

Introduction

Exploring Activity Across Education, Work, and Everyday Life

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INTRODUCTION

Clearly, there has been an international explosion of interest in theories of mind, culture, and activity over the last two decades. This interest is well founded. The traditions involved in this explosion speak to some of the most pressing and obvious challenges facing the social sciences. These include the increasingly inter-disciplinary nature of problem solving; the complexity of social systems; the role of technologies, tools, culture, divisions of labor, and other mediating factors; the role of cognition, social interaction, and learning; and, perhaps most importantly of all, how and why such systems – from classrooms, to schools, to organizations and beyond – undergo change. There are very few analytic traditions that offer so much to students, scholars, and perhaps even policy-makers. In this collection, theories of mind, culture, and activity are also rooted in a long and rich tradition of social criticism as well. These traditions have been recovered, developed, and expanded.

Today, there are flourishing journals, scholarly associations, conferences, and powerful research programs widely available. Reports, monographs, articles, books, and collections such as this one are circulating across international and linguistic boundaries more than ever before. However, despite this, and, in particular, despite the existence of several high-quality collections devoted to representing this explosion, there remain several important gaps that must be addressed. This collection seeks to respond to these gaps by posing, illuminating, and answering important questions that define these gaps in two principal ways.

First, each of the chapters in this collection represents an original and cutting-edge analysis in its own right. Many provide the grist for important new lines of research to be taken up and expanded. All authors orient to the concept of social cultural participation in relation to the concept of “activity.” Activity in this tradition is not used in the everyday, common-sense way, however. Rather, it is a specialized and, in fact, highly contested concept. To

begin with, it is defined as the minimal unit of analysis for the understanding of cognitive development, human participation, and change. It inherently contextualizes practice in cultural and historical terms. It is, in our view, the most comprehensive analytic framework for analyzing human practice and learning currently available. At its heart it affirms that all human practice is mediated by symbolic, cultural, and communal, as well as material, resources or tools; it is through these forms of mediation that human practice is understood as both dynamic and historical. This conceptual approach allows important, integrated forms of analysis. In this collection, for example, some authors explore activity vis-à-vis education and economy, and its relation to the reproduction of inequities and contradiction. Others examine activity in relation to the nature of work and learning processes, job design, and the institution of schooling as a workplace. And still others develop new understandings of activity in the context of everyday life. Importantly, one of the original contributions this collection makes to the corpus is that these varied topics have been carefully selected to generate additional “meta-level” observations. In other words, our chapters do not simply represent reports on discrete, unrelated phenomena. Rather, they offer a profile of, and insight into, an important “complex” of overlapping practices and institutions in contemporary society: Activity at school, at work, and in everyday life are connected forming a mutually dependent set of activity systems. We return to the interconnectedness of these foci at the close of this chapter, but suffice it to say here that, in this way, the collection seeks to penetrate and inform a broader societal debate over the nature of “knowledge economies” and, by now one of the most frequently discussed policy issues of all, “lifelong learning.”

The second gap to which this collection seeks to respond relates to the fact that, although application and development of the concept of “activity” have seen remarkable growth, and although many of the leading writers in the broad area of Cambridge’s “Learning in Doing” series have (albeit sporadically) noted the importance of recovering and evaluating the larger influence of the writings of Karl Marx on current and future research directions, as yet there exists no collection devoted to critical dialogues of this kind specifically. We seek to reflect seriously upon the importance and theoretical influences of what we refer to in the title of the book as a “critical perspective.” It builds more or less explicitly on the writings of Marx. Marx’s work was, of course, central to the genesis of theories of activity beginning with the work of Vygotsky, Leont’ev, Luria, and others in what has become known as the Cultural Historical School. Across our collection, contributors engage in critical exploration of Marx’s writings and concepts. Some authors examine the issues of Marx as a “founding influence.” Others explore specific concepts, including “estranged labor,” “alienation,” “relations of production,” “class consciousness,” “class struggle,” “ideology,” “labor process,” and theories of “value” – all original preoccupations of Marx and Marxist analysts since him.

