'Collaborative Project'
as a Concept for Interdisciplinary Human Science Research

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The human sciences are fragmented into myriad disciplines, but a veritable *chasm* separates those disciplines which study the individual person and their actions from those disciplines which study human beings en masse: economics, history, political science and so on. The lack of a concept which meets the needs of science on both sides of this chasm mirrors the condition of modern life: individuals dominated by great processes of societal life in which they play no part. Could Activity Theory with 'project' as a *unit* of activity, provide a way to overcome this gap by using a shared conceptual language across both domains?

There are already many writers who address themselves to collaborative projects as part of their research, and among these, some of whom share a commitment to Activity Theory or the Cultural-Historical Psychology which underpins Activity Theory. However, these writers do not constitute a coherent current of thinking, as each writer does not take the concept of 'project' as central to their own project. Nonetheless, this literature provides a beginning for interdisciplinary research in the human sciences which can reach across the chasm between the sciences of the individual and the sciences of society.

The adjective 'collaborative' is meant to distinguish 'project' as a social formation in contradistinction to an individualistic conception of projects, but projects are *always* collaborative, and collaboration is *always* for a project.

In what follows I will outline the origins of project as a unit for the human sciences and its value as an interdisciplinary concept, and then briefly review the foundation of the concept in different domains of theory, and conclude with a concise definition of the concept of 'collaborative project'.

ORIGINS OF THE IDEA OF PROJECT AS A UNIT OF ACTIVITY

Very broadly, 'project' has arisen from currents of social philosophy whose origins lie in Hegel or Marx, rather than Kant or Frege, but the concept of 'project' as a unit of analysis for an interdisciplinary Activity Theory arose out of the work of Vygotsky and his followers in the Soviet Union. It is this latter line of development which is the proximate origin of the approaches considered here.

Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) approached the cultural formation of the psyche by means of a study of the collaborative use of artifacts which originate in a wider culture, in some social situation, also the product of the wider culture. He observed that "the concept arises and is formed in a complex operation that is directed toward the resolution of some task," (CW v. 1, p. 123) "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" (*ibid.*, p. 132). But he did not investigate the processes of formation of the social environment itself. His units of analysis were the artifact-mediated action (such as word-meaning) and *perezhivanie* (a lived-experience), and he did not pursue the relation between these personal actions and experiences and the formation of the "tasks ... associated with ... the social life of

the adult world." These were issues that were taken up by his younger associate A. N. Leontyev.

A. N. Leontyev (1904-1979) identified the concept of "an activity" as follows:

> "Thus, the principal 'unit' of a vital process is an organism's activity; the different activities that realise its diverse vital relations with the surrounding reality are essentially determined by their object; we shall therefore differentiate between separate types of activity according to the difference in their objects." (2009, p. 29).

And an activity is "a non-additive unit of the corporeal, material life of the material subject. In the narrower sense, i.e., on the psychological plane, it is a unit of life" (2009, p. 397). According to Leontyev, an activity was specified by the object to which all the actions composing it were directed, and in the light of which these actions can be made sense of. The problems arising from the future-oriented character of his definition, undoubtedly necessary for any study of the human mind, he resolved by means of a distinction between the *societal* motives/needs of the community as a whole and the *individual* meaning/needs, or personal sense of an object which motivates a person's actions. The harmonization of societal motives and personal meanings was a problem to be resolved by the formation of a mode of production, distribution and exchange which ensures that individuals are motivated to act in such a way that societal needs are met. But how can we make sense of 'societal motives' and 'societal needs'? There is no Central Committee authorized to determine the needs of the whole country – but nonetheless, individuals' actions are motivated by their conception of the collaborative pursuit of more remote, societally developed ends, but these are realized only in the unfolding of the project itself. The object is not external to the activity, but is immanent within it.

In Russia in 1984, Fyodor Vasilyuk published a seminal book on psychotherapy: "The Psychology of Experiencing" (1988) – "the first important contribution to the field of psychodynamic theory made by a Soviet author in the last 50 years" (Kozulin 1991). The key concept of the work is переживание (*perezhivanie*), translated somewhat inadequately as "experiencing" or "a lived experience," and understood by Vasilyuk as an active process of "working over," or overcoming a crisis which has arisen in what he calls a "отношение," translated as "life relation," but which could also be translated as "attitude to (something)" or "life orientation." I find it difficult to interpret отношение as anything other than commitment to a life-project (c.f. Stetsenko 2003, 2012; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004, 2004a; Vianna & Stetsenko 2011).

Crisis situations arise in a person's life from failures of or blockages to life-projects, or conflicts between them. He says:

> "During the period of acute pain [such as following the death of a loved one, or failure to win a desired career move] *perezhivanie* becomes the person's leading activity. We will remind you that psychology calls that activity leading which occupies a dominating position in the life of a person and through which his personal development is carried out." (Vasilyuk, 1988, p. 231)

In his 1991 review of Vasilyuk's book, Alex Kozulin interpreted this as follows:

> "The individual must bring about the unity of the self, and not only as an internal conscious project, but as an actual existence in a difficult world.

> The prototype of experiencing in this life-world is a creative experience of an author. Because the work of art is simultaneously present and not yet present at the moment of its conception by the author, the unity of the self first appears as life-intent or life-project. This intent as related to the system of values is felt by a person as a "calling," and in its relation to the spatio-temporal actuality of existence it becomes "life work."

Vasilyuk constructed a four part typology of such crises in terms of an *internal* life-world which is either simple or complex, and an *external* life-world which is either easy or difficult. A *simple* inner world means that the crisis arises from the pursuit of just one activity without implication for any other project to which the person is committed. A *complex* inner world means that the subject is motivated by multiple projects which may be conflicting, or interdependent, and resolving a crisis becomes complex in that sense. An *easy* outer world means that the crisis arises from inner causes, not existential threats to the project or blockages having their origin independently of the subject. A *difficult* outer world means that a project to which the subject is committed faces a blockage or disaster. Vasilyuk's use of *perezhivanie* as a concept of an active, lived experience, thus rests on the conception of commitments to projects which are simultaneously features of their subjective life *and* objective, material projects in the external world.

