept is the culmination of a series of 'empirical concepts' arising from

the abstraction of attributes more and more consistently and 'logically'. In fact, the potential concept is as far as you can go with this mode of conception; true concepts come from an entirely different direction.

Davydov's unique contribution to psychology was the development of a method of teaching theoretical topics like Russian grammar and algebra, which he successfully taught to 8-year-olds. He regarded the 'everyday concepts' which children brought with them into school as a positive barrier to the acquisition of 'scientific concepts', since true concepts could be acquired only by a completely different route, 'from above' so to speak, and he praised Vygotsky for his discovery of the nature of 'scientific concepts' (Vygotsky: 1987: 167-242). His method was to lead children through a series of stages in the solution of practical problems arising within a certain theoretical domain, beginning with the *Urphänomen*, that is to say, a material relation which represents the fundamental *concept* of the subject matter. That is, Davydov transferred Hegel and Vygotsky's idea of the development of a science to the problem of the teaching of a science in the school environment. And his method has proved to be very effective.

However, there is a danger in Davydov's attitude to 'everyday concepts'. Vygotsky took the example of the learning of a foreign language in school, quoting Goethe, that "he who does not know at least one other language does not fully know his own" (1987: 222), to show how the learning of a scientific concept in school, 'from above', and learning everyday concepts from personal experience, 'from below', mutually reinforce and deepen each other. Davydov thinks that the only type of *true* concepts are *scientific* concepts (and remember that in the Soviet Union, 'scientific' is more or less co-extensive with 'Marxist'), and that everyday concepts can rise no further than generalized conceptions (pseudoconcepts). Vygotsky, on the other hand, thinks that everyday concepts can be true concepts, and by interacting in the child's psyche with the concepts learnt at school, everyday concepts which began life as pseudoconcepts gradually take on the character of true concepts. Likewise, life experience fills out school concepts with elements of realism. If we follow Davydov's approach to the teaching of scientific concepts, we may get excellent mathematicians and grammarians, but the results are somewhat like the product of a religious school: inculcation into a closed, sectarian system of thought. What characterizes everyday life in a community is that everyday life is

penetrated by the concepts of literature, religion, art, economics, political organization, and so on, as well as science. Each such institution provides a framework for a regular system of judgments, but a truly *universal* understanding arises only through everyday life experience in which a multiplicity of systems of activity and thought merge with one another.

Surprisingly, Luria also exhibited a failure to understand Vygotsky's distinction between pseudoconcept (based on common attributes) and true concepts (based on social practice) in his report on the Central Asian expedition (Luria 2006: 66ff). Subjects who grouped objects according to a concept by bringing all the objects into relation with one another in some social practice, and refused to group things according to some common attribute (which they regarded as stupid) were described by Luria as not having attained a level of theoretical and logical thought. What they lacked was certain habits of abstract thought inculcated in formal schooling, including a propensity to substitute pseudoconcepts for true concepts.

18. The Significance of Vygotsky's Legacy

Both social behaviorism and physiological behaviorism are locked into individualistic conceptions of the human subject, and neither allows the use of a scientific concept of consciousness, which is after all the subject matter of Psychology, and the key proximate determinant of human behavior. Only introspective psychology (Phenomenology) could study consciousness, but Phenomenology took consciousness as something real, as equal to being. Even the Gestaltists proposed a holistic conception of the mind, but were locked into abstract conceptions of the individual psyche. Vygotsky solved these fundamental problems.

Vygotsky said of the Gestaltists, that "having smashed atomism, [they] replaced the atom by the independent and isolated molecule" (1997e: 230) and was able to show how the person can be conceived together with their social situation as a *Gestalt* in which the inside/outside dichotomy is genuinely transcended. A person's psyche and forms of practical activity emerge through a process of internal differentiation of what is an integral whole: the child in their social situation. With his concept of the 'instrumental act', Vygotsky has given us a precise activity reading of Hegel's idea of a Gestalt as a system of concepts. Through this approach we see that the sovereign individual is the product of a multiplicity of collaborative projects in which their personality, intellect and motivations are both formed and enacted. Vygotsky's conception of this process of becoming a person reproduces the 'manifold richness of the subject' rather than reducing the person and their situation to just so many contingent attributes that can be captured in a multiple choice questionnaire.

How different is Vygotsky from his predecessors though! No great historical claims, no systems. Vygotsky's greatest methodological virtue is that he always posed very specific problems entailing quite specific functions of individual human beings; he never operated with abstract generalizations. His is a *cultural* psychology, but he used no abstraction to represent culture; we hear nothing of 'social norms', 'social class' or 'the dominant ideology'; he just deals with two people using an artifact together. But even then, rather than a general category like 'artifact' he makes a specific enquiry into 'verbal intelligence' through the use of a *word*. By the

resolution of *one* problem, which functions as a microcosm, he sheds light on an entire landscape.

The modest scale of his conceptualization has functioned to ensure that a solid base of empirical science has been built on the foundations he has laid, and it also probably contributed to its ability to slip under the anti-communist radar and take root where an overtly Marxist theory of society could never have reached. It was of course the use of Goethe's idea of *Urphänomen*, which Vygotsky appropriated from his reading of Marx's "Capital," which made these achievements possible. But in itself, Vygotsky's psychology is not complete.

Nominally, the wider society is represented in those participants in an interaction who are experienced in the culture, their expectations, norms of behavior and so on, which are transmitted to a neophyte, and represented in the artifacts they use, the words and symbols, and even their bodies, which have been shaped through the history of the society in which they live. But some kind of representation of the wider society is necessary for a cultural psychology, even for its own purposes, let alone as we have posited here, for the building of an interdisciplinary conception. Without further qualification, the picture of society that Vygotsky leaves us with is that of a mass of dyads or small family groups, using a common resource of artifacts, but we have no way of conceptualizing how these dyads and groups interact with one another to form a social formation. Nor actually do we have any idea of the source of motivation for the actions individuals carry out, and this is the most serious problem. Without any scientifically developed alternative, anyone using Vygotsky's psychology must fill in the blank source of motivation with the use of whatever theory or conception is at hand.

The challenge Vygotsky left to his continuators was to develop a view of the source of motivation in the larger society, and an approach to representing the place of an individual or group within the larger society, whilst retaining the strengths which had characterized Vygotsky's methodology: refusing abstractions and dealing everywhere with interactions between individual persons. This is no mean challenge. None of the conceptions available in social theory in Vygotsky's time, and even perhaps today, could square this circle.

This ends the first part of this book, presenting in the form of an historical narrative the foundations for an emancipatory human science. Vygotsky was a product of the Russian Revolution, and his legacy would inevitably bear the stamp of its origins. Initially this meant that his work was to be further developed within the Soviet Union, with all the difficulties that this entailed. It also meant that for a long, long time, his work would remain unknown outside of the Soviet Union.

Next we must turn to the efforts of those who survived Vygotsky to develop the concept of activity, which we claim, is the key which opens the possibility for an *interdisciplinary* and emancipatory human science. The concept of activity was the special focus of the work of Vygotsky's youngest colleague, Alexei Nicolaevich Leontyev, but the concept of activity was developed by others after Leontyev's death and our critical review of Activity Theory will bring us up to the present day.

Part III. Activity Theory

19. Activity[68]

> "A need gets its definiteness only in the object of the activity; it has as it were to find itself in it. In so far as a need finds its definiteness in an object (becomes 'objectified' in it), the object becomes the motive of the activity, and that which stimulates it."
> (Leontyev 2009)

Interdisciplinary concept

Vasily Davydov was to be a keynote speaker at the Fourth Congress of the International Society for Activity Theory and Cultural Research, in Aarhus, Denmark in June 1998. A leading member of the third generation of CHAT, Davydov had worked in Activity Theory for 40 years, renowned for his original method for the teaching of mathematics. Unfortunately he died before the Congress convened, but had prepared his speaking notes in advance. He closed his contribution with the following observation:

> "I always argue that the problem of activity and the concept of activity are *interdisciplinary* by nature. There should be specified philosophical, sociological, culturological, psychological and physiological aspects here. That is why the issue of activity is not necessarily connected with psychology as a profession. It is connected at present because in the course of our history, activity turned out to be the thing on which our prominent psychologists focused their attention as early as in the Soviet Union days. Things just turned out this way" (Davydov, 1999: 50, my emphasis).

Vasily Davydov was right when he said that activity is an 'interdisciplinary' concept by nature, and the objective of this work is to take up Davydov's argument and investigate what is needed for one and the same concept of activity to be useful both in the resolution of problems associated with individuals and their relations, *and* those associated with societal entities and their relations. Such a concept would provide a rational basis for psychology (including education, organizational theory, and so on) to

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[68] References to 'Activity Theory' or 'Activity Theorists' refer to the theory founded by A. N. Leontyev and variants on this theory, and do not include Vygotsky, Luria or their followers. This is not to exaggerate the differences between these two currents which together make up CHAT.

appropriate concepts from sciences concerned with societal phenomena (economics, cultural studies, political science, and so on) and vice versa, and contribute to overcoming the individual/society dichotomy institutionalized in the academy.

The type of problems specifically opened up by an interdisciplinary conception of activity are analogous to what Gadamer (2005) called the 'hermeneutic circle': each word in a text is interpreted in the light of it being part of a text of certain genre; but conversely, the text is recognized to belong to that genre only thanks to the meaning given to each of its constituent words. Likewise, *the meaning of each individual action is derived from an understanding of the whole activity of which it is a part, but conversely, social phenomena are constituted only in and through the meaning given to individual actions*. In general, individuals uncritically accept for what they appear to be, all the states, social classes, institutions and so on, they meet with. Psychology tends to follow individuals in this uncritical acceptance of the ontology of social life. Meanwhile conversely, the social sciences tend not to ask how it is that individual consciousness does or does not adapts itself to the forms of activity with which the individuals are confronted.

Interdisciplinary work is commonly organized through the collaboration of specialists who each use different specialized theories and concepts, but communicate with one another in the lingua franca. But this cannot facilitate critical collaboration because the respective theories lack common theoretical concepts. Davydov is right in suggesting that 'activity' can provide a common theoretical foundation across disciplinary boundaries. What we are considering here is not a theory of everything, but simply a concept which facilitates disciplines to critically appropriate insights from other disciplines, and collaborate using common, or at least overlapping, conceptual tools, especially at those points where sociological and psychological considerations interact with one another. By an 'interdisciplinary concept' we mean a scientific concept which will have the same meaning for a political scientist, psychologist, political economist, neuroscientist or sociologist.

And surely, when Marx spoke about activity (*Tätigkeit*) in "Theses on Feuerbach" (1975g) he meant precisely an *interdisciplinary* concept of activity, and not a concept limited to the solution of problems of individuals

and small groups. Defining practice as "the coincidence of changing circumstances and activity," he says that "All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice." *All* mysteries, not just psychological mysteries. In "The German Ideology," (1975i) claimed that the 'real premises' for his work would be "the *real individuals, their activity and the material conditions* under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity" (1975i: 31). So defined, this project remains before us to this day.

Because of the 'historical accident' referred to by Davydov, the concept of 'activity' "stayed out of politics" (Sawchuk & Stetsenko 2008), so to speak, and came to be linked specifically to *psychology*. Despite the efforts of Activity Theorists, the concept as it has been developed is inadequate beyond the domain which Hegel referred to as 'subjective spirit' – activity amongst a finite, self-sufficient group of individuals. But it was more in the domain which Hegel referred to as 'objective spirit' – rights, politics, economics, history, etc., – that Marx used his concept of activity.

CHAT is a psychology which is concerned primarily with how the personality is formed by the social situation in which the person grows up and lives. CHAT does not have a theory of human nature *in general*, but rather understands that societal entities and individual personalities mutually constitute and form one another. So even within its own terms, CHAT needs to be able to span this dichotomy.

Sylvia Scribner discussed this issue at length in her article 'Vygotsky's use of history'. She expressed the problem like this:

> "Psychologists, for example, tend to conceive of the individual as a dynamic system while assuming in their research designs that history on the societal level is static; anthropologists often make the reverse assumption" (Scribner 1985: 140).

In the same collection, Michael Cole suggested that "[CHAT] holds great promise, in my estimation, for promoting reintegration of psychology and its sister science of anthropology" (Cole 1985: 146). Cole suggests that CHAT ought to "mine concepts" from cultural anthropology, but remains somewhat pessimistic about the willingness of academics in the different disciplines to actively and creatively collaborate:

> "'Man-acting' and 'schema' may be the 'inside' and 'outside' versions of the same sphere of activity" as I have suggested. But the mutual indifference of psychologists and anthropologists to the phenomena that they study quickly induces mutual indifference and robs the social sciences of the benefits that might result from the interactions that a common unit of analysis might provide" (Cole 1985: 159).

To grasp the connection of psychology with societal phenomena, Activity Theory must make use of concepts representing societal phenomena ('activities'), but it lacks a genuine sociological theory of its own. Political conditions in the Soviet Union made it impossible to develop a sociological theory, beyond the repetition of truisms from culled nineteenth century Marxist literature.

According to Activity Theory, an activity[69] is a system of actions in pursuit of some socially determined object, that is to say, an object the motive for which resides in the requirements of the society to reproduce itself, rather than the needs of an individual. But in reality, the identity of such activities have been borrowed from other sciences or from common sense, and fitted into activity theory by circular definitions of 'objects'. For example, a spinner is participating in the activity whose object is yarn. But under capitalism, the worker's goal is wages, its personal meaning for them, and the employers' goal is profit (Leontyev 2009), whereas for a worker in the socialist USSR:

> "Its motive and its objective product are not now foreign to each other for him, because he is now working not for exploiters but for himself" (Leontyev 2009).

On what basis can we establish 'a social need for yarn' in capitalist society, other than that society does in fact produce yarn? And how can we establish that the worker is 'working for himself' in a 'socialist' society? Liberals make exactly the same claim for bourgeois society after all. So

[69] In Leontyev's Activity Theory, 'an activity' is an objectively existing system of actions with a social motive, whereas 'actions' are the finite actions of individuals directed towards their personal goal, which all, thanks to the organization of labor, contribute to the achievement of the object of the activity. Leontyev's theory is quite complex and will be dealt with in detail in §20. In the meantime it is sufficient to know that an activity is a system made up of actions.

there is an implied sociological theory in CHAT; whether it can withstand criticism will be considered in detail below.

In what follows we will review the general conception of activity, drawing upon the classic work of Leontyev, leading into consideration in the next section, of how activity is rendered as the *substance* of the human sciences. In the following sections, we will contrast this conception of activity as substance with the problem of 'unit of analysis', drawing on the material in the earlier sections, and some interpretations of Vygotsky's idea of activity. We will then look at Leontyev's theory of activity in more detail, and briefly review the adequacy of this theory in relation to two problems of the social sciences for which CHAT would be expected to provide guidance: Marx's critique of political economy and the constitution of social subjects. We will then consider whether Engeström's response to the problems which have been identified in Leontyev's theory, and the work of Michael Cole in bringing out the importance of context. We will then propose a conception of the 'unit of analysis' of activity which provides a foundation for the human sciences.

The method of argument relied upon for much of this work is *immanent critique*, the method, originated by Aristotle, developed by Hegel (1977 [1807]) in his "Phenomenology" and the Logic, and applied by Marx in his critique of political economy and by Vygotsky (1997 [1927]) in his study of the psychology of his own time. Instead of standing outside of activity theory and pointing out its failings, in using immanent critique we will enter into activity theory itself, and follow its development through its own crises, disagreements and their resolution, where possible in the voices of its own advocates. In making sense of the history of the concept of activity, we aim to arrive at an objective conception of its crisis and to be able to make proposals which respond to problems of activity theory in its own terms. This entails a line of argument marked by *contradictions*, rather than a series of smooth logical deductions – that is the whole point: to bring out the contradictions, and show how they are resolved in actuality. For this approach, science is a social process, advancing through crisis and contradiction. This immanent critique will occupy chapters 17 to 24.

The General Conception of "Activity"

The idea of Activity Theory is associated with the name of Aleksei Nikolaevich Leontyev[70] (1904-1979), so let us begin with his definition of activity.

Leontyev defines activity through the relation between subject and object:

> "[A]ctivity is a process of intertraffic between opposite poles, subject and object. ... The basic, constituent feature of activity is that it has an *object*. In fact, the very concept of activity (doing, *Tätigkeit*) implies the concept of the object of activity" (Leontyev 2009: 396-7).

A great deal of effort was devoted by Leontyev to the study of primitive forms of life, observing the way microscopic organisms search for food and respond to stimuli, navigate around obstacles and so on, tracing the emergence of conscious forms of life from the simplest organic material.

So Leontyev defines the notions of subject, object and activity with corresponding scope: the subject is any living thing, inclusive of its internal processes and whatever form of sensation and consciousness that the organism may have. The object is some thing or situation in the subject's environment which represents to the organism the satisfaction of a need. Activity is what mediates between subject and object. The subject is the source of the activity, but the activity is oriented to the object. The object is an object *for* the subject.

According to Leontyev, activity is the processes by which a person's actual life in the objective world is realized – what they are doing (*Tätigkeit*), as opposed to the nervous, physiological processes that realize this activity within the organism – and includes mental activity (Leontyev, 2009: 221). The subject-activity-object relationship exists wherever a living

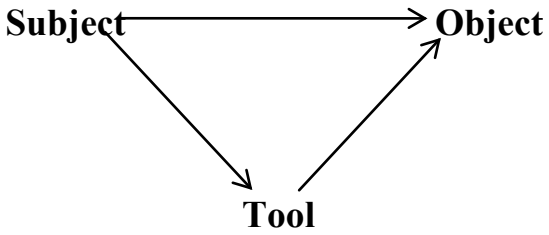
[70] A. N. Leontyev will be referred to a 'Leontyev', but his son A. A. Leontyev will be referred to using his initials.

thing, as 'subject', has a need which lies outside of itself, satisfaction of which is the *object* of the subject's activity, activity which is stimulated by the object.

This approach has the advantage of allowing the origins of consciousness to be traced from non-human organic matter, in the capacity of organisms to reflect properties of their environment. Human life is distinguished by the fact that the objects of activity and the needs which the objects satisfy are no longer natural objects and biological drives, but rather artifacts and needs which are themselves products of human activity.

Leontyev followed Engels' "The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man" (1987) in seeing the emergence of labor as the key to the formation of the human form. The key role here is played by tools. Labor appears from the very beginning as a process mediated by tools (in the broad sense) and at the same time mediated socially. In line with Hegel's original idea, the tool is an objectified human capacity. Because the production and use of tools is invariably a social process in which the tool acts as both a norm and a means of labor, the tool is the carrier of the first real, rational abstraction and generalization (Leontyev 2009). The tool is thus the prototype of the word, and symbols and other psychological tools are but further developments of the tool (c.f. Toomela 2008a).

According to Leontyev, an animal's actions are always directly towards an object which is identical with its motive, that is, which satisfies a nature-given need of the animal and is the stimulus for its action. With the creation of tools which are used to satisfy the human need, the human being's action becomes oriented to the tool, and the tool mediates the activity. We will return to this below, but suffice it to say that Leontyev refers to this as a division between the object and its motive, or the differentiation of action and activity. The tool, or artifact, now mediates between the subject and object. This means that the human being now has new needs which are themselves artifacts, including manufactured food, implements for eating, etc., and activity is always mediated by artifacts, tools and symbols of various kinds that are both means of implementing labor actions and have social significance. Having a goal given by the object of the action, the subject orients to the tool or socially determined means of achieving the goal. The person may have the object in mind, but its meaning for him is the tool to which his action is oriented.



Human life is thus conceived as a *system of needs* and the means of their satisfaction. But it is striking that in this view, the human being is seen in continuity with the natural world, as just another organism pursuing the objects of its needs. Of course, the fact is that in producing its own needs and creating a culture, the human species has created a completely new 'artificial' sphere of activity and system of meaning. In the process of producing a culture, human beings also produced their own species, oriented not to the immediate satisfaction of their needs from Nature, but to achieving culturally produced objects by culturally produced means.

The categories of subject, object and activity are mutually constitutive; none can exist without the other two. Leontyev's concept of subject is like Kant's in being associated with an individual organism, but differs from Kant's in that it can be any living organism, not just a human being. For Kant, a subject was essentially a human being, enjoying moral autonomy.

Further, for Leontyev, the subject is not a transcendental subject, but an entire organism. Kant's idea of a transcendental subject entered philosophy as a solution to specific philosophical problems. And it was not simply abolished by Hegel, but *sublated* into Hegel's conception of subject as a nodal point in a formation of social consciousness. The subject of activity subsumes all those internal processes which are not subject to conscious control. There is not a fixed boundary here, but as we shall see below, as operations which begin as a conscious method for the completion of an action under given conditions, become unconscious and subsumed into the subject, so there is a continuous interpenetration between subject and object. Nonetheless, those parts of the organism which are part of the autonomous nervous system are deemed part of the subject.

On the object, Leontyev is at pains to point out that:

> "The expression 'objectless activity' is devoid of any meaning. Activity may seem objectless, but scientific investigation of activity necessarily requires discovering its object" (Leontyev 2009).

and continues:

> "Thus, the object of activity is twofold: first, in its independent existence as subordinating to itself and transforming the activity of the subject; second, as an image of the object, as a product of its property of psychological reflection that is realized as an activity of the subject and cannot exist otherwise" (Leontyev 2009).

So, as soon as tools and symbols mediate between the subject and object, with the mediating element representing the object to the subject, the subject itself also becomes internally contradictory and subject to cultural development.

As a special case of the more general category of natural, *object-oriented* activity, human activity is adapted to and reflects the objective properties and connections of its objects, but these objects are themselves human products, artifacts. The foundation of psychology is the capacity of the human organism to reflect the properties of the objects of its activity. We do this first by the creation of artifacts, which are then apprehended internally through perception. So the process of reflection is essentially tied up with the use of the human capacities objectified in the means of labor.

So it is human needs which form the structure of activity for Leontyev. Remember that by human needs we do not mean the biological drives which underlie the activity of all animals, but rather the range of sensitivities which are cultivated in social life, and the artifacts in which they are objectified.

Human activity is characterised by the fact that it is social activity meeting social, or collective needs; the needs of individuals are met only thanks to the meeting of *social* needs. As a result of division of labor, we have a not just a gap, but a disconnection between the goals of an individual's action and the *objective motive* of the activity, which is deemed to be the meeting of some human (i.e., social) need.

The motive of an activity (such as production of cloth) is not translated directly into individuals' goals (which may be earning a wage). The problem of forming individuals' goals so that the individuals' actions are rearticulated to constitute activities which meet social needs is a problem of

the social organization of labor. The goal of the individual's action arises only thanks to the representation of the activity in and through the mediation of social relations.

It is striking nonetheless that if we look at the overall structure of a community of subjects, it is the objects which are the active elements giving structure to the whole, even though all of these needs are products of the creative activity of the subjects in the past. It is in this sense a very *objective* view of the world. Both singly and collectively the object subordinates the subject to it.

This is Leontyev's general conception of object-oriented activity. Not limited even to human life, activity is ubiquitous. Activity is neither the object nor a method of research, but rather is a *general conception* of the nature of the underlying reality, what is called the 'premises' of a science, or its 'substance'.

Only the most general outline has been presented here. We will return to a more detailed treatment of Leontyev's theory of activity later, but in the meantime we deal with some methodological points which arise from the general conception of activity.

20. Activity as the Substance of a Science

> "The specific processes that realize some vital, i.e. active, relation of the subject to reality we shall term processes of *activity*, in distinction to other processes."
> (Leontyev 1940)

Each science defines the specific character of its subject matter or the approach it takes to the subject matter with a basic principle or concept. But not all such concepts are of the same kind. In the opening paragraph of Vygotsky's 1924 speech on Reflexology with which we began, Vygotsky pointed out that:

> "outside the domain of the elementary and primitive, reflexology was left only with its general bare claim – equally well applicable to all forms of behavior – that they constitute systems of conditional reflexes. ... Classical reflexology sticks to its elaboration of the universal scientific principle ... and reduces everything to a common denominator. And precisely because this principle is too all-embracing and universal it does not yield a direct scientific means for the study of its particular and individual forms" (Vygotsky 1997: 35).

Both Pavlov and Bekhterev claimed reflexology as a 'universal science', but Vygotsky contrasted Bekhterev with Pavlov, who had made genuine scientific discoveries. As was observed above, Vygotsky admired Pavlov precisely because the way Pavlov had investigated the concept of reflex and did so by means of an exhaustive study of just one reflex. The contrasting method demonstrated by Bekhterev of which Vygotsky was so dismissive was the propensity to 'explain' complex phenomena by simply declaring them to be this or that kind of reflex: the speech reflex, the joy reflex and so on, without a concrete investigation of the pathway by means of which the specific experience came about. The reflexologist adopted an *abstract reductionism*, whereas Pavlov practised a method of concrete investigation. But the two kinds of science shared a common basic principle: "Everything is a reflex."

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explains 'substance' as follows:

> "the substances in a given philosophical system are those things which, according to that system, are the foundational or fundamental entities of reality" (Robinson, 2004).

The conception that the researcher has of the ultimate reality which underlies the domain of phenomena which the researcher seeks to understand is called a 'substance' of the researcher's philosophy; there may be more than one substance. For Bekhterev, the substance of behavioral science is reflexes. Reflexes were the focus of Pavlov's study, but Pavlov's empirical research into reflexes constantly led him into the study of *other* phenomena of the organism. This question is not generally understood amongst Activity Theorists, but if the important questions of unit of analysis and microcosm are to be properly understood, then we must be clear about the difference between these concepts and the *different* notion of 'substance'. When Marx says his premises are: "the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live" (1975i: 31), this is the same concept, and I will use the terms 'premises' and 'substance' interchangeably.

The same notion of substance will underlie any number of distinct enquiries and sciences, within the broad scope of a world view. Let us look at the premises or substances used in a variety of approaches.

The kind of naïve realism which underlies most natural scientific research presumes the existence of *matter* existing independently of human activity and underlying all phenomena, obedient to natural laws which are to be the subject of investigation. It is not a question of whether this presumption is true or well-founded – actually it certainly is well-founded – but simply that the whole idea of natural science is to describe the world of Nature, outside and beyond all labor processes. The substance of naïve common sense and natural science, gave us the meaning of the word 'substance' which has flowed over into the natural language, that is as kinds of matter.[71] But it is self-evident that such a conception of the substance of science cannot suffice for the social and psychological sciences since the entities with which the social sciences are concerned are *not* obedient to natural law, but subject to the human will. The problem of what are to be

[71] In its original, philosophical meaning, which we owe to Aristotle (ουσια), 'substances' are discrete entities, rather than types of things or a continuum of some kind.

the substances of the human sciences, both psychological and social, has troubled philosophers for at least 400 years. For Descartes, thought and matter were two different substances. Spinoza wanted a single substance with different attributes, an approach which inspired many generations of humanist research, suggesting that an approach to human science could be accommodated within natural science.

For Kantian skepticism, science deals with a domain of *appearances*, manifesting things-in-themselves which are beyond perception and cannot be the subject matter of science. So the substances are objects of possible experience, while matter and things-in-themselves are deemed not to be legitimate objects for science. For Kant, the other substances are those categories such as causality, space &c., which are acquired directly with the faculty of Reason.

For Hegel, the only premise was Spirit, which he described as "the nature of human beings en masse" (Hegel 1952 §264), but which he conceived of as pure thought unfolding out of itself alone; for Hegel, even Nature was a manifestation of Spirit.

So far as this writer knows, no writer in the CHAT tradition has broached the issue of substances, beyond the conviction that Spinoza was right as against Descartes, so it is difficult to say what the substances of CHAT are. Vygotsky was quite clear that the concept of 'consciousness' had a central place in psychology, but rather than being a distinct substance, he saw consciousness as an attribute of an organism and its behavior, for which indirect methods of investigation had to be developed. Vygotsky's response to the Reflexologists gave a genuinely scientific meaning to Spinoza's brilliant intuition.

If we are to critically appropriate concepts from other sciences, rather than uncritically import them into CHAT, then we need to be clear on the underlying reality implied in the use of concepts from other disciplines. The same would apply whether or not our aim was limited to appropriating concepts from these other disciplines. But even more importantly, no critical science is possible without the determination of a unit of analysis, and Activity Theorists are liable to mix up the notions of substance and unit of analysis, resulting in various kinds of confusion.

In this case however, we can take our lead from Marx. Marx was clear about the 'real premises' of his work: they were "the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live" (1845b: 31)[72]. 'Activity' is to be taken as an *interdisciplinary* concept, because for Marxists it is part of the premises for *all* science, including even the natural sciences. Activity Theory needs not only the concept of activity, but to recognize that the researcher is given a definite population of individuals and a constellation of material culture. Marx talked of *real* individuals in contrast to fictional players in Robinson Crusoe stories and such like which can mobilized for ideological purposes. Speculating about the origins of the human species is an interesting topic, as is the origins of our culture and the Universe for that matter. But what is given to us is definite human individuals with all the mysteries they may yet reveal to us, their activity, and all the material conditions, both natural and cultural, which they create or find around them. These substances underlie all the human sciences; only when we are investigating the biological basis of human life, scalpel and microscope in hand, can we restrict ourselves to the substances of natural science.

For Leontyev, subject, object and activity are fundamental concepts, not reducible to others. Let us take these three concepts together as 'activity' for the moment. Likewise, Leontyev conceives of activity as made up of actions and operations, but for the moment, let us subsume operations and actions under the category of activity.

Leontyev went to great length to establish the continuity of his approach to human life with natural science. He saw activity as characteristic of living matter, arising out of inorganic matter in the past and regenerated by means of natural processes, and he approached the study of activity natural-scientifically, that is, taking activity as a specific form of the movement of matter. That said, having established this continuity, activity does figure as a *substance*, along with the substances of natural science. But activity does not represent a concept of the subject matter, it is just part of the substrate of a very broad range of possible enquiries, across the natural and social sciences.

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[72] Marx did not make such a highly differentiated study of activity as such, so in Marx's terminology, operations, actions and activities all are subsumed under 'activity'.