The research observations and theoretical debates collected and initiated in this collection offer specific directions for research on mind, culture, and activity with empirically grounded arguments. But it is also our hope that the collection will ultimately benefit the development of the tradition as a whole whether people choose to pursue the directions mapped out or not. An important element of making a contribution to broader debates, as we've said, is inter-disciplinarity, and this collection is remarkably diverse. Inter-disciplinary dialogue is vital to anyone facing real, concrete challenges. To us, it seems clear enough that one doesn't solve complex problems in the real world by strict reference to any single academic discipline. Interestingly enough, in the first decades of the twentieth century, a significant feature of Marxism's broader appeal in the academy, political spheres and political parties, labour unions, and assorted working-class movements, was its multi-disciplinarity. At that time, in academia, scholars contributing to this research tradition working from the fields of economics, anthropology, history, and jurisprudence, as well as philosophy and sociology, were evident. In his work *Essays on the Materialistic Conception of History* (1908), Antonio Labriola commented,

[t]he various analytic disciplines which illustrate historical facts have ended by bringing forth the need for a general social science, which will unify the different historical processes. The materialist theory is the culminating point of this unification. (p. 149)

This "inter-disciplinary impulse" is an important point of similarity between Marxist scholarship historically and the Cultural Historical School today that we wish to develop further. We'll return to the importance of this multi-disciplinarity in relation to a critical, dialectical analysis in a moment, but in the case of this volume, we note that its genesis lay in dialogue between an educational scholar, a psychologist, and a sociologist. In turn, we each recognized the need to extend this impulse further as we included leading international scholars working from the fields of philosophy, anthropology, communications, industrial relations, and business studies as well.

A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE?

Within the field of mind, culture, and activity as a whole, there are important, recent predecessors to this book (e.g., Chaiklin, Hedegaard, and Jensen 1999; Chaiklin 2001; Robbins and Stetsenko 2002). Each is an important volume that has informed thinking for us and many others. For our purposes, an exemplar in this regard is Engeström, Miettinen, and Punamaki's *Perspectives on Activity Theory* (1999). That volume had as one of its explicit goals to collect diverse sets of scholarship that were often "hybrid" in nature. Contributors frequently combined a range of theoretical traditions in dialogical relation with Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Topics addressed there were wide-ranging and included sections devoted to

play, learning, and instruction, as well as technology and work. As a whole, that collection offered a concentrated primer in historical roots and current trends. Our volume can be thought of as a complement to that collection. As our title indicates, however, our unique contribution lies in its interest to express a type of “critical” perspective on activity and to recover, express, and press forward many of the original Marxist elements of the Cultural Historical tradition.

So, it is appropriate that we turn to the question of what exactly is meant by this notion of a critical perspective. In return, and by way of an answer, we pose what we see as an important question. Although much is said in the Cultural Historical tradition about context and history, why is it that the concept of capitalism, the contradictions inherent in the commodity form, conflictual social relations, and class struggle remain latent or, worse, ignored by so many scholars? Indeed, many of the most powerful and insightful contemporary writers in this tradition seem to prefer to speak of general principles that run across historical periods such as mediation, co-construction, and so forth. For us, although provocative, these are particularly abstract abstractions in the sense that, by omission, they deny a coherent statement about the particular kind of social, political, and economic – let alone historical – world in which we are, in fact, engaged.

Of course, we wish to be careful to avoid the impression of dogmatism. Indeed, it will become obvious that our collection does not programmatically eschew the contributions of non-Marxist traditions. Nevertheless, throughout we are persistent in claiming the importance of recovering Marxist and related critical elements, and more than that, pressing these elements into service for further development of future, international, and multi-disciplinary conversations. In this sense, we hope that our collection becomes an important resource for those wishing to engage with such perspectives whether, in the end, they apply them directly themselves or not. We begin, however, with a *prima facie* observation that Marx forms the central philosophical and social analytic root of the Cultural Historical tradition. We emphasize the need to go further than the otherwise correct observation that “a careful and critical study of Marx’s work” is necessary (Engeström, Miettinen, and Punamäki, 1999, p. 5). Indeed, for us, what is most remarkable about Marx’s work is not simply its role in the genesis of this tradition, but that it maintains an extraordinary power for understanding its future.

At the same time, frequently noted in activity-based scholarship is the overlap of CHAT with questions emerging from sometimes vastly different traditions. The debate over the meaning of activity is central to our book. So, whereas many authors have been both quick and insightful in noting and exploring the overlaps of CHAT with other intellectual traditions, we nevertheless suggest that there needs to be some clarification. Our claim is that the ultimate value of such overlaps, if it is to be something more than merely

intellectually fascinating, is to be found in integration within the rubric of a critical approach to activity rather than the other way around. At the very least, the re-assertion of original elements of activity in relation to a “critical” and/or Marxist perspective should be actively debated. Thus, in defining what we mean by the term “critical” in relation to the original germ cell of “activity” we propose a re-vitalization of Marxist analysis.

