

9.1 Supplementary on Units

Since completing the book, as a result of teaching activity, I have realised that while every unit must be an activity, “an activity” is a general category. To function as a unit *of analysis* or germ cell for the purpose of analysing or intervening in some phenomenon, it is necessary that the unit be a specific *kind* of unit, and this in three distinct ways. Otherwise, analysis cannot produce a *concrete* concept of its subject matter.

9.1.1 Activity, Action and Operation

A unit must be either (a) an activity, that is, an aggregate of actions all oriented to realisation of the same motive. Consequently, the unit could be presented as the *object-concept* of the activity. In this instance, the activity may still be at some definite stage of its life-cycle, namely a social movement or some kind of institution. In the course of its development such a unit will however pass through different phases of its life cycle. The object can be specified quite concretely, for example, the health of people in Copenhagen, or the health of this clinic’s clients.

Or (b) the unit could be an action, that is, an activity whose object differs from its goal. In other words, the activity in question serves the motive of some larger, more inclusive activity. The action could be an action in the most definite sense of an action taken by one person, such as diagnose the patient, utter a word or to weld a piece of steel.

Or (c) the unit could be an operation, that is, an action which is not consciously controlled towards its goal, but is controlled by its conditions without conscious awareness. This equally refers to the routine operations of an institution or movement or to the momentary operations of an individual person.

9.1.2. Tool, Sign, Word, Land or Hand

To be unit of an analysis, the mediating artefact must be of a specific kind, even if it is not specified in particular (a) the activity in question could be an action or activity mediated by a *tool* towards some given goal, or (b) the activity could be a *sign*-mediated action. That is, the action does not act on material processes but on the mind of the self or other. Sign-mediated action is distinguished from the special case of *word*-mediated actions, that is, a spoken word meaning. Because speech co-originated with tool mediated actions in the origins of the human body, it has a special status. Sign mediated actions have evolved on the basis of technical (tool-mediated) activity.

A special case of tool-mediated action is a special case of where the tool is an element of Nature, such as the (d) *land*, sea, air or water cycle. All human communities have evolved on specific natural endowments, and the manner in which they use that land. For indigenous communities, the land has a special place as all elements of their culture are mediated by the land. Finally, (e) the human *hand* itself, as well as other parts of our body, co-evolved with speech and tool use in our evolution living off the land, and the human hand, a product of human labour is a unique mediating artefact, unlike any of the tools which have extended the power of the hand.

9.1.3. Artefact, Action or Object

Human beings have a habit of thought and activity in which an (a) activity is mentally, socially and linguistically *reified* as the (b) object or the (c) artefact of an action. For example, the unit of bourgeois society is really the *exchange* of commodities. But exchanges cannot be used or accumulated. Consequently, Marx said that the unit of bourgeois society (*i.e.*, a market) is not exchange of commodities, but the *commodity* itself. It is the presence of the commodity and our interest in acquiring, and using or accumulating commodities which is of interest. Consequently, Marx took not exchange, but the *commodity* as his unit. On the other hand, sometimes (b) the object, such as health care, is taken as the unit, irrespective of the type of action or activity which is used to achieve the object – a healthy personal life, a GP clinic, or a hospital.