The way in which activity functions for *natural* science became clear with the advent of quantum physics and relativity, in which the certain entities it was found could not be described independently of the human activities through which they are made objects of experience. For example, prior to Einstein's formulation of the theory of Special Relativity, everyone believed that space existed, and was describable by Euclidean geometry, independently of the human activity entailed in actually measuring it, even if that space was empty. Einstein's 'thought experiments' showed that when one examined in careful detail the operations entailed in measuring an object under the special condition that the object was moving relative to the observer, and one allowed that to make measurements of the moving object, the observer would have to rely on the transmission of light. If the laws of electromagnetics were to be independent of steady movement through empty space (the 'inertial frame'), as was demanded by the objectivity of the laws of physics, then it turned out that Euclid's geometry would have to be modified to take account of this relative movement. What this meant was that the natural scientific approach of endeavoring to describe a world beyond our labor processes independently of human practice became untenable at a certain limit. In order to describe natural phenomena, one had to introduce human activity into the picture. So taken to its limits, the natural scientific paradigm with its substances fell into contradiction, and could only be rescued by excluding certain objects (such as the trajectory of electrons). Of course, Nature exists independently of man, but if you want a science which can describe Nature with the concepts of human experience, like space, time, matter, electricity, wave, particle and so on, then you have to bring activity into the picture.

For the natural scientist, the wave-particle nonetheless remains matter in the philosophical sense of the word, as existing outside of and independently of consciousness (Ilyenkov 2009: 296). Up to a point, natural scientists can accommodate recourse to the language of activity as a method of description of Nature, while maintaining matter as the substance. Conversely, psychology can get by with an uncritical notion of 'an activity' as the social source of motivations for and interpretation of actions, but only up to a point. Ultimately, a concept must be formed of what constitutes 'an activity'. This is because the objects of human life are both constituted by

and perceived through activity, and this is the key aspect of activity which an interdisciplinary concept of activity must address.

A 'science of activity' would be a misconception because it would amount to subsuming the subject matter of all the human sciences under one concept, just as a 'science of matter' would be an abstract totalization of the natural sciences. That would risk making the same mistake that the reflexologists made when they simply declared: "Everything is a reflex." In investigating the basis for an *interdisciplinary* concept of activity, the aim is (1) to construct a richer definition of activity as premises for both psychological and sociological sciences, and (2) focus on those problems lying on the boundary between psychology and sociology where the 'hermeneutic circle' operates by developing a 'unit of analysis' appropriate for the solution of problems in this domain.

To define this relation a little more precisely, we should note that psychology generally takes as *given* the forms of social practice and the artifacts constituted by the culture within which an individual psyche develops, unconcerned with the causes of social change. On the other hand, the sociological sciences take as given individuals who are adapted to and reproduce the culture in which they are active (c.f. Cole 1985). But the viability of these acts of abstraction has its limits, just as the viability of natural science's abstraction of natural entities from activity has its limits. We need a conception of activity as premises equally adapted to the problem of the constitution of forms of social practice as to the problem of the constitution of the psyche.

According to Leontyev (2009: 401), activities are the various aggregates of *actions* making up the social life of humanity, each activity being wholly reducible to the actions of which it is composed. But an activity is also distinct from any of its actions, being oriented to a socially constructed object, which differs from the goals of the actions through which it is realized. The whole is not equivalent to the sum of its parts. Actions are empirical, observable entities, even though there are outstanding problems in formulating an adequate definition of action which can function as a unit of analysis for psychology. Wertsch (1985: 202) cites Leontyev in pointing to the difference between specific activities (plural) and human activity in general, and what constitutes *an* activity must at the very least be admitted to be open to interpretation. "[A]nalysis first identifies separate activities,

according to the criterion of the difference in their motives. ... These 'units' of human activity form its macrostructure" (Leontyev 2009: 401). But is motive an adequate basis for the analysis of society? In Chapter 22 it will be shown that Activity Theory fails to provide a basis for appropriation of sociological concepts precisely because it does not have an adequate concept of 'an activity'.

Leontyev's interpreters have either rejected the need for a unit of analysis or failed to formulate a satisfactory unit of analysis at the level of 'an activity'. The point is just this: 'activity' does not provide a concept of the subject matter of any definite science, or what is the same thing, a 'unit of analysis'. It is simply a concept of the ultimate reality underlying human life, along with individual human beings and their material conditions, including those they have created themselves. This is the case whether one is doing psychology, political science, archaeology, history, economics or any other human science. This was Davydov's point, and this is how Marx understood matters.

We will come back later on to a more detailed consideration of what is the heart of the problem: how Leontyev saw the structure and anatomy of activity. But first we have to clarify what is needed for a science which deserves to be counted in the tradition of Goethe, Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky, a science which begins from a conception of the whole not the parts, and is consistent with the demands of an emancipatory science.

If we are to formulate an interdisciplinary concept of activity, then following Marx, we must:

> (1) take the individuals and the material conditions, i.e., the constellation of material artifacts, *along with* activity, as our premises.
>
> (2) form a clear conception of the essential problem of the *mutual constitution* of social life and individual consciousness.

Central to both problems is the conception of what constitutes '*an* activity', that is, of what constitutes a *unit* of social life, from the standpoint of Activity Theory. The objects of social life are institutions, cultures, discourses, norms, industries, communities, classes, and so on. Activity theory suggests that these objects are constituted by activity, but what, from the standpoint of activity theory, is the basic unit, the unit of analysis, from which we can elaborate the constitution of the objects of social science

through activity? How can Activity Theory talk to other sciences unless it is clear on this?

Gadamer on the Hermeneutic Circle

This work does not aim at a critique of psychology, but is concerned with the use of Activity Theory that impinges on the 'hermeneutic circle' where the psychological insights of CHAT interact with the sociological sciences. Since we are relying on this concept to define the subject matter of this work, we should take a moment to clarify its meaning.

In his 1960 work "Truth and Method," Gadamer (2005: 291-3) introduced the idea of 'hermeneutic circle' in the context of interpreting texts when the reader and the writer belong to different times or traditions. He said that the interpretation required a circular movement back and forth between the part and the whole. Quoting Gadamer at length:

> "We recall the hermeneutical rule that we must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole. This principle stems from ancient rhetoric, and modern hermeneutics has transferred it to the art of understanding. It is a circular relationship in both cases. The anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes actual understanding when the parts that are determined by the whole themselves also determine this whole.
>
> "We know this from learning ancient languages. We learn that we must 'construe' a sentence before we attempt to understand the linguistic meaning of the individual parts of the sentence. But the process of construal is itself already governed by an expectation of meaning that follows from the context of what has gone before. It is of course necessary for this expectation to be adjusted if the text calls for it. This means, then, that the expectation changes and that the text unifies its meaning around another expectation. Thus the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to expand the unity of the understood meaning centrifugally. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed.
>
> "... When we try to understand a text, we do not try to transpose ourselves into the author's mind but, if one wants to use this terminology, we try to transpose ourselves into the perspective within

> which he has formed his views. But this simply means that we try to understand how what he is saying could be right. If we want to understand, we will try to make his arguments even stronger. This happens even in conversation, and it is a fortiori true of understanding what is written down that we are moving in a dimension of meaning that is intelligible in itself and as such offers no reason for going back to the subjectivity of the author. The task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning.
>
> "... The circle, then, is not formal in nature. It is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity but proceeds from the commonality that binds it to the tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it" (Gadamer 2005: 291-3).

Gadamer is concerned with interpreting a *document* which is part of a *tradition.* In lieu of 'document', we have 'action'. A document is part of a tradition, an action is part of what? Gadamer requires that some basis of *continuity* be found between the writer's tradition and the reader's tradition; rather than by an act of imagination placing themselves within the writer's cultural context, a *real basis* for continuity, common concerns, be found on the basis of a tradition which *actively furthers* certain aims and presuppositions. We must presume that the 'other world' is neither entirely foreign to us nor naïvely presume that it is the same as ours.

It would take us too far from an immanent critique of Activity Theory to pursue what Gadamer meant by 'tradition', but I believe that we share this approach, though in somewhat different terms.

21. Criticisms of Vygotsky's concept of Activity

> "The dialectical unity of form and content in the evolution of thinking is the beginning and end of contemporary scientific theory of speech and thought." (Vygotsky 1931)

Before moving on to an examination of Leontyev's Activity Theory, we should review what can be learnt from Vygotsky's concept of activity. Vygotsky is remembered for his psychological work: formation of concepts in adolescence, child development, learning disabilities, educational psychology, memory, attention, speech, cognition and so on. Activity Theory, on the other hand, is marked by its effort to extend the scope of problems dealt with beyond the boundaries of psychology narrowly understood, using the notion of activity to describe the dynamics of social interactions and societal phenomena, and explicitly taking account of societal phenomena in its psychology. Vygotsky, on the other hand, never attempted to make critical inroads into social theory. But this does not at all mean that Vygotsky did not have a concept of activity (Davydov & Radzikovskii 1985). Vygotsky did not develop the differentiation between action and activity which we owe to Leontyev, but Vygotsky did have a concept of *action* and his concept of action shall play a crucial role in the critique and reconstruction of the concept of activity.

Let us just *summarize* what we have learnt from Goethe, Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky in the earlier parts of this work about the idea of 'unit of analysis' (under its various names) as the starting point for a science.[73] By its very nature, there can be no formula for the determination of the unit of analysis which arises, ultimately, from *insight* into the subject matter of the science, but three requirements for a unit of analysis may be elaborated as follows.

(1) *It is the conception of a singular, indivisible thing* (not a collection or combination of distinct things) (Hegel 2009 §86), but it is typically a

[73] Zinchenko (1985) and Engeström (1987) just list requirements arbitrarily, according to their own reflections on the matter, without any enquiry into the origins of this concept. It was in order to overcome these shortcomings that we have devoted such attention to the sources of CHAT prior to Vygotsky.

particular genus of some universal (such as commodity relation, private property, conditioned reflex).

If we make a start from what is a collection of things, this simply means that we have not started at the real beginning, having already uncritically accepted as given the component concepts and their relation with one another. But the beginning may certainly be the *intersection* of two concepts, that is, a particularization of something more general. Although the concept must be a singular thing, for it to be the basis of a science, some internal tension or contradiction must be discovered within the concept.

(2) *It exhibits the essential properties of a class of more developed phenomena*.

The point is to discover *which* thing exhibits the essential properties of the class of phenomena. The discovery of the 'cell' is always the outcome of a search for the essential relation behind a persistent series of problems or relations. What is essential is what exhibits the problem. As a cell, it is not a typical relation, but rather the most primitive of its type, a *prototype* (Hegel 2009 §163). The unit of analysis poses the key problems which can be examined without presuppositions. Historical or developmental investigation helps differentiate the essential from the inessential, but the concept must be the logically first, not the first in time.

But the 'cell' originates from *outside* the science in question (Hegel 1952 §2), so as to make a finite beginning, while having its foundation in the universal. Wertsch (1985: 196) wrongly demands the opposite, taking meaning to be a property of a closed system of signs, which, being therefore foreign to consciousness, "it is not a unit for analyzing human consciousness itself."

(3) *It is itself an existent phenomenon* (not a principle or axiom or hypothetical force or such like non-observable) (Davydov 1990: 282), in Goethe's term, an *Urphänomen* (Goethe 1996).

A science can only base itself on something real and empirically given. But the existent thing must be captured as a *concept* because it is the starting point both for a real development and for the development of understanding. For example, if we understand a child's 'social situation of development' simply as a collection of factors capable of influencing the prospects for a child's development we have nothing more than an excuse

to do some statistics. On the other hand, when we grasp the situation as a predicament, a trap from which the child must emancipate herself (Borozhov 2004), then we have what is *both a concept* and *an existent reality*. Vygotsky's (1997: 318) discussion of Pavlov's study of salivation in dogs confirms that Vygotsky used this same conception of 'unit of analysis'. This requirement also rules out 'origins stories', taking as one's starting point some situation supposed to have existed in the past. The requirement that the *Urphänomen* be an observable, is that it be observable in principle. The molecule and the cell were not visible under any kind of microscope at the time they were proposed, but they were *parts* which were *in principle* observable, albeit with the use of instruments. For example, when Hegel took the abstract concept of Objective Spirit to be *Recht* or legal right, he was insistent that law "in its objective existence, it is posited, ... when thinking makes it determinate for consciousness what is right and valid," i.e., in written statutes available for all to see (Hegel 1952: 134-5).

Wertsch (1985) cited Zinchenko in support of this criterion, and Zinchenko (1985) in turn cited Davydov in support, although Zinchenko has no idea of the 'cell' as expressing the *concept* of the subject matter, but rather reduces it to a problem of finding something possessing each of a check list of attributes deemed to be 'essential'.

Davydov wrongly held that the unit of analysis must be the *historically* first, which is not true; the unit of analysis is the logical first, not the first in time (Marx 1986: 39ff). But he agreed that the 'cell' must be empirically real:

> "The aforementioned requirements can be met only by an entirely *real* relationship that is given in a form *that can be contemplated by the senses*. As an aspect of something concrete – that is, having its *particular* form – it at the same time functions as a genetic basis for another whole (and in this sense it functions as a universal). Here the real, objective unity of the individual (particular) and the universal, their *connection*, which mediates the process of development of the whole, is observed" (Davydov 1990: 282).

So the unit of analysis remains simply a 'building block' of a larger more complex phenomenon, with all its emergent phenomenon, but the 'cell' must be conceived and chosen so as to provide the building block for *conception* as well as *actuality*.

Vygotsky's Unit of Analysis for Consciousness

Vygotsky made a number of investigations in different domains of psychology, but the work we are concerned with here is his approach to the central category of psychology, consciousness.

What, in very broad outline, was Vygotsky's approach to a science of consciousness?

The first problem which faced anyone wishing to create a genuinely scientific psychology was the problem of the inaccessibility of consciousness to observation. The subjective psychologists had accepted the method of introspection to 'observe' consciousness, which the behaviorists had (rightly) rejected as unscientific. What is taken to be an 'observation' of one's own consciousness is just more consciousness; 'observation of consciousness is meaningless phrase'. But the behaviorists had (wrongly) rejected the observability of consciousness altogether. Consciousness is a consequence of two objective processes – human physiology and human behavior – each reflecting the other, and both the processes of which consciousness is a consequence are observable and subject to scientific study (Vygotsky 1997b: 322-328).

Vygotsky likened the problem to that of the historian who can access the facts of the past only by the documents and traces they leave, "nevertheless in the end *they study the facts that have been,* not the traces or documents that remained and were preserved. Similarly, the psychologist is often in the position of the historian and the geologist. Then he acts like a detective who brings to light a crime he never witnessed" (Vygotsky 1997). But although consciousness is therefore accepted as the central concept of psychology, it cannot serve as the *starting point*.[74] Psychology had to set out from the observation of behavior,[75] but the actions of the researcher as well as the research subject and their interaction had to taken together as the research data and controlled. The behaviorists were wrong in thinking that

[74] Descartes set off from consciousness as his starting point, possible because he relied on introspection, but this led to a number of well-known difficulties, including the mind/matter dichotomy which necessarily follows from the use of consciousness as the starting point for understanding itself.

[75] Similarly, the central concept of "Capital" was capital, but Marx began with the commodity, which had its historical origins outside of bourgeois society.

the behavior of the research subject could be taken as a unit in isolation from the researcher's questions, instructions, research aims and so on. The research which would disclose consciousness would have to be the study of interactions.

So requirement (3) obliged Vygotsky to look to the joint action of the two subjects (the researchers themselves as well) for a unit of analysis for psychology, not a thought-form, state of consciousness or some such metaphysical entity, even though consciousness is a legitimate, indeed the central, concept for scientific psychology. Because its nature has to be imputed from data of a different kind, a form of consciousness cannot itself be a unit of analysis.

Taking note of Pavlov's success in the exhaustive study of just one reflex, and his widely-shared conviction that speech is the most *highly developed* mode of behavior, Vygotsky decided that to resolve the key problems of psychology he should take the word as a 'microcosm':

> "*Thinking and speech are the key to understanding the nature of human consciousness*. ... Consciousness is reflected in the word like the sun is reflected in a droplet of water. The word is a microcosm of consciousness, related to consciousness like a living cell is related to an organism, like an atom is related to the cosmos. The meaningful word is a microcosm of human consciousness" (Vygotsky 1987: 285).

Here Vygotsky follows Marx's dictum: "Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape" (Marx 1986a: 42), but this is not a claim that the meaningful word is a unit of analysis *in general*. It is a claim that word-meaning is a unit of analysis for the relation of thinking and speech, or 'intelligent speech', which is the microcosm of consciousness. Although Marx studied the simplest relation of bourgeois society, the commodity, he studied the simplest relation of the *most developed* form of human life, bourgeois society.

Marx seems to be in agreement with Vygotsky about the focus on language:

> "One of the most difficult tasks confronting philosophers is to descend from the world of thought to the actual world. *Language* is

> the immediate actuality of thought. Just as philosophers[76] have given thought an independent existence, so they were bound to make language into an independent realm." (Marx 1975j: 446)

Note the double edge to this observation by Marx: "*Language* is the immediate actuality of thought," and therefore perhaps a starting point for psychology, but he goes on to ridicule philosophers who were "bound to make language into an independent realm." "Theses on Feuerbach" had talked exclusively of *activity* and had not a single word to say about language. So Vygotsky would have been very clear that he was following Marx in focusing on word meaning in order to find the *key* to consciousness, but not claiming that word meaning was a unit of analysis for consciousness *in toto*, because he understood that language does not constitute an 'independent realm'!

Kozulin (1990), on the other hand, seems to conflate microcosm and unit of analysis when he quotes the paragraph on the 'microcosm of human consciousness' to show that for Vygotsky: "To study human consciousness means to study this sensible structure and verbal meaning is the methodological unit of this study." Wertsch (1985) reads Vygotsky in the same way, but ascribes the obvious error to Vygotsky, rather than to what seems to be his own misreading of Vygotsky.

Next we need to clarify exactly what is meant by 'word meaning'. Vygotsky is taking a little poetic license here. He does not literally mean 'word', as in 'the' or 'of', or 'boot' and 'camp' but not 'boot camp'. With 'word' he means *the sign for a concept* (see Vygotsky 1998a: 50). 'Word' is a special kind of artifact, that is, a material thing with ideal properties, functionally dependent on the language of which it is a part, and thereby of the entire culture. It is also essentially a product and means of human action. Meaning is simultaneously subjective and objective, it has both categorical sense and reference to an object. Meaning can only be interpreted as a species of action. A word in-itself has *potential* for meaning, but meaning is only manifested when it is used by a person in a social context where it is meaningful. Word meaning is a *concept-in-action*.

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[76] Marx always uses the word 'philosophers' either to mean Hegel, or ironically, meaning 'an alienated human being', and never as a proxy for truth.

Hegel understood a social formation as a formation of consciousness. We have made Hegel intelligible by interpreting spirit as activity in Marx's sense. For Hegel, the unit of analysis of a 'formation of consciousness' is a concept. If we were to make the mistake Marx referred to above, of making language an independent realm, then 'word meaning' corresponds precisely to this reading of Hegel. Word meaning is a unity of the word, a material artifact with ideal properties, a person using the word and the social action of enacting the word in a given social context. This is the same universal-individual-particular form of concrete concept which we identified in the work of Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky earlier, which facilitated these writers to theorise a *Gestalt* without fragmenting the whole from the outset. Norris Minnick (1997) noted that in using the expression 'word meaning', Vygotsky "rejected the use of scientific constructs such as 'concept' and 'language' in this context." This observation points to a real strength of Vygotsky's approach.

V. P. Zinchenko (1985) was right when he said that: "one can consider tool-mediated action as being very close to meaning as unit of analysis." In fact, word-meaning is a *special case* of *joint artifact-mediated action*.

I disagree with Roth and Lee, citing Kozulin (all advocates Activity Theory), who claim:

> "At the risk of oversimplification, Vygotsky privileged sign or semiotic mediation, especially in the form of speech, whereas the activity theorists succeeding him widened the scope to view object-related practical activity as the proper unit of analysis (Kozulin 1986)" (Roth & Lee 2007).

This is like criticizing Marx for privileging the commodity as against production. One begins from the simplest form of the most highly developed relation. And in reality, Vygotsky by no means restricted himself to speech and language in the short span of his work in psychology. For example, his study of child development, much of which concerns pre-lingual infants, and the 'double stimulation' experiment cited above, in which Vygotsky demonstrates how artifact-mediated collaborative action *generates* forms of consciousness, satisfying requirement (2) above.

By choosing as his starting point, word-meaning or artifact-mediated joint action, Vygotsky's intention was to determine a single thing, as per requirement (1) above.

> "Word meaning is a phenomenon of thought only insofar as thought is embodied in speech, and of speech only insofar as speech is connected with thought and illuminated by it. It is a phenomenon of verbal thought, of meaningful speech – a union of word and thought" (Vygotsky 1987: 244).

Vygotsky traced the development of speech and of thinking and determined that thought and speech have different genetic roots and the two functions develop along different lines and independently of each other, but at a certain point, the two trajectories intersect and verbal thought arises (Vygotsky 1987: 101). This is a classic demonstration of inner contradiction in the unit, how the unit arose out of its conditions as both a finite thing and a definite concept.

The 'double stimulation' scenario is very explicit. The researcher is able to observe the creation of a psychological function in a child by setting the subject a task they can't quite manage, and then offering them an artifact so that the subject is able to complete the task by using the artifact. The 'double stimulation' experiment shows clearly that the unit which may be used to study the development of consciousness is the collaborative use of an artifact. The scenario is an *artifact-mediated collaborative action*, or as it is often expressed, 'joint mediated action'; and 'tool' may be substituted for 'artifact', as in 'joint artifact-mediated action' or 'joint tool-mediated action', etc.. All these expressions are synonymous.

So the conclusion is that Vygotsky determined the unit of analysis for psychology to be 'joint artifact-mediated action'. Let us briefly review the conclusions that a couple of other writers have come to in respect to Vygotsky's unit of analysis for the study of consciousness. Quoting Vygotsky's article "The instrumental method in psychology," Engeström (1987) says:

> "According to Vygotsky, the instrumentally mediated act 'is the simplest segment of behavior that is dealt with by research based on elementary units'."

In the context of Engeström's Activity Theory approach, 'act' and 'action' are effectively synonymous, and are used appropriately in preference to 'activity' which suggests a societal aggregate of actions. But in Engeström's reading, Vygotsky recognized a dichotomy of artifacts: *signs* used in communicative acts, and *tools* used in instrumental acts

(following the terminology of Habermas 1987), leading to two distinct units of analysis. I don't accept that such a dichotomy is either sustainable in its own right, or can be unambiguously ascribed to Vygotsky (See for example Davydov and Radzikovskii 1985). Nonetheless, it is fair to say that in specialized domains of investigation, different types of artifact, and therefore different units of analysis, are needed. The notion of 'artifact', a category which includes symbols, tools and the human body and every product of human art, provides a truer reflection of Vygotsky's approach. It is not clear whether Engeström's omission of 'joint' or any equivalent term in the above quote is deliberate or incidental, but Engeström goes on to cite Leontyev in a manner which suggests he agrees with a criticism to the effect that Vygotsky saw actions as inherently individual. If, for example, I am planting potatoes with my hoe, this appears to be an individual action. But the seeds, the soil and the hoe are all social products and my motivation is social: I grow potatoes for sale. Activity Theorists claimed to have solved this problem, but perhaps Vygotsky was closer to a solution than he is given credit for. We will return to this issue below.

Michael Cole (2000) reads Vygotsky's unit of analysis for psychology as "joint artifact mediated activity." Following Vygotsky, Cole does not make a distinction between 'action' and 'activity'. Absent the specialized meaning given by Leontyev to 'activity' as opposed to 'action', this is not an issue of principle. For his own work, Cole extends this unit of analysis to 'joint, mediated, activity in context' and we will return this issue below.

Wertsch (1985: 198) concluded that since 'word meaning' did not prove to be an adequate unit of analysis for consciousness in general (having failed to observe the difference between microcosm and unit), then a foundation for the investigation of consciousness had to be sought in Leontyev's activity theory. Nonetheless, Wertsch does conclude that "tool-mediated, goal directed action is the appropriate unit of analysis in Vygotsky's approach" (1985: 208).

Leontyev's Criticism of Vygotsky's Unit of Analysis

The core of Leontyev's criticism of Vygotsky's psychology was this: when a person is carrying out some action, for example if they are a beater in a collective hunting group, their aim is to get food, but in the light of this aim, the goal of their action, to scare the game away, is senseless from the

psychological point of view. It is only when account is taken of the beater's participation in a division of labor can it be seen that the group's motive of catching the game and thereby satisfying the *group's* aim, is achieved by the beater's action, and that as a result of the beater behaving according to the norms of the group, his personal need for food will be met by the group according to the appropriate norms. Thus according to Leontyev, there is a gap in Vygotsky's analysis since the very goals which motivate a person's actions remain out of view in the scenario of artifact-mediated action. The task is just given to the subject; why? and why does the subject carry out the given task? Clearly these are psychologically crucial facts, and yet there is no place for them (it appears) in Vygotsky's unit of analysis.

Engeström (1987), made the following commentary on Leontyev's observation:

> "These lines, originally published in 1947, demonstrate the insufficiency of an individual tool-mediated action as a unit of psychological analysis. Without consideration of the overall collective activity, the individual beater's action seems 'senseless and unjustified' (Leontyev 2009: 187). Human labor, the mother form of all human activity, is co-operative from the very beginning. We may well speak of the activity *of the individual,* but never of *individual activity;* only actions are individual.
>
> "Furthermore, what distinguishes one activity from another is its object. According to Leontyev, the object of an activity is its true motive. Thus, the concept of activity is necessarily connected with the concept of motive. Under the conditions of division of labor, the individual participates in activities mostly without being fully conscious of their objects and motives. The total activity seems to control the individual, instead of the individual controlling the activity."

The idea is that over history, and the evolution of humankind, action and activity which are initially identical, became separated from one another. Originally, needs were satisfied immediately, but with the deferral of satisfaction and the development of division of labor came a labor process, means of production and cultural mediation of all social processes. This distinction between action with its immediate goals, and activity with its social motivation, is not touched upon by Vygotsky. This is the criticism of Vygotsky which laid the basis for what became known as Activity Theory.

The issues which are opened up by these observations are serious and pose problems which are indeed unsolved in Vygotsky's work, however the view that will be developed below is that Vygotsky had nonetheless created the best methodological foundation, and that there are difficulties in Leontyev's solution. Wertsch put it this way:

> "The debate over whether Leontyev's work represents a legitimate extension or a misappropriation of Vygotsky's work has been going on for several years now (cf Davydov & Radzikhovskii 1985, Kozulin 1984, Minick 1986). It is my opinion that Leontyev did not understand, or at least did not incorporate into his own approach, many of Vygotsky's most powerful insights about semiotic mediation and interpsychological functioning. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Wertsch 1985, ch. 7), I also believe that Vygotsky's approach can be extended in important respects by incorporating some of Leontyev's ideas into it. ..." (1997: 227)

Cole and Gajdmaschenko explained Leontyev's contribution this way:

> "In the highly charged ideological context of the USSR, [some of] Leontyev's writings have been seen as a repudiation of Vygotsky and the substitution of activity for mediation as a unit of analysis. It is certainly plausible that Leontyev, like many others, sought to distance himself from ideas and associations that had led to the death of colleagues and friends. However, given the evidence, it seems more plausible to see his reformulation as an effort to place mediation in its cultural context, extending culture's actual presence both within a Vygotskian framework and in human life. From a contemporary point of view, however, not only meditational means but also the cultural practices of which they are a part constitute culture" (Cole & Gajdmaschenko 2007: 206).

A brief answer to Leontyev's criticism would be as follows. In the double stimulation experiment, the subject does not simply discover the artifact to complete a task of their own choosing, but on the contrary. The task and the relevant artifact are presented to the subject by the researcher. According to Vygotsky, the researcher, with their aims and their access to artifacts, are as much part of the scenario as the subject himself. This is the point: Vygotsky does not look to abstractions to represent 'society' or 'social motives'; the actions of the researcher and the artifacts that they have at hand are the actually existing entities by means of which the culture and wider spheres of social practice are presented to the subject's

experience as stimuli for their actions. Vygotsky always focused his scientific work on *interactions between individuals*, rather than using representations of societal phenomena and institutions abstracted from their constitution in specific forms of the activity of human beings. This is his strength, and does not detract from the significance of his work for understanding societal activities. After all, societal institutions exist only in and through individual actions and interactions between individuals.

All the essential aspects of the concept of activity are present in Vygotsky's concept of joint artifact-mediated action. Well, almost. We will return to this question later. In the meantime, we will look briefly at the work of Alexander Meshcheryakov, which demonstrated the potential of Vygotsky's theory in practical application.

Meshcheryakov's Work

Alexander Meshcheryakov was a student of A. R. Luria, and an associate of the leading philosophers of the third generation, Feliks Mikhailov and Evald Ilyenkov. In his application of Vygotsky's ideas, he was able to respond *in practice* to criticisms of Vygotsky's concept of activity.

Meshcheryakov (2009) developed Vygotsky's conception of learning in his work in the education of deaf-blind children. A child who is deaf and blind from infancy will generally not develop a fully human consciousness without scientific intervention. This work gave Meshcheryakov's staff the opportunity to bring consciousness *into being* where it did not previously exist. Further, the teacher is not just 'experimenting' on the child, but *assisting* the child in achieving something it needs to achieve: helping the child gain access to a human life.

In Meshcheryakov's scenario, the teacher manually helps the novice complete a task using an artifact taken from the cultural life of society, and then gradually withdraws that assistance, in such a way that the novice is able to take over the teacher's actions and complete the task autonomously.

In using a spoon to eat, the child does not just satisfy its immediate need for nourishment, but by mastering practical-sensuous actions with the spoon, forms an internal image which contributes to a reconstruction of the whole universe of social conventions and practices with which the spoon, its shape and its presence at dinner time is associated. Meshcheryakov takes us through the process whereby his students learn, step by step, the skills of

self-care, play and communicating with others, learn the lay-out of their home, their neighbourhood and the activities which go on in the various buildings, learn a daily timetable, a calendar, the important national holidays and their meaning, learn to grow and prepare food, learn to travel by public transport and explore the country and so on and so forth; in other words, to reconstruct in their own consciousness and activity the entire sweep of the culture of their society.