Given the preceding explanation, we can now more meaningfully state that by “critical” we mean approaches that ultimately have an interest in describing, analyzing, and contributing to a process of historical change and human betterment along the lines of Marx’s *Eleventh Thesis* on Feuerbach, that is, an emphasis on change with a clear-eyed understanding of the social, political, economic, and historical bases of material reality. Building on this basic idea, though, we recognize some differences amongst authors in the collection; we note their shared beginnings in this impulse as well as the recognition that there are dialectical contradictions at play in the various phenomena of interest. These contradictions are, of course, far from apolitical and far from irrelevant to the larger questions we face as a society. Thus, critical perspectives on activity understand that “revolutionary practice” is not limited in the least to overt political activity: It is activity that is historical, incorporating elements of fundamental individual and, necessarily, social change. Perhaps most apposite to our claim is the observation that the fundamental nature of this change, in the Marxist sense, is understood as the resolution of contradictions. As a form of politics, then, all activity is at its heart contested or conflictual; it is, in a phrase, deeply shaped by collective as well as individual struggle. Struggle, in our definition of “critical” is crucial. In this collection, we see the notion of struggle expressed in a variety of ways: as politicized, theoretical struggle to retain a means of understanding individuals, societies, and change processes; as struggle to argue for the relevance of Marx’s concern with the labor process (in school, higher education, as well as other workplaces); as a struggle to break down ideological boundaries between work and education, learning and everyday life, different forms of social consciousness, and forms of value creation; and most centrally, as struggle against inequities rooted in the diversity of class experiences and class-based organizations and social systems.

The question of defining a “critical perspective,” then, is rooted in dialectical thought. Dialectical thought, in the Marxist tradition, is defined by the union of “materialist” thought associated with the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment and Hegel’s dialectics, itself rooted in even older philosophical traditions. It seeks to break the boundaries between thought and ideology on the one hand, and concrete, material reality on the other by demonstrating their co-constitution: the dialectic of base and superstructure. As an analytic method, Marxist dialectics seems remarkably well suited to the contemporary, globalized context more often treating change as a given fact whereas dealing with apparent stability as something to be explained.

Although we cannot provide an extensive introduction to Marxist dialectics here, nonetheless, as a starting point for understanding our use of the term “critical” we must, at the very least, speak to some of its important general principles. To do this, we start by recognizing the significant challenges that ideological barriers create in any attempt to analyze and understand culture, institutional forms, and human development as a process of historical change. This is, after all, perhaps the first achievement of the concept of activity as it inherently challenges and, in turn, helps us transcend powerful ideological individualizing boundaries reflected in dominant understandings of human development and learning. Marxist dialectics, as a central element of this original thinking, is seen as a critical approach that allows us to question the ideological distortions embedded in dominant, taken-for-granted definitions. Does this mean we dismiss, for example, the notion of “institutions” as a mere ideological distortion? Hardly. Such categories or boundaries can be used critically when they are historicized and contextualized through the specific techniques of dialectical abstraction (e.g., Ollman 1993): a process ably demonstrated in the chapters of this volume. It is, after all, only through such forms of analysis that we can begin to assemble a sense of the overall societal or rather, societal–historical, picture, what is called in the language of this method, “totality.” Moving in the opposite direction of the well-known post-modernist refusal to acknowledge notions of totality, this collection adopts the assumption that a critical approach to human activity is impossible without a critical theory on capitalism as a “totality of many determinations and relations” (Marx, in Tucker, 1978, p. 237). Capitalist relations are not confined to economical fields of social practice. We all live and act as part of a totality named capitalism necessarily making us all part of the dialectical struggle between humanization (or emancipation) and alienation.

An expression of this impulse in third-generation CHAT scholarship, for example, is when we extend our exploration of local systems of activity (e.g., a classroom, a department in an organization, etc.) to the notion of *systems* of activity systems, each with dynamics of change and historical trajectories. Dialectics, as the likes of Marx, Ilyenkov, Ollman, and others have so consistently demonstrated, brings “ideas” under the yoke of analysis rather than the other way around. It is, in fact, a dialectical observation to say that ideas should be treated as artifacts: tools that mediate activity but which can also be re-made by people to allow us to change ourselves and our world.

Before concluding this section, it makes sense to briefly reference one final distinction of Marxist dialectics: the basic difference between philosophies of “external” and “internal” relations. To begin, first we acknowledge that an awareness of both internal and external relations is necessary. In the same way that Marx originally sought to conjoin idealist philosophy with concrete, material analysis, likewise a critical approach as we understand it

seeks to combine analyses of both internal and external relations, a form of anti-essentialism developed long before the ground was claimed by what is now known as post-modern social theory. Specifically, a strict philosophy of external relations focuses analysis on the interaction between two seemingly self-contained spheres, institutions, or fields of practice that may, in turn, interact to produce a third separate effect whereas the original two spheres remain largely unchanged. A philosophy of internal relations, on the other hand, allows an analytic focus on the nature of a particular part of a system as an element in relation to the whole, necessarily reflecting in it the central defining relations of the total socio-historic system, or totality. A philosophy of internal relations explores the nature of any single part deeply. It abstracts elements inherent in one analytic object through time, through the dialectical techniques of generalization, extension, contradiction, and the recognition of alternate standpoints (see Chapters 1 and 2 of Ilyenkov 1982; Part II of Ollman 1993).