The four types of crisis are (simple-easy) *stress*, (simple-difficult) *frustration*, (complex-easy) *conflict* and (complex-difficult) *crisis*. He says that *stress* is a "hedonistic" or "infantile" crisis – the subject is concerned only with the here and now and acquiring more; *frustration* is a "realistic" crisis – the subject has to accept the unattainability of the object and determine what it is they *really* need, not just the specific thing which has the meaning for them of their real object; *conflict* is a "crisis of values" – the subject is obliged to revisit the bases for their past actions and question their values which have led them into a tragic situation; *crisis* as such is a creative crisis, which obliges the subject to transform the meaning of the absent object so as to make the psychologically impossible situation possible, so that the life-crisis resolved by creating a new life-world, a new self.

Resolution of the crisis in psychotherapy entails the patient engaging in an inner dialogue with themselves through which the object of the critical project(s) is reinterpreted in a more satisfactory way. His sketch of the stages through which psychotherapy passes resembles those outlined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969).

The concepts of "an object-oriented activity" and "a leading activity" are central to psychotherapy in Soviet psychology, whether or not it is understood as a 'project' or a 'life relation'.

In the 1950s and '60s in the Soviet Union, psychologists focusing on the problem of engineering design developed the concept of 'psychological projection'. In the concept of project arising from this work, the project is not simply the fulfillment of an original design, but rather the project develops in response to experience and therefore realizes a process of intellectual development. Here arose the concept of the object as *immanent* to the project rather than being given to it externally. In the 1980s, the Moscow Methodological Circle further developed these ideas and broadened the scope and scale of the problems tackled. 'Projective psychology' also took root in educational psychology with the work of Elena Kravtsova and Gena Kravtsov (see Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010). The projective method, as they see it, is the experimental-genetic

method of instruction which aims to model developmental processes which are replicated in real life, and has been applied in their 'Golden Key' schools since 1992.

In the early 2000s, Anna Stetsenko utilized the concept of collaborative project, founded in Vygotskian Activity Theory, firstly in a review of biography of A. R. Luria (2003), and later (2004) in an analysis of the Vygotsky's heritage. In these articles, Stetsenko used the concept of collaborative project both as "the *leading activity* that organized and underpinned both [an individual's] life and ... work," and as broad social endeavors such as the Russian revolution, at the macro level, as well as particular collaborative activities at the meso-level. Here for the first time the concept of *project* spanned micro-, meso- and macro-levels of human life.

While this Soviet current is the proximate source of the idea of 'project' as a unit for the concept of 'collaborative project' developed here, 'project' also has deep and broad roots in Western social science, most explicitly in the field of education.

The 'project method' had been used in schools in the West since the first decade of the 20th century, where a project was described as "a unit of educative work in which the most prominent feature was some form of positive and concrete achievement" (OED). The project method continues to be a favored approach in remedial education, and in science and technical education. John Dewey (1897/1981) pioneered an approach of this kind in his Laboratory School where all learning took place within projects closely connected to the tasks of everyday life. Paolo Freire (1921-1997) also used a project approach to learning, in the form of 'problem-posing education' in which the "concrete, present situation [is posed] to the people as a problem which challenges them," (Freire 1970/2011, p. 95) building knowledge through a collaborative enquiry into the real-life situation confronting them.

The Soviet educators went further in designing projects and lessons which 'modeled' child development, optimizing psychological conditions for a child's development, instead of the usual curriculum segregated by age and subject. Here the concept of a project as a societal product is merged with the concept of a project as a psychological projection in the formation of a personality.

But different concepts of project have been proposed independently elsewhere as part of a foundation for psychology and social theory in currents springing from Husserl's Phenomenology.

Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) was a European emigré at the New School in New York who aimed to extend Husserl's concepts for use in social theory.

> "Conduct which is devised in advance, that is, which is based upon a preconceived project, shall be called *action*, regardless of whether it is an overt or covert conduct. As to the latter it has to be distinguished whether or not there supervenes on the *project* an intention to realize it – to carry it through, to bring about the projected state of affairs. Such an intention transforms the mere forethought into an aim and the project into a purpose." (1945/1970, p. 125)

But despite Schutz's efforts to build a *social* theory, a project for him remained a product of the individual mind, directing a person's actions towards some imagined state of affairs, whereas for Activity Theory, the project is a societal process which usually already exists when it provides motivation for a specific person. Nevertheless, he had the key insight that in order to make sense of a person's actions, those actions

have to be seen as arising from a subjective commitment to some project, from which a person draws their motivation.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) also began from Husserl's phenomenology, but put the artifacts which people produce and use in the course of their activity at center stage. According to Heidegger, we 'project' our concepts on to objects, although there is always something there, and we have a pre-intellectual or practical knowledge of how to use a tool, for example, and what it is for, prior to our projection. Heidegger developed his Existentialist concept of the project in "Being and Time" (1927). Although Heidegger introduced the concept of 'project' into phenomenology, the artifacts which mediate our actions play the predominant role, rather than the activities which constitute the object, as a concept for Activity Theorists.

In his Existentialist phase, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) saw the self in terms of an individual having a 'fundamental project' which gives meaning to a person's life and what they do:

> "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." (1946/1989)

Each of the projects in which an individual participates is a *part* of the subject's 'fundamental project'. For Sartre, the notion of identity formation was 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', a quintessentially inner process. This phase of Sartre's work contributed to the development of Existential Therapy, which deals with conflicts arising in these inner projects. With the writing of his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), however, Sartre appropriated aspects of Marxism, and developed the categories of phenomenology as *social* formations. A 'project' he defined as a chosen way of being, expressed in *praxis*; groups were formed by a pledge or commitment individuals make binding them to a common goal, thus fusing their will to that of the group. A fused group passes through a phase of 'white heat' in which it is able to transform the world, after which it becomes a 'practico-inert' – a 'human object' or institution, no longer a living organism or project. Such practico-inerts form the world which we inhabit, the residue of fused groups of the past.

What distinguishes Activity Theory from Phenomenology and Existentialism is that for Activity Theory, the project has its origin and existence in the societal world in which the person finds themself; for Phenomenology and Existentialism the psyche projects itself on to the world. For Activity Theory, commitment to a project and formulation of actions towards it, are mediated by the psyche, but a project is found and realized as something existing in the world, be that an entire civilization, a single personality, or anything in between. (See MacIntyre 1981, p. 146)

In the appropriation of Vygotsky's and Leontyev's ideas in Europe and the Nordic countries, the concept of 'activity system' was developed as a further elaboration of 'an activity' as it is understood in Leontyev's system. An 'activity system' is a system of actions directed towards some object, with its own norms, tools and division of labor. The concept is essentially the same as that of 'project' but is usually understood as some kind of functional institution, which develops as a result of contradictions within its structure.