Meshcheryakov calls the unit of analysis '*shared object activity*' (Meshcheryakov 2009: 294).

> "A kind of vicious circle develops: in order to know how to act with the tool the child has to know it, and in order to know the tool it is essential that the child act with it. The vicious circle is broken when the adult begins to teach the child to act with the tool in the process of satisfying its needs. This instruction is only possible in the form of joint object action shared between the adult and the child" (Meshcheryakov 2009: 239).

By means of finite interactions with people and artifacts which are part of a definite cultural-historical society, a person gradually learns the ways of this society and very soon develops their own will, their own life-goals, and goes on to become a full and equal member of the society.

This is a practical demonstration that Vygotsky's scenario contains what is necessary to represent societal phenomena in the psychology of human beings.

Vygotsky's Cultural Psychology

The great strength of Vygotsky's psychology was that he did not begin from abstractions, "just-so" tales or metaphysical entities, but made the foundation of his work individual human beings, their activity and the material conditions and artifacts (including words) that they used. His conviction was that all that was required for a psychology which reflected the formation of the individual by their participation in the ever-changing social life of society was contained in these elements.

Further, Vygotsky began not from the behavior of mollusks searching for food, but from the highest development of social life, including art and literature, science and literary criticism.

Cultural practice is *built into* the artifacts a person uses and the actions of those with whom they are collaborating. Neither Meshcheryakov nor Vygotsky, however, went on from these ideas of interpersonal collaboration to develop an approach to understanding societal phenomena on a broader scale, that is to say, a critical social theory. And this is the problem which Leontyev tackled, to which we will turn shortly.

The fact remains that actions do differ from the activities of which they are a part. What appears to lie over the horizon of Vygotsky's vision is how the aims of the action are interpreted by the acting subject. It cannot be taken for granted that the aims of the action can be inferred by the subject from the actions of those they are interacting with or the nature of the artifact mediating the action. There is room for misunderstanding and non-recognition. Many writers (for example Wertsch and Cole) hold that the *context* of the activity conditions what and how the subject may experience the interactions and the artifacts being used. The teleological aspect of actions presumes an intelligible context in which it all makes sense. Further, the word 'joint', in 'joint mediated activity', is not as well defined as it seems at first sight. What precisely does it mean to say that an action is 'joint'? These matters will be dealt with later.

But what is meant by 'context'? The context is potentially an open-ended infinity of social, physical, cultural and historical circumstances. Just as the understanding of 'social situation of development' entailed forming a *concept* of the situation which captures the way in which the situation determines social interactions and psychological development, so in this more general sense, we need to determine a concept of context which captures the teleological content of a person's action.

Bakhtin

Mikhail Bakhtin was a contemporary of Vygotsky's with whom we see a number of similarities, although Bakhtin was no Marxist. For Bakhtin (1986: 67) the unit of analysis was the *utterance*. Being the entire speech act between 'turn taking', rather than a 'word', this is a more pragmatic unit than Vygotsky's. That is, attention is focused on social interactions between speakers, what Ratner (2008) calls 'micro-culture', rather than the cultural-historical circumstances which invested a word with meaning ('macro-culture'), appropriated by individuals. Also, Bakhtin developed the idea of

genre. To be intelligible, an utterance must be taken to belong to this or that genre. The genre characterizes the manner in which an utterance is to be interpreted. The genre is not simply the context in which the utterance is uttered, but rather, is a potentially ambiguous property of the utterance itself, which places it in a family-like relationship with other utterances. Like the words and concepts, the utterance is adopted by the speaker from those made available by the culture.

Posed in this way, the relevance of the 'hermeneutic circle' mentioned above is immediately obvious. That is, an utterance gets its meaning in large measure from the genre it is taken to be part of, and the genre is communicated by a wide range of techniques many of which are not linguistic as such.

Bakhtin uses the word 'unit' (Bakhtin 1986: 67-99) and it is clear enough that the concept he is evoking is the same as Vygotsky's unit of analysis. Utterance is a unit which may include many word meanings, much as a molecule can include many atoms. So what we have is two different conceptions of human behavior and consciousness which will clearly shed light on different groups of problems but there seems to be every reason to believe that the concepts of the two sciences are distinct but compatible, in the same way as are those of chemistry and physics. It would seem that Bakhtin's approach is particularly strong in the study of interpersonal action rather than concept-formation.

The idea of turning-taking marking the objective and unambiguous beginning and end of an utterance forces us to reflect on what marks the beginning and end of an action. There would seem to be some merit in taking a similar approach in our understanding of communicative action. When we consider that all actions are carried out within some social context of personal initiative, command, cooperation, collaboration, the idea of turn-taking would seem to be admissible to a generalization. In action we take turns, too. In his early critique of the 'reflex arc', Dewey (1896) argued somewhat to the contrary that the idea of an action beginning from a stimulus and ending with a response must take account of the fact that the act of *perceiving* and the act of moving are both equally sensori-motor acts, and can only be contrasted on a functional or teleological basis, not a qualitative basis. This needs to be taken into account.

The aim of this book is an immanent critique of Activity Theory, so it would divert us from our project to go too far into Bakhtin's theory, but it does seem that elements of his approach ought to be appropriated by Activity Theory, as part of a resolution of its own problems.

In conclusion, we can say that Vygotsky's unit of analysis for the science of consciousness (i.e., psychology) was joint, artifact-mediated action, meeting all the requirements which are appropriate for science in the tradition of Goethe, Hegel and Marx. There are however some problems in the way in which this unit of analysis captures or fails to capture the narrative context. These are the problems which motivated Leontyev to found Activity Theory, to which we now turn.

22. Leontyev's Anatomy of Activity

> "Together with the birth of action, this main 'unit' in human activity, there also arises the main unit, social in nature, of the human psyche, i.e. the rational meaning for man of that which his activity is directed to."
> (Leontyev 1947)

Levels of Activity

Leontyev introduced his approach to the sources of motivation underlying human actions with the idea that at the dawn of human life, and amongst animals, the subject's actions are directly motivated by the object of its actions. The organism's perception of the object is internally linked to the processes driving its activity. Based on extensive observation and experiment with animals, Leontyev speculates that working in groups, humans developed complex multiphase activities, securing an object they needed in a *series* of actions, which therefore had the potential to be disarticulated. Growing along with social cooperation, this opened up the potential for division of labor. Thus developed a labor process which entailed the individual's actions being directed to a goal which was *different* from the object motivating the activity as a whole. The difference arises from the development of the social division of labor, and the same social organization has to provide for setting the goals for all the individual members of the group, such that the individuals' actions realize the group's object.

Thus we have on the one hand, *activities* which are directed towards objectively existing *objects*, the negation of each satisfying a need of the group, and it is this social need for the object which provides the socially constructed *motive* of the activity.

And on the other hand we have the *actions* which are carried out by individuals, directed towards their personal goals. As a result of their social position, the individuals are in general aware of the motive for the group activity of which their action forms a part, but the personal meaning of the object is the goal to which their own action is directed. The activity of the group is reducible without remainder to the actions of the individuals.

Then there is a third level in Leontyev's anatomy of activity, *operations*. Actions are executed by a complex system of operations – moving limbs,

uttering words, changing gears and so on. These operations begin as learned actions, and they are selected and adapted according to conditions. Over time they become second nature, and are carried out without conscious attention. But when something unexpected happens, attention is switched on, and the operation is consciously controlled. The classic example of the operation is the blind person who makes their way along the street with the use of a white stick. They 'feel' with the end of the stick exactly as if it were the tip of their own finger. It is only when something goes wrong, the stick gets jammed perhaps, that consciousness reverts to the holding of a stick in their hand.

Operations are where Activity Theory connects with the development of the psyche, as participation in actions entails operations which are 'internalized'. Operations are both activity, because they are always potentially conscious, and not activity, because they are subsumed into the autonomous processes within the subject through which the activity of the subject is realized. Operations also make the connection with the cultural development of artifacts, which are objectified operations.

Nonetheless, the criterion here is not internal/external; as is illustrated in the example of the blind person using a stick, an external tool can be incorporated into an operation. Likewise, as Zinchenko (1985: 104ff) emphasized, mental or other internal actions still count as actions, provided they are purposive (as in *Tätigkeit*), distinct from the autonomous processes within the organism. To summarize in tabular form:

Unit	Description	Object	
activity	individual participates and is aware of motive	has social motive, independent of the will of any individual	motive continues throughout, realized through various goals
action	consciously controlled by individual	oriented to individual's goal, collectively realizes activity	goal of action may not be same as motive of activity it realizes
operation	not consciously motivated	realization of action, selection depends on conditions	autonomously flows from will to action

All activity is object-oriented. There is no such thing as objectless activity (Leontyev 2009: 28). It makes a lot of sense to develop a structure

like this based on the teleology of activity. Also useful is the differentiation of the goal-oriented actions, carried out by individuals, from the underlying object-oriented social processes, which set individuals in motion and articulate their actions into coherent social processes. At the lower end of this hierarchy we have a clear connection with the psychological development of the individual, and at the upper end we see the activities which the individual finds already-existing in the societal world around them. Their participation in activities is secured by having them pursue their own goals and articulating individual actions to achieve social objects, creating the wherewithal to allow individuals to share in the social product.

This story is all about *needs*:

> "... we always must deal with specific activities, each of which answers a definite need of the subject, is directed toward an object of this need, is extinguished as a result of its satisfaction, and is produced again, perhaps in other, altogether changed conditions.
>
> "... The main thing that distinguishes one activity from another, however, is the difference of their objects. It is exactly the object of an activity that gives it a determined direction. ... The main thing is that behind activity there should always be a need, that it should always answer one need or another" (Leontyev 1978).

The object has a dual existence, being the objective means of satisfaction of a need, and the socially constructed image of it, which serves as the motivation for a social labor process, which may or may not prove adequate to its object and which may or may not be present in the consciousness of an individual (Leontyev 2009: 398).

Meaning arises in this structure through the fact that both social and individual needs are represented to individuals through goals which are oriented to 'tools', themselves objectified human capacities (Leontyev 2009: 134). These tools acquire personal meaning, while social motive, of which the individual is aware, is represented to them through a social need expressed in the articulation of individuals' needs and the means of their satisfaction (Leontyev 2009: 412).

Supported by Vygotsky's psychology at the lower end, this schema of Activity Theory provides a means of conceptualizing the formation of social practices and culture and their representation to the individual. The main issue which concerns this work is the conception of activities, what

constitutes *an* activity, and what kind of society can be envisaged with this taxonomy of activities.

Some Activity Theorists (Wertsch 1985; Davydov 1999) suggest that an activity is not to be so narrowly understood, but rather is what should more properly be called *types* of activity, viz., play, instruction, labor, sport, etc.. For these writers, 'an activity' resembles the more widely used notions of 'frame' (Goffman, 1974; Lakoff 1980) or 'genre' (Bakhtin 1986, Frow 2006). It is difficult to read this into Leontyev's description because activities in such a generalized sense can provide a schema for interpretation of actions, but not actions as such (See Chapter 31(e) below). Nonetheless, as a taxonomy of activity these notions remain helpful and should be extended.

The Standpoint of Activity Theory

It is the objects which drive the activities, and activities are defined by the objects which motivate them. So it is a purely functional[77] model of social structure which Leontyev presents. Every action has its final purpose. And where do these objects come from? The general schema is that of the system of needs and the means of their satisfaction. Needs for means of production are theorized through the idea of tools as objectifications of human capacities: systems of activity are 'crystallized' in operations which are objectified, and become themselves objects of need.[78]

An activity is defined by *an* object. An object is the motive of an activity, and an activity is oriented to an object. It seems then that activities are branches of industry, in the broadest sense, or components of the national plan. The question is: does this general functional description of a system of needs and labor give us a means of *cognizing* the workings of

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[77] Functionalism is a current of sociology associated with the name of Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) in which a society is likened to an organism rather than a structure; every component of the organism, like an organ, performs some 'role' in maintaining stability of the whole, and answers to the question "What is it for?". Thus, as in structuralism, the whole is not simply the sum of its parts, and change in one part has ramifications for the whole and vice versa. But also like structuralism, society is viewed as a system, leaving little place for human agency and amenable to the methods of natural science.

[78] For example, when a complex series of operations normally done manually are replaced by a machine.

modern social life? Work is just one type of activity, and the one to which Leontyev gave almost exclusive focus. Just as some theorists have taken tools to be just the archetype of the general category of artifacts, Activity Theorists generally take work as the archetype of Activity, but do allow for other types of activity (Davydov 1999: 44). So in addition to those activities included in the 'national plan' we have other types of activity, such as sport and religion, to be cognized along similar lines, according to 'an object' in each case.

This generalized functionalist picture requires us to identify the various objects of a society, if it is to tell us what is *an* activity, that is, what are the units of which society is made up, from an activity point of view. The psychological purchase of the activity approach, located in the concepts of action and operation, remains, so long as we can take the activity and an individual's awareness of its motive and its relation to their actions as given, but can these be taken as given? Does the idea of objects of activity give an adequate means of illuminating the structure of society and the motivation of individuals?

Leontyev sees no difficulty in a functionalist analysis of modern society, that is, an approach which sees society as made up of various functional components each dedicated to the satisfaction of a specific social need: a medical system, a legal system, an agricultural system, an entertainment system, ... a criminal system, a military system, a secret police, ..., drug distribution, begging, lottery ticket selling, etc. Who decides what is a social need? An outside observer can survey what a society *actually does* and organize this data according to a functionalist scheme, but such an objectivist, abstract empirical approach, would necessarily penetrate the entire science because activity is the real content of individuals' actions. Such a science would remain entirely descriptive, not explanatory.

What Leontyev describes, a society organized to meet a range of social needs is descriptive of a self-sufficient tribal group perhaps, or of the distorted self-image of the 'really existing socialism' in which he lived, in reality a bureaucratically managed society. In fact, the functional view of society is precisely the view, not of an unbiased observer, but of a bureaucrat or administrator. The pitfall of 'God's eye view' social analysis is that the point of view turns out not to be a God's eye view at all, but

rather the view of some specific social layer, mistakenly taking itself to be above society.

We will return to this question below in an examination of the relation of Leontyev's Activity Theory to Marx's critique of political economy, but Leontyev seems to see an idealized version of the USSR as the norm, alongside of which bourgeois society is defective: poorly planned, and ridden with contradictions. But it is defective only in relation to a model which is foreign to it.

A scientific approach to the problem of 'what is an activity?' can only be an *immanent* approach, an approach which follows the formation of systems of actions into socially determined activities immanently, from within activity, critically, but in its own terms. But the disconnection of motive and goal identified by Activity Theory means that there can be *no immanent* definition of an activity on the basis of its goals. To define an activity solely in terms of what everyone is striving to do at any given moment would be subjectivist and incoherent. We do need a motive separate from goals. So it looks as if what constitutes 'an activity' can only be determined from the standpoint of those who *manage* society and the various social functions. This is a problem, because it is inconsistent with the aim of building an emancipatory science. But how can we have an immanent approach to the determination of an activity which avoids subjectivism? The problem has not been addressed in Activity Theory up to now because an objectivist approach has been accepted.

Also, the very concept of 'social need', a need of society, begs the question of the personification of society as well as the individual's self-identity. The needs and objects of a stratum of bureaucratic managers are not those of 'society', nor are those of an elected government, and nor are the frequently perverse outcomes of the market. Unless, that is, we take 'social need', 'object' and 'motive' in a *metaphorical* sense, immanent in objective processes, like Adam Smith's 'invisible hand'. But in this case we cannot talk of the separation of motive and goal for they are entities of a different kind. The motive would be simply a scientific abstraction, with social structures which are alien to the actual life of the individuals, obedient to quasi-natural 'laws of history'.

Insofar as social motives are to form the content for psychology, the identity of 'society' begs the question of the individual's identification as

belonging to the society. Unless, that is, we categorize individuals objectively into abstract identity-categories according to some combination of their attributes, and take the alignment of goals to motives as given.

The classic example Leontyev used to illustrate his theory and the relation between activities and actions, is the primeval hunt. In this scenario the collective goal of the activity of the hunt is absolutely unproblematic. But this is not representative of modern life whether in a capitalist country or the actual (as opposed to idealized) USSR. In no modern society is there a collective decision by members of the society about what activities are to be carried out. In the majority of cases, there will be consciousness of participating in an activity which is oriented to the needs of some institution or clientele, the boss or the company, and in a few cases, 'for society'.

But if Leontyev's Theory gives us an inadequate anatomy of society, and one which moreover abandons the emancipatory methodology of Marx and Vygotsky, one would have to ask why it is not better to simply take the various activities which the theoretical representatives of a society take as given, together with the sociological categories they use to describe them? This is to some extent what Leontyev's theory does, simply putting the label of 'system of activity' on to the actually-recognized branches of social life, taking as read the supposed motives of the relevant institutions, and then doing the kind of psychology which the notions of operations and 'joint artifact-mediated actions' make possible, but uncritically accepting the content of activity as given in the given society. The alternative of a *rewriting* of the anatomy of a society in functionalist terms would actually be worse, because it would correspond to nothing at all.

Leontyev's Methodology

We cited Wertsch above to the effect that Leontyev was responding to some real problems in Vygotsky's psychology, but "Leontyev did not understand, or at least did not incorporate into his own approach, many of Vygotsky's most powerful insights." Let us look at how Leontyev dealt with the issue of unit of analysis.

According to Leontyev's son A. A. Leontyev (2006):

> "Throughout, even within the framework of activity theory itself, an ambiguous understanding of the units and levels of activity organization can be seen. ... As is well known, A.N. Leontyev does not

> provide an explicit definition of it; as a rule, he puts the term "unit" within quotation marks, and in so doing, "determines" it. And this is justified: after all, as it applies to his point of view, the concept of unit has little applicability to activity, action, or operation, since it presumes their *discrete* nature. ... In A.N. Leontyev's conception, the only thing that can be called a "unit" in the strict sense is activity (an activity act)."

For Leontyev, activity (incorporating all levels of activity) is the *substance* of the study of behavior, but Activity Theory is not developed out of the concept of an activity. And there is more to the inapplicability of the notion of 'unit' to the theory than the lack of a notion of discrete entities. There is no real barrier in principle to taking activity as a system of actions oriented to a given object, and an action as a sequence of operations and sub-actions serving a goal, etc. The point is that the theory has never been methodologically developed from a conception or unit: what makes a system a system and not just an arbitrary collection (pseudoconcept)?

Wertsch (1985: 202) holds that for Leontyev: "Associated with each level [of activity] is a specific type of unit. At the first, most global level of analysis is the unit of an activity." But Wertsch does makes no mention of how he believes Leontyev understands the unit of activity at this level. "As Leontyev points out, the use of the terms 'activity' here must be distinguished from the use of the term in connection with the general 'theory of activity'," i.e., as substance as discussed above. The next level down is action, where Wertsch's interpretation of Vygotsky's unit of analysis is "tool-mediated, goal-oriented action." These points are well made, but it leaves no unit of analysis between the general *frame*, which cannot qualify as a *unit*, and actions. If this means that the extension of Vygotsky's theory to incorporate societal entities should remain with Vygotsky's unit of analysis, with the added conception of frame, then this is a powerful position; but it is not consistent with Leontyev's position and it still leaves Leontyev's original criticism of Vygotsky's position unanswered. It fails to offer a uniquely Activity Theory approach to societal phenomena, instead just appropriating the notion of frame from Goffman. It seems to be presumed that the motivation for actions is implicit in the frame or institutional setting.

In the editorial introduction to "Perspectives on Activity Theory" (1999) of which Engeström was co-author, the position of Activity Theory is summed up this way:

> "To be able to analyze such complex interactions and relationships, a theoretical account of the constitutive elements of the system under investigation is needed. In other words, there is a demand for a new unit of analysis. Activity Theory has a strong candidate for such a unit of analysis in the concept of *object-oriented, collective and culturally mediated human activity*, or *activity system*. Minimum elements of this system include the object, subject, mediating artifacts (signs and tools), rules, community, and division of labor" (1999: 9).

This promotes Engeström's own theory of activity which we will deal with below. But Engeström did not refer to this *strong candidate* as a 'unit of analysis', and on a number of grounds it *cannot be* a unit of analysis (including the circularity and self-contradiction of the above definition), but rather he called it a 'root model'. So Engeström either does not understand what a unit of analysis is, or he holds that a unit of analysis is not required for Activity Theory.

So the question is: does Activity Theory need a unit of analysis, or is Vygotsky's unit of analysis for the study of consciousness sufficient?

As discussed above, there are some problems with Vygotsky's legacy, namely, that his unit of analysis fails to adequately capture the narrative context of an action, by means of which actions can be interpreted. Activity Theory arose as an extension of his psychology to resolve this problem. Leontyev's and more recent versions of Activity Theory do address this problem, but it seems that no-one can provide a viable suggestion for a unit of analysis for activity, i.e., what constitutes *an* activity, which can function as a prototype for the activities making up the social life of human beings?

Perhaps a unit of analysis is not required? Does Vygotsky's unit of analysis for consciousness, a joint artifact-mediated action, suffice? For example, Marx wrote "Capital" using the unit of the commodity relation, and yet on this basis he theorized such highly developed relations as capital, credit, money and so on. But these other relations are still *species* of commodity. "Capital" did not go on to theorize the state, psychology or social movements, for example.

Is an activity a species of action? No. The whole point is the differentiation of action and activity; all the writers seem to agree that an activity is not a species of action. Either we uncritically import concepts from other sciences, or we must resolve this problem and develop a unit of analysis for Activity Theory. The only other alternative is an abstract-empirical schema of activities which has no foundation either in CHAT or existing social science.

Some Outstanding Problems

Investigations into the phylogenetic origins of consciousness and of the human species in general are always interesting, and such studies frequently shed new light on current problems. But a science must be built out of an empirically verifiable concept of its own subject matter. A science cannot be based on origins stories. The science of a certain domain of phenomena will inform investigations into its origins, which in turn can function to empirically test certain hypotheses, concretizing and making more precise the concept of the science. But the huge effort Leontyev expended on the study of the activity of the lower animals contributes nothing to psychology. Leontyev used these investigations to justify a functionalist anatomy of modern human society which poorly serves the science of human life. The starting point for science must be, as Marx (1975i) insisted, "the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live."

A major problem with Leontyev's theory however is that it completely lacks a theory of identity. Using the tribal group as the archetypal example, he seems to assume that belonging to and identification with large groups or institutions is unproblematic. But under modern conditions, it is not possible to talk of the activity of a group without problematizing the membership of individuals in the group and how the individual perceives the actions of the group and their participation in it. Leontyev takes it for granted on the basis that members of a tribal group obviously know their status in the tribal group and participate in its social life to the exclusion of outsiders, just as Soviet citizens know of their status and responsibilities as Soviet citizens, and they know who speaks for them on behalf of the Soviet Union. This is not normally the case. But the whole theory of activity rests on it.

Bourgeois society is taken to be defective by taking an idealized Soviet Union as the norm; concepts are lifted from Marx's critique of political economy and chaotically mobilized to give a Marxist veneer to a functional description of bourgeois society.

But most serious of all is the very problem for which Activity Theory was devised, the extension of the unit of analysis to incorporate the narrative context of an action. It is important to have a critical perspective in relation to the activity to which an action is deemed to belong. Actions are meaningless outside of their connection with the activity they are realizing which invests the action with social meaning. Wertsch's (1999: 212) idea is to take 'activity' to be "an institutionally defined 'setting' ... with a set of assumptions about appropriate roles, goals, and means used by the participants in that setting." He says "perhaps the construct in contemporary Western social science that is most similar to this ... is the notion of 'frame' as outlined by E. Goffman." These suggestions have merit and we will return to this problem later.

Whatever its limitations, Leontyev's effort to develop a theory of activity made the important advance over Vygotsky's theory in attempting to define activity as a societal entity, beyond the domain of the individual's immediate relations and actions. Something of this kind is necessary if we are to develop an interdisciplinary concept of activity which 'connects' the domain of psychology and the domain of the social sciences.

We will now move to consider Leontyev's concept of activity in relation to two problems of social science for which Marxism has developed authoritative models: political economy and the constitution of social subjects.

23. Leontyev's Activity Theory and Marx's Political Economy

> "The socialist worker ... is now working not for exploiters but for himself, for his class, for society."
> (Leontyev 1947)

Without ever having had the opportunity to observe life in the capitalist world, plenty of opportunity to observe life in the USSR but no opportunity to honestly talk about it, let alone study it scientifically, Leontyev should not be blamed for the quality of his social analysis. But given that Leontyev was addressing real problems in Vygotsky's theory, we cannot walk away from the problems in his solution. The great strength of the Activity Theory approach is the understanding that the structure of Activity and the structure of the psyche are in essence identical. So the psychological implications of the various broad types of social formation, such as tribal life, feudal society, degenerated workers' state, late capitalism, etc., do need to be addressed. But this should not and need not be approached by means of mythological tales and utopian speculations.

Leontyev's analysis of capitalism is a selection of quotes from "Capital" inserted into a fairy tale about cultural evolution from animal life through primitive communism and capitalism to socialism. The psychology of the epoch between Arcadian and Utopian communism is that actions lose their real meaning, which is the objective motive of the activity, being supplanted by the personal meaning of the action for the individual. In capitalism, the meaning of his labor for a worker is wages, whilst for the capitalist it is profit.

> "[The worker's] conditions of life, however, are such that he does not spin to satisfy a social need for yarn, does not weave to meet a social need for cloth, but for wages; that also imparts sense to weaving for him, and to the yarn and cloth produced by him. ...
>
> "The foreignness of meanings to the sense behind them also comes out of course at the opposite pole of society. For the capitalist, for instance, the whole sense of spinning and weaving consists in the profit he will make from them, i.e. in a thing devoid both of the properties of the output of production in itself and of its objective meaning." (Leontyev 2009: 226-7)

whereas under socialism:

> "The socialist worker, just like the worker in a capitalist undertaking, is occupied in weaving, spinning, etc., but for him this work has the sense precisely of weaving, spinning, etc. Its motive and its objective product are not now foreign to each other for him, because he is now working not for exploiters but for himself, for his class, for society. ...
>
> "The socialist worker receives wages for his work, so that his work also has the sense of earnings for him, but the pay is only a means for him to realize some of the output of social production for his personal consumption. This change in the sense of labor is engendered by its new motives." (Leontyev 2009: 237-8)

So the *objective meaning* of production is providing for the needs of the society, and in Arcadian or Utopian communism, this is present in the mind of the producer and is manifested in the harmonization of sense and meaning, but in capitalism sense and meaning are alien to one another, a contradiction which is manifested in a kind of pathology. The core idea here makes abundant sense, but its use without a realistic sense of social life in *any* epoch undermines its value. All that is required here is to detach this key idea from the Stalinist fairy tale. Meaning and sense differ, just as activity and action differ, and may be in contradiction with one another. The contradiction arises from the power relations. The social relations through which the actions are controlled means that people can be conscripted into projects for purely external motivations, and even the technical details of their labor can be under the control of another. These are phenomena which can be studied here and now, amongst real individuals, their real activity and the real material conditions under which they live.

The Object of Labor under Capital

Leontyev claims that the objective meaning of labor is the provision for the needs of "society." Marx did not see it that way, and rejected altogether the idea of "society" as a subject distinct from its ruling elite: "the fiction of the person, Society" (1976: 153). Consider for example this excerpt from "Capital":

> "Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is essentially the production of surplus-value. The laborer produces, not for himself, but for capital. It no longer suffices, therefore,

> that he should simply produce. He must produce surplus-value. That laborer alone is productive, who produces surplus-value for the capitalist, and thus works for the self-expansion of capital. If we may take an example from outside the sphere of production of material objects, a schoolmaster is a productive laborer when, in addition to belaboring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the school proprietor. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of in a sausage factory, does not alter the relation. Hence the notion of a productive laborer implies not merely a relation between work and useful effect, between laborer and product of labor, but also a specific, social relation of production, a relation that has sprung up historically and stamps the laborer as the direct means of creating surplus-value. To be a productive laborer is, therefore, not a piece of luck, but a misfortune" (Marx, 1996a: 510).

Now what Marx is claiming here is *not* merely that the capitalist is only interested in profit, that the sense of teaching for the capitalist is profit (though this may be true as well), but rather that the expansion of capital is the essential dynamic of social life insofar as it is subsumed under capital. This is a different claim, and it is as much obligatory for the capitalist as it is forced upon the worker. Under this specific social formation, the dominant social relations is the expansion of capital. Even a well-meaning capitalist who acts contrary to the interests of capital cannot change this.

So if we are to give a meaningful definition of 'object' under capitalism, then that would be the expansion of capital, not the meeting of any social need. The idea that the object of capital accumulation and the operation of the market is the satisfaction of human needs is precisely what Marx was arguing against. Capital is only prevented from poisoning and injuring the purchasers of its products by vast tracts of legal regulations and criminal penalties.

But if we allow that in the last analysis, the objects of activities are *not* human needs, but some *other* product of social history, such as market equilibrium, effective demand or the maximal rate of profit, then we are no further forward: either the notion of the *object* of an activity is tautological (the object of activity is the outcome towards which it tends) or the notion of a human need is devoid of meaning (market equilibrium, etc. are not

'human needs'). The supposed 'object' of an activity would be nothing more than a reification of that activity itself.

Capital produces use-values, and the advocates of the market take that as the beginning and end of the matter, but according to Marx the object of labor in bourgeois society is the production of exchange value and the accumulation of surplus value. The production of use-values is a means to an end, not the object of activity itself.

Further, for the purposes of economic analysis, Marx divides the activity of capital between Department I (consumer goods) and Department II (means of production), but this division has little psychological significance. Apart from this, there is nothing in Marx to the effect that functional branches of industry ('activities') constitute the units of analysis of capital.

The unit of the social life of capital is the company (Connell 1977: 39), not a functional branch of industry. For Marx, capital is a 'quasi-subject'. Capital is a system of activities which sets goals and actions for individuals and underlies representations people form of the motives of their actions, and its units are units of capital, companies. People are set to work through the organizational structure of companies; it is companies which set goals and provide identities and motives for people.