To ground this explanation, a brief example suitable to the topic of the volume may be in order. For this we can look toward schooling. A philosophy of internal relation allows us to understand how schooling – in itself through individual testing, competition, differential reward systems, and so on – produces learning as a “credential” that is, at the same time, recognizable as a form of commodity. Students obtain credentials that have as one of their organizing features an exchange-value. In this way, claims about the nature of credentialism can be made on the basis of internal relations within the educational process, which also express a key relation defining the broader socio-economic system of capitalism. A key contradiction then becomes apparent. The credential-granting process is subject to the contradictions between use-value and exchange-value inherent in the commodity form. Use-value in the context of this example is what most students, parents, teachers, and administrators might understand as “education as valuable in itself.” This relation thus represents the classic “unity of opposites.” As most educators would agree – and as two of the chapters in this volume directly demonstrate – credential production as an “exchange-value” has increasingly come to govern its internally related opposite, educational “use-value” to produce a specific form of development on the basis of internal relations. The contradiction within this unity tells us a great deal about the struggle that goes on within the walls of every school under capitalism. At the same time, we cannot ignore external relations. In our example, schools as institutions have an important relation to the separate institutions of paid work and, more directly, labor markets. Tracing interactions between these separate spheres is an important element of understanding how the contradiction above plays itself out in the concrete.

As we’ve suggested, it will always be inadequate to try to provide a thumbnail sketch of the development of Marxism as a system of thought, let alone as a practical/political movement in this context and space. All the same,

one might still ask: What is Marxism? The answers, of course, have been the subject of volume upon volume of clarifications, refutations, and constructive development over the past 130 years. Perhaps the most often recognized and concise statement concerning the foundational elements of Marxism, as provided by Marx himself, is the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). The authors in this collection have not sought to re-hash what is already widely available; suffice it to say here that through the history of the corpus, we define Marxism broadly. It is a critique of political economy from the standpoint of the proletariat. It is also a specific form of dialectical analysis and a materialist conception of history and change. It is expressed, perhaps most simply, in the relations between “being” and “consciousness,” relations that the founders of activity research took very seriously indeed: that “being”, the sum total of material practice/production, is the root of historical change in relation to the super-structure of civil society, including “consciousness.” This relation according to Marx, lies in opposition to the Hegelian radicalism that privileged consciousness. To conclude, we might add that, in this broad definition, if there is a critique of other non-Marxist sciences, it is that, although not necessarily inaccurate, they are historically bounded by capitalism as a social, cultural, and economic period of history.

It is the purpose of this volume to collect applications of this type of critical perspective on activity across a number of social spheres. As Marx did, through his now-famous immersion in the governmental Blue Books of the British Museum and the social, political, and economic questions of the day, our collection seeks to understand, with the help of empirical resources, the real contradictions of the day leading to change. Marxist dialectics is not a generic theory of change. It is a theory of change that is rooted in actualities of particular historical epochs. In our current historical context, it is a theory of change within and beyond capitalism specifically.

MAJOR THEMES ACROSS THE COLLECTION

Following this introduction, Mohamed Elhammoumi’s Chapter 2, “Is There a Marxist Psychology?,” provides a fascinating account of the mind in action, an essay on the thinking through of key questions of Marxist psychology as well as Marxism as a whole – its past, present, and possible future. It is highly personal, shedding many of the clothes of confident appraisals, preferring good questions to partial answers, and thus serves well as our initial presentation. Elhammoumi begins noting the parallel between the methods of Vygotsky in arriving at his theory of higher mental functioning and Marx’s own method in the study of the development of human history. Returning to the historical roots of radical psychologists in discussions of the Austro-Marxist School, German critical theory, Freudo-Marxism, Pavlov’s

Materialism, Soviet Psychology, Frankfurt School, Berlin Critical Psychology, Western Marxist Psychology, and other forms of Materialist Psychology, Elhammoumi responds to a provocative question: Was Vygotsky the Feuerbach of psychology or was it Marx? Along the way, he emphasizes how Vygotsky's thinking obviously responded positively to the role of various social relations (social relations of production, social interaction, cooperation, collaboration, etc.) in individual development. Exploring the explicit Marxist questions Vygotsky entertained and the variegated tradition of Marxism more broadly, the author arrives at a focus that he argues may be crucial to the future of both. This focus is spatio-temporality, an issue that the author claims sets the limitations of Marx's own theoretical development. What are the inconsistencies in treatments of abstract and concrete labor, in treatments of "leisure time," in the dialectic of use-value and exchange-value, and so on? Theories of activity, in particular, are said to require an assessment of the forces of spatio-temporality if they are to become truly formative conceptions. Springing from such issues, among other important insights, is a radical re-engagement with notions of individuality, that is, the social production of the individual, understood by Elhammoumi as the "individual form."