A rebellion against objectivism in social theory also manifested itself in the emergence of Marxist-humanism, originally with the Frankfurt School in the 1920s and particularly in Eastern Europe in the 1960s. In opposition to both Stalinized Marxism and Western sociology, these writers sought to restore a place for the active subject in social theory. Notable in this connection is Ernst Bloch. His major work, "The Principle of Hope" (1938-1959/1986) traces a path which:

> "leads via the little waking dreams to the strong ones, via the wavering dreams that can be abused to the rigorous ones, via the shifting castles in the air to the One Thing that is outstanding and needful." (1986, p. 11)

Bloch rejects the hostility to 'utopianism' which the Marxist tradition counterposed to 'scientific socialism', pointing out that "everybody lives in the future, because they strive." More than any Marxist before him, Bloch understood that this striving for an imagined future is the motor of human history and must be placed at the center of science. It is this same humanist perspective which motivates the studies included here.

Some writers have come to the notion of 'project' as an important concept in their work by various paths, from reflections on Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, social work, psychotherapy, Marxism or the study of social movements. But 'project' is also a concept which has become more and more prominent in the language of everyday life, whether talking about science and the arts, hobbies, political life or personal biographies. The combination of the philosophical sediment that the concept has acquired in the history of the human sciences, with the connotations that the word has accrued from everyday usage makes the concept of 'project' a powerful tool for interdisciplinary science. This is the idea I proposed in my book *An Interdisciplinary Theory of Activity* (2010).

PROJECT AS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CONCEPT

Taking a cue from Hegel, projects can be seen as passing through four stages in their development. (1) Firstly there will be some group of people who by virtue of their social position are subject to some taken-for-granted or impending problem or constraint on their freedom. These are the conditions for a project to exist, but the project has not yet come into being. (2) On becoming aware of the problem there will be a series of failed projects arising from misconceptions of the situation, until, at a certain point: (3) An adequate concept of the situation is formulated and named and a social movement is launched to change social practices so as to resolve the problem or injustice. As the project unfolds and interacts with the social environment, its object becomes clearer and more concrete. (4) Eventually, the new form of practice becomes 'mainstreamed' as part of the social practices of the wider community. That is, it is institutionalized and its concept enters into the language and culture of the community.

Hegel (1807; 1816) outlined this process in detail in his conception of a 'formation of consciousness', which Marx interpreted as a 'social formation'. Vygotsky and subsequent Activity Theorists used this same conception of concepts as both units of consciousness and the units of a social formation, and in their understanding of the genesis of projects. Here 'concept' does not reference a mental object (as it does for much contemporary psychology) but rather a system of actions which are united by their orientation to a common purpose. *Actions are both subjective and objective*. A concept is the ideal or normative form of that aggregate of actions which is implicit in the immediately given actions and interactions manifested in relation to some situation.

Actions have the same relation to the project of which they are part as word meanings have to a concept. A concept, like a project, is a *larger* (molar) unit, which is implicit in each meaningful action, disclosing its motivation. The project inheres in the norms and rules flowing from the project's self-concept and underlying the actions which constitute the project. In my *Concepts, A Critical Approach* (2012) I examined these relations in some detail, but what is important here is how projects manifest themselves as *social movements* (in the broadest sense), before becoming *institutionalized* as part of a social formation which is nothing but the product of many such social movements in the past.

In the course of their development projects objectify themselves, and there are three aspects to this objectification: *symbolic*, *instrumental* and *practical*. Firstly, the moment someone first communicates the concept of the project it is given a name or symbolically represented in some other way, after which the word or symbol functions as a focus for actions. The word eventually enters the language and acquires nuances and meaning through the development of the project and its interaction with other projects and institutions. Secondly, the project may be objectified by the invention and production of some new instrument or by the construction of material artifacts which facilitate or constrain actions in line with the project and facilitate its integration into the life of a community. The word in which the project is symbolically objectified may then be taken as referencing this artifact, reifying the concept as if it were an independently existing object, rather than an ideal functioning as the focus of a new form of social practice which constitutes it. Finally, and most important is practical objectification: once the project achieves relatively permanent changes in the social practices of a community, the project transforms from a social movement into an institution. In this instance, the word may be taken as referencing the form of practice in which the project has been given practical objectification and normalized.

The projects I have in mind here might be a social movement, such as the women's health movement, or a campaign against asbestos production, or it might be a capitalist firm promoting a new product under its own brand name, or a fashion or youth trend, a government program, or a branch of science. But in every case, it is an evolving and expanding social practice which arises as a protest against and remedy for some problem. A project begins with a break from the former practices of the community. In particular, projects generally arise within some definite form of practice or institution which is sensitive and resistant to contradiction, so that overcoming a problem necessitates a self-conscious break, which is nonetheless eventually incorporated into the normal life of a community.

A project goes through a series of transformations. First is the immanent development of its conception of its object. Although launched with a certain conception of the nature of the relevant problem or opportunity, as the project unfolds and interacts with other movements and institutions in the community at large, it experiences the effects of its own activity, and its conception of its object changes. That is why I say that the object of a project is *immanent within the project itself*. The object is not some objective need existing independently of the project, which determines the project from outside. It might even be quite illusory. But it emerges from the activity of the project itself, as its immanent goal and self-concept.

In the process of flowing through a community, projects *sediment* symbols, material artifacts and institutions, which remain as testaments to their activity. Such sediments

may be a *technological* inheritance which will benefit subsequent generations, *institutions* – such as the legal system, universities, and scientific institutions, nation-states, firms, and so on, or words and symbols embedded in our *language* and symbolic culture. The legacy might also be climate change, polluted rivers, linguistic abominations, an obesity epidemic or some other 'social problem'. But, whatever form they take and whatever their legacy may be, projects are what makes and constitutes the world we live in.