The structure of capital, divided into companies (in the broad sense), internally structures activity by means of a flow of funds downwards supporting a confluent command structure, subject to the capital market. All labor subsumed under capital can be divided into units and analyzed according to the understanding of capital as a form of activity. Other organizations modeled on capitalist enterprises, not to mention the institutions of the former Soviet Union, function internally in the same way using the wages system, and all the employees within such enterprises are aware to some extent of their dependence on that specific unit of capital, and there is a degree of shared interest between capitalist and worker. Further, it can never be presumed that the formal aims of the organization, even a public service, is the effective object of all actions in the organization as every nodal point in the distribution of funds creates new interests – "the bureaucracy as civil society of the state" (Marx 1975b: 45). Not only may goals be at odds with motives; actions may be at odds with activities!

So within capital, there are a myriad of possible relations of alienation and domination governing the operation of labor activity.

Now, even today, the relations of capital do not exhaust social life; there are *other* forms of activity that provide different motivations other than expansion of capital, but nothing in Leontyev's notion of activity offers an opening even for such a distinction. The relations dealt with by Leontyev are taken to be characteristic of *whole societies* over entire epochs. But what is needed is a psychology which sets out from the diversity of real relations to be found in bourgeois society here and now.

That people manage to live *despite* capitalism is not simply because their needs are met as a by-product of capital accumulation. Were social life to be totally subsumed under capital, then not only would the social conditions for human life be extinguished but the natural conditions for human life would be destroyed as well.

So as a theory of psychology Leontyev's activity theory still works, just so long as the content of 'activity' is not taken too seriously. But if that is the case, what does activity theory add to Vygotsky's original formulation?

24. Groups as a Model of Sociality

> "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. In epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes." (Marx 1852)

On the face of it, the problem of identity and the constitution of social subjects, would seem amenable to an Activity Theory approach, given that a person's system of social interactions and life activity is widely seen as being the medium of identity formation (e.g. Vygotsky 1998a: 43). Conversely, the formation of systems of activity necessarily draws upon individuals' sense of identity and identity is surely central to the formation of social subjects – the formal or informal, collective self-conscious actors which mediate between the lives of individuals and the broader social terrain. But social subjects are far from being entities that one 'belongs' to in the narrow sense of belonging to a party or a team, though they may crystallize into a coherent group in critical situations.

Social life is inconceivable without the formation of social subjects, a process which was a central concern of Hegel, and which Marx dealt with in writings such as "The 18th Brumaire." There is a vast modern literature on group dynamics, identity and other related topics tied up with the problems of identity which have come to be seen as central to late modernity.

But the problem of identity seems to have completely escaped Leontyev's attention.

The archetypal scenario with which Leontyev illustrates the differentiation of action and activity is the primeval hunt organized by a tribal group. Leontyev never reflected for a moment on how and why it is that an individual tribal member sees themself as a member of the tribe and therefore agrees to participate in the collective hunt. Of course, under normal circumstances, every member *will* identify with the tribe, that is the nature of tribal life, but how is this achieved and sustained? On the other hand, instead of taking the identification of every individual with an arbitrarily selected group of which they are deemed to be a member, as a *premise* of Activity Theory, the tribal group could be taken as an archetypal

instance of the *formation* of a stable sense of identity. In this case, the collective hunt and the distribution of the product according to norms would seem to play a role in *creating* a sense of identity where it did not previously exist, rather than collective activity resting upon a pre-existing common identity. But either way, without that sense of identity on the part of the participants, it is senseless to even talk of the collective needs of the tribe, let alone those needs being the object of the activity.

But participants in modern society do not generally belong to tribes. Leontyev takes it for granted that the 'objective' meaning of labor is the provision for the needs of the whole 'society'. What is this 'society'? Leontyev presumes that every individual is essentially and objectively a member of the nation-state. But at the same time he presumes that a worker sees in their labor only wages, and the capitalist only profit. In other words he presumes that everyone is an individualist (notwithstanding undeveloped gestures to proletarian internationalism and worker solidarity, whose origin is quite inexplicable by means of his theory). So subjectively everyone is an individual, whilst objectively they are organs of the nation-state! How an individual thinks and acts to one degree or another as part of a group is a question which needs to be *answered*, *not presupposed* by Activity Theory.

From animal life to human life, Leontyev retained an individualistic definition of the subject. Even while he demonstrated how human consciousness arises through the use of cultural products in collective activity, the subject remained an individual organism pursuing individual goals. But as a Soviet citizen, he seemed to take it for granted that everyone works for the good of *their* nation-state.

The fact is that membership of a group of any kind is not something which Activity Theory can take as a given datum or as a means of explaining or expressing the social character of people's activity – it is a phenomena which needs to be explained by Activity Theory. Why does the tribal person see themself as member of the tribe? Why do Soviet citizens identify themselves as Soviet citizens? Why do some workers see themselves as workers, and others not? Why does a woman see herself as a woman, or a wife or a citizen, and what does this mean for them? These are prime questions for social theory and psychology which Activity Theory needs to answer.

The kind of conception of sociality which Leontyev expresses – individual self-consciousness on one side, uncritical group-identity on the other – is what I call the 'lumpy' conception of social subjectivity, lumpy because it is like a poorly made custard, with a continuum of isolated particles, plus lumps. This lumpy conception of subjectivity is shared by later versions of Activity Theory as well.[79] For example, Lektorsky, who is renowned for his work on the subject-object relation in the Activity Theory tradition, says:

> "Activity cannot exist without a subject. But the initial form of a subject is no ego, but a subject of collective activity (e.g., a group, a community, a team). The individual subjective world, individual consciousness, ego are not something given (as philosophers in the 17th and 18th centuries thought), but the result of the development and transformations of collective activity or practice." (Lektorsky 1999: 107)

Lektorsky is right in his claim that the subject begins not as an individual organism, but rather as a "subject of collective activity," but to appeal to "a group, a community, a team" to exemplify what is meant by "collective activity or practice" is misguided. This problem is not restricted to Activity Theorists; Critical Theorists also discuss social subjectivity in terms of phrases like "individuals and groups" or "individuals and collectivities" as if social subjectivity was reducible to group membership[80]. Identity is always contested, multiple, and conditional, but never individual.

Activity is not social and collective because people belong to groups or teams. And even if this were the case, then that would still leave two further moments of collective activity to be explained: the membership of the individual in the group (how is it established and how is it manifested?), and interactions between groups (how are they controlled and in what are they manifested?). In other words, group membership explains nothing about social subjectivity at all, but poses further problems for solution.

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[79] Those Activity Theorists who escape this trap generally do so by combining Activity Theory with modern European philosophies which have developed notions of identity-formation.

[80] Fraser (2003: 31) is a recent example, but also, Nancy Fraser has done a great deal of work on the constitution of group-identity (see Fraser 1997) through communicatively mediated forms of activity.

In the "Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," Marx remarked:

> "But also when I am active *scientifically,* etc. – an activity which I can seldom perform in direct community with others – then my activity is *social,* because I perform it as a man. Not only is the material of my activity given to me as a social product (as is even the language in which the thinker is active): my own existence is social activity, and therefore that which I make of myself, I make of myself for society and with the consciousness of myself as a social being" (1975e: 298).

Social subjectivity arises from participation in social practices in artifact-mediated collaboration with others, sometimes very indirectly. As Lektorsky correctly pointed out, in pre-modern times the relevant activities had a 'lumpy' character because everyone lived in relatively small, relatively homogeneous communities with relativity little collaboration between communities. But this pattern of activity belongs to a distant past. A person's identity is essentially identical with their participation in social practice, and identity is formed through simultaneous participation in a myriad of different social practices, practices which routinely extend across very diverse domains. This complex identity is formed not through the existence of abstract entities like the nation-state, but through the use of artifacts (including the symbols of national unity) and social practices (including practices oriented towards national unity), and conversely the nation-state (like other identity markers) exists only in and through such social practices and symbols.

In "Activity, Consciousness, and Personality" (1978) Leontyev dealt with personality formation. The basic idea is that people acquire aspects of their personality by participation in a range of social practices, but Leontyev never reflects on the difference between character and identity. A person might, for example, acquire a character suited to manual labor, but still not identify as a laborer; and conversely. The only mode of identity which Leontyev's Activity Theory knows is group membership. This is a very abstract mode of identity. For a richer mode of identity formation we need to go back to Vygotsky's ideas about word meaning. Identity is acquired in the process of forming meaning through collaborative action together with others. We will return to this problem below.

Rather than being a solution to the problem of membership of society, the idea of membership of a group simply sets up an infinite regress much as the homunculus sets up an infinite regress in the other direction. The concept of group membership is also a particularly poor representation of sociality in modern society. Membership of a team or committee is one relatively marginal part of social life.

Activity theory can and must shed light on identity-formation, interpersonal relationships such as solidarity, loyalty, friendship, ethical commitment, respect for law, pursuit of science, political affiliation, religious identity, ability to cooperate with others, the acquisition of cultural competences and so on. Societies are not homogeneous. The dogmatic identification of the *objective* meaning of all activity with the interests of an abstractly-conceived 'society', blocks the way to the solution of these problem, and therefore makes the formation of a coherent theory of activity impossible.

Activity Theory is very well placed to make a significant contribution to the study of identity formation, but to do so it must let go of the idea of 'objective' identity which is determined not by criteria immanent in the experience of an individual, but according to abstract collectivities determined by the theorist's preconceptions.

25. Yrjö Engeström's Model

> "Science tries to capture and fixate the general into models. Models are simultaneously secondary instruments and outcomes of science. But science cannot be understood without the sensitive link of transmission and translation of scientific models into secondary instruments of work or other productive practice outside science."
> (Engeström 1987)

Yrjö Engeström is probably the most influential Activity Theorist today, working from his Center for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research in Helsinki, where the central concerns are education, training and work organization.

Engeström's classic work, "Learning by Expanding" (1987) began with a penetrating critical review of the competing currents of psychological and social theory at the time. This included "the semiotic and epistemological lineage from C. Peirce to K. Popper; the lineage from the symbolic interactionism of G. H. Mead to modern interactionist developmental psychology; and the lineage of cultural-historical psychology from Vygotsky to Leontyev." His review of Soviet Activity Theory included an examination of the various units of analysis, leading up to the conception which has been the hallmark of his work and that of his followers ever since, the 'expanding triangle'.

Engeström's comprehensive schema of nested triangles tackled a lot of the problems in Leontyev's model. He begins with the natural model of the activity of social creatures, represented with a triangle, in which an individual's relationship to their environment is mediated by their community. This makes a *three-way* relationship of mutual mediation, as the community's relationship with its environment is mediated by individuals and the individuals' relationship with their community is mediated by the environment.

The specifically human form of life then develops through the mediation of each of these three relationships:

- The individuals' relationship with their environment opens up as the direct relationship with nature is mediated by emergent tool use and

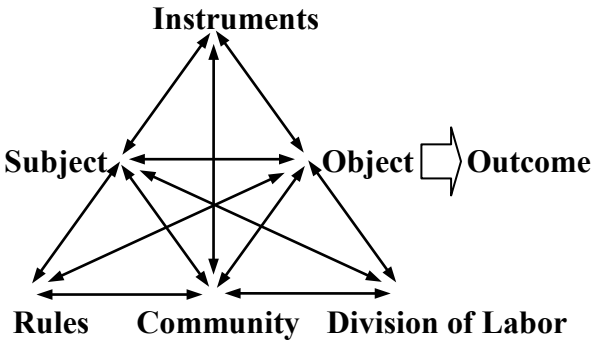
tool making underlying a system of production mediating between needs and their satisfaction.

- The relationship of the entire community to the means satisfying its needs opens up with the direct relationship being replaced by a division of labor with a system of distribution of the products of labor.
- The direct relationship of the individual to the group gives way to the emergence of larger and more complex communities and social relationships mediated by norms, rules and traditions, including the exchange of products on the market.

The combination of production, distribution and exchange are then mediated by a system of social consumption of the products of labor. Thus, we have Engeström's famous expanding triangle of triangles (1987) representing the relationship between an individual and their natural and social environment. The relationship between the individual subject and their object (the means of satisfying their needs) is now subject to multiple lines of mediation. Each implementation of this schema produces an outcome which is a changed relationship of all the factors, and each of the mediating links contains contradictions, the mediation of which generate further lines of development.

We see here classic markers of Activity Theory, with the satisfaction of needs of individuals providing the motor of individual activity and development. But Engeström does not refer to this schema as a unit of analysis, but rather the 'root model of human activity'. The derivation of the 'root model' is introduced by specifying four criteria:

> "*First*, activity must be pictured in its simplest, genetically original structural form, as the smallest unit that still preserves the essential unity and quality behind any complex activity. *Second*, activity must be analyzable in its dynamics and transformations, in its evolution and historical change. No static or eternal models will do. *Third*, activity must be analyzable as a contextual or ecological phenomenon. The models will have to concentrate on systemic relations between the individual and the outside world. *Fourth*, specifically human activity must be analyzable as culturally mediated phenomenon. No dyadic organism-environment models will suffice" (1987).



The first of the above criteria clearly indicates that Engeström is continuing the search for a unit of analysis as the starting point for a science, but he never actually makes this claim, and indeed will deny it. Nonetheless, the way the concept is deployed seems to imply that it is to be understood as a unit of analysis. But it cannot be a unit of analysis.

Altogether, Engeström's model represents relationships between individual (subject), object, outcome, community, environment, social rules, instruments of production, division of labor, production, distribution, exchange and consumption. Even if we assume that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are *derivative* rather than essential concepts, and we take 'outcome' as a reproduction of the same relation, we are still left with 7 distinct concepts – subject, object, community, environment, social rules, instruments of production and division of labor – which have to be derived before we have the so-called unit of analysis. But if the ultimate reality we are dealing with is activity, then every one of these concepts is derivative of the concept of activity. For example, 'subject' is one of the 7 concepts which are presupposed in the conception of activity; but what is the nature of the subject? And how is a 'community' constituted if not by activity? Answers to these questions would be *outcomes* of a theory of activity, and cannot be its presuppositions.

The idea of pairs or triplets of concepts which are *mutually constitutive*, being a differentiated unity, has a long pedigree, but a set of *seven* mutually constitutive concepts is not really tenable, and Engeström surely doesn't mean it that way.

One is forced to the conclusion that Engeström has abandoned the approach characterizing the tradition of science running from Goethe through Hegel and Marx to Vygotsky, in favour of an abstract-empirical approach, beginning from a collection of abstractions which acts as a

template for research. But his 'strong candidate' for a unit of analysis of activity Theory is "object-oriented, collective and culturally mediated human activity, or activity system" (Engeström 1999: 9), though this concept is not a unit at all, but a whole *system*. This seems to imply a continued commitment to the idea of a unit of analysis and that the 'root model' is the 'strong candidate' referred to.

Engeström's claim rests on the idea of the initial natural relationship of individual-community-environment 'expanding' through the intervention of mediating elements. This would make activity the coincidence of three processes: tool-making, law-making and labor organization. So activity is *derivative* from these concepts. It is a plausible conception, similar to the schema Hegel derived from the idea of the differentiation of production and consumption, and used to theorise the emergence of Spirit in his 1802-03 system. But it remains a schema.

To make a start with a science we have to have a *concept* of what it is that we are investigating and the possibility of observing it. But here at the very least we have 7 entities, whose conceptions are posited as *preliminary* to the science of activity. The argument seems to be a proof that one cannot have a unit of analysis for Activity Theory, inasmuch as the root model which is "the smallest unit that still preserves the essential unity and quality behind any complex activity" is already a composite, a whole system in fact.

Whether it is called a root model or a unit of analysis, Engeström's expanding triangle is an impressive *schema* of social life, a handy pocket manual of social analysis, but it is not the foundation of a science, in the sense that Goethe, Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky envisaged. Engeström has given us an elegant general schema for various components of social life, but he has not given us a *concept* of any of those components or of activity itself.

One of the drivers for the development of activity theory was the need to explicitly introduce the character of the social context of actions, especially their motivating factors, into the picture we have of the individual's psychology. Engeström does this by listing the main relevant characteristics and by visually implanting them in the expanding triangle, making sure that the researcher does not forget to include them in their analysis. However, it is very much to be questioned whether registering the

relevant community, the rules and norms, division of labor and technology is a satisfactory representation of the social context. What is lacking is a *concept* of the social context: what is it about the social context which is determining the psychological problems?

Secondly, we are still left with the idea that community is something given, along with rules, so that the individual's identity and/or their acceptance of the relevant community and norms seems to be taken for granted.

Finally, the same dynamic underlies Engeström's model which is characteristic of Activity Theory: activity is driven by needs. Is this satisfactory? Is this was life is about: individuals pursuing their needs?

26. Michael Cole and Cross-Cultural Psychology

> "The effective programs were tolerated so long as they 'paid their own way'; when outside funding dried up, they could not compete successfully for internal resources." (Cole 1996)

In 1963, the UN was supporting efforts by the government of Liberia, West Africa, to improve their education system. John Gay was teaching Kpelle children in a small college in the interior and was particularly concerned at the poor performance of the children in mathematics. 25-year-old Mike Cole (1996) was called in to assist as a consultant psychologist, probably in the mistaken belief that Mike's expertise in 'mathematical learning theory' was something to do with how people learn mathematics, which it wasn't. Nor did Mike have any experience in field work or development or know where to find Liberia on the map. Coming into the field as a complete outsider was probably an advantage as it turned out.

The conventional wisdom in the field was that African children suffered from a long list of intellectual and perceptual deficits, to the extent that they could not be expected to solve simple jigsaw puzzles and, if given a choice, would always resort to memorizing rather than understanding. Visits to schools seemed to confirm this belief, with children seen learning to recite by rote long passages of European poetry that they did not understand and even trying to memorize the answers to arithmetical exercises. But coming from the US at that time, when the Civil Rights movement had been vigorously challenging racial prejudices like this for more than a decade, Cole found the claim that these phenomena were the result of an intellectual deficit simply not believable. There had to be another explanation.

So Cole and his colleagues then closely observed the local Kpelle people in their daily life to see if they were really that dumb. They observed people rapidly and accurately carrying out complicated calculations in the market place, buying and selling produce in a range of units, taxi drivers bargaining with great skill taking account of a wide range of cost factors, players of a board game called *malang* exercising sophisticated strategies and the old men using arcane language skills and mobilizing logical arguments in exercising their civic duties in dispute resolution, etc., etc., etc. Clearly the Kpelle were not dumb.

The team then set about trying out a variety of approaches to testing Kpelle children to find procedures in which their obvious intelligence would be manifested in a test environment. Tests used typically in the US were used as well as tests devised to measure the kind of skills they had witnessed in action observing the Kpelle in their daily life, using both artifacts lifted from daily life and tasks which made sense in the local context. The kind of tests used by Luria in the expedition to Uzbekistan where the subjects had to complete abstract syllogisms[81] were also incorporated. Cole later had an opportunity to carry out work in the Yacatán Peninsula in Mexico, where people were to be found across a variety of ages, with and without schooling, and also did some 'backwards cross-cultural testing', asking Americans to do 'intelligence tests' designed using artifacts and procedures indigenous to the Kpelle culture.

The results of this work over a period of years were as follows.

In tests where the subjects had to estimate relative quantities of rice in a variety of odd-shaped bowls and tins, something Kpelle people have to routinely do in their marketplace transactions, Kpelle children and adults out-performed Americans. This seemed to confirm that using artifacts which were indigenous to a culture and carrying out tasks which were indigenous to their culture, people displayed the same level of intellectual skill as any other people.

A cross-cultural experiment was devised which used leaves from a variety of trees and vines, drawing on an ability to recognize, categorize and remember them. Groups of North Americans and Kpelle people were required to recognize and remember which were from trees and which were from vines, and could then use this knowledge as an *aide mémoire* in sorting leaves categorized according to fictional criteria. Unsurprisingly the Kpelle outperformed the North American subjects in all tests, but the Kpelle seemed unable to use their good knowledge of the leaves to recognize and remember categories based on fictional criteria. The North American subjects also proved unable to make use of the clues coded in the leaf taxonomy, even though experience of school had attuned these subjects to looking for such information as *aides mémoire*.

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[81] For example: Q: "Cotton grows well where it is hot and dry. England is cold and damp. Can cotton grow in England or not?" A: "I don't know, I've never been there."

Cole's team concluded:

> "cultural differences in cognition reside more in the situations to which particular cognitive processes are applied than in the existence of a [cognitive] process in one cultural group and its absence in the other" (1996: 80).

Undoubtedly differences in experience resulting from cultural difference could be reflected in specific cognitive differences. Schooling in particular induces people to organize disjointed information in order to remember it later. Even a few years at elementary school would foster school-like abilities which could be used in other contexts. Schooling also entailed training in skills such using counter-factual data within a problem to provide counter-factual solutions to logical puzzles, and in general, familiarity with hypothetical situations. But the whole social set-up in a school which is built around such practices is foreign to cultures where formal schooling is not found. Parents for example do not ask their children questions, just to hear them answer. People do not make counterfactual statements just because they follow logically from other statements. School would to some extent impart an understanding of these skills and practices.

In bringing this to light, Cole's group began to see that their own test procedures, even when indigenous artifacts and practical content were used, were "covert models of schooling practices." Testing using these school-like test procedures would only reflect the degree to which people had been encultured to schooling. Likewise performance in school only reflected the degree to which the children had been encultured to school. This did not alter the fact, though, that schools imparted skills and inclinations which were needed for useful participation in a bureaucratic/industrial economy and social life.

This explained the problems Luria had had in his expedition to Uzbekistan (Cole 1996: 169). His testing had only measured the degree to which each individual had been exposed to schooling or modern industrial practices, but gave no further information at all about the cognitive capacity of the individuals.

A series of actions cannot simply be transplanted from one cultural context to another; if so transplanted, it would be either misconstrued or rendered altogether incomprehensible. A system of actions is essentially inseparable from the artifacts and modes of social interaction mediating the

processes making up the activity, and the social context in which the actions were situated.

The problem remained though: if Uzbeks or Kpelle or groups systematically excluded from the dominant institutions in industrialized countries, were to gain access to the benefits of modernity, how was their native intelligence to be mobilized in the new cultural context? What was it about the context which rendered the actions meaningful and how could differences in cultural context be overcome?

But the team did discover that however poorly the Kpelle children performed in their school tasks, attendance at school *did* have an impact on their thinking.

Later studies in Yacatán (Sharp, Cole, & Lave, 1979) demonstrated that women who had attended school even for relatively short periods of time acquired from their experience enhanced skills in dealing with the various bureaucracies. As a result, their children experienced reduced infant mortality, better health and fared very much better at school than their mothers. Researchers (Levine & White 1986) following up on this work suggested possible explanations: the mother (1) gained skills useful for interacting in health and educational institutions, (2) adopted teacher/student-like behaviors in interactions with their children and (3) was able to use information from the mass media and bureaucracy more effectively. After their experience of schooling, the women did not change their life-course, and went into their traditional role as mothers and farmers; but the second generation did benefit from their mothers' schooling. In any case, it appears that what schooling taught the first generation was not so much reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic, but the whole range of interpersonal behaviors which are implicit in industrial/bureaucratic societies – and these practices of course also vary not only between industrialized and non-industrial countries, but vary widely from Europe to North Asia to North America, etc., etc.

Back in San Diego, Cole continued his efforts to find a way to introduce the benefits of education to those children in his own community who were being labeled with one or another disorder to explain why the teachers were unable to teach them. He gained permission for his research assistants to video classroom activity in a variety of settings. But this project came to a

sudden end when the teachers refused to allow the researchers to record the dysfunctional conditions in their classrooms.

One of the conclusions which had to be drawn at this point was this: so long as researchers simply engaged in observing and testing children and teachers, they could hardly expect the children and teachers to commit themselves to the process; like laboratory rats, they are nothing more than objects for someone else's research. The only way to learn about learning was to set up a school and help children learn.

Cole set about researching the different initiatives which had been tried over the years in the US. Some of them sounded extremely promising from the standpoint of the experiences of his research into the impact of cultural differences on the success of schooling. He found however that in every single case, after operating for a while the new schools had failed and disappeared without a trace (1997: 288). Sustainability would have to be a key criterion for any new initiative.

He also reflected that in Liberia:

> "As often as not the most visible consequence of schooling was alienation of the young from their parents and from the community's traditional forms of economic life" (1997: 287).

This story, of educated children becoming alienated from their parents or hometown community, is repeated countless times, a story with which we must all have encountered. Hardly surprising then that schools which try to offer an escape from this trap soon fall prey to alienation from the community themselves.

A further conclusion follows from these findings: the very idea that education is something that can be delivered to an individual is mistaken. An individual is a product and integral part of a certain community and its indigenous culture, and attempts to 'educate' an individual in a culture where such practices are not indigenous, are tantamount to kidnapping them. In relation to both the research and the education, Cole was also concerned with the issue of 'ecological validity', that is, to what extent is what happens in a laboratory or classroom replicable in any other environment (Cole 1991)?

In the light of this, it is of some significance that Cole's next initiative (Brown & Cole 1994) has managed to last for more than two decades and

replicate itself into a network of centers. In 1987, Cole set up Fifth Dimension, an after-school center that children attend voluntarily, staffed by graduate students from the neighboring university. The first Fifth Dimension opened after researchers and community participants spent more than a year discussing needs and goals and exploring various alternative forms of activity before it was agreed to use the Fifth Dimension as an open afterschool center. The aim was to involve an elementary school, a daycare center, a library and a Boys and Girls Club, and great effort was expended in trying to fit the management of the center into the requirements of these groups. Everyone wanted 5D to succeed but the operations of the center would not fit into the institutional demands of the school, daycare center and Club and in the end only the library continued their commitment. In other communities, different arrangements have worked. The activities in the center appeal to the children as a rewarding mode of self-directed play, and children attend voluntarily, but considerable effort was and continues to be expended in ensuring that the center fits into the demands of the relevant institutions (Nicolopoulou & Cole 1993).

Only by making Fifth Dimension a collaborative project involving the children and the other members of the community affected by their education, could the project succeed. Young researchers have unique and often transformative experiences interacting with children with experiences very different from their own, parents have their children kept safe for free after school, the schools get better performing and better behaved children. It was only to the extent that everyone was able to integrate Fifth Dimension into their own projects and interests that people continued to support the project. And educational outcomes have been sensitive not only to the children's need to gain access to the dominant culture, but also to the parents' needs to remain in touch with the raising of their own children.

What is Context?

Cole sometimes says that 'joint artifact-mediated activity' is the strongest candidate for unit of analysis, but in any case, there can be no unit of analysis that is not sensitive to the context.

But 'context' is an open-ended totality: do we include only the immediate social interactions, or the external social relations in which participants are involved, the whole physical environment or just the cultural markers,

the broader institutional environment with all its pressures and constraints, or just the immediate social setting, etc., etc.?

Van der Veer defines 'context' as:

> "... not just the physical and socioeconomical environment with all the possibilities and tools that it affords but also ... the intellectual environment in the sense of available ideas, traditions of thinking, and so on. The physical, technological, socioeconomical, and intellectual environments and their complex interdependency determine the individual's possibilities" (2007).

Van der Veer continues by pointing out that what "may be an inhospitable environment for one organism may be an El Dorado for another," so that 'context' is in that sense a *relative* concept, and further notes that individual and environment "mutually shape each other in a spiral process of growth." Despite its nuances, this conception still gives no guidance as to how motivation arises from an individual's connection to their environment. While insisting that the organism and its environment form an evidently *unbounded* and integral system, it offers no conceptual approach to the problems raised by such a demand.

It makes no sense at all to talk of a unit of analysis – 'a singular, indivisible thing which exhibits the essential properties of a class of more developed phenomena and existent phenomenon' – and include within it an *open-ended totality*. Recourse to open-ended totalities is exactly what a unit of analysis is supposed to obviate, and inclusion of such an infinity would be to abandon the whole project of a "romantic science." As A. R. Luria's most prominent advocate today, Cole is committed to a "romantic science," and he has not taken this step. It remains an unsolved problem in Cultural Psychology.

How can a unit of analysis for consciousness express the context?

This is a similar problem we had with Vygotsky's concept of the 'social situation of development' in his study of child development. How do we conceive of the 'social situation of development'? As a list of attributes like sibling order, parental education, family income and so on? Or do we have to include the entire *context*? A close reading of Vygotsky's text showed that the 'social situation of development' had to be conceived of as a 'predicament'. The concept of predicament allowed us to see what factors were relevant to the 'social situation of development' and how exactly each

aspect of the situation[82] contributes to the predicament which normally drives the child's development. There is no need to get involved in trying to capture an open-ended totality in the concept. Of course, absolutely everything can in some way and to some degree have an impact on a child's development. But to say 'anything is possible' is of no use to science. The point is to establish the norm. Something in the environment would contribute to the formation of the normal course of child development insofar as it contributed to the child's developmental predicament. We have the same problem here when we try to understand the factors conditioning educational development in situations where cultural difference in involved.

But what Mike Cole has uncovered here is not so much a specialized problem of education in multicultural environments, but rather the general problem of coordination of psychological functioning and the social conditions which form the context of psychological functioning.

The idea of 'context' can also be theorized through the notion of *ecological validity* (Bronfenbrenner 1979), which Cole (1991) explained as follows in the context of the 5D exercise:

> "How do you know that the system of interactions you are studying has any equivalents outside of itself? In particular, how do psychological processes manifested in standardized tests and school lessons relate to each other and to processes manifested in other settings where teaching and learning are not the motive of the activity. One important conclusion: both psychological tests and classroom interactions are very distinctive though historically interrelated kinds of activity."

In this approach actions which are part of some activity (e.g., science, play, schooling) are assessed on the basis of whether the action can be replicated when transposed into a different activity. This approach poses the notion of 'context' in a clearer manner, but the same issues arise.

Earlier we described this problem in terms of a hermeneutic circle, that is, where actions are meaningful in the light of recognizing the system of actions of which they are a part (the activity), whilst activities become

[82] Dewey (1938) also used the notion of 'situation' to represent a contextual whole, defined as the interaction of internal and objective conditions in experience.

meaningful only by adding up, so to speak, all the actions of which they are composed (since they are composed of nothing else but actions).

