

## Critical Perspectives on Activity

The last two decades have seen an international explosion of interest in theories of mind, culture, and activity. This unique collection is the first to explicitly reach back to the tradition's original critical impulse within which the writings of Karl Marx played such a central role. Each author pushes this impulse further to address leading contemporary questions. The contributors include a diverse array of international scholars working from the fields of education, psychology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, communications, industrial relations, and business studies. The book is broken into three main sections – education, work, and everyday life. Each chapter builds from an analysis of practice and learning as social cultural participation and historical change in relation to the concepts of activity, contradiction, and struggle. This book offers insight into an important complex of overlapping practices and institutions to shed light on broader debates over such matters as the “knowledge economy” and “lifelong learning.”

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Explorations Across Education, Work, and Everyday Life  
Edited by Peter Sawchuk , Newton Duarte , Mohamed Elhammoumi  
Frontmatter  
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*Explorations Across Education, Work,  
and Everyday Life*

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*In memoriam,*

*Mario Golder & Joachim Lompscher*

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## Foreword

The historical development of the cultural–historical research tradition can be understood conceptually in a simple dialectic of “oral-written-oral.” From the 1920s through roughly the 1970s, persons actively engaged in doing research in the cultural–historical tradition were likely to be living in Moscow, to have studied in Moscow, or to have regular access to persons who were living or had studied there. In short, the dominant form for coming to understand and work with the cultural–historical tradition was to be engaged in dialogue with others who were working in this tradition. Starting in the 1970s, many translated and secondary texts became available in several different languages and later included online and course materials. At present, interpretation of written texts is the dominant form by which persons learn about the cultural–historical tradition, without necessarily having access to the participants of the oral tradition from the previous historical period. During this “written” period, awareness, interest, and acceptance of the cultural–historical tradition has grown internationally, without a corresponding dialogical interaction among its “readers.” There is now a considerable diversity in which aspects of the historical tradition are known, emphasized, and investigated (which explains in part the variety of its descriptive labels, such as socio-cultural, cultural–historical activity theory, socio-historical, and so forth).

The appearance of a new oral period is desirable, but dialectical logic does not require such a transformation. It depends necessarily on the actions of researchers who work in this tradition, as well as the conditions that have developed until now. An important step in this direction was the constitution of the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR) in 2002, reflecting the culmination of a process that started in the early 1980s and early 1990s, when researchers from the oral tradition started to organise conferences and scientific organisations. The integration of these organisations into ISCAR represents, in part, a commitment by active researchers to avoid the sectarian responses (observed all too often within both scholarly



and political traditions), in which persons with similar, minority views form semi-closed communities, differentiated and isolated from each other by subtle distinctions. ISCAR's commitment to open dialogue is reflected in