It should be noted that like a branch of science, a project has its own norms: theoretical norms, semantic norms and practical norms. Such norms not only ensure that actions carried out within the project are meaningful for participants but also insulate participants from countervailing norms of the wider community. Soldiers mobilized for war kill people deemed to be the enemy, while recklessly risking their own lives; asbestos workers expose themselves and others to the lethal fiber sharing the belief that the material is harmless; priests may feel free to abuse children in their charge, who in turn submit to the abuse – it is likely that in any project which sanctions hierarchy, abuse will flourish to the extent that the internal life of the project is insulated from public discourse. Participants in a project may evolve a unique jargon incomprehensible to outsiders, while, especially if they are successful, introducing new words to the lingua franca. These norms are not just a means of creating internal bonds and distinction from outsiders (though they may be this as well): they instantiate the self-concept of the project and give meaning to all the individual actions which constitute the project as a whole.

Ethics

One of the great strengths of Activity Theory with 'collaborative project' as the unit of analysis is that collaboration is not only an observable phenomenon which can be a means of scientific description and explanation, but it is also an *ethic*, and one with powerful normative force in contemporary, secular society. Having a concept which is both a unit of analysis for science and a secular ethical norm gives it a special place in social science and its practical application, particularly in sciences such as economics, jurisprudence and sociology whose subject matter is ethical life.

For example, economic science assumes that economic agents will act 'rationally' within the bounds of the information available to them at the time. But the definition of 'rational' assumed by economic science is contrary to the ethics of large sections of social life. When governments make policies and laws based on a conception of what is ethical, then such laws function so as to *propagate* the ethic which is built into the science. This process, which has gone on since governments began to take policy advice from economists in the 18th century, has had deleterious effects on human welfare.

In 1981, Alasdair MacIntyre published *After Virtue*, which, despite the fact that MacIntyre had converted to Catholicism in 1980, became a reference point for secular ethics. MacIntyre situates ethical norms in 'practices' which he understands much as I understand 'projects': "Every activity, every enquiry, every practice aims at some good" (1981, p. 139). MacIntyre distinguished between 'internal goods' "realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity" (1981, p. 175) and 'external goods' such as prizes, monetary rewards and wages which are used to sustain the practice, and are associated with the transformation of the form of practice into an institution. In this connection,

MacIntyre refers to the "corrupting power of institutions" (1981, p. 181). For MacIntyre also, the concept of 'project' extends from the organizations such as a school or hospital to entire political communities, "concerned with the whole of life, not with this or that good, but with man's good as such" (1981, p. 146). The virtue ethics which MacIntyre builds on this conception of social life is precisely consistent with the 'project' approach to Activity Theory.

One qualification to MacIntyre's ethical project which is important to the task at hand is Agnes Heller's (1987) contrast between the sense of equality which prevails within the 'dense ethos' uniting participants in a project, and the 'loose ethos' which characterizes the marketplace of public intercourse. Heller observes that the obligation to treat others as equals is not universal. While we are obliged to treat equals equally, within the practices of an institution 'equals should be treated equally and unequals unequally' – the boss gets paid more, managers give orders to subordinates, parents bear the burdens of care for their children, etc. Utopian dreams notwithstanding, there is no real project within which equality is truly the norm. Consequently, Heller points out that the ongoing displacement of the formerly dense ethos of institutional life by the loose ethos of modernity which underlies MacIntyre's concerns is *not* a regressive development. However, the critical problem of developing a universal ethos which can sustain a genuinely human life still lies before us. Since human freedom can only be attained through mediated self-determination, *i.e.*, participation in projects, the ethics of *relations between projects* must be central to our concerns.

Finally, I will briefly touch on discourse ethics (Habermas 2001) which requires that "all those affected" be counted as participants in a discourse. This requirement is not only vague and abstract, but untenable. Who decides who is affected, and how exactly does someone remote from the discourse participate? But more significantly, what are the discussants *doing together* which gives a purpose to the discourse? Seyla Benhabib (1992) reminds us that "discourse ethics ... is not to be construed primarily as a *hypothetical* thought process, carried out singly by the moral agent ... but rather as an *actual* dialogue situation." Moral maxims based on the hypothetical interests of a generalized other are meaningless. To be meaningful at all such an ethics presupposes state or supra-state institutions, as representatives of the generalized other, to mediate social action, which is an unwarranted restriction on the moral standpoint. Rather, the real relations between any two individuals is given by the projects in which they collaborate, whether that 'collaboration' entails cooperation or conflict over the object. Collaboration is a strong ethical norm, but encompasses a complex variety of nuances according to the mode of collaboration. The complex ethics entailed in consultation, attribution, privacy, sharing, ownership, division of labor, consistency, and so on, provide a real basis for the construction of an ethics for the modern, secular world.

One of the corollaries of Benhabib's (2002) approach is that the concept of nation-state has to be disentangled into the several distinct projects which are conflated in the notion which has pertained since the Treaty of Westphalia. This is task which can only be resolved by a social theory which takes projects and not abstract general categories as its basic units.

Methodological Individualism and Dichotomies in the Social Sciences

Every science has for its foundation one concept, either a 'unit of analysis' which characterizes the smallest entity which constitutes a whole in the theory, or a 'system concept' of a multitude of such units, a 'molar unit', constituting its conception of the *Gestalt*.

The unit of analysis for many human sciences, especially those in the analytical tradition, is the individual person. And for the most reductive strands of psychology and medicine generally the individual is also the *Gestalt*. The raising of a person by this or that family, into this or that historical epoch, speaking this or that language, are taken to be external, contingent processes, like the pressing of wax into a mold. Alongside the concept of the individual is a system concept of the 'social group', the unit for the social sciences, generally conceived of as an aggregate of individuals sharing some attribute in common, be that ethnicity, place of residence, gender, age, occupation, income or whatever. But for a growing body of human science, this analytical approach is unsatisfactory.

Accordingly, twentieth century researchers introduced a range of system concepts for social interaction: discourse, activity, genre, language game, frame, tradition, figured world, activity system, idioculture, social formation, network, ideology, ideological apparatus, field, habitus and so on. All such conceptions provide insights into the formation of the human mind, but rarely extend to considering the collectives represented in the relevant 'system concepts' as themselves *units*, subject to transformations and interaction with *others*.

Likewise researchers with a broader resolution took nation, state, market, community, economy, culture, people, social class and so on as objects of study. As Sylvia Scribner observed:

> "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." (1985, p. 140)

'Methodological collectivism', which takes such suprahuman entities as its units must take for granted the nature of individuals acting out the behavior of the collective, which in turn can only be the subject of abstract empirical description. Either a logical circle in which the individual – a parody of a real human being – behaves as required to reproduce the macrophenomena, or a logical circle in which *descriptions* of the collective are elevated to the status of laws *governing* the collective.