The problem Cole has identified is one of this kind. For some reason, participants fail to key in to the activity in such a way that the actions become meaningful and engaging. But after tracing the problems which have arisen in Activity Theory, we no longer know how we can define 'the activity', that is, what the action is for, what its motivation is. We have to have a concept of the specific totality of actions, artifacts and 'jointness' which makes it meaningful to the participants.

'Jointness' draws attention to the fact that 'joint' is also somewhat ill-defined. Everyone has agreed that the unit of consciousness includes an action with or in relation to another person. This is established by observing how a new psychological function is brought into being. This other-relatedness of an action can become quite remote, but it is always there 'in the last analysis'. But what relation counts as 'joint'? Why is it important to differentiate, as we have, between the observer with a note pad, and the researcher who actively intervenes to assist the subject complete a task? Are the funding organizations who may pull funding out of a progressive school project really part of the unit of analysis for the psychology of the pupils?

Again, it is not a question of drawing up an open-ended list of all the people who are relevant to the formation of a psychological function. We have to form a *concept* which expresses the jointness, such that we can understand what it is about a relationship which is either contributing to the formation of a psychological function or acting as a barrier.

As some writers (e.g. Wertsch) have pointed out, the context is also a 'frame' or 'institutional setting' which gives guidance on how an action should be interpreted by another.

Also, Activity Theory approached the problem of connecting up actions with the relevant activities of which they are a part by examining the motivating forces at work in activity, that is, the dimension of teleology, or purposefulness. Activity Theory approached this problem by means of the concept of *object*: every activity has its object, and activity is fundamentally object-oriented, rather than *active*.

It seems that the object-oriented concept of activity failed to adequately capture the nature of the social life of human beings. We need a concept of

'an activity' which (like "Theses on Feuerbach" §1) expresses the *active* side, the *subject* rather than the object.

In "The Zone of proximal development: where culture and cognition create each other" (1985), Michael Cole summarizes the problem of forming a unit which includes the 'context' in this way:

> "1. There is a basic unit common to the analysis of both cultures' and individuals' psychological processes. 2. This unit consists of an individual engaged in goal-directed activity under conventionalized constraints. This unit is variously designated as 'activity', a 'task', an 'event'[83]. ..." (1985: 158)

Following in the tradition of Vygotsky and Luria, refusing to substitute objectivist abstractions for the activities in which individuals are actually engaged, Cole has sharply problematized the concept of context as a factor in consciousness and learning. His reflections on the struggle to overcome the barriers that cultural difference places before educators have brought out in sharp relief the methodological tasks which now lie before us.

History and Culture

'History' is one of the four words registered in acronym of CHAT, the object of our enquiry, but what little we have had to say of history has been negative – we discounted, in a manner reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss (1962), Leontyev's use of speculative historical narratives to support his functionalist conception of society. Sylvia Scribner comprehensively covered the question of the use of history in CHAT in "Vygotsky's uses of history" (1985) and Mike Cole (2009) deals with the problem at length in *Cross-Cultural Research in the Cultural Historical Activity Theory Tradition* (in press). Both these writers agree that whatever errors can be found in the uses of history by the founders of CHAT, reflecting the misconceptions of their times, these errors do not undermine the foundations of the theory. Consequently, these remarks will be limited to just one issue which bears on the problems we want to resolve here.

Scribner says:

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[83] 'Event' refers to the work of Katherine Nelson (1981) in which children acquire 'scripts' within highly structured contexts, participating with assigned roles in 'social events' directed towards adult aims.

> "Vygotsky addressed the question of *general processes of formation of particular functional systems*, a project quite at variance from one aimed at delineating a particular sequence of general functional systems" (1985: 132).

That is, for Scribner as for Vygotsky it was not legitimate to claim that this or that historical society is 'higher' or 'more developed' than another, as each society represents a unique solution to the problems of its existence and as such there is simply no basis for comparison with any other society; there is no shared standard of comparison, at least until the two societies in question come into actual contact with one another. But it is incontestable that it is legitimate to compare specific functional systems between different societies, since such functional systems carry with them immanent bases for measurement and therefore comparison, even if it is not explicit, and societies do practically compare themselves with other societies, in certain specific functional relations with one another.

And the same goes for individuals. It is never possible to say 'this person is better than that person', but it would be nonsense to deny that it is possible to say 'this person can sprint faster than that person' or 'this person earns more many than that person' because such well-defined projects (sprinting or earning money) bring with them a standard of measurement which is immanent to the project itself, i.e., necessarily connected to the aims of the functional system.

When two societies come into contact with one another, then they enter into one or a number of specific modes of interaction which brings with it an immanent mode of comparison. For example, when two societies trade, the economic power of the two societies is brought into comparison, and this is reflected in the equivalence of labor times associated with the production of goods exchanged between them. When two societies go to war, their capacity to visit death and destruction upon one another and to withstand destructive force, is brought into comparison. When a person migrates into a new land, they compare their host country and their homeland in terms of economic prospects, but at the same time the upbringing they got at home is compared in terms as a preparation for their new life, with the upbringing the indigenous population received.

These are real bases for comparison, and very real social and psychological effects flow from such acts of comparison. What is being compared

here is the development of functional systems. It is often said that what is being compared is only the person's 'psychological tool-kit' rather than the person as such, but that is really meaningless: what goes for a person goes for a 'psychological tool-kit'. The point is that only an *immanent* basis for comparison is meaningful. Also, comparison is not inherently a process which presupposes an observer standpoint. When people migrate from one society to another, people make a comparison on their own terms, just as when people into any sort of competition with one another.

The alternative positions were amply demonstrated in the March 2008 edition of *Culture & Psychology*. In the name of 'cultural preservation', Eugene Matusov claimed that CHAT had split into two opposing factions, and that:

> "the sociocultural paradigm [insists] on the long overdue societal rehabilitation of and respect for cultural practices of non-mainstream others" (2008).

But his valid concern for the plight of disadvantaged cultural groups in modern society is misplaced. Such groups are certainly engaged in 'self-preservation', but only incidentally engaged in the business of 'cultural preservation', being generally more importantly interested in acquiring the elements of the dominant culture that they need for economic, cultural and political survival. Then on the other side, Toomela (1985) counterposed the cultural-historical approach to the sociocultural approach and asserted that: "The sociocultural approach is fundamentally deficient in ignoring a need for cognitive analysis and not taking seriously the notion of hierarchical [*sic!*] development." While insisting on the importance of the "universal developmental stages" of the cultural-historical school, Toomela pleaded for the two currents to see each other as complementary, each current having their own questions to which they can provide answers.

But Scribner's observation above is the key to this conundrum. Vygotsky's was always focused on one or another specific functional system, which is why it has been difficult to find an explicit statement of a unit of analysis which is not tied to this or that functional system. Even in his theory of child development, at each new phase of ontogeny, a different functional system moved to center stage. It is an irony that Vygotsky's capacity to see the human being *as a whole* allowed him to approach the

person by distinguishing the distinctive functional systems making up the personality.

The emigration of CHAT to the US not only linked it back to American Pragmatism which had been a part of its origins in the 1920s, but also, brought it under the sway of the most emancipatory forces of the times, the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements, which were at their peak in the 1960s and '70s in the U.S. It was these projects which cast doubt over the idea of arranging societies in a hierarchy of cultural-historical evolution. The politicization of the issue of comparing people and comparing societies highlighted the fact that societies can only be compared, and hence conceived, as differentiated, historically articulated and developing functional systems.

We now need to sum up what has been brought out in this review of the development of Cultural Historical Activity Theory.

27. The Results of this Immanent Critique

It is Lev Vygotsky who is rightly recognized at the creative genius of this current of thought. As well as producing a prodigious amount of research in a small time, Vygotsky labored in equal measure to put down firm methodological foundations. The term which Vygotsky used for Goethe's *Urphänomen* and what Marx called the 'cell-form', was 'unit of analysis'. Discussion of units of analysis has been a consistent theme of methodological discussions and disputes within CHAT ever since. Even after Leontyev effectively abandoned the idea of unit of analysis, or at least moved the question into the background, it returned in the 1980s as a central theme of debate, and remains so to this day.

Vygotsky's use of Goethe's idea, as appropriated by Hegel and Marx, allowed him to represent the human psyche, personal interactions and cultural products, such as language, as a *Gestalt*, as a 'situation', providing clear concept of each of the problems he tackled. Every one of his studies has remained a landmark for those who have followed him and built upon his work. But problems remained in relation to the representation of the wider narrative context of the situation by which each problem was represented.

Since his death, others have not been able to fruitfully develop Vygotsky's methodology so that cultural psychology would be genuinely sensitive to the social and cultural context of interactions, and problems that have arisen in Vygotsky's legacy have remained at least partially unsolved. The question could hardly be resolved, because no-one had investigated the historical origins of the idea of 'unit of analysis' so as to bring out the full depth of its significance. 'Unit of analysis' seemed to be an idiosyncratic idea of Vygotsky's. All that people had to go on were Vygotsky's manuscripts dealing with the determination of a unit of analysis for verbal thinking.

As expressed by Leontyev, the problem was that Vygotsky's *Gestalt* was insufficient to represent what was motivating people's actions. The immediate goals of any action a person was carrying out ('Go to point A') could only be made sense of in the context of the social relations lying

behind the action, generating the motivation. These motivations were not included in the unit of analysis and were qualitatively different from the individuals' own goals. On the basis of the idea that people do things in order to fulfill needs, Leontyev proposed a new unit of analysis, the activity, which was the system of actions motivated by satisfaction of some objective societal need, i.e., a need of the whole society, be that yarn for cloth, coats for wearing or chromium sulphide for the manufacture of dye. Also, an individual person acts to fulfill their personal needs, but their needs are provided for socially. The division of labor must therefore be so organized that the goals of individual actions are aggregated so as to meet the objective social needs, and the norms of distribution must be so organized that pursuit of an individual's personal goals results in their needs being met by a share of the social product. This means that the social motive has a personal meaning for the individual, and it is a problem of social communication to represent the needs of the whole society in terms of such personal meanings for individuals, according to their social position.

However, this concept of societal needs and objective motivations turned out to be incoherent, implicating a sociology which could not be sustained in modern society. The concept of 'objective societal need', representing society as an integral system of needs and labor, turned out to be an inadequate concept or unit of social life. But the problem remained: individuals' actions draw their motivation from outside the immediate scene of action, and each scene cannot be made sense of without grasping their relation to the whole plot, to activity which was off-stage, so to speak. Leontyev's Activity Theory remains in many respects a useful activity reading of Hegel's Spirit, representing how social production happens behind the backs of actors, and how human powers are objectified and activated in social practice. Activity Theory clearly has much to offer social theory. But how could Leontyev's Activity Theory be renovated so as to provide a concept or unit of social life which would provide us with a useful approach social theory, whilst allowing us to understand the source of individuals' goals outside the immediate scene of action.

Mike Cole came up against the same problem from a quite different angle when he uncovered a further anomaly which had remained unexamined by Soviet investigators. A system of actions cannot be plucked from one cultural context and dropped into another. A system of actions,

such as a psychological test, which made perfect sense in the context of Western capitalist societies where social scientific research is indigenous, makes no sense in, for example, a Central Asian community of herdsmen and farmers. The actions entailed in carrying out a psychological test will not make sense to people from such a culture, and their responses are likely to be misconstrued or incomprehensible to the Westernized researcher. This is a manifestation of the same problem which arises with the introduction of formalized schooling into communities where there is no such tradition or comparable forms of activity.

Cole found that the 'failure to connect' which he had uncovered, was nothing to do with any intellectual deficit on the part of the subjects concerned, but was a side-effect of cultural difference. The problem could only be resolved by constructing some project which made sense to all the parties concerned in their own terms, so the actions which were required of people as part of the project made sense to everyone and everyone had a means of understanding what others were trying to do. So this project then provided the larger 'unit of analysis' or Gestalt within which the goals of individual actions and the source of their motivation could be grasped.

Cole claims that the context has to be included in the unit of analysis for learning, meaning: the smallest unit of the subject matter which includes all the properties of the process, still has to include the social context. But, as other writers have pointed out, even if it is admitted that it is necessary to include the context, it leads to an infinite regress. Where do you stop? The context is an open-ended totality, so to include it in a unit of analysis is to *abandon the whole idea* of unit of analysis. Unless we can grasp the relevant context with some concept which captures the significance of the all the relevant attributes of the situation, then we don't know when to stop. We will have to try to grasp the context according to whatever attributes we think are important, in other words, use an abstract-empirical conception of the context.

The project of Vygotsky's which may be of most relevance here is his unfinished theory of child development in which he posited the 'social situation of development' as the key concept by means of which he was able to construct a *Gestalt*, that is, a concept of the child in their immediate social environment. How can we extend this idea into the more general case to deal with the kind of problems which Cole has brought to light, and

renew the opportunity to develop Activity Theory in a way which is suitable for use in a general social theory?

That is the end of the immanent critique. We must now move over to a different mode of exposition in which a solution to these problems will be proposed and defended.

Part IV. An Interdisciplinary Approach

28. Collaborative Projects

> "The self becomes a *project*, not as a fully formed 'thing', something that is constructed in the processes of mutual recognition in social life. The affirmation of themselves as independent agents ..." (Pinkard 1996)

To resolve the impasse at which Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) has arrived, I propose a new unit of activity to represent the whole of which actions are a part. So in Leontyev's three levels of activity, with *operations* and (joint artifact-mediated) *actions*, we are to introduce a new unit for '*an activity*'. To introduce this proposal we must first of all explain the concepts of 'project' and 'collaboration'.

For 'project', the Oxford English Dictionary has:

> "A planned or proposed undertaking; a scheme, a proposal; a purpose, an objective; a collaborative enterprise, ... planned to achieve a particular aim. An exercise in which students study a topic, either independently or in collaboration, over an extended period" (OED Online).

This is consistent with what is meant here, but we need further explanation to determine a dialectical conception which is suitable for the pivotal role it needs to play in the development of CHAT.

For collaboration, the Oxford English Dictionary has simply: "United labour, co-operation; *esp.* in literary, artistic, or scientific work" (OED Online). This is not quite sufficient, because we shall make a distinction between collaboration and cooperation and the concept needs more explanation.

These two concepts are closely connected with one another; projects are essentially collaborative[84] and collaboration is possible only with some project. Consequently, from time to time we may refer to collaboration and projects separately, whilst retaining the understanding that the two are essentially inseparable. Likewise actions are always artifact-mediated and

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[84] Solo projects are conceivable as a limiting case, but such efforts invariably turn out to be part of larger projects involving others, or at the very least look to others for appreciation or support.

are essentially other-related, but we may from time to time refer to actions without the qualifications that actions are essentially joint and mediated by artifacts.

A project is an on-going, interconnected aggregate of actions[85], and contains nothing that is not contained in the constitutive actions, but is at the same time something more than the sum of its actions. A project is directed to some aim, but at the same time, a project is also not equated with its aim; on the contrary, the aim is implicit in the actions of which it is composed alone, and has no other existence; the participants may be quite mistaken in what they take to be the ultimate effect of the project. What this means is that the project has a concept, but every participant may have a different take on that concept (a personal meaning). For example, Christianity. Doubtless every Christian has a different concept of Christianity, incorporating different aspects of its history and culture. But these are not simply individual fragments, but all are interconnected in the social life of Christians. The concept 'Christianity' has many nuances; it is a concrete concept with a meaning which has accrued connotations and contradictions over the centuries. And Christianity is *nothing other* than this project. This is a very complex and concrete example. Alternatively, the project may be a planned fundraising party, with a finite time-scale and few accrued nuances of meaning. Nonetheless, the group collaborating in organizing the fundraiser will have a range of differing ideas about the event, and will argue and struggle over all the steps of preparation and staging until the event becomes an actuality, despite all the disagreements along the way. Nonetheless despite the fact that a project is made up of a myriad of actions there is a concept of the project, a living concept. There will nonetheless be differences and contradictions contained within the concept, but these contradictions and differences are coherent and belong to the concept. It is a matter of judgment how adequate a particular action may be and there are objective criteria.

All those things which may be more usually thought of as attributes of a person – their nationality, their profession, their hobbies – insofar as they

[85] Actions are always mediated by artifacts, and those artifacts which mediate actions which are part of the project are taken to be part of the project as well.

contribute to the person's identity are to be taken here as *projects* in which the person is a participant.

A project is not only actions but artifacts. These artifacts are implied in the notion of action and all the artifacts mediating the actions of which the project is composed are understood as subsumed in the project as well. Among the artifacts included in a project are the words naming it, the language(s) used and any symbols representing it, and all the tools, land, buildings, documents and so on supporting the projects. So there are a mass of material artifacts entailed in any project, but they are not just a mass of unorganized material, but on the contrary are all coherently deployed in a constellation determined and grasped in the concept of the project.

CHAT is a project, and I am a participant in this project and my psychological functioning is in great part determined by this project because of my participation in it. When I say that CHAT is a project, that includes all the people involved, everything they have written and the myriad of actions other than writing which have an impact on the furtherance of CHAT, such as travel, conversations, donations, research, etc. So for example, the psychological impact on me of reactions to this book would depend on the reception of those reactions within CHAT.

When we survey the open-ended totality of actions which make up the 'context' of an action, then we will have to interrogate the relation between two actions. The relevant issue for psychology is: *of what common project are the actions a part* (there may be more than one) and how do the actions relate to joint furtherance of the project. This is not an open-ended totality. There are definite normative criteria against which the relevance of an action or artifact or individual person can be determined – the project and its concept.

'Project' differs from 'object-oriented activity' because collaboration in a project is essentially *active*, whilst object-oriented activity is essentially *passive*, a response to the stimuli given by the object, a species of reflex. In "Theses on Feuerbach," Marx made a great deal of the idea of activity as *active* and not passive. For example, when he says: "The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances ..." this is precisely his point: human beings are active subjects, they *change* the

circumstances of their lives, they do not just passively respond to their environment. So 'project' does not give us an objectivist, functional/structural vision of the fabric of society, but on the contrary, a living, active view of society as a cloth which is constantly being stitched and embroidered by human activity, a myriad of intersecting and overlapping projects, a billion personal *Bildungsromans*.

Like participation in a project, collaboration encompasses both cooperation and conflict[86], and is essentially both. The collaborators have a shared interest in the outcome of the project, but they may disagree not only on the best means of getting there and fight over the means to be used, but they may also fundamentally disagree over the nature of the end. In fact, disputes over means usually resolve, to some degree, into disputes over ends. A project may break down and the collaborators may cease collaborating and go their separate ways. But insofar as they remain collaborators, then they share the outcome, and in that sense will come to a practical agreement in the end; the end resolves the conflict. Concretely, the role of conflict in projects can only be resolved by empirical investigation.

So when we say 'joint activity' then the claim here is that we put instead 'collaboration'. 'Joint' carries no particular normative content. Collaboration on the other hand is rich in content, both normative and descriptive. Normatively, collaborators consult with one another and reach consensus on actions. Of course, this is not always the case; sometimes consultation is not necessary, sometimes agreement is not necessary, sometimes what is needed is just clarity on what needs to be discussed and what can be left well alone. Again, the concrete role of discussion and consensus in collaboration can only be resolved by investigation, but *normatively*, everything is up for discussion and everything should be agreed. Collaboration is a process of convergence both cognitively and in action. In the normative case, power relations are not posed; the collaborators do everything by consensus and without strategic action, because they have, in principle, a common will. But what is the case is often far from what is

[86] The place of conflict in collaborative projects is a complex issue. Clearly there is conflict and conflict; conflict can be destructive as well constructive; sometimes people's lives have led them to such a degree of agreement that no conflict is needed. But the point is that conflict is *in principle* part of collaboration.

normative, and this disjunction between the actual and the normative is always psychologically significant.

There are a number of different relations between two people when mediated by a project in which they are collaborators, and these relations have profound ethical and psychological significance. Projects mediate relations between people. Although in CHAT it is common to talk about artifacts mediating relations between people, but artifacts cannot *do* anything; an artifact can be used in a common project, but it is only the common project which mediates.

There are a number of modes of collaboration which function in the theory as *limit cases* of collaboration.

In families and in bureaucratic organizations, collaboration may take the form of (1) management or (2) division of labor.

(1) *Management*, or hierarchical cooperation: one subject takes full ethical and cognitive responsibility for the project – 'owns' the project – and directs the actions of the others who do not question orders. This is the master-servant relation taken by Hegel as the first form of modern society, and it remains the norm inside capitalist and public service enterprises. The entire organization acts as the corporate subject in a project, with actions directed according to some system of line management. As Agnes Heller (1986) says: "equality means treating equals equally and unequals unequally." The person at the top of the hierarchy is not an equal to a subordinate, and they are not treated equally, and this inequality is not taken to be unfair. In certain circumstances it is entirely rational to hand authority to just one party, and the very act of passing the helm to someone else and following their directions is a positive act of collaboration. Clearly this relationship has profound psychological consequences.

The methodology used here is that we take meritocratic and traditional hierarchy as a *mode of collaboration*, in particular as a *limiting case* in which the initiative has gone entirely to one pole of the relationship. It is not that we want to study only projects which are collaborative, but rather that we want to study *all* projects through the lens of collaboration. So, working together but *not* according to a particular norm of collaboration, is a limiting case of collaboration. The concept of 'collaboration' provides us

with a compass for the exploration of relationships with the concept of 'project' acting as the pole of attraction.

(2) *Division of labor* is ubiquitous in modern society, representing the collaboration of all the operatives within a capitalist or public service enterprise and all the productive workers in an economy. But division of labor also operates in some traditional relationships, for example, with women attending to women's business and the men attending to men's business.

Division of labor includes (3) *Cooperation*, where a project begins by dividing up the activity so that individuals or subgroups may separately carry out actions under their own initiative towards a shared objective. In (2) and (3), relations may be egalitarian and consensual, but there is no mutual critique. As soon as participants make suggestions on each others' work, for example, then that is collaboration in the normative sense.

(4) *Exchange of commodities* is a variety of collaboration in which the parties have separate, even mutually hostile projects, but are willing to exchange money or goods in order to instrumentalize the other parties for their own project. Under this heading, the notion of (5) 'external rewards' (MacIntyre 1988) is relevant. For example, an Olympic athlete is formally participating in a project to raise the level of athletic performance in their sport, perfecting control over their own mind and body, but the prevalence of performance-enhancing drugs suggests that many competitors are in it for fame and glory, not art for art's sake. To those who participate in good faith, the sport gives internal rewards of a deeper kind. The days when people took up political office for the good of the country rather than money, power and fame seem to have gone. Also, in many projects, such as scientific or artistic projects, the question of *attribution* becomes a powerful factor in the psychology of participants. One person may do all the work, while another receives attribution and along with attribution the kudos which accompanies successful projects.

There are a myriad of such relations of 'jointness'. For example, when a service provider does some service for a customer, the customer is quite often deeply involved in specifying and controlling the project: collaboration is subsumed under exchange. This is especially the case with health services and building projects, for example. And on the other hand, we can have conflict over an outcome where people are collaborators despite

themselves. For example, rivals in a competition succeed in improving the standard of achievement by trying to prevent each other from winning.

We will deal with these issues in greater depth below. The point is that when we refer to 'joint' activity, we have to have a normative concept of what corresponds to 'jointness' and be able to draw on science with respect to deviations from the norms of collaboration. It is the fact that there are norms of collaboration that prevents 'collaboration' from indicating an open-ended totality. It by no means suggests that relationships which differ from the norm of collaboration are ipso facto wrong or deficient on that account.

By taking *collaborative project* as a unit of analysis for activity (along with operation and action), we take normative collaboration, to be the norm against which actual relations are measured. We take as the norm that collaborators participate for the internal rewards, that is, the shared aim of the project and desist from strategic action and free-riding. But we do not *presume* that there is no conflict or free-riding. On occasion there is no other means of furthering a project than to mobilize some others by offering external rewards, and very often free-loaders contribute despite themselves. Conflict is normal in project collaboration; so is division of labor, but neither are mandated.

So we see that the notion of 'jointness' covers a wide range of psychologically significant differences in the nature of collaboration. But we have a norm, and norms relevant to specific situations, and psychological problems need to be informed by specific science concerned with these different modes of collaboration.

One of the problems with the notion of 'an activity' is that in Leontyev's concept, the identity of the activity, according to a supposed societal need, was ill-defined. In Cole's concept, 'the activity' is the essentially unbounded context. This is not the case with 'collaborative project'. A person could be engaged in innumerable projects and the projects could be relatively ill-defined. But in principle, a project is well-defined, bounded and finite. Instead of thinking of a person as a hook for so many attributes, think of all the projects in which the person is engaged. What you have then is so many threads into the social context in relation to which everything the social environment can be objectively assessed in

terms of their relationship to the project. It makes sense then to take each relevant such project as a unit for psychological analysis.

Let us recall the three characteristics we determined for a unit of analysis: (1) It is the conception of a singular, indivisible thing; (2) It exhibits the essential properties of a class of more developed phenomena; (3) It is itself an existent phenomenon. Collaborative project satisfies these criteria. Projects may be vast enterprises, like a nation-state. Projects may be very small or very large. One could argue that a 'joint mediated action' is the archetypal project, and on this basis that 'purposeful joint mediated action' should be the unit. We do retain 'joint artifact-mediated action' as a unit, but recognizing that actions have motivational sources which implicate the larger social context, we propose 'project' as a unit, with 'joint artifact-mediated action' as both a limiting case and an underlying level of activity.[87] Projects outlive actions, and are normally on-going; people join and leave a project, and this is a sense in which a project is essentially different from its constituent actions. Projects also nest one within another, so that a large project like a nation-state is the sum of millions of personal projects. All that is required is that someone works with at last one other towards an end.

And a project is by no means abstract or imaginary. It is a finite existent, observable entity. Actions are purposive, and when we interrogate an action, we will always ultimately disclose that there is a project which is providing the motivation. It was Leontyev's original aim to disclose the teleological or motivating forces underlying the actions of an individual, which he rightly saw as having social roots and branches. The notion of 'project' serves this need, and it is not necessary to equivocate about a person being 'aware' of the object of the activity. For example, if a weaver is working for a capitalist, he is lending his efforts to another person's project in order to further his own project; that is the relation. Perhaps he genuinely wants to see his boss grow richer, and perhaps the project also allows him to further perfect the art of weaving? All these problems are entailed in the relationship between collaborators in a project. Who owns

[87] 'Operation' is also a joint mediated action, but one which has been internalized by a person, so in a sense 'joint artefact-mediated action' is the one unit, extended inwards to operations and outwards to projects.

the project? Who is committed to the internal rewards of the project, and who is pursuing only external rewards?

Social life at first sight appears an incoherent mass of actions. How do we stitch this incoherent mass of actions together into a coherent picture? How do we unravel the tangled mass of interconnections? Leontyev said, in effect: start with the needs of the society for its reproduction and work back, fitting all the actions into the object that motivate them. But starting with an abstract and hypothetical set of societal needs and working back to the concrete and given reality is problematic. Since the object of the enquiry is to shed light on people's motivation, we must start with a concept of people's motivation. We should start with the understanding that human beings pursue projects, and in and through the pursuit of these projects they form social bonds. It is true that in the end, the needs of the society to reproduce itself must be met. But this is by no means absolute. People *change* circumstances. But people also draw their aims and aspirations, their identity and understanding of the world around them. But it is only by their *active* participation in the world, by joining projects, that they gain an identity for themselves and a place in social life. If we want to understand people, then we have to begin with the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live. The notion of 'project' makes this possible.

This means that activity remains the substance of social life for Activity Theory, but we now have a *unit* of social life, the project. A project is activity, it is not anything different from activity; it is made up of actions; it is *an* activity. But we have given a coherent meaning to 'an activity'. A project is not an objectivist conception, imposed on society from outside, but arises from and is driven by and therefore subject to immanent critique.

To take an example, when Luria and his colleagues visited Uzbekistan and conducted psychological tests, their project was scientific research. Scientific research is a project which was quite foreign to the Uzbek peasants. This is the fundamental reason why the actions of Luria and his colleagues were misconstrued by the Uzbeks and the responses of the Uzbeks were misconstrued by the researchers. Cole was finally successful in creating an environment for research into learning by creating a project – Fifth Dimension – in which his own project as well as that of the kids, their parents, funding bodies and the university could integrate into their own

project as collaborators, even if negotiations were not uniformly successful. Cole cut through a billion factors which could be counted as part of the context of learning and identified the problem as one of making a common project. How can we collaborate in the same project so that we can all achieve our ends?

In fact, more generally, collaboration is a means of conceiving of social bonds. If we say that this person and that person share a social bond, we might imagine joining the two persons together with glue. On the other hand, if we say they 'worked together', that is, that they are or have been collaborators in this or that project, in this or that mode of collaboration, then we get a fairly precise picture of the nature of the social bond in question. It is collaboration of some kind which forges social bonds.

This concept is true to the example of Vygotsky and Meshcheryakov, in believing that an individual can form an image of an entire world through their immediate interactions with those around them, without the help of the arbitrary conceptions of the totality entailed in structural/functional models of the world. We form an image of the world by concrete and personal involvement in the activity of the world, using the artifacts produced in the world and participating in projects great and small, which contribute to sustaining the social life of humanity.

The notion of project may not be the unit of choice for a study of world history or financial markets, but even in these contexts so remote from problems of psychology, 'project' does make sense. What we need is a concept of activity which can provide a way of conceiving of a person's participation in the world insofar as it affects their psychological functioning. The notions of collaboration and project do that.

When Marx remarks that "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx 1979: 103), then the notion of project offers a viable way of building a social theory which is consistent with Marx's dictum.

* * *

In the remaining chapters we will go a little further into the notions of collaboration and project. If the claims of this work succeed, then it would follow that CHAT can benefit from further study of the specific range of

problems entailed in collaborative projects, because, in fact, these problems are everywhere.

In Chapter 29 we will look at the ethical implications of the notion of collaboration as a norm and fundamental principle for ethics. In Chapter 30, we will look at the implications for political economy, and how collaboration allows us to discern a multiplicity of shades in the economic life of a society, not just buying and selling. In Chapter 31, we shall review several taxonomies of collaborative projects which suggest directions for further research. In Chapter 32, we shall review the problem of identity formation in the light of the notions of project and collaboration. It is after all projects which give meaning to our lives. In Chapter 33, we will investigate the problem of agency: how individuals and groups become agents in a world dominated by structural imperatives by engaging in collaborative projects.