Joachim Lompscher's Chapter 3, entitled "The Cultural-Historical Activity Theory: Some Aspects of Development," is the second chapter of our sub-section on "Theoretical Foundations." It presents an original, critical profile of the developmental history of CHAT with the hope of stimulating a further elaboration and debate. He begins with a grounded description of Vygotsky and collaborators, taking careful steps to show key theoretical origins and foci of work, including its divergent patterns of development amongst Vygotsky and Leont'ev specifically. Throughout, the author shows the key theoretical elements as they underwent development. He directly addresses the question of whether or not the works of Vygotsky and Leont'ev represent two different stages in CHAT development, an issue that contributes to an understanding of the overall relation of critical theories of activity to current scholarship. As Lompscher discusses, it is now known that Leont'ev did in fact write a private letter to Vygotsky, which openly argued for a return to earlier preoccupations that included the notion of collective human activity. Nevertheless, Lompscher concludes their work remains deeply intertwined with later work building on the earlier elements. Following this, Lompscher delineates schools and sub-schools of Russian and non-Russian CHAT research approaches, providing a detailed account of several works, some not widely available in the English translation, across a range of key concepts, covering the research of the three generations of Leont'ev scholarship and the work of Asmolov, Davydov, and others. By the end of the chapter, the author offers constructive directions forward for analyses in the CHAT tradition, highlighting the lack of careful consideration of the socio-technical and economic role of the forces of production,

namely computer technology and the Internet, as an underdeveloped area of research.

A key element of our opening discussions of CHAT theory is the concluding chapter of this section. Maria Célia Marcondes de Moraes' Chapter 4, "Epistemological Scepticism, Complacent Irony: Investigations Concerning the Neo-Pragmatism of Richard Rorty," offers a useful antidote to the free-flowing search amongst many CHAT researchers to find other traditions that offer more suitable paths of development than those already offered. The author takes on one that is, perhaps, most central to current discussions: neo-pragmatism. Moraes methodically affirms the importance of a dialectical, historical materialist reality in understanding activity that is, she argues, incompatible with the path that neo-pragmatism, as embodied in the work of Rorty, suggests. Moraes provides a searing assessment of Rorty's claims about knowledge and truth in the context of "hypercontextualism." Hypercontextualism in this context is said to reduce every knowledge and every ethical value strictly to conventions shared by people in a specific cultural set. In this sense, the knowledge is neither true nor false; it is only good or not good depending on its instrumental function; the truth is just something taken as true by people in a particular social practice. Importantly, this cultural relativism is considered by many to be the same as the Vygotskian conception of human beings as cultural and historical beings. But the real question is, can a Marxist theory such as Vygotsky's be connected with the pragmatic philosophical tradition? Moraes' critical analysis of Richard Rorty's philosophy is a contribution toward the negative. Moraes' contribution is a strong and persistent argument against the post-modernist appropriation of Vygotskian theory, addressing epistemological questions as well as the educational, ethical, and political consequences of Rorty's neo-pragmatism. It should give pause to those assessing theories of activity generally and especially those enthusiastically taking up the pragmatist tradition, including the writings of Dewey, Mead, and others.

Following our more general assessments of theories of activity, we move to our second sub-section on "Education." First in this section is Alessandra Arce's Chapter 5, "The Importance of Play to Pre-School Education: Naturalization Versus a Marxist Analysis." Here, we see a critical comparative perspective on play, pre-schooling, and child development in which she takes up the perspectives developed by Elkonin and Leont'ev from the CHAT tradition against the perspectives of Froebel. Her critique of Froebel demonstrates the problems associated with ahistorical and universalistic modes of analysis with a focus on naturalism or rather "primordialism." The significance of the comparison comes, first, in its careful analysis but also, perhaps in particular, when we note the "genetic role" that early theories of education and pedagogy had, and thus still have, within dominant conceptions of education. In other words, the history of education, specifically in the West, carries with it a lasting influence of such philosophies. Arce begins by agreeing