The 'rational economic agent' of economic science, for example, cannot withstand criticism from the standpoint of psychological science. The results are even more desultory when this parody of the human being is extended for example to social movement theory. This is the case with most American social movement theorists who try to understand the actions of individuals in relation to social movements in terms of individuals pursuing individual goals and performing a cost-benefit analysis as they do so (Jamison 1991, p. 24ff). Such approaches treat human beings as automatons, and lack any defensible ethical insight into what motivates human life. Outside the boundaries of his or her own discipline, the scientist most often resorts to folk conceptions of the smaller or larger unit of analysis, as the case may be – a simple boundary condition

beyond the horizon of critique. A concept is needed which is concerned equally with how a person's mind is shaped by their social situation and cultural context, *and* how social formations and cultural constellations are shaped by the actions of individuals. The same concept must facilitate scientific investigation at *all* levels of aggregation.

Such a concept must meet certain requirements. It must be able to represent a self-sufficient *Gestalt* of social life at the individual level, the meso-level with which 'project' is normally associated in common parlance, *and* the cultural-historical level. It must embody movement and change, not some functional or structural conception of 'dynamic equilibrium'. And it must capture both how the individual human psyche is determined by a person's social situation *and* how individual persons participate in real social change. Finally, it must express both a viable ethical conception of modern life *and* a unit of scientific analysis for the formation of modern life and its conduct.

Such a concept is the collaborative project.

'Project' may be understood just as it is understood in books on 'project management' written for engineers and producers in the arts and sciences. It also encompasses 'life projects' which form the core of a person's identity, and projects in the sense of historical projects such as nation-building, the Enlightenment, Science and so on.

Such a conception must give maximum scope for the co-formation of individual persons and the forms of life to be lived by those persons. By taking 'project' as a unit of analysis a number of other notorious dichotomies become manageable. For example, if we replace the concept of 'social structure' with that of a world as a fabric woven from interacting projects, and at the same time, understand that a project is the only possible manifestation of the human will as a collective will, then the agency/structure dichotomy can be resolved. If we understand that the object of a project is immanent within the development of the project itself, real unfolding of which is equally a learning process, then there is no dichotomy between development and immanence. There is no quandary between determinism and contingency, because in commitment to projects the individual's life is itself a determining factor. Because projects both create and instantiate concepts, and are therefore, like actions, are both subjective and objective, the ancient dichotomy between subject and object is no longer problematic.

The study of collaborative projects is open to any method of analysis, be it discourse analysis, behaviorism, rational choice theory or whatever. The are no axioms for projects; the insights from any of the approaches to understanding social action can contribute to the study of projects. In this way, the wall between the various analytical approaches can be broken down, by shedding light on the nature of a formation of human action which in turn can function as a unit at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of human life.

'Project' as a unit of Activity and as a starting point for Activity Theory is an interdisciplinary concept for the following reason. A project is the focus for an individual's motivation, the indispensable vehicle for the exercise of their will and thus the key determinant of their psychology *and* the process which produces and reproduces the social fabric. Projects therefore give direct expression to the identity of the sciences of the mind and the social sciences. Projects belong to both; a project is a concept of both psychology and sociology. Social and political theory resting on the concept of 'project' is humanist because it gives realistic expression to the agency of individuals in societal affairs and concrete content to social relations.

The Project conception of the Person

Cultural-Historical Psychology and Activity Theory (CHAT) is a rich and living tradition of research and education across a wide range of psychological disciplines: psychology, psychotherapy, vocational training, counseling, education, child development as well as meso-level disciplines such as town planning, community development, work organization, etc. Everything that has been established within this scientific tradition stands with the adoption of 'project' as the unit of activity. To a great extent, the present exercise is the *extension* and *strengthening* of Activity Theory in those disciplines which deal with human beings en masse. But nonetheless, 'project' as a unit of activity contributes new insights to our conception of the individual person and the psyche and enriches the work already done by CHAT researchers.

The unit of a social group is an individual, but the unit of a project is an *action*, just as the unit of an activity is an action. A project is constituted by the actions of different people at different times, whilst individuals participate in different projects. 'Project' is not another name for a 'group'. A project is an aggregate of actions, a unit of social life.

It is a common criticism of psychology that emotion and reason are treated as two distinct processes, independent of one another, and many theorists have considered how to 'connect' reason and emotion. But if we begin from actions, actions whose meaning and value are manifest in the project of which they are a part, then before cognition or emotion can be abstracted, we have something which is neither emotion nor cognition but which underlies both. It is only by means of reflection that the affective and cognitive aspects of an action can be abstracted from one another. But the project is the source both of motivation for action and conception of the means by which the end may be attained. Participation in collaborative projects therefore provides for the unity of cognition and emotion and their subsequent differentiation.

There are many theories of identity and some CHAT researchers locate the source of identity in the projects a person is committed to and in the roles a person takes in pursuance of the project. This leads us to a humanist conception of identity, which is in contrast to structuralist theories of identity based on difference and likeness. A person's identity is that central, concrete project (or narrative) which is realized and concretized through a person's life, subsuming the diversity of projects to which a person commits themselves over their lifetime: furtherance of their family, a profession, national or community goals, and so on. So a person's identity is not just formed *by* collaborative projects, it *is* a collaborative project. Projects create selves at the same time as they create social bonds.

A central and defining aspect of the personality is the will. Growth from infancy to adult citizenship entails the development of self-mastery and a will moderated by consciousness of one's social position. Exercise of the will is in principle possible only through collaborative projects – the person as a sovereign subject comes into being only thanks to communicative self-determination achieved in the realization of shared goals in collaboration with others. The study of projects provides insights into the formation of will. As human beings are formed as sovereign subjects, so also are the social bonds which will sustain them formed. Mental problems, if not resulting from injury or disease, can generally be traced to the frustration or failure of projects or the person's collaboration in them, or in conflicts between projects themselves or a person's commitments to projects, or exploitation of a person's commitment to a project in the 'thick ethos' prevailing within a project. Understanding personal crises therefore leads

directly to a consideration of the projects to which they are committed and their position within those projects.