These chapters are simply short essays illustrating how the idea of 'collaborative project' as a unit of activity provides avenues of investigation in a wide range of fields in that area where problems of social theory and problems of psychology intersect.

Finally, by way of conclusion, in Chapter 34, we will show how these concepts may contribute to the creation of an approach to emancipatory science and concluding in Chapter 35 with some comments on the urgency of the need to address these problems in science generally.

29. Ethics and Collaboration

> "The fiction of a general deliberative assembly in which the united people expressed their will belongs to the early history of democratic theory; today our guiding model has to be that of a medium of loosely associated, multiple foci of opinion formation and dissemination which affect one another in free and spontaneous processes of communication." (Benhabib 1996)

Social Science and Ethics

In the tradition of abstract-empirical science, ethics and science are incommensurable and must be kept separate lest we confuse 'Is' and 'Ought'. The only place for ethics is to put boundaries around the activities of scientists to ensure that they don't violate the rights of others in their pursuit of knowledge. But in the tradition of romantic or emancipatory science, things are not so clear-cut. Goethe, Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky did not develop separate ethical and scientific theories; their ideas were simultaneously ethical and scientific. And there are good reasons for this.

Any scientific project carries within it a commitment to certain ethical norms and precepts. For example, liberal economic theory bases its science on the presumption (norm) of individuals who act as mutually independent, self-interested, rational agents. The fact that agents are neither individual, independent, self-interested nor rational registers as a 'distortion' of the market, and as something which needs to be fixed. While making an atomistic society the norm for science, economists make policy recommendations which have the effect of atomizing society. The norm of the independent rational economic agent orients both the science and the ethics. To take another example, behavioral psychology is based on the ethical principle that interactions with other people aim to predict and control their behavior. The activity of behavioral psychologists serves to promote just such strategic action.

A human science which does not make its ethical commitments explicit is only deceiving itself.

But further than this, all social theorists know that social formations operate according to ethical norms, and these norms simply form part of the data. The ethics of the scientific project is taken to be something separate from the data. But modernity supports a 'thin ethos' (Heller 1988) for

public discourse governing interactions between citizens who do not necessarily share particular, possibly sectional belief systems, in which people have to be able to justify their action by reason-giving argument (Rawls 1993). In any society governed by the rule of law, with secular courts in which parties are obliged to argue their case by giving reasons, ethical arguments become in themselves social forces, which social theory must therefore explore in their own terms. Scientific projects are subject to these same ethical principles. Discourse ethics (Habermas 2001), to take an example, has gained important insights into the dynamics of the public sphere by its study of what it is possible to argue without falling into performative contradictions (i.e. arguments which contradict themselves by being uttered) or dogmatism (i.e., arguing without giving reasons). But in fact, Habermas and Rawls fail in their project precisely because they do not take collaboration as the norm for interactions between individuals and have either a 'lumpy' conception of the social fabric as composed of individuals and groups or an outright liberal conception. If we bring to bear a conception of society as fundamentally made up of projects, and take collaborative projects as the fundamental relation in society, rather than liberal individualism, then we can determine some important ethical principles. So long as we live in a society in which rational argument and reason-giving still carries weight, then ethical insights are simultaneously political and sociological insights.

Collaboration with Strangers

The idea of 'collaboration' and 'project' as basic notions for social theory allows us to examine ethical principles that are relevant, not just to participants in an explicitly acknowledged collaborative project, but to interaction with others in general.

The Christian religion has inscribed in its principles the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Luke 6:31). Muslims have, from the *Hadith* ("Sayings of the Prophet"): "None of you

truly believes until he desires for his brother what he desires for himself." This ancient principle transcends religious barriers.[88]

As part of the Enlightenment project, seeking to place religion on a rational basis, Kant generalized the Golden Rule as the Principle of Universalisability: "Act according to a maxim which can be adopted at the same time as a universal law" (Kant 1785). This principle is widely recognized to be applicable in modern conditions.

Reflecting on the ethics of modernity in the 1980s, Habermas discerned an element of dogmatism in the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule presumes that you can decide how another person ought to be treated, viz., in the same way you want to be treated. By the 1980s, the illegitimacy of the presumption that other people's needs were the same as yours had become widely recognized; empathy has to be transcended with an actual enquiry into the other person's needs. Habermas reformulated the Golden Rule in these terms:

> "only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as *participants in a practical discourse*"[89] (Habermas 1992).

Seyla Benhabib and Agnes Heller are among those Critical Theorists who find this formulation inadequate. Concretely, who is affected? Is it adequate to address others only insofar as they participate in a discussion about ethics? Agnes Heller reformulated the Golden Rule this way:

> "What I do unto you and what I expect you to do unto me should be decided by you and me" (Heller 1986).

The problem with all such reformulations of the Golden Rule is similar to the problem we had with Mike Cole's notion of 'context'. Habermas's formulation has an inadequate conception of what mediates the relation with others, so on the one hand he specifies 'all those affected' and on the other hand, he wants to regard the other as a participant in a discussion of

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[88] This author has seen versions of the Golden Rule from Bahá'í, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Native American and African tradition, Sikhism, Taoism and Zaroastianism.

[89] In philosophy, 'practical' refers to actions, so 'practical philosophy' means ethics, and 'practical discourse' means a conversation aimed at reaching an unforced consensus about proper conduct.

moral philosophy. Seyla Benhabib questions the demand for universalism, and demands that ethics be oriented to a *concrete* other, not a generalized or abstract other. Taking up Benhabib's suggestion, and taking collaborative projects to be the essential, concrete practical relation between people, we formulate the Golden Rule in this way:

"*What we do*, is decided by you and me."

That is, by default, I take another person to be a collaborator in the project which is implicated in the moral problem raised between us, and that includes those who are participants by virtue of being or claiming to be affected. The aim is seek consensus on what we do, that is, taking us to be joint participants in the action. If no such shared project is conceivable, then the supposed moral problem is void. But also, I know that a range of different collaborative relations are normative in different circumstances. What kind of collaborators are we? Whose project is this? These questions have to be answered concretely. The point is to struggle to identify a viable 'we-perspective'. It is the absence of any 'we-perspective' in liberalism that is its most serious problem.

In fact, Kant's Principle of Universalisability is also flawed. It makes no sense to utter a principle and suppose it to have universal applicability, because for a principle to be universal, it must apply irrespective of the project with which you and another are practically engaged. Ultimately a principle is just words, a species of artifact, and unless it is uttered from some determinate subject position to another person, with respect to some determinate project with which you are collaborating with the other person, it is senseless. That is why moral principles always turn out to be relative, conditional and often very slippery. When people utter a universal ethical claim, the only way it can be made coherent is that they implicitly address themselves to the state. So in effect they seek to engage the state as a collaborator in a project to promote an ethical claim. But the state is by no means always the best collaborator in an ethical project.

So we see that it is important to keep the concept of project collaboration as the unit of analysis in our practical relations even with strangers, not just our immediate collaborators.

The Ethics of Collaboration

Concretely, the ethics of collaboration depends on the specific modes of collaboration in which people are engaged. That's the whole point! We will only come to a general taxonomy of collaboration in Chapter 31. At this point we will merely look at some very general issues related to the ethics of collaborative projects.

The whole period of modernity has been characterized by division of labor which was governed by traditional, hierarchical modes of collaboration and cooperation gradually giving way to division of labor governed by exchange of commodities. Substantial sections of social life still lie outside the market, but still, the marketization of social life continues apace. What is worth noting for the moment is the rising trend for forms of division of labor formerly governed purely by hierarchical command, traditional, bureaucratic or meritocratic, to give way to normative modes of collaboration. Let us take a few examples.

In the Health Services in Australia, since the 1980s, nurses and doctors have been trained to establish collaborative relationships with patients, in which the patient is encouraged to take a leading role in directing their own treatment.[90] This very welcome development originated from agitation by patient rights groups, especially the women's health movement (Lewin & Olesen 1985), but also the disability action groups and the self-help movement still mobilize people suffering from various, especially rare, illnesses (Borkman 1999) so as to actively intervene in treatment of their conditions. From the mid-1980s in Australia, the bureaucracy itself embraced this ethos from the top down; in their medical training health professionals are trained in the use of collaborative relationships as the optimum approach to healing. Collaboration promotes the health of the patient because collaboration is the route from dependency to communicatively mediated self-determination, which is essential to well-being.

Of course, in some circumstances some patients insist on their dependency and demand that the medical professional take charge, and this applies

[90] In the U.S., "Patient Centered Care" system, the patient is supposed to be consulted about the care plan, but the insurance company always has the final say and the system is designed to serve their interests.

to all collaborative projects; insofar as this is the patient's wish, it is a form of collaboration. Consultation and consensus may be the norm, but a patient who knows they are in no condition to weigh things up and make a rational judgment on the evidence, neither wants nor expects to be consulted.

In education, since the 1980s there has been a rising tide in favor of collaborative learning. Prior to the 1970s only a minority of progressive schools encouraged students' autonomy; elsewhere schooling was organized almost exclusively along the traditional and meritocratic models of hierarchical authority, which included a teacher-pupil relationship which was completely one-sided: "I teach, you learn."

In the 1980s, the ethos of corporate restructure began to make serious inroads into the beginnings of a collaborative approach to teaching and learning. According to the now-dominant neo-liberal conception of learning, the pupil-teacher relationship is that of *customer-service provider*. "The customer is always right," so the pupil knows what they need to learn, and the responsibility of the teacher is to deliver the knowledge. Then the teacher is evaluated by the students; satisfied, uncritical students who pass exams give positive evaluations. If a student has paid for their qualification, there is no sense in challenging them and certainly not in failing them in their exams. These three modes of collaboration used in education – hierarchical command, commodity exchange and collaboration – represent the three major modes of social organization. Cultural Historical Activity Theorists have been the leaders and main theorists of collaborative learning (See Lee & Smagorinsky 2000; John-Steiner & Mahn 1996), as were their predecessors in the Progressive Movement.

In 'project delivery', we now frequently see, for example, architects and building contractors endeavoring to engage their clients in collaborative arrangements. These transactions can be very fraught because in the last instance the relationship remains one of purchase and sale and when the customer is not happy or legally binding standards are not met, matters may end up in court with recriminations and severe penalties. But a close involvement of the client in specifying design aspects is the only way to get a satisfactory result. The various entities responsible for design and construction are engaged in a collaborative project whether they like it or not. The law does not handle these relationships with ease. The law prefers to reduce every collaborative relationship to a contract, which is essentially

a relationship of exchange: this is what you must do and this is what I must do.

Collaboration is well-established as a paradigm in creative arts and in the sciences, where cross-media, cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration is regarded of particular creative value, and manufacturers go to great lengths to engage their market in design of products.

But all these relationships are fraught because the overall social, political and legal framework is hostile to collaboration. In any of the cases just mentioned, collaborative relationships sometimes break down. An architect may want to use a client's new home as a show piece of design rather than following the client's specifications; a doctor may fail to convince a patient of what is in their best instance and impose their view, or give up trying. So it is not only the benefits of working within a collaborative project which has psychological implications, but also the failure of collaboration. Breakdowns in collaboration can have profound negative impact on people who may feel betrayed and violated.

Other ethical problems that arise in collaborative projects include the problem of external rewards, which includes the kudos entailed in taking credit for a collaborative project, as well as pursuing a career for monetary gains alone. In fact, the majority of labor in a capitalist society is carried out in exactly this way: for external rewards, viz., wages and profits.[91] It is unfortunate that many Marxists have accepted a narrative about division of labor and exchange of commodities being tied up with the origins of the species. Isn't it more likely that separate groups already collaborating within their own communities, came together in order to exchange surplus products? That is, that collaboration is prior to exchange? But that is all speculation. The fact remains that it is participation in collaborative projects which creates social bonds, gives meaning to people's lives and teaches us how we ought to behave with others. Exchange of commodities does reach out and create new relationships between peoples that were formerly foreign to one another, and it can lead to collaboration. But the narrative which is more significant today is about the marketization of activities which were

[91] This is not to suggest that doing a job you don't enjoy is evil, but simply that in the best of all possible worlds, people would be able to live doing what they believed in and would believe in what they do.

formerly part of collaborative projects, resulting in the atomization of communities.

Throughout, it is important to note that failures or shortcomings in collaboration have psychological implications only because collaboration is normative, even while the norms are contested. This is a powerful reason why science and ethics cannot be separated. The point of these quite cursory remarks is to draw attention to the richness of the concept of 'project collaboration'. It is the fact that collaboration has a normative core for human beings that makes it so rich as a foundation for human science.

30. Marx's Critique of Political Economy and Activity Theory

> "The bourgeoisie has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'. ... and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade." (Marx 1848)

We saw in Chapter 23 that Leontyev's Activity Theory is incompatible with Marx's critique of political economy. The incompatibility arises essentially from Leontyev's claim that each system of activity is *objectively* motivated by an object, which is a need of the whole society. This implies that any system of activity objectively tends towards to the satisfaction of some definite social need. For Leontyev, this is not something peculiar to capitalism, but applies to *all* social formations between the Arcadian communism of the past and the socialist utopia of the future.

For Marx, on the other hand, capital is an historically specific system of activity within which all activity tends to the expansion of capital, that is, towards the command of a larger and larger proportion of the total social labor under capital. If social needs are to be met, then this is something that must be assured by other means, for the needs of individuals and whatever is required for the nation-state to reproduce itself are provided for as a by-product of or despite the activity of capital itself.

In effect, Leontyev tried to extend CHAT into a social theory without a concept of the subject matter, retaining only a unit which had been developed for the purposes of psychology. His concept of societal action – an activity – was misconceived. The point is not to rewrite "Capital" with activity taking the place of commodity production, but rather to see that Marx gave us a scientific and critical diagnosis of *one* tendency in modern society, which, as he foresaw, was bound to become dominant and drive out its rivals. This tendency was the market, i.e., production for exchange, capital. But this is still, even to this day, not all that there is in modern society. In fact, were it ever to come to pass that the market subsumed *all* human life, then human life along with the natural conditions for human life on Earth would come to an end.

Collaboration and Exchange

As early as 1843, in his "Comment on James Mill" (1975d), Marx appeared to regard the commodity relation as the central problem of bourgeois society. But in beginning "Capital" from the 'economic cell-form', Marx quite explicitly indicated that the exchange relation was the *Urphänomen*, the prototypical relation of bourgeois society. This means that "Capital" is not about modernity *in toto*, but quite specifically about bourgeois society, even while Marx showed how bourgeois society was swallowing up all its rivals (state, family and voluntary activity).

In the preceding chapters, we have proposed that 'collaboration' be taken as the fundamental human relationship, and that this notion entails both the normative conception and limiting cases, that is, modes of collaboration which are 'not collaborative'. As also noted, we live in times when exchange of labor is the dominant mode of collaboration, eclipsing the formerly dominant mode of traditional and meritocratic hierarchical command, but a tendency towards normative collaboration can nonetheless be witnessed. The market does not and never will subsume the whole of social life. Marx has described exhaustively the dynamics of that sector of social life which is subsumed under the commodity relation; what remains is to develop an understanding of that part of social life which is subsumed under collaboration. Cultural Historical Activity Theory has a role to play here. The science of collaborative life is not like economics; it is all too human, not subject to quasi-natural laws nor fostering quasi-religious forms of fetishism and mutual manipulation. CHAT is already to a great extent a science which is interested in building a truly human life-world. But the world is not simply divided between sectors of market relations, collaborative relations and hierarchical relations: all three principal modes of working together mutually interpenetrate and subsume one another.

At the widest level, the UN, governments, regulatory bodies, NGOs and other voluntary organizations are essentially collaborative, for all their faults. The extent to which money is able to buy legislation varies from country to country. Though embattled and contested, these bodies do have formal power to re-write the rules of the market if they so decide. Alongside the administrative sector, the market is the dominant sector, the sector in which there is mass involvement, and is subsumed under relations of exchange. But *within* every capitalist or public service organization we

generally find that hierarchical command is the dominant relation, and then at the operational level, we have productive workers often collaborating with one another, in union activity if not in work. And productive workers are available for hire only because of the collaborative labor inside working class families and communities, where workers are raised, educated, nourished, comforted and psychologically and physically prepared and motivated for work. Not all families are collaborative of course, and much family life is still subsumed under traditional hierarchical and cooperative arrangements.

Within capitalist enterprises, the hierarchical command relation is under some pressure from two directions. On the one hand, the internal relations within firms are becoming more and more marketized, through the use of one-line budgeting and bonus systems, out-sourcing, subcontracting, franchising, and so on. On the other hand, management is being delegated down to the shop-floor level with workers being required to collaborate in teams, write their own procedure manuals, discipline their colleagues, etc., etc. In the majority of cases, all these moves towards collaborative work practices are simply deceptive forms of line-management, charades in which workers are co-opted whilst being subordinated with the use of humiliating double-speak.

The point is just that there is much to be done for anyone interested in human emancipation to develop a study of the complex interweaving of these different modes of collaboration, and that collaboration is a useful concept for understanding the overall structure of society without calling upon metaphysical abstractions.

Projects and Firms

What is motivating people to work in capitalist society? At the beginning of our study of Activity Theory we found that the *raison d'être* for Activity Theory was the need to identify the motivational forces underlying people's actions, and we have claimed that the motivational sources of actions has to be represented through the notion of 'project'.

To begin with, we have to understand capital as a system of activity. The basic unit of capital is the company. The relation between commodity and company is the same as the relation between action and project: both are units, but operate respectively at the immediate level of transactions

between individuals, and at the level of *on-going* societal phenomena. So the motivational roots of labor in the service of capital is organized through firms, which are a species of collaborative project: money flows down from the top, delivering external rewards in order to sustain its own command structure, with command flowing down from the top in parallel to the flow of money. Meanwhile all income generally belongs to the firm as a corporate subject. This is the basic physiology of capital as a form of human activity.

Apart from this, everyone is involved in their own projects, among which is earning a living, and all those other projects which lend meaning to their lives. For some, the firm is their project; for others, especially professionals, their work is a project, without any loyalty to the firm they work for. But for all employees, work is at least to some extent instrumental.

The subsumption of one person into another's project is the master-servant relation, and it is by no means limited to employment; subsuming the actions of others under your own project is an almost ubiquitous phenomenon, varying from making converts to hiring staff.

The suggestion here is that Activity Theory lends itself to a kind of sociology in which a trichotomy of relationships – command, exchange and collaboration – characterize the interactions between a myriad of projects. Economics is one part of this overall picture. The overall logics of development of commodity production and that of collaboration are different. Because the substance of economics is value, labor inevitably becomes more and more abstract, and the result is a social logic which is *abstract general*, a kind of pseudo-concept. On the other hand, collaboration fundamentally rests on reasoned argument between uncoerced participants, and therefore develops according to a *concrete universal* logic, quite literally, dialectically. What this means is that collaboration corresponds to the development of participatory forms of association, whereas in late modernity, where abstract labor has become the norm, all forms of participation are suffering attrition. Unions and churches find themselves replaced by subscription-based lobby groups; sporting groups wither away in favor of superstars performing before crowds of spectators (Putnam 1993 & 2000). People identify not by active participation in a

project, but by identification through inessential attributes attached to a manufactured identity.

We shall now return to the question of a taxonomy of activity.

31. Towards a Taxonomy of Activity

> "In this collaborative context, cultural-historical theory was born. And the scholars who rediscovered the Vygotskian school, and are expanding it today, also work collaboratively." (John-Steiner 2000)

Up to now we have taken for granted the normative meaning of collaboration, and limited our description of collaboration to the contrast between the limiting cases: hierarchical command, division of labor (either by exchange or voluntary cooperation) and collaboration as such.

The types of activity already developed by Activity Theory, according to Davydov (1999: 44), "the activity types which were developed in the course of human history", are: 1. Work, 2. Artistic Activity, 3. Activity in the field of morals, of law, of religion, 4. Sport, and 5. Scientific activity, and "the activity types that emerge in the ontogenetic process": 6. Object manipulatory activity, 7. Play activity, and 8. Learning.

Below are other approaches to the taxonomy of collaboration.

a. Vera John-Steiner's "Creative Collaboration"

Vera John-Steiner made an extensive study of well-known artistic and scientific collaborations. This is the only deep study of collaboration from the point of view of Cultural Psychology. John-Steiner has proposed a 4-way typology of collaborations as follows (John-Steiner 2000: 196-204):

1. *Distributed collaboration*, which "takes place in casual settings and also in more organized contexts. These include conversations at conferences, in electronic discourse communities, and among artists who share a studio space. In these groups, participants exchange information and explore thoughts and opinions. Their roles are informal and voluntary."

2. *Complementarity collaboration*: which is "characterized by a division of labor based on complementary expertise, disciplinary knowledge, roles, and temperament. Participants negotiate their goals and strive for a common vision."

3. *Family collaboration*: "a mode of interaction in which roles are flexible or may change over time." The long period of time over which these collaborations extend often brings about transformative changes in the participants and their roles.

4. *Integrative collaboration*: which "require a prolonged period of committed activity. They thrive on dialogue, risk taking, and a shared vision. In some cases, the participants construct a common set of beliefs, or ideology, which sustains them in periods of opposition or insecurity. Integrative partnerships are motivated by the desire to transform existing knowledge, thought styles, or artistic approaches into new visions."

b. Virginia Fraser's Archetypes from Popular Culture

Fraser's study of collaboration, particularly in the arts, drew upon representations of collaborative projects in popular culture to identify a rich series of archetypes of collaboration. Most of the collaborations examined included an element of secrecy about the authorship of works. Fraser's study (Fraser 2002) revolved around issues of attribution, initiative and deception, and particularly around discrepancies between authorship and attribution. Using feature films as source material she identified the following models:

The Accidental Hero: One person produces a work, but another opportunistically and successfully takes the credit, being more acceptable in and better able to perform the stereotyped role of hero/author than the actual hero/author.

I've Heard the Mermaids Singing: One person privately produces the work, while another is mistaken for and ultimately comes to be known in public as the producer. In this voluntary division of labor, one person produces the work while the other publicly performs the stereotyped role necessary to market it.

High Art: Authorship and attribution are inseparable and this is signified by the use of the artist's personal life as the subject matter of the work. However, the production of the work is part of a larger enterprise involving many people, in which the artist is the least powerful, having only the power to supply or withhold.

The Draughtsman's Contract: The nominal author of the work is unknowingly manipulated by hidden co-authors. The resulting apparently coherent work has multiple authors with completely different intentions, and the work operates in several ways at once.

The Tango Lesson: Two people with different but equally highly developed skills work together on a project. The job of the project leader is

to accomplish the project's goals by temporarily harnessing the talents and desires of the willing other to their own. This collaboration is shown to be a struggle from beginning to end.

A House Divided: A slave bears a child fathered through force by the slave-owner. The child is brought up as the slave-owner's without knowing who her mother is, while the mother works skillfully but without credit on behalf of the estate her daughter will one day inherit. The initiating act, not necessarily committed with collaboration in mind, nevertheless harnesses one party to the interests of a more powerful other by creating a common goal through coercion or trickery.

My Fair Lady/Pygmalion: Two people of different cultural and economic backgrounds engage in a project on unequal terms, with different expectations of the outcome, and different degrees of knowledge about its nature. The project is initiated by the more powerful and skilled of the parties for their own amusement and profit, but depends for its success on the transformation of the less powerful party into someone, at least superficially, more like the initiator.

This transformation is a means to an end for the more powerful party, but an end in itself for the less powerful, and is produced by both. The project and the collaboration are terminated when the more powerful party has made their profit, and taken all the credit for the success of the project.

State and Main: The work is seen to be an inherently collaborative enterprise (via a division of labor). The job of the nominal author (a screenwriter) is not to be the author (of the film) but to solve such problems in the whole enterprise as are capable of solution by narrative imagination within the limits of genre stereotypes. The finished work is shown to have been formed as much by friction between those involved as by their cooperation, or by any individual's intentions. Attribution is a negotiable commodity, which may be a substitute for remuneration.

In addition Fraser draws attention to Tilly Olsen's use of the term 'leech author' for those who depend on the extensive contributions of unattributed others to construct and complete a work, and discusses the partnership of the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude and the assertion made about them that one collaborator in that partnership for many years performed the

stereotyped role of author in order to gain recognition, which would not be forthcoming for a couple.

c. Modes of Assisting in Another's Project

This author presented a talk at the Hegel Summer School in Melbourne in 2004 including a three-way typology of the ways in which people support another subject's project.

Colonization: in this scenario, another subject is helped by subsuming their activity into one's own project. The aim may be exploitative, but the aim may also be philanthropic.

External Reward: in this scenario, another subject is incorporated into the subject's own project by offering them external rewards, such as wages, trade or support in their project.

Solidarity: in this scenario, another subject is assisted by voluntarily lending one's own labor to the support of the other's project according to their direction. Solidarity is the opposite of philanthropic colonization, because in assisting someone, the other remains the owner of the project and is thereby assisted in achieving self-determination.

d. Forms of Collective Subjectivity

In a book in press (Blunden 2010), this author contributes a chapter tracing the various classic forms of collective subjectivity in the political arena since the emergence of the workers' movement in Europe in the 1830s. These movements manifest different forms of association reflecting social consciousness and the sources of identity-formation at the time. Briefly these forms are:

Spontaneity: in the earliest manifestations of the workers' movement people came on to the streets without planning or leadership, with social bonds which hardly extended beyond their immediate associates.

Secret society: small groups of people met in secret, bound by a blood oath, a common utopian ideology and usually bound together by a charismatic leader.

Social movement: In 1848, the *Communist Manifesto* gave voice to the ideas of communism before any organization existed, as embryonic class-consciousness.

Mutual aid association: In the 1860s, the International Workingmen's Association united working class people from across Europe, fostering the development of collective self-consciousness through mutual aid activity. Politics and ideology played a secondary role.

Commune: In 1871, the workers of Paris formed government for two months, even though a political party capable of leading a government had not yet been formed.

Political party: In the 1890s, the first mass working-class parties were formed, each with a separate national base, as governments-in-waiting.

Front: because of the fragmentation of the workers' movement and the need to unite with different classes of the population, Fronts were formed. After World War Two, National Liberation Fronts became the vehicle for uniting cross-class mass movements.

Movements: The Front proved to be little more than a transmission mechanism for a party, and from the 1950s onwards, the Civil Rights, Student Protest, Anti-Nuclear, Anti-War, Women's Liberation and Environmental Movements collaborated in pursuit of an ideal with no overall direction or ambitions to form government, and parties contested for leadership within the movement.

Identity Politics: Mass movements gave way to sectional movements which, rather than offering alternative visions of a way of life, asserted their identity and claims for inclusion.

Alliance Politics: The demobilization effected by identity politics obliged people to make alliances around very finite objectives on which everyone could agree. Alliance politics lacks any utopian ideal but constructs a shared practical ideal manifested in organizational methods.

Finally, it should be mentioned that a fine grain of analysis of social life is given by *concepts*, realized in and through activity. Concepts are objectified projects. In general concepts represent the sedimentation of past projects which have become objectified within the culture. When concepts first appear, they constitute projects, but in time, they become objectified and merge into the fabric of social life, the language and culture generally, as an aspect of all subsequent projects.

Consciousness is therefore constituted by participation in a multiplicity of different projects and activity organized around a multiplicity of different

more or less independent concepts, which represent the sediment of past projects.

e. Genre, Frame and Field

We have mentioned above that Activity Theorists such as James Wertsch have shown that concepts from semiotics and literary criticism lend themselves to the characterization of types of activity. Foremost amongst such concepts are *genre*, as developed by Bakhtin, and *frame*, as developed by Goffman. These are extremely flexible concepts which allow for the formulation of an infinite range of archetypal projects and relationships. A frame and genre, or 'institutional setting', is characterized by a set of rules of behavior and interpretation determining how different actions will be interpreted within the genre or frame. The first such rule is the specification of those actions which are appropriate or on the contrary are ruled inappropriate in the given setting.

The main qualification that has to be made about these concepts is that they are no substitute for a unit of activity. They do not offer any form of collective identity, will or action. Genre or frame can be used to characterize a project, and define how actions figure within the given setting, but a genre or frame does not of itself provide or express the motivation for an action. Genre provides a useful frame for analysis of the fine grain of interplay between people especially via linguistic interactions. But we still need 'project' as a unit of activity. Certain kinds of project imply certain frames of interpretation, are appropriate to certain institutional settings and are to be found in certain genre of discursive activity.

Dorothy Holland's concept of '*figured world*' is a concept arising from CHAT which, like 'frame' and 'genre', characterizes a social setting semiotically in terms of how actions are to be interpreted by actors within the field defined by the figured world. The figured world defines a *field* of the kind described by Pierre Bourdieu, a setting in which agents are able to occupy a given range of social positions, constituting an arena of struggle whereby agents are able to compete for desirable resources. This concept *does* provide sources of motivation by means of which people's actions can be rationally interpreted. This applies generally to all fields of the type described by Bourdieu, so fields imply the existence of certain projects which are integral to the construction of the field, namely competition for

status and resources. As powerful as these concepts are, they are limited in scope to analysis of certain types of social settings characterized by competition between individuals.

32. Collaborative Projects and Identity

> "Getting accustomed to the spirit of the epoch, to those great currents which permeate the world, is the only criterion here ... not simply to listen to, but to create the music of revolution." (Vygotsky 1926)

According to Dorothy Holland (2007: 102), the term 'identity', with the sense is has nowadays, entered psychology only in the 1950s thanks to Erik Erikson. Prior to this time, essentially the same concept was referred to as the 'self'. Holland contrasts Eriksonian *vs*. Meadian identity, according to whether a single overarching identity (Erikson) or multiple identities manifested in different cultural contexts (G. H. Mead) is suggested. Mead's approach is consistent with the whole tradition of thought with which we are concerned here, and indeed the concept of identity or self we have in mind is what Holland would call 'Meadian'.