Even the conception of knowledge is radicalized by the project approach. Knowledge as it is usually offered in schools nowadays is a fragmented mosaic of disconnected material, grouped in subject areas, reflecting the fragmented character of modern capitalist society. In the project approach, knowledge is seen as practical, taking the form of problem/solutions at this or that point in the realization of projects to which a person may be committed. Knowledge in this conception expresses a person's capacity to change the world. This different conception of the mind reflects a different conception of social life.

The Project conception of Social Life

Generally speaking, for the dominant currents of social theory, the unit of a social formation is taken to be a *social group*, and the unit of the social group an individual. Fear, antipathy or indifference to outsiders may be explained in terms of 'difference' – people of one social group distrust or fear others speaking a different language, looking different, adopting different norms of dress, etc. This approach (which has a sound enough basis in both casual observation and social theory) leads to a picture of the political community as a kind of mosaic of distinct groups, cemented into fixed positions, held together if at all, by residual shared attributes, or at best by mutual interest and exchange. There exist any number of theories, some of them very powerful, which explain how such social groups cohere and reproduce themselves over generations. Some theories, such as that of Bourdieu (1979), see social groups as actively constructed by their members, rather than as abstract general categories, but even in such cases the individuals remain trapped in a social structure whose dynamics lie beyond their horizon of action. But Activity Theory sees a social group as but the *product* of a project, as the *appearance* of a project at one stage in its development. The representation of social formations in terms of social groups (however defined) is abstract and static. Social structure and especially social *change* can only be grasped by means of the concept of 'project'. Equally, social structures can only be properly understood through the process of their formation and change. A coherent community is an integral fabric, woven together by projects: not a quilt of multi-colored patches, but a rich and moving tapestry of diverse intertwining threads. The personality and identity of every individual is formed through the multiplicity of projects to which they are committed and through which they have fashioned collaborative relations with others.

In political life, the social form in which world-transforming projects can manifest themselves is historically circumscribed. In my essay "Forms of Radical Subjectivity" (2003), I traced the particular forms of collaborative self-consciousness through which projects have formed themselves since the advent of modernity. "Radical subjects" are those projects which have identified themselves as Other to the dominant social subject and set out to overthrow existing social conditions. These forms have been, in succession: the spontaneous uprising, the secret society, the class-based movement, the mutual aid association, the (Paris) Commune, the mass political party, the workers state, the popular or united front, the national liberation front, new social movements (such as the Civil Rights and Women's Movements), the more ephemeral protest movements, identity politics and, more recently, alliance politics. Each successive form sublates and subsumes those forms which have preceded it: the front presupposes the party, the alliance more often than not is made up of 'affinity groups', a.k.a., secret societies, etc..

Each form, as it is overtaken by later forms, continues to exist within and beside the new forms of subjectivity. In each case the mode of collaboration is adapted to the social and political landscape of the time. Conditions of civility, freedom from repression, social cohesion, the available means of communication as well as the distribution, resources and existing forms of activity among the radicalized social layers all determine that projects for radical change will adopt different forms of 'cognitive praxis' (Jamison & Eyerman 1991) in different historical circumstances.

Writing in the 1920s and '30s, at a time when the tactics and strategy of the workers' movement in Europe was facing a crisis, Antonio Gramsci (1937/1971) addressed himself to the problem of the formation of a *collective will*. In particular, he saw the need for workers to form themselves into a project with a consciousness that would transcend their own 'corporatism' (*i.e.* fraternity to their immediate peers) and establish relations of solidarity and collaboration with other workers and other sections of the community, notably the peasants in the South of Italy and intellectual fellow travelers. Gramsci's approach to social problems, like the project approach advocated here, does not take social interests and social consciousness as given, but rather as processes to be developed in *praxis* (*i.e.* critical activity). Gramsci took as his inspiration Machiavelli's *The Prince*. According to Gramsci, in the modern age of mass politics, the Prince is not any concrete or even ideal individual, but rather a utopian image which can only be instantiated by a 'party' – in the broadest sense of an organized faction of society – or more precisely, a 'project'. The Prince is the realization of a collective will, which Machiavelli had personified in the image of the ideal political leader. The modern Prince entails the immanent formation of a "philosophy of praxis": a coherent world view that emerges from the mutual interpenetration of everyday class practices and philosophical critique. In order to consolidate the working class social movement, Gramsci recognized the need for internal differentiation of directive, cultural, and technical functions within the class project. However, he also emphasized that if the Prince is to be an emancipatory power, 'dialectical pedagogy' – *i.e.* a reciprocal and democratic relation between the educators and the educated – is required.

A central problem for activism and political struggle today is the modalities by which distinct projects (social movements or institutions) may lend aid with one another or enter into alliance to gain some specific objective. Collaboration is the birthplace of creativity (John-Steiner 2000), and new developments of all kinds very often arise through the penetration of one project by another or the formation of a collaborative alliance between projects. There are three basic ways in which one project may lend assistance to another project.

Colonization: In this scenario, another subject is rescued by subsuming their activity into one's own project. The aim may be exploitative, but may also be philanthropic. As a result the colonized subject no longer controls its own destiny and to one degree or another must abandon its self-consciousness, ideals and norms, in return for survival.

External Reward (or Exchange): In this scenario, the labor of another subject is incorporated into the subject's own project by offering external rewards (see MacIntyre 1981, p. 181), such as wages, prestige, trade or reciprocal support in their own project. Cooperation for mutual benefit is encompassed by this mode. This leaves the other subject free to pursue their own object, and may even gain resources for that purpose while providing resources for the 'host' project. But this is an arm's length relationship

which leaves the independence of both subjects intact and does not generate a relationship of genuine collaboration or reciprocal critique.

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 the other's direction. Solidarity is the opposite of philanthropic colonization, because in assisting an other, the other remains the owner of the project and is thereby assisted in achieving self-determination. The project lending solidarity sacrifices part of its autonomy for the benefit of the struggling project and creates the basis for trust and mutual understanding, thereby opening the way for a creative alliance based on collaboration.

Given that social movements (and projects generally) set out to change social practices, social movements must transform institutions. This may entail abolishing or overthrowing an institution, but almost always the aimed-for transformation is achieved by forming an alliance with at least a section of the institution and ultimately the institution itself, facilitating the institution's self-transformation. In the project approach, an institution is a project: *a social movement which has become mainstreamed*. In this view an institution is not simply a practico-inert (Sartre 1960), but an arena within which an institution has the potential to re-discover its concept and reform itself. Scientists do not become scientists and work long hours in the laboratory just to get good pay, travel opportunities and prestige, even if on a day-to-day basis, as individuals, they are motivated by these goals. According to Activity Theory participants in an activity have an understanding of the motive of the activity, even if it figures only mediately in setting their day-to-day goals. Jamison's (1991) otherwise excellent approach to social movements falls down where he sees the objectification of a social movement in institutions as simply the 'break-up' of a social movement as part of its decline and fall. But as former social movements, institutions are always open to a 'paradigm shift' to use Kuhn's (1962) very apt expression. Because different projects have different norms of action, belief and meaning, any kind of alliance generates friction and often misunderstanding, the norms of an institution or social movement flow from its self-concept and have meaning which transcends immediate misunderstandings.

Yrjö Engeström (2001) has theorized the process of mutual transformation of 'systems of activity' (i.e., projects) through the idea of a 'shared object'. In Engeström's approach an object is formed through the collaboration of two distinct systems of activity which orients both activity systems.

The project conception of economic Life

With the emergence of the modern era, bourgeois (civil) society rose up in the gap which opened up between family and state. It has given us a domain in which the ethic of exchange is dominant, rather than collaboration and command. Economics may give us scientific knowledge of economic activity by taking as its unit of analysis the exchange of commodities. This is all very well, but critics have pointed out that exchange of commodities fails to take account of 'externalities', in particular the natural and social pre-conditions for economic life. But even *within* its own domain, economics covers only a fraction of the activity through which people's needs are met by social labor.

The project approach takes the *company* as the unit of analysis of capital, and it takes the company to be a project. That is, a unit of capital is a social relation, specifically a

project whose object is the expansion of capital by putting commodities into circulation and withdrawing money at a profit. The measure of capital – the 'molar' unit of value – is the proportion of the total social labor which is commanded by the company. In general, a company is constituted as a project through instrumental, symbolic and practical objectification so as to command labor from which profit can be accrued and accumulated.

But companies (or more broadly, 'corporations', including statutory and not-for-profit enterprises which are active within the economy) are far from being the only projects active in economic life. Further, companies have an internal life of their own which is not based on the ethic of exchange. There are three basic modes of collaboration which constitute labor activity as projects.

Command: this is the dominant relationship existing within companies (or not-for-profit projects), constituting the line management. The stream of command begins with a Board of Directors or CEO (legally, the "directing mind" of the company) and flows along with funds down the tree to the 'coal face' employees. Command is a strong archetypal mode of project collaboration which has characterized projects from nation-states to families down the centuries. It is a limiting case of collaboration: a *non-collaborative mode of collaboration*.

Exchange: this is the dominant relationship in the marketplace, but is increasingly found within commercial projects with the use of one-line budgeting, out-sourcing, franchising and so on. This is the other limiting, *non-collaborative mode of collaboration* in which each party retains its independence and formal equality by regulating the relationship through payment or exchange. The flow of command is accompanied by the flow of money, but the parties retain their freedom to refuse.

Collaboration: this is the relationship which predominates among the productive employees of a company as well as within the 'directing mind' of a company. In both cases, 'working together', consultation, mutual critique, sharing work and attribution are the norms. Profit-making companies rely on the collaborative labor not only of their employees during working hours, but of the working class communities who collaboratively produce the labor power made available for exploitation.

In the market, command and collaboration are subsumed under exchange, while within companies, collaboration and exchange are subsumed under command, and in the voluntary sector, normally exchange and command are subsumed under collaboration. A complete picture of economic activity is possible only by recognizing the mutual subsumption of these three modes of collaboration, including both normative collaboration and 'non-collaborative' modes of collaboration, which are normative within hierarchical organizations.

For all its faults, 'social capital' research (Coleman 1990, Putnam 2000) has demonstrated that modes of collaboration other than exchange are amenable to quantification, and confirms that projects other than companies need to be considered to get a full picture of economic life and its preconditions. A project-based approach has the potential to introduce some clarity into 'social capital' research which currently lacks a rigorous foundation. The same holds for corporate law and the legal theory surrounding corporate action generally. As MacIntyre pointed out: "Every moral philosophy has some particular sociology as its counterpart" (1981, p. 209), and the same is true of Law.

This conception of the three paradigmatic modes of interaction between projects also encompasses A. N. Leontyev's conception of the "merely understood" and "really effective" motives in psychology. For example, if a child is *commanded* to do their reading, seeking to commit the child to this project which is important for their development, the child resists, and does not embrace the motive of completing the reading. Then the child may be offered in *exchange* for doing their reading that they can go and play with their friends. This creates an "external" commitment to the reading project. But a genuine *collaboration* between teacher and child in which the child is motivated to read, does not arise from rewards, even rewards closely connected to the task. The child has to discover the task's value in relation to existing "really effective" motives. Collaboration is possible only when the effective and merely understood motives coincide.

Summary

'Project' may function as a unit of analysis for activity in a range of disciplines from psychotherapy to political science and historiography, because *one and the same concept* may be used in each discipline. 'Project' is not just a metaphor or a polysemous word, whose meaning is different in different contexts, but a genuinely interdisciplinary concept. 'Project' functions explicitly to theorize *the connection between human actions and the societal context* in which individual actions are meaningful. Since no social phenomena are possible other than through the actions of individuals, and no meaningful individual action is possible other than in and through the larger cultural and historical context of action – the concept of 'project' is applicable in all the human sciences. The concept of 'a project' is a further development of the concept of 'an activity' developed by A. N. Leontyev, or 'system of activity' developed by Yrjö Engeström and others based on cultural-historical research in psychology by many thousands of researchers, and facilitates bringing the entire tradition of Activity Theory to bear on a wide range of subject matter beyond the normal disciplinary bounds of psychology.

THE CONCEPT OF PROJECT

A 'project' is *an activity*, that is, a *unit* of activity, and as such is the basic concept of Activity Theory. To say 'collaborative project' is simply to emphasize that 'project', as the basic relation which brings people together, is not a common attribute, but a commitment to a common aim.