There is broad agreement today that identity-formation is a key problem for society and central for an individual's psychological health. But the theories devised to describe and explain the process of identity-formation vary in the kind of explanation they give. Identity is the answer a person gives themselves to the question: "Who am I?" after they have dispensed with all those contingent attributes such as name, date of birth, etc., and have to determine a *concept* of themselves. All individuals, even ants, hang on to life when faced with death, but if asked "Why should you live?" how do you answer? How this idea should be further explained differs from one theorist to the next. Before turning to what Activity Theory can tell us about identity formation with the notions of collaboration and project, we should mention Leontyev's approach.

Although Vygotsky studied self-consciousness, self-image and class-consciousness, identity was never singled out as a problem among the Soviet psychologists. Leontyev did write about *personality* though, as did others. For Leontyev, the notion of personality joins the continuity, uniqueness, stability and integrity of the psyche with the concept of *character*. Leontyev (1978) says that personality is formed through the person's activity, and he is at pains to say *activity* not actions or operations. So, in Leontyev's view, it is through the orientation of the person to social needs that a person forms a personality, and within the limitation of his own theory as already discussed, this seems a fruitful approach, but he has little

to say beyond this about exactly what features of activities form personality and how. Given that Leontyev never formed a concept of the unit of activity, and given further the objectivist character of his understanding of activity, as a response to socially formed stimuli rather than an *active* process, it is difficult to see how Leontyev could form a conception of identity-formation.

Anna Sfard (2005) says that an identity is a story told about a person, both those told by a person to themself and to others, and those told by others. As with Holland, this leads to a 'Meadian' concept of identity, with identity being multifaceted and contradictory. Sfard is at pains to distinguish this idea from identity being something behind or manifested in narratives: it is the narratives themselves, something *in the world*. Sfard also usefully distinguishes between stories which are projected into the future and those that tell of the past. This conception is especially compatible with the idea of projects as the activity in which narratives are realized and implanted.

Jean-Paul Sartre sees identity in terms of an individual having a 'fundamental project' which specifies the way in which the individual subject understands themself and defines themself as this, rather than another, individual.

> "For we mean to say that man primarily exists – that man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so. Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus or a cauliflower. Before that projection of the self nothing exists" (Sartre 1989).

All projects in which the individual participates are from his or her point view a *part* of the subject's 'fundamental project'. For Sartre, the notion of identity formation is tied up with the discovery of a symbol of the person's being and the desire to realize that symbol which is their 'fundamental project'. But for Sartre, the conception of the fundamental project is understood as quintessentially an inner process, and so is hardly consistent with Activity Theory.

Althusser, as the structuralist *par excellence*, altogether denies the active side of which Marx spoke in "Theses on Feuerbach," and 'subject' for Althusser (1971) means to be subjected. Ideology is the 'lived' relation

between human beings and their world, or a reflected form of this unconscious relation, and ideology constitutes individuals as subjects. To be a subject for Althusser is therefore to be a prisoner of the dominant way of thinking. Identity formation is merely the recruitment (interpellation) of a person into a social position which they recognize to be their own. The association of identity-formation with being summoned to a social position is a view which can be encompassed within Activity Theory, but Althusser's view is altogether too objectivist.

For Foucault, the individual is immersed in discourses which offer subject positions, or roles which can be adopted and played out within a range of narratives available in the culture. There is much about discourse theory which is consistent with Activity Theory, but it suffers from over-emphasis on language at the cost of other types of material culture, glossing over the materiality of culture, a materiality which transcends linguistic construction. Although Foucault's philosophy has proved to be a powerful weapon in the hands of social activists, both for polemical purposes and as an instrument for real social change, his own works seem to deny this potential. Nowhere do we see how a discourse is created or modified. But "changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, [and] it is men who change circumstances" (Marx 1975g). Foucault sees the insertion of a person into a social position in a narrative as something that is *done to* them, rather than being in any sense an act of creativity or resistance by the individual. This is one-sided and not believable, and places the activist in an excessively privileged position. A post-structuralist feminist like Judith Butler, for example, sees that:

> "The subject is constituted through an exclusion and differentiation, perhaps a repression, that is subsequently concealed, ... the autonomous subject can maintain the illusion of its autonomy insofar as it covers over the break out of which it is constituted" (Butler 1995:45-46).

What this means in effect is that contingent attributes of a person, such as gender, skin-color, etc,. are made into markers of identity by social conventions, and the behavior of other people towards them places a person into one of a narrow range of possible subject positions whether they want it or not, and they get used to their situation. Such binary exclusions, according to Butler, *constitute* the subject. The element of truth in this is

that we do live in a society in which people identify both themselves and others through contingent attributes, and as atomized individuals in a shredded social fabric. In a sense, people *are* a bundle of contingent attributes with nothing underneath. Deconstruction is a project which uses critique to undermine this kind of imposed binary categorization. These considerations are real enough, people are sensitive to difference, but contingent attributes are not what is essential in identity-formation. And if there is *nothing* underneath such imposed subjectivity, if autonomy is just an *illusion*, perhaps it is unwise to deconstruct?

Dorothy Holland (2007) noted the importance of participation in 'an activity' for the construction of identity, but she never spelt out what, in her view, constitutes '*an* activity'. However, she defines 'figured world', which is the key concept of her work, as follows:

> "The idea of figured worlds as a horizon of meaning for Meadian identities is related to studies of framing processes, drawing on Goffman's frame analysis, and sociological studies of social movements. ... Wertsch ... deploys "genre" and "sociocultural setting" (cultural, historical, and institutional setting), which together approximate the intent of figured world (A narrative genre of activity *in situ*)."

The combination of a *genre* of semiotic activity in a *cultural-historical setting* is a powerful approach to the conception for the narrative context of mediated identity-formation (see also Holland 1998), closely related also to Bourdieu's idea of field.

Sartre's conception of a 'fundamental project' at the center of identity-formation is an attractive approach, but Sartre's idea of looking into the depths of his soul for the source of this project is hardly compatible with the Activity Theory approach. People either *join* projects or put them together with other people, but it is through their interaction with other people that identity is formed in the Activity Theory approach. The point of adopting the idea of project as the unit of activity was to identify the sources of motivation. Projects are teleological, they aim at something, they are motivated. Insofar as people make some level of commitment to a project, the project provides a person with reasons for their activity, their aims, and at the same time something larger than themselves. They allow a person to

discover who they are and give sense and meaning to their activity. They give to people an identity.

Projects have an objective existence: real people, their activity and the material conditions in which they live. When people join a project, their personality adapts itself to the new system of activity and artifacts and most of all their sense of identity joins itself to the aim of the project and its means of achieving it. Concretely this happens through collaboration, interactions between individuals mediated by participation in the project.

But projects have a life of their own, just like human beings: they grow and develop and give birth to offspring. A project is a living thing, but what is alive in it is the human beings who participate in it. Projects do not have some *other* existence, in 'society' or in structures; projects exist only in the people's activity and the artifacts they use. At the same time, the artifacts which are included as part of the project they are mediating are material objects, and include artifacts which, unlike the spoken word, do not disappear into nothingness once uttered. In this specific sense, projects are material things that exist independently of people's will and outlive their participants. This contrasts with the notion of 'discourse' which carries the implication that projects are free creations of the mind.

'Project', as a unit of activity, emphasizes the *active* side. Activity Theory understands that a project, and the conditions for its existence, are in the first place *objective* to any individual. An individual can lend their efforts to a project, fight against it, take a free ride on it, or occasionally initiate it.

It is also possible that a person may be recruited or condemned to a subject position which entails participation in a project which oppresses them, pushes them into a mold they do not fit. They may be subsumed into someone else's project. No doubt there is a sense in which projects have a life of their own, like moral panics. Projects are 'intersubjective' in the original sense of the word, i.e., neither objective nor subjective (with respect to an individual) but 'between' individuals. The idea of 'project' as a unit of activity does not in itself resolve the problems of subjectivity raised by Existentialism, Structuralism and Poststructuralism, but given that Activity Theory rests on a very substantial current of psychological science, with a real base in experimental science, the concept of project as a unit of

activity offers the possibility for genuinely scientific investigation of identity formation.

In Chapter 8, Hegel's categories of the subject-object relation were reviewed. Hegel described in effect the stages through which a subject's identity may change through interaction with other projects, beginning with mutual indifference, through mutual instrumentalization up to a merging into a new shared identity. Use of the idea of project as a unit of activity opens up the whole of Hegel's system for appropriation in dealing with problems like that of identity formation.

Also, the taxonomy of collaboration dealt with in the previous chapter is equally the taxonomy of the *internal dynamics of projects*, and consequently, the structure of identity.

These observations simply go to the point that the adoption of 'project' as a unit of analysis for activity opens up fruitful possible lines of enquiry for a wide range of problems in that domain where the meaning of an individual's actions and the nature of some societal phenomenon mutually implicate one another, what I have referred to as the hermeneutic circle of activity.

The question as to whether identity is something imposed and passively absorbed, or on the contrary actively adopted and constructed, is closely connected to the question of agency, to which we now move.

33. Collaborative Projects and Agency

> "*History* does *nothing*, it 'possesses *no* immense wealth', it 'wages *no* battles'. It is *man*, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims." (Marx 1846)

At a time when people are more and more conscious of how their lives are determined by global events and processes utterly out of their reach, economic and social changes have led individuals to crave assurance that they are in control of their own lives and have a say in the affairs of their country. This contradiction has focused attention on the 'problem of individual agency', that is, what sense can be found in notions like being in control of one's own life or having a say in the world or having an effect on history. Is 'individual agency' in any sense a coherent concept?

Lévi-Strauss (1962) once said that "as one passes to histories of progressively greater 'power' ... the historian loses in information what he gains in comprehension," i.e., the greater the distance from which one looks at a society, the more one is ready to see individual agency as illusory, and describe social change in terms of quasi-natural processes for which structural-functional explanations seem more satisfactory than ascribing events and social changes to the agency of any individual. But when we are describing our own life-world, objectivist explanations are surely unsatisfactory.

Among the difficulties which confront us in trying to make sense of the idea of individual agency is (1) the conception which follows from the above contradiction, that we have on the one hand, individuals who make choices about their own actions, and on the other hand, societal structures obedient to social and historical processes which are as objective as the movements of the heavens. In this case, individual agency is like arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. (2) Since both the form and the content of an individual's thinking is determined by social and cultural factors, giving the individual both their ends and their means of pursuing them, the individual is nothing more than a carrier of social and historical phenomena. Movies like "The Matrix" and "The Truman Show" express these anxieties.

Confronting the situation in his native Germany at the close of the eighteenth century, Hegel regretted that theorists had neglected the simple

truth that "freedom is possible only when a people is legally united within a state" (1999: 220), and Hegel devoted much of his life to promoting the idea of the state as a manifestation of the freedom of its citizens, rather than as a limitation on that freedom. When a people suffering under a foreign power or in a condition of lawlessness such as we have in the rising number of failed states around the world today, join together to found their own sovereign state, then surely this is a simple demonstration of the form and content of agency, namely self-determination, recognition and sovereignty. Even though nation-states, like individuals, live in a world beyond their control, we don't question their sovereignty because they control their own internal affairs according to their own laws, and they participate as an equal in the affairs of the rest of the world.

But liberals were not the only people who disagreed with Hegel. Marx ridiculed the idea of working class people, who were excluded from political life, being able to see the state as an expression of their own freedom. Although Marx was an enthusiastic supporter of the Paris Commune, he does not seem to have supported the idea of a 'workers state' on a wider scope than a single city, where there was a realistic opportunity for any citizen to directly and personally intervene in the life of the Commune. Marx reported approvingly the idea among members of the Commune for the cities of France to each form themselves into self-governing Communes led by the organized workers, break up the centralized state-machine and restore the unity of the nation with a constitution based on the Communes. These were merely speculations as the Commune got no further than the walls of Paris, but the point is that self-determination, whether individual or national, has to be mediated by some form of association, in which individuals have real participation; otherwise, self-determination is simply self-deception.

So, if we interpret 'agency' as self-determination in the same sense in which nation-states exercise self-determination, of being recognized as a subject in one's own right, being in control of your own mind and body and having an equal say in the world around you, then this is something which is meaningful and attainable for individuals. However, we cannot adopt a cheap solution which shrinks the world to the individual's immediate sphere of activity, because this does not deal with the fact that language, custom, law and ideology all have their origin in the wider sphere of activity, not to

mention invading foreign armies, climate change and American cultural imperialism. Self-determination is meaningless if it does not include the capacity to critically respond to societal forces.

After 50 years of working towards a definition of the meaning of 'well-being', Amartya Sen (2002: 258) arrived at the notion of 'critical voice'[92] as the only reliable measure and source of an individual's well-being. Measurement of someone's level of functioning[93] was not enough to reflect someone's well-being because self-determination was essential to well-being and flourishing. Sen introduced the idea that having an equal voice in society as a more truthful notion of equality and well-being than one based on functioning. But reflecting on the fact that even educated Indian women in some parts of the country would participate in the abortion of female fetuses made it clear that having a voice was not enough, one had to have a *critical* voice. This meant that people needed both a voice in the affairs of their country and enough knowledge of life *beyond* their own immediate milieu to be able to *critically* appropriate their own culture, in order to be truly free and equal. Sen's opinion is especially significant in that he has travelled a long road from welfare economics and the causes of famine to reach these conclusions. But how can we interpret the notion of 'critical voice' and how can it be made open to scientific investigation? The notion of 'collaborative project' in the context of activity theory is very useful in making sense of self-determination as exercise of critical voice.

The notion which was described above as a 'lumpy' conception of subjectivity makes a relevant point of contrast here as well. At first sight, being a member of a group which is represented in government may seem to qualify at least in part for having a critical voice. But in fact being part of a group tells us nothing of whether an individual has a say in the group or whether the group has any real say in the wider community, and with or without a say, whether the one expresses the self-consciousness of the other. Being a voter in a geographical electorate along with 80,000 others, confers

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[92] In this book, Sen refers to 'voice' and 'critical agency'. I am conflating these two ideas.

[93] Sen reasoned that wealth and income fail to reflect well-being as many factors mediate between wealth and a person's 'functioning', such as gender, education, health, location, nationality. Functioning takes account of all such factors to reflect how well a person is able to function, but even this was not sufficient ...

no say in the affairs of the country whatsoever. One person's vote can never change the result and consequently confers no social power; the voter has no voice in deciding the issues to be discussed or how they are discussed, and secret ballots ensure that voting is strictly individual and not collaborative. Unless you are very wealthy, the only practical ways a private person can influence an elected government are via lobby groups and social movements. Only if a group is formed around some concept through which the individual can work, only, in other words, to the extent that the individual participates in a collaborative project can he or she have a voice in the wider community.

But how do we understand the qualification 'critical'? Surely to have a critical voice means participating in a project in which there is both cooperation and conflict amongst many voices in pursuit of the common aim. To be critical in respect to one's own culture and ideology, if it means anything at all, means to be challenged by views coming from *outside* your own culture and ideology, perhaps from other countries; an individual is never absolutely barred from access to a critical viewpoint, and through collaboration is able to attain a critical voice in relation to their situation. A 'project' in which no dissenting voices can be heard, is unlikely to produce critical positions. But in a genuinely collaborative project, which concretizes its concept of itself through mutual criticism, a critical voice may manifest itself.

So for self-determination, one needs to be a part of collaborative projects. A collaborative project *is* a social subject in fact. Collaborative projects mean *communicatively mediated self-determination*. Collaborative projects are the very manifestation and measure of the self-determination of their participants.

The individual/society dichotomy can only be overcome by forms of activity which mediate between the wider culture in which laws are made, the literature of the world circulates and armies are raised and deployed, and the immediate day-to-day life of individual human beings. We can only conceive of such a bridge in terms of a concept, a concept for-itself. This is what a project is.

This is not to deny that it may be legitimate to talk of social structures in terms of quasi-natural laws. But if we are to find any sense in the notion of individual self-determination, then it can only be by means of individuals

participating in projects which do have the capacity to change these structures. The feeling of helplessness in the face of geopolitical forces and structures is a direct outgrowth of the promotion of individualist ideology and the undermining of the conditions for active participation in social life. You don't need to raise an army or build a political party to change the way things are done; just be part of a project which introduces a new word or concept.

34. Emancipatory science

> "Romantic scholars ... do not follow the path of reductionism .... want neither to split living reality into its elementary components nor to represent the wealth of life's concrete events in abstract models that lose the properties of the phenomena themselves." (Luria)

This book is an immanent critique of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), following the arguments raised within CHAT against positions defended within CHAT, and endeavoring in each case to disclose the underlying source of the contradiction, and with the benefit of hindsight, identify the most satisfactory resolution. This is the method that Aristotle used, at the end of the period of the flowering of Greek philosophy. Goethe applied it in the form of self-criticism and a life-long struggle to develop himself. Hegel used it in "The Phenomenology" and then made it into a systematic method in the "Logic," as a method for building all the sciences from their founding premises. Marx applied it to political economy in order to disclose the dynamics of bourgeois society and Vygotsky applied it to Behaviorism and European psychology in general.

In subjecting a current of thought to immanent critique, the critic places themself *within* that school of thought. This replicates the normal method by which a science develops. Writers rarely subject those who are morally or intellectually distant from themselves to serious criticism, or listen to criticism that comes from afar; critical dialogue is the very thing which constitutes an intellectual pursuit *as a project* and binds it together with common aims. Even when a current is shown to have arrived at an impasse, critique reveals a solution which answers to the problems addressed by the current. So by subjecting CHAT to immanent critique my aim is to collaborate with those who have gone before and with those who currently work in the traditions of CHAT, hoping to overcome the most important contradictions and further our shared project.

One of the characteristics of CHAT and its predecessors in German thought is the continuous attention given to scientific method and in particular what Vygotsky called the unit of analysis; under one name or another, all the writers considered here have pondered the problem and given their own view on it. This on-going dialogue over the central problem of method is one of the characteristics constituting CHAT as a project.

Because of this practice, we are all able to communicate with one another, even whilst there have been sharp differences between us. That is the nature of a collaborative project.

But CHAT is also part of larger projects: the human sciences, including medicine, psychiatry, linguistics, literary criticism, etc., and we need to be able to communicate with other currents within the larger project of science. And for communication it is not enough to able to speak the same language; there has to be also shared concern with common problems and shared concepts. There may be an interest in each other's theoretical frameworks, but the existing fragmentation of all the academic disciplines is evidence that this is not enough. Only the catharsis brought about by *the failure of the scientific project* may create the conditions for a reassessment. A scientific practice which has proved successful in generating academic positions but has proved utterly ineffective in stemming the destruction of the biosphere may be due for critical self-examination. Goethe knew that he could not stem the tide of positivism in his own times, but the world can survive only so much abstract-empirical science. Perhaps now is the time to take up Goethe's banner once again?

The central concepts of CHAT are *activity* and *culture*. In themselves, these are very general concepts, and not at all specialized concerns. Activity simply means people doing something, with a distinction between activity, which is purposive, as against the autonomous and unconscious processes of the body through which activity is realized, and with the understanding that activity is always pursuit of social ends by social means. Culture simply means a constellation of artifacts, that is, the material products of human activity of all kinds which people use in their activity with one another. But these concepts have accrued rich layers of meaning through their use in the work of CHAT, and others do not share these same layers of meaning. So the problem of mutual appropriation between CHAT and other sciences, requires attention to clarification of the meaning of these concepts.

Mutual appropriation between scientific disciplines is not the norm. But there are times when a sweeping critique makes such an impact in one branch of enquiry, that its effects become widespread. Changes in the *Zeitgeist* flow through all domains of thought and new directions taken by one science may be taken up by others. There is great scope today for

reflection on the idea of emancipatory science. CHAT theorists are far from alone in their wish that their science should free people rather than enslave them, and in dissatisfaction with the mainstream tradition of abstract empirical science, but it is CHAT which has kept the essential ideas of emancipatory science alive for a century. However, it is suggested that certain contradictions which have arisen within CHAT's concept of activity need to be resolved before we can expect to be able to appropriate (and not simply import) insights from the social sciences, and before we can expect our work to be useful to others trained in different traditions of science.

We all know how CHAT grew up as a school of thought under the inspiration of Marx and most serious works in this tradition will include some direct reference to Marx, continuously sustaining the connection with this much-misrepresented icon of revolutionary socialism. We all know that CHAT has incorporated ideas from Hegel, but since the master-servant has dialectic swamped almost all other readings of Hegel in recent decades, few are aware of the way Hegel was read by earlier generations of CHAT. And almost no-one seems to be aware of the origins of the key ideas in Goethe.

Goethe's approach to science was largely drowned by the rising tide of analytical science, so Vygotsky and Luria were probably among very few scientists who carried a flame for Romantic science into the 1970s. But the tide turned a long time ago and the kind of concerns which Goethe expressed a century ago, about the uncontrolled side-effects of an exclusively analytical, quantitative style of science would now be widely shared.

The first expression of these ideas by Vygotsky was his rejection of the way behaviorists treated experimental subjects like objects; they excluded verbal communication between the subject and the researcher from the data of psychological research and denied the relevance of the subjects' consciousness; the aim of their science was the prediction and control of behavior, essentially dehumanizing those who were to be the subjects of their science. Vygotsky on the contrary insisted on the centrality of the collaborative relationship between the subject and researcher and the necessity of regarding the subject's consciousness as the key determinant of their behavior, and the subject's speech as the most developed mode of their behavior. As with the psychoanalysts, talking was an essential part of the practice of psychology.

One of the manifestations of the failure to grasp phenomena as *Gestalten* is the elevation of distinctions to dichotomies. Foremost amongst dichotomies which have plagued psychology is the mind/body dualism. Vygotsky was brilliantly able to overcome this dualism, and drawing on the philosophical tradition of Goethe, Hegel and Marx, he was successful in overcoming a number of other dualisms. In experimental procedures, Vygotsky and his colleagues were able to break new ground by using experimental scenarios based on collaborative relationships with the experimental subjects. Luria's ideographical methodology, where the focus was exclusively on the *whole* person, was another strand of CHAT's commitment to Romantic science. In our own times, support for an approach to science like this is reflected in criticism of randomized, double-blind trials, the promotion of self-help groups as a legitimate style of knowing, the promotion of collaborative relationships in health and education, the promotion of the study and care of Nature as something in which everyone should participate, losing trust in specialists. This commitment to 'emancipatory science' is something which needs to be renewed today.

But the most powerful concept in Goethe's approach to science was the *Urphänomen*. The *Urphänomen* is an empirically given thing, the simplest possible unit of a complex phenomenon which still has all the essential properties of the whole. As such it functions as an empirically given explanatory principle for the complex whole. This remarkable idea functions as the key methodological principle for Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky. It is the way in which it is possible to see the whole in every part, and therefore the key means for understanding a complex process *as a whole*, rather than dismembering it in the manner of analytical science. But the idea of the *Urphänomen* is not on its own sufficient to be able to understand a process as a *Gestalt*.

Although Vygotsky had not actually read Hegel, he turned out to be possibly the foremost Hegel interpreter of his times. (See the section "Vygotsky's Hegelianism" in Chapter 14 above) Vygotsky himself, and the whole current of Cultural Historical Activity Theory was a product of the Russian Revolution. In the wake of the Revolution Hegel was in the air. Lenin had made a study of Hegel and made it clear that political leaders and scientists should read Hegel's Logic if they were to understand Marx.

Vygotsky read Marx, Engels, Plekhanov and Lukács, and during the 1920s he worked with, amongst others, Kurt Lewin, John Dewey and Deborin, all of whom were familiar with Hegel and in this environment Vygotsky was able to develop an approach to psychology which reflected such a profound understanding of Hegel, it is difficult to believe that he had not studied Hegel personally. But this is the point about collaborative projects. Vygotsky was better able to appropriate Hegel through his collaboration in a scientific project, saturated by the ethos of the Revolution, than he could have by private study.

Hegel had taken an entire social formation – which he called a 'formation of consciousness' – as his object of study, a *Gestalt*. Every subject within a formation of consciousness was a unit of that whole, interconnected with every other subject; but Hegel conceived of the subject as a *concept*, not as an individual, and a concept has three moments: the individual, the universal and the particular. Hegel transformed Goethe's idea into philosophical terms. The *Urphänomen* had become an abstract concept, understood as part of an entire formation of consciousness. Though expressed in arcane logical terms in Hegel's exposition, what this essentially means is that a concept exists only through the particular activity of individuals with each other, organized around universal representations of the concept (i.e., artifacts which are part of the general culture).

Hegel made mind/matter dichotomies and problems of epistemology *objects of critique*, and felt no need to have his own version of such systems. He saw that any society operated with a range of artifacts that were products of their own labor, and this same range of artifacts was represented in their knowledge, so there was not a lot to be gained by trying to draw some line between the 'thought-objects' created by labor and knowledge of these 'thought-objects' produced by activity with them. As the practical activity of a social formation changes, so the artifacts they produce, and people's knowledge of those artifacts change. In this way, the idea of *mediation* dispensed with the problem of dichotomy.

Each of the different sciences in Hegel's "Encyclopedia" begins with a simple concept, such as 'Being' or 'Reflection' or 'Right' and the science is developed by interrogating what is in that concept. This meant that the entire science is developed as a 'formation of consciousness' in which every concept is genetically interconnected with every other. Hegel thus provided

a model for the development of any science, albeit on an absolutely idealist foundation.

What is emancipatory about this approach to science is that the content is grasped *as a whole*, consistent with an ethical approach to all human beings as subjects in their own right. Further, the science begins from one *Urphänomen* whose nature and origins can be easily grasped, and which implicitly contains everything. There is therefore no recourse to dogmatic claims about 'laws of nature' or 'the origins of man' and so on. "All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice."

Marx's was the emancipatory science *par excellence*: the *raison d'être* for Marx's work was the liberation of humanity. This meant that his published work was very much directed towards a broad public where it would have an effect: "theory becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses" (Marx 1975c: 182), so we generally have to turn to manuscripts which were not published in his lifetime to learn about his methodology. But he makes it clear in the original preface to "Capital" that he uses the idea of *Urphänomen* as the foundation of his critique of bourgeois society. He criticizes Hegel for believing that the development of a science was the "product of thought concentrating itself" whereas, he says, the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete "is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being" and "the subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the presupposition" (1986a: 38). This meant that an idea arises as a form of activity before it "appears in the head ... as a product of a thinking head." This takes the idea of immanent critique a step further, for it is the activity of human beings, even as it develops in the business of daily life, which is creating the *real abstractions* which are later to be reflected in the head of the theorist.

In his appropriation of Hegel, Marx introduced the idea of 'activity' as a philosophical category, making the substances of his philosophy "the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity" (1975i: 31) from which it was possible to appropriate Hegel's philosophy as a genuinely humanistic method of science. This allowed Marx to develop an approach which ruthlessly did away with all forms of metaphysics. "History does nothing," he said, pointing out that "It is man,

real, living man who does all that" (1975f: 93). It was precisely this refusal of the use of abstractions at the fundamental level which allowed Marx to develop a unique approach to the understanding of social formations as *Gestalten*.

It should be noted that just because he took as his premises "the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live," this did *not* mean that he set off from individuals as the atomistic components of a society. On the contrary, in his analysis of bourgeois society, he set off from the empirically given archetypal relationship, the commodity, which characterized the whole of bourgeois society. Further, Marx correctly identified the commodity relationship as the most typical of bourgeois society, he did *not* claim this as a transhistorical truth or universal relationship.

Vygotsky's argument with Behaviorism had led him to the conclusion that conversation between the researcher and the subject had to be central to the research data. He further recognized that speech was the most highly developed mode of human activity, and he therefore concentrated attention on the relationship between speaking and thinking to gain the key insights for a science of consciousness. He expressed this in the aphorism that the word is a microcosm of consciousness. His study of child development led him to the conclusion that there was pre-intellectual speech and pre-lingual intelligence; at a certain point, the two trajectories intersect, and speech becomes intelligent and intelligence becomes verbal. Speech modifies thinking and behavior, as children use language at first expressively, then indicatively and communicatively, but then to issue commands to themselves and narrate their own actions. He summed up his study of thinking and speech with the claim that the meaningful word is the unit of analysis for this study. However, he did not claim that word meaning was a unit of analysis for *all* the phenomena of behavior and consciousness. Close study of his work led to the conclusion that Vygotsky took the 'joint artifact-mediated action' as the unit of analysis for the study of consciousness. This is important, because it marks Vygotsky off from, for example, recent philosophy which goes beyond the study of language-use as the microcosm of human life to claim that language is the sole determinant of human behavior. But this is not the case.

One important thing about Vygotsky's methodology is that his concern to focus scientific work on the simple and empirically given was not limited to the idea of *Urphänomen* or 'unit of analysis' but characterized his approach more broadly. It was absolutely central to the work of Vygotsky and his colleagues that the individual human psyche was a moment of the whole social formation (*Gestalt*), and could not be made sense of except through the understanding of a person in the context of their social practice. Nonetheless, Vygotsky consistently refused to introduce into his scientific work abstractions to represent societal phenomena and generally avoided reliance on speculative narratives about the past to explain the way things are today. "Each person is to some degree a measure of the society, or rather class, to which he belongs, for the whole totality of social relationships is reflected in him" (Vygotsky 1997b:317). Rather, Vygotsky represented how societal products, such as language, ideology and institutions, enter the psyche, not as abstractions, but through interactions with other people (adults already part of the wider culture) mediated with the use of artifacts (which are drawn from the wider culture). He had a very concrete conception of action. Only those empirically given entities – behavior, other people and things – entered into his reasoning, not invisible 'objective' motives or other abstractions used to represent societal forms of activity. Just as a word was a microcosm of a culture, every artifact conveys hard information about the wider world and every individual is a microcosm of the entire society of which they are a part, a fact of significance not only for the researcher, but also for the growing child with whom the adult interacts.

Later on, Vygotsky was subject to criticism by Leontyev for failing to represent the social sources of the motivation for people's activity. Experimental scenarios in which people sort colored blocks hardly shed light on the motivation of people's significant life activities.

In his unfinished studies of child development, Vygotsky made a definition of 'social situation of development' which gave us a clue to how Vygotsky would approach the more general problem of representing societal phenomena in the development of the individual's psyche. Vygotsky captured a child's social situation of development as a predicament, represented in a contradiction between the mode of satisfaction of a child's needs on the one hand (including social expectations on the child at its stage of development) and the actual mode of

perception and psychological functioning of the child. At a certain point, the specific mode by means of which their needs are met becomes an 'offence' and the child wants to escape from this mode of interaction in which it is trapped, but they are not yet able to function at the higher level which is needed to operate outside this mode of interaction: thus the predicament, and the predicament is the driving force for the child's development and transformation of their mode of interaction with adults. Likewise, the formation of a *concept* of an action-in-context is required to represent the motivations animating a person in their activity in society. The situation cannot be represented *in abstracto*.

The key criticism that Leontyev made of Vygotsky's psychology was that because of division of labor, the goal of a person's action was not generally the same as the motive of the social activity of which it is a part. So long as goals and motives were at odds with one another, analysis of their actions could not fully reveal their psychology. The same goes for the formation of concepts: that a set of blocks are all red-squares, hardly represents the full depth of word meaning in the spoken language, with its myriad of interconnections and shades of meaning. So Leontyev developed an activity-based representation of social life, a view which went a long way towards an activity reading of Hegel's Spirit. Artifacts are objectifications of human powers, which in turn mediate activity. Marx insisted that concepts were formed in social activity before they came to be reflected in someone's head and incorporated in theory. So it would seem that a theory which could grasp the creation of concepts in activity, rather than in the head, was a useful avenue to take.

With a three-level anatomy of activity – operations, actions and activities – Leontyev aimed to develop a notion of activity which had psychological, interpersonal and societal aspects to it. This looks like an interdisciplinary concept of activity. But Activity Theory never fulfilled this potential, and there are reasons for this failure.

One of the problems with Leontyev's approach was that he used a false historicism. The whole problem of the phylogenetic origins of consciousness is always an intriguing one. Leontyev developed a painstaking study of non-human life-forms with the idea that in some way this would shed light on human consciousness. But, for all this labors, this is unlikely; the opposite is rather the case, that is, that a better understanding of human

consciousness will shed light on the consciousness of non-human life-forms. The tendency to seek an explanation for what is immediately given in entities beyond our horizons, characterized other parts of his work as well. He supposed that the motivation of the activity in which a person was involved could be represented as an *objective societal object*. This meant firstly taking 'society' as a subject which could have needs and motives, distinct from that of the classes, groups, individuals, etc., of which a society is composed. It also meant that the theorist takes a "God's eye view" from which such needs can be determined. Thirdly, it implied that human motivation in all its grades, can be theorized as a passive response to stimuli.

On all these counts, Leontyev was wrong. But he was quite right in his claim that Vygotsky's psychology needed support from an activity theory which could deal with the motivation for social action and its sources in social life. Also needed was an activity-representation of concepts in the institutions and social movements of the wider society. Leontyev's diagnosis was correct, but his remedy left room for improvement. The strength of Vygotsky's method was his insistence on grounding his work on the empirically-given actions of human individuals, just as Marx had done. "History does nothing," and nor do the abstract, objectivist conceptions which Leontyev invented to provide motivation for human action.

Also, the representation of human motivation in terms of fulfillment of needs is inadequate. Granted, Leontyev holds that human needs are the product of human activity, not simply natural drives. But this acknowledgement of the cultural-historical origin of a need in social production, does not bear on the nature of human motivation as such. Human beings are not (always) led by the nose; we project our aims forward. It may be a tautology, but it needs to be said: activity is active.

What is not emancipatory about Leontyev's approach is firstly the ascription of the ultimate motivating forces to remote abstract entities, motivations which are supposed to be objective. This is a form of functionalism which denies the autonomy of human individuals. In addition to this, the conception of motivation as essentially passive, a response to an objective stimulus, also denies the capacity of human beings to create and change their own material conditions. These concessions to functionalism arose because Leontyev did not have clear concept of his subject matter, not

a concept in the exact sense which Goethe, Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky had all insisted upon. Once he felt free to invent objectivist abstractions to overcome the difficulties of forming a concrete conception of societal phenomena, the approach of emancipatory science was inevitably abandoned.

So the problem remains. How can we represent the source of the motivation of human actions? How can we represent the objective existence of concepts in forms of activity, prior to their reflection in consciousness? How can we represent the social context of human action in such a way that the cognition of actions and artifacts can be theorized? The long-standing interest of philosophers and psychologists in child development is because personality and consciousness *comes into being* as a child grows into adulthood. A more modern form of this problem is cross-cultural phenomena: how can people understand each other across cultural boundaries, and thereby *gain* a concept of something? In Leontyev's system based on *objective societal needs*, it is impossible even to represent such a problem, let alone solve it. It was this problem which was the impulse for the particular contribution of Michael Cole which we need to mention.

Mike Cole confronted the problem of context in his work 40 years ago, studying difficulties children had learning mathematics in school in Liberia. Cole was able to demonstrate that in their daily life, children displayed the normal level of ability in all those base-level cognitive skills which we associate with facility for mathematics, and yet the children just did not seem to get it when mathematics was presented to them in the context of formal schooling.

Even though children left school with no significant skill in mathematics, schooling did have an impact on their thinking. Another study showed that exposure to the kind of relationships and interactions characteristic of schools and other institutions in Western bureaucratic societies did allow women to improve their ability in dealing with these institutions and apply this knowledge in raising their children, and it was this second generation which benefited. What this implied was that it was the location of teaching within the context of the highly structured and formalized system of schooling which made incomprehensible the same content which was transparent to the children when it appeared in day-to-day activities in their own lives.

Clearly then, Vygotsky's 'joint artifact-mediated action' did not contain all that was essential in human consciousness and behavior. The context was an essential element of the microcosm of activity, and if actions and/or artifacts are taken out of their social context and dropped into an alien context, they do not make sense and are incomprehensible to people trying to appropriate them.

In his research efforts to resolve this problem, Cole took up Vygotsky's belief that the researcher had to engage in a collaborative relationship with the research subject. In the case of learning, this meant, rather than 'observing' people teaching and learning, his researchers had to roll up their sleeves and try to help children learn. This was the only possible foundation for a fruitful research environment. Further than this, Cole discovered that all the progressive education initiatives which he could trace in the US had failed. The source of these failures, he diagnosed, was the inability of the initiatives to gain support, not only from teachers and pupils, but from all the parties involved in the provision and support of schooling in the community.

What this meant, in summary, was that learning could only effectively take place in the context of all the relevant people being committed to the school and its work as a shared collaborative project. This discovery was in fact not just a pragmatic observation but contains the essential philosophical insight which is implicated in the original problem of the sources of motivation, or to put in Cole's terms, in the context of learning.

The problem is that 'context' is an *open-ended totality*. How do we conceive of this totality? Cole has a diagram (credited to Bronfenbrenner) in his book (1996: 133) showing the learner in the center of a series of concentric rings: lesson, classroom organization, school organization, community organization, in order to represent an approach to analyzing this totality as 'that which surrounds'. But this is a description which seems only to represent the infinite regress posed in trying to solve this problem. Cole also includes an approach to context as 'that which weaves together' which is perhaps a richer and more fruitful metaphor for context. Cole has investigated a number of writers in search of a way of conceiving of the act-in-context. But none of these metaphors and visual images gave us concepts of the act in its context, or allowed us to conceive of a definite unity of the

two in one and the same concept, rather than the act on one hand added to the context on the other.

Vygotsky came up against the same problem in child development. How to represent the 'context' into which a child grows up. Of course, in order to fully understand even a single grain of sand it is ultimately necessary to understand the entire universe. But this is not the point, is it? How can we represent the child in its social situation as a concept or unit through which we can theorize their development? Vygotsky theorized this social situation in a concept which captured the relation between their needs and the means of their satisfaction in the form of a definite concept: a predicament. We need something similar for cross-cultural learning. In fact, we need a concept through which we can represent the intelligibility of actions in which mediating culture cannot be taken for granted. Leontyev had a point when he talked of the goals of an individual's action being the personal meaning of a societal object. This insight needs to be retained. In theorizing a person's motivation, the teleology of action, we theorize at the same time their cognition. We tend not to understand something in which we have no interest. So the learning process is inextricably bound up with motivation, and cross-cultural learning entails people sharing aims in an appropriate way.

The concepts proposed to resolve these problems are 'collaboration' and 'project'. These mutually constituting concepts represent individual actions within on-going societal processes and the motivations underlying people's actions and relationships.

'Project' is a concept which is sometimes preferred by Hegel scholars to represent 'formations of consciousness'. A project can be a single thread in the fabric of society, and does not have the connotation of being an entire 'social formation'. It is somewhat similar to the notion of 'community of practice', but rather than suggesting a closed system of self-reproducing actions, 'project' carries connotations of projecting itself forward to some ideal – a different concept of object than Leontyev's needs. It also implies that the individual and their acts are saturated with the ideal towards which the project is directed. But consistent with the conceptions of both Marx and Hegel, the ideal is not an objectively valid, better world waiting to be realized, but rather is immanent in the activity itself, and is ultimately objectified in a residue which becomes an integral part of the life of the

whole. A project is inclusive of all the cultural artifacts which mediate its activity, and is sustained by definite forms of collaboration.

Collaboration is a rich concept which expresses the jointness of actions, but in collaboration the action is always conceived of as directed towards a shared end. There is a normative concept of collaboration which implies cooperation towards the common end, combined with conflict over the means of attaining the end, with cooperation and conflict sustaining one another and merging. Another important distinction is that although collaboration is a normative concept, it contains within it a range of limiting modes of collaboration, namely, division of labor, mutual instrumentation through exchange, and hierarchical command. Different modes of collaboration are also differentiated by attribution. All these different modes of collaboration have significant psychological implications precisely because collaboration is a normative concept, and people have expectations: about being consulted, about sharing objectives, about solidarity, about privacy, and so forth, which means that deviations from the norm, and from expectations, will have a psychological impact.

The suggestion is that instead of looking at the classroom or the market place as different contexts in which measurement skills are mobilized, or looking at the classroom and the school ecologically, as an environment, we could look at the relevant projects. If a teacher relocated themselves into the market place, but still spoke to the children in the manner of a school teacher, we would not expect much progress. The point is: what project does the child see the actions as part of? The child has to figure this out to make sense of the actions and mobilize its own intellect to carry out the actions required of them. There is in fact a style of schooling in which children choose a project, usually a relatively complex and protracted project in which the child already has an interest, and then the teacher helps them complete the project and in one or another way, works the curriculum material the child will need to know for adult life, into solving the problems that arise in the course of the project.

But Cole identified deeper problems. It is not enough that the child has to integrate the learning material into a meaningful project for themselves, this has also to be a meaningful project for the teacher, the school and the supporting institutions. So this remains a difficult social problem to be resolved, but perhaps the concept of project can be of use here. This concept

of project is not just suggested as a cover for promoting a specific style of pedagogy. These concepts are meant in the first instance as a means of conceptualizing the place of individual actions in wider social life.

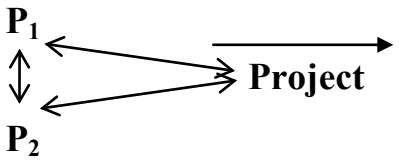
One of the aims of this work was to open up the potential for activity as an interdisciplinary concept[94], which could facilitate the representation of societal entities, as well as individual behavior and interactions. We have called on the concept of hermeneutic circle to indicate the specific type of problem which can be illuminated by this concept of activity. In the hermeneutic circle, an action is meaningful only in relation to the project it is furthering, whilst the project is comprehensible only through the actions of which it is composed. So the aim of the project is immanent in the actions, rather than in some imagined future state of affairs. This was Marx's conception of communism: "Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence" (1975i: 49). This is how *all* projects need to be understood; this is how Marx understood activity.

The functional method in sociology rests on the idea that every institution in society has some regulatory function: "What is the state for? It is for maintaining law and order. What is marriage for? It is for raising children," etc., etc. Ultimately, this method is not scientific, but is nonetheless an example of how teleology is used in social science. Teleology also arises in nature: creatures strive to stay alive and questions like "Why does a peacock have such colorful feathers?" are meaningful questions that can be answered functionally on the presumption that natural selection takes care of the underlying mechanism. The question is: in what sense can we talk of the teleology in projects, and how do they give motivation to people in their actions, or is it the other way around, that projects are purpose-driven

[94] The reason that I have stayed with the notion of 'interdisciplinary' rather than the increasingly popular 'transdisciplinary' is because the aim is to penetrate work going on within a number of different silos, and it is my aspiration that work currently fragmented by academic silos might be transformed. There is a danger that transdisciplinary work could become trapped itself in a silo marked by a specific kind of work distinct from any existing tradition of research. Nonetheless, those practicing transdisciplinary research, more than anyone, should find this concept of use.

because the actions of which they are a part are purposive? There is no simple answer to these questions; projects do work towards ends and people do strive for something. Individual ends are certainly derived and fulfilled in social life, and institutional ends exist only insofar as they are pursued by individual people. But the notion of project gives us a tool with which to interrogate people and their associations and look for their meaning, just as people seek meaning in the same way. 'Project' is a suitable unit for the study of sociological problems, especially where what is at issue is the very constitution of social entities (rather than being limited to interactions between existing societal entities) and the ability of institutions to mobilize people (rather than just taking people as given members of a collective).

The rich content of the notion of collaboration also brings to light more complex relationships. The notions of hierarchy, command, division of labor, cooperation, exchange, service, attribution, exploitation, dependence, solidarity, and more can all be studied in the context of just two individuals working together in a common project. And yet almost all the mysteries of social science as well as a good part of psychology are contained in this archetypal unit: two people working together in a common project.



35. Conclusion

> "[The Frankfurt School was founded around] ... the question of the connection between the economic life of society, the psychical development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture." (Horkheimer 1931)

Disputes over the unit of analysis have marked the development of CHAT since the revival of Vygotsky's work in the 1960s. But there has not been any fruitful resolution, because no-one had enquired into the origins and genesis of this concept before Vygotsky. This work has now been done, and the meaning and significance of the idea of unit of analysis has been settled. That does not settle the question of finding a unit of analysis suitable for further development of the CHAT, but we have made a proposal, namely, that 'collaborative project' is an interdisciplinary concept of activity. This may not be the end of it, and that is as it should be. But the proposal has to be responded to.

This work has also demonstrated the essential unity of the diverse currents of thinking and practice which have evolved out of Vygotsky's original work. We have pointed to what we regard as errors, but the work of all the strands of CHAT and some more can be seen to contribute towards a common standpoint which is amenable to interdisciplinary work.

CHAT is already an emancipatory science. It is committed to the ethos of self-emancipation. It does not seek to control people, test them or predict their behavior, but rather to join people in striving for their own goals. CHAT respects the integrity of the human subject, and does not seek to divide human beings up either by organs or by attributes. Its aim is not to judge but to realize.

By including the concept of collaborative project in its theoretical 'tool-kit' and devote some resources to the study of collaborative projects, CHAT can take further steps towards clarifying and strengthening the ethical basis of the human sciences. Just as we eschew metaphysical entities in solving the problems of psychology, we also eschew metaphysics in the solution of problems of ethics. We seek collaboration with others, and resolve ethical problems on the basis of these concrete relations of collaboration.

CHAT has withstood the pressure of analytical, abstract-empirical science for a long time, rising as it does from the traditions of Goethe,

Hegel and Marx. We are skeptical about neuroscientific rationalizations of current prejudices about the nature of the psyche, and we are also skeptical about theories of structuralism and poststructuralism which belittle the possibilities for human beings to fashion the conditions of their own lives. The notions of collaboration and project are consonant with our aims, and will allow us to develop a humanism which retains clarity about the social sources of human psychology.

CHAT is already involved in education, the treatment of all kinds of psychopathology and rehabilitation as well as being involved in sociological projects like work organization, resolving planning issues and so forth. The stripping of the residue of metaphysics from the concept of activity will allow us to broaden our interdisciplinary work and we can expect opportunities to more fruitfully appropriate insights from other disciplines into our own work as a result.

CHAT aims at the self-determination of human beings. We cannot do this with concepts which fail to capture the essential nature of human activity as being tied up with the projection of our ideals, however mistaken they may be from time to time. But self-determination is never that of being an island. Self-determination, or sovereignty, is about participation in the self-determination of oneself and others, together as equals, through collaborative projects.

Cultural Psychology and Critical Theory

Critical Theorists such as Max Horkheimer, Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth have all agreed on the need to appropriate practical theories of psychology to underpin their social theory, in particular, a social psychology and a developmental psychology. Accordingly, such thinkers as Freud, Piaget, Kohlberg, Hartmann, Winnicott and Mead, have been targets of appropriation.

According to Max Horkheimer, the Frankfurt School was founded around "the question of the connection between the economic life of society, the *psychical* development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture" (Horkheimer 1982: 11, my emphasis).

To this end, Horkheimer proposed an interdisciplinary research program which would include survey methods adapted from American social research. Circumstances prevented the project of bringing such a range of

specialists into a single collaborative effort, and Critical Theory has since appropriated the psychological research of others.

Horkheimer defined the question this way:

> "[W]hich connections can be demonstrated between the economic role of a specific social group in a specific era in specific countries, the transformation of the psychic structure of its individual members, and the ideas and institutions as a whole that influence them and that they created?" (Horkheimer 1993: 12)

Outlining a variety of tasks that require psychological research, Horkheimer remarks:

> "Psychology no longer has to do with human beings as such. Rather, it must differentiate within each epoch the total spiritual powers available within individuals – the strivings at the root of their physical and intellectual efforts, and the spiritual factors that enrich the social and individual life process – from those relatively static psychic characteristics of individuals, groups, classes, races, and nations that are determined by the overall social structure: in short, from their character.
>
> "... Historical transformations are drenched with the mental and the intellectual; individuals in their groups and within various conditioned social antagonisms are mental entities, and history thus needs psychology" (Horkheimer 1993a: 119/127)

This is surely nothing less than a call for a Cultural-Historical Psychology. But how was this program implemented by later members of the Frankfurt School?

In Habermas's appropriation of Piaget and Honneth's appropriation of Winnicott and Mead, the reasoning seems to include the following idea: Take a theory which has (or had) a real basis in psychological research; substitute for the individual subject, a social formation of some kind; thus we have a social theory, with an empirically verified basis in psychology. This move cannot be justified. Scientific theories can provide a source of inspiration, but they cannot be extended outside their own domain of research by metaphor. This is pre-scientific speculation. In the case of efforts to appropriate Piaget, all we have is a series of biologically programmed stages of the cognitive development of mid-20th century, middle-class European children and a now-discredited theory of the

underlying processes. The only use they have for social and historical development is as possible *metaphors*.

According to Thomas McCarthy:

> "Habermas's explication of the key notions of a developmental logic and of levels or stages of learning are adapted from the Piaget tradition in cognitive psychology. The idea underlying ontogenetic studies of this type is that the various abilities of the adult subject are the result of an integration of maturational and learning processes. ... Social evolution can then be thought of as a bidimensional learning process, the stages of which can be described structurally according to a developmental logic. ...
>
> "Habermas's explication of the key notion of a developmental logic and of levels or stages of learning are adapted from the Piaget tradition in cognitive psychology" (McCarthy 1978: 246-7).

Nice idea, but the fact is that psychological development does not replicate the stages of cultural development, just as ontogenetic development does not replicate phylogenetic development or vice versa. Piaget's own efforts to introduce these stages into historical development also failed. The positing of the identity of stages of development in these different domains is called the "biogenetic hypothesis" (Vygotsky 1997b) and it is a fallacy.

> "The fundamental hypothesis of genetic epistemology is that there is a parallelism between the progress made in the logical and rational organization of knowledge and the corresponding formative psychological processes" (Piaget 1968).

This simply doesn't hold up. Each line of development has to be theorized in its own right, including the *interconnection* between development on the microgenetic, ontogenetic, cultural-historical and phylogenetic planes.

Ontogenetic development rests on the fact that an infant is a completely helpless organism utterly reliant on the support and direction of its carers, whereas the adults of both our hominid ancestors and our hunter-gatherer predecessors were supremely competent individuals capable of surviving in the wild alone and unaided, and could reproduce their entire culture from their own resources. In other words, two structurally distinct processes of development are posed, each of which can be understood only by different

methods, and exhibit at a basic level a quite different 'logic'. Consequently, absolutely *no* conclusions can be drawn from the structure of ontogenetic development for the structure of cultural-historical development, other than those based on the *actual relations* between the two processes, as opposed to transposition of ideas from one domain to the other.

So when Thomas McCarthy says:

> "... social evolution can be comprehended as a *learning process*, not in the sense of behavioristic psychology ... but in the sense of cognitive developmental psychology [i.e., Piaget]. Central to this approach is the notion of a *developmental logic* that incorporates a distinction between formally characterized levels of learning and the learning processes that are possible at each level" (McCarthy 1978: 246)

we are using an unsupportable metaphor borrowed from Piaget to take a culturally bound, Kantian theory of child psychology as a schema of historical development.

The conception of history as a kind of learning process is not ruled out, only there is no basis for grounding such a conception on a metaphor, let alone one based on Piagetian cognitive psychology. However, it seems self-evident that a theory of cognitive psychology which dealt with the relationship between social knowledge (cultural artifacts, child-rearing practices, technology, languages, institutions, etc.) and the learning processes of the individuals who act out these processes, would be well placed to ground such a concept without recourse to metaphor. And this is exactly what is provided by CHAT.

This attempt at a biogenetic metaphor hardly represents the high-point of Habermas's work, but the theory of *communicative action* plays the central role in his theory. For Habermas, the lifeworld constitutes a *resource* or *background* to communicative action:

> "Participants draw from this *lifeworld* not just consensual patterns of interpretation (the **background** knowledge from which propositional contents are fed), but also normatively reliable patterns of social relations (the tacitly presupposed solidarities on which illocutionary acts are based) and the competencies acquired in socialization processes (the **background** of the speaker's intentions). ... the

> rational potential of speech is interwoven with the **resources** of any particular given lifeworld." (Habermas 1987b: 314/326; my bold)

When concretely investigated, the role of cultural 'resources' is seen to be far deeper than Habermas's metaphors imply. Further, a concrete consideration of the process of growing up in a lifeworld unpacks the notion of socialization to disclose the fact that individuals *re-invent*, appropriate and to a greater or lesser extent, reconstruct and transform the lifeworld, in the process of making themselves. Such a notion is self-evidently beyond the horizon of 'genetic structuralism', but ought to be of great interest to an emancipatory social theory.

What is missed by the *intersubjective* standpoint, whether in Mead or Habermas, or in any of the philosophical systems derived from the Kojèvean master-slave dialectic is that intersubjectivity is always a *mediated* process. This notion cannot be adequately grasped with the notions of 'resource' and 'background'. Individuals do not stand apart from and *use* culture. This question was dealt with earlier, suffice it to note that Critical Theory seems to have been captured by the atomistic master-slave vision of social life.

Habermas claims that there are three functions of language: communicating facts about the world, communicating facts about our subjective state and interacting with others. But in his work, Vygotsky (1987) shows that these communicative functions arise only at a certain point in the development of language, and by no means exhaust the function of language in the human psyche. Is it possible to build a theory of communicative action without consideration of the ontogenesis of language-use? But more importantly, what the theory of communicative action omits is that discourse depends on people having something to talk about, on there being some common project in which they either collaborate or struggle against one another (See Chapter 29 above).

In the Introduction to "Theory and Practice" Habermas claims: "It is certainly meaningful to conceive social systems as entities which solve objectively posed problems by means of supra-subjective learning processes" (Habermas, 1974: 12). It seems to me that there is a clear opening here for Cultural Psychology, rather than relying on metaphors and out-dated theories of learning.

Moving on to Axel Honneth's "Struggle for Recognition":

> "I attempt to develop, on the basis of Hegel's model of a 'struggle for recognition', the foundations for a social theory with a normative content. ... The systematic reconstruction of the Hegelian line of argumentation ... leads to a distinction between three forms of recognition" (Honneth 1996: 1).

That is, we are to have a *model* which is instantiated in three forms, each of which exist in quite different domains of social action: infancy, personal development and political action. This project constitutes another exercise in pre-scientific metaphors connecting relations in distinct levels of activity.

Broadly, what Honneth does in "The Struggle for Recognition" is to demonstrate that a schema of recognition fits Winnicott's description of the process of personal development which an infant goes through in gaining independence from the support of its mother (to which Honneth adds nothing). He then shows that the same general schema also fits Mead's concept of the development of self-consciousness through the development of successful interpersonal relations with other people (which Mead modeled on Hegel's *Phenomenology*). He then further proposes that the same schema of recognition can be stretched to describe the successful formation of a citizen through the gaining of key elements of social status in society. Thus, he claims, his schema of recognition has a global scope, describing the requirements for and the process of successful personal development at the three key levels of social action.

But this fails to substantiate a true concept of recognition, for what we have is an abstract comparison of a general philosophical schema with three more or less defensible notions in different domains of research. Whether or not one accepts a thesis that these three processes follow the same 'logic' (along the lines of a biogenetic hypothesis) is neither here nor there. What is *actually* required is a notion which *unifies* the three so-called 'levels' of social existence *concretely*. The only psychology we can draw upon for this is CHAT.

Honneth treats social movements and labor struggles as phenomena of 'mass psychology', but he fails to distinguish between a mass of people having the same psychological condition (such as lack of recognition) and an organized group of people making a collective claim (such as recognition) and participating in a shared project – the difference between a

movement 'in itself' and a movement 'for itself'. In other words, what he lacks is a genuine theory of cultural psychology, and substitutes for this lack with abstract speculation.

The point about CHAT is that is a theory with a very substantial empirical base in *how* individuals appropriate or fail to appropriate or challenge the culture in which they participate. The question of bridging a gap between the individual and the social does not arise for Cultural Psychology because that gap is precisely its home territory – it *is* the bridge.

Mead engaged in some brilliant speculation but did not do any empirical work in psychology, and never published his work, but his students collected his lecture notes and other unpublished work and published them; they went on to found a school of psychology called Symbolic Interactionism, a tendency which does continue to this day. Mead was one of Vygotsky's sources in the 1920s and '30s, and Symbolic Interactionism is one of the contributing currents to Cultural Psychology as it grew up in the US. If we are going to appropriate Mead's speculations in the 1930s, then it is hard to understand why you would overlook a fully developed school of psychology, with broader theoretical foundations and an on-going practical research practice, which had already appropriated Mead, and continues up to the present day, unless one is simply trying to avoid the taint of Marxism.

Isn't it time for Critical Theory to take off the blinkers, stop playing with metaphors and look to a *living* current of psychological research which continues to grow in strength and significance to this day? Can't we implement Horkheimer's original program? Isn't it time to take a break from Freud, Winnicott and Mead and take an interest instead in a really existing program of psychological research which has emancipatory interest inscribed in its foundations, and is growing almost unnoticed, with its aficionados, not in the departments of Social Theory and Philosophy, but teaching in your local elementary schools.

Science and Survival

Whether the concept of activity developed here through a critique of Cultural Historical Activity Theory is taken up and proves useful in other disciplines only time will tell. But we must make a beginning. The fact is that as things currently stand there are as many mutually independent theories as there are academic posts in the average university. Every new

writer produces a new theory. That is just *as it should be*. Original and creative thinking is not according to a template. But we *do* have a problem.

The global economic crises and uncontrolled climate change taking place at the time of writing are as extreme a demonstration of the failure of our institutions to grasp problems as a whole, as *Gestalten*, as it is possible to imagine. It would not be drawing too long a bow to say that the destruction of the natural and economic conditions for life on Earth as a direct outcome of the planned and scientific development of these resources is the result of fragmentary and blinkered methods of work which cannot see the forest for the trees. Our political institutions, our research and education institutions and our entire economic system are geared towards isolating every issue from every other issue and trying to resolve each one at a time without any means of grasping each problem as a whole, let alone grasping the whole of which every problem is but a part.

Now had the reader started reading from here, they would be forgiven for heaving a sigh of boredom at this point, for how often have we been read these lessons, of the blind man holding the elephant's tail and so forth? The point is, of course, exactly *how* is one to grasp the whole? Although this book was written within a specific current of thought, Cultural Historical Activity Theory, almost the entire content concerns problems of scientific method which are equally applicable to *any* scientific discipline. We have shown *how* the researcher must proceed in an effort to grasp problems as a whole. Most of the observations we have made with respect to psychology and related disciplines can be extended directly to any of the human sciences.

The problem of the fragmentation of the sciences between a thousand and one disciplines unable to effectively communicate with one another, is the same as the problem of each science being unable to grasp the problem which defines their subject area as a whole. It's macrocosm and microcosm. The analytical, abstract-empirical methods of scientific thinking, and the corresponding hierarchical, compartmentalizing and competitive methods of organization of the sciences, leads to a social consciousness which is atomistic, destructive and narcissistic. Such methods are structurally incapable of grasping and proceeding from the whole.

Many serious minds are endeavoring to solve these problems at the global level. The 'science' is relatively straightforward, at least each bit of

the science taken on its own is well enough understood. But at the time of writing, the consensus seems to be that there is little chance of actually forestalling catastrophe. Science can describe the crisis, but cannot resolve it. Because the whole, that is, human activity taken together with the natural and artificial conditions for human life and the state of consciousness of the six billion people involved in this problem, cannot be grasped in its full complexity by any one person or any one theory.

But if in each discipline we are able to identify the nature of the specific problem as a whole, then we can make progress. We can all learn to speak a common language.

There is an increasing interest in transdisciplinary work, and this is essential. But there is a danger that transdisciplinary scientific work could become just another discipline, leaving existing disciplines just as they are. That is may be unavoidable. But it is necessary to make a beginning with the critique and transformation of each branch of science (human and natural), from inside each discipline. So long as there is an effort in each of the disciplines to critically review their concepts with a view to breaking from abstract-empirical methods in favor of the kind of approaches we have described as emancipatory science, then interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work takes on more significance.

But we cannot continue as we have been. Goethe was right. With the very conditions for human life under threat, surely it is time to change.

I ask the reader to accept this work as a contribution to the collaborative project of Cultural Historical Activity Theory, and I hope that those from other disciplines will find it useful in their own reflections, too.

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