Activity Theory has its roots in Classical German philosophy especially that of Hegel, in particular as appropriated by Marx, as set out in *Theses on Feuerbach*. The proximate source of Activity Theory is the Cultural Psychology of Lev Vygotsky. On these foundations, A. N. Leontyev first set out a framework for Activity Theory, elaborated, for example, in *The Development of Mind* (2009) and *Activity, Consciousness and Personality* (1978). These foundations were further developed by a number of Soviet writers, by Yrjö Engeström with his *Learning by Expanding* (1987) followed by numerous journal articles and book chapters, and separately by a number of researchers in Europe.

An activity or project is an aggregate of actions, so the conception of a project rests on the conception of an *action*. In Activity Theory actions are both subjective and objective – behavior is not abstracted from consciousness. Consequently, an aggregate of actions

is also equally objective and subjective. Implicit in the concept of 'action' is that actions are artifact-mediated; that is, all actions are effected by means of tools or symbols meaningful within the project and usually within the wider culture. Consequently, activities are also inclusive of the material conditions they both create and presuppose.

Activity Theory with 'project' as the concept of 'an activity' is continuous with all the research conducted in this scientific tradition and incorporates its insights. Briefly, the concept of an activity which was first formulated by A. N. Leontyev, can be defined as follows:

> "Activity is a molar, not an additive unit of the life of the physical,
> material subject. In a narrower sense, that is, at the psychological level, it
> is a unit of life, mediated by psychic reflection, the real function of which
> is that it orients the subject in the objective world.." (Leontyev 1978)

'Molar' means a large mass of material of some quality, in contrast to 'molecular' which means the smallest unit of material of some quality. The concept of a molar unit originated in German Romanticism and is reflected in almost every action and thought of a human being – which is not directed towards its immediate object and result but always to some relatively distant motive. Nonetheless, 'molar unit' is a concept with which modern social science has a great deal of trouble. In Activity Theory there is nothing in an activity other than human actions, and this is a thesis with which contemporary interactionist theories would be in agreement, eschewing recourse to biological determinism, religious or structural fatalism or any other force outside of human action as determinants of human life. But because there is nothing other than human actions to be found in an activity this does not mean that an activity is simply the additive sum of actions. In fact, the activity is generally a *precondition* for any of the component actions which instantiate it: when we act we do not generally *create* an activity, we *join* it. So Activity Theory recognizes that there are aggregates of actions which have a unity of their own for which, as the saying goes, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The question then is *what is it that gives an activity its unity*?

An activity is defined by a universal, societal concept of its object, instantiated in its principal symbols and name. Individual participants may be aware of the motive of the activity in which they are participating, but its meaning for them, and their motive for participation in the activity, is individual. The harmonization of the contradiction between societal and individual needs is resolved by the development of a social division of labor and a societal system for the circulation and distribution of the products of labor. Each individual action is motivated by a goal which may not be the same as the motive of the activity which it realizes. An individual action which serves an individual's goal, such as "Go to point A," realizes the motive of the activity of a large number of individuals thanks to a social division of labor and a socially produced means of the supervision of labor.

The above outline has a number of problems chief among which is that its context was a planned economy such as was known to the Soviet writers, and it does not extend well to life in the capitalist world, or for that matter, to any really existing 'planned economy'.

Yrjö Engeström freed Activity Theory from some of the shortcomings of this first model, introducing his 'expanding model' of activity. Here the elements mediating subject and object are introduced at the 'ground floor', so to speak, of analyzing an activity. The subject and its object are mediated by instruments and the community. In

turn the relation between the subject and the community is mediated by norms and rules, and the relation between the community and the object of the activity is mediated by a division of labor. Engeström thus introduced into the concept of an activity, explicit consideration of the culturally produced artifacts used in the activity, the community engaged in the activity, and the norms and division of labor. Engeström describes this model as 'expanding' because each mediation arises in response to contradictions and an iterative process of new mediations and new problems bring about an expansion of the activity system and changes in the object.

What the notion of Project is intended to do is to bring the concept of an activity back to a simple concept which can also mobilize everyday meanings, and at the same time give greater emphasis to the dynamic nature of activities and a vision of the social fabric in which the unlimited agency of individual human beings is manifest. To this end two important concepts of Hegel have been brought to bear, namely the concept of immanence and Hegel's mediation of the molar/molecular relation in a logical concept.

How is the relation between a project and its object to be understood? If we take the object to have an independent, objective existence, then we are left with a number of problems. Is the object to be determined by the Central Committee or does it suffice to say simply that it arises from human activity in the past? An aim or 'human need' cannot be added to an activity otherwise lacking in motive, and nor can an activity added to a pre-existing need. The objective of a project is *immanent within the project itself.* The project arises in response to some contradiction or problem within some social situation, but the object cannot simply be conceived of as "to solve problem X." The problem stimulates efforts to find a solution but it is not in itself sufficient to form a concept (Vygotsky, 1934/1987, p. 126). Quite different, even mutually hostile projects may arise to solve one and the same problem. The formation of a project with a concept of the problem is an original and creative social act. From that time forward the project, with its aim, continues to develop according to its own logic, so to speak. Where a project may 'end up' cannot be determined in advance. The plot unfolds according to its own dynamic and through interaction with the wider community. This is what is meant by immanence.

How can we understand the relation between the motivation of individual actions on one hand, and on the other hand, the immanent objective of the project which forms the unifying principle of the project uniting all the disparate individual actions into a single activity? Hegel resolved this problem in his solution to the problem of the subsumption of any number of individual actions under a concept, but there is no criteria other than the concept itself determining this subsumption. The relation between an action and the project which gives to the action its rational meaning is the same as the relation between any individual discursive act and the concept which it instantiates, and the same as the relation between any individual thing and the category under which the thing is subsumed. The relation between the individual and the universal is mediated by the particular, that is by praxis, and is not to be conflated with the subjective-objective relation which is a quite distinct relation. The universal has no separate existence, but exists only in and through its particularization by individuals.

It is the failure to grasp this conception which has meant that interactionist discourses fail to see the forest in their fascination with the trees. Attempts to replace the individual/universal relation with the categorization of individuals according to contingent attributes leads away from activity theory and projects to the theorization of

society in terms of social groups made up of like individuals – a truly postmodern, fragmented view of the world. Activity Theory with Project as a unit of activity can, on the contrary, grasp the real participation of the individual in the universal and the universal in the individual. But *any* research, not just Activity Theory, which sheds light on the dynamics of collaborative projects will contribute to the understanding of social cohesion and social change, and facilitate interdisciplinary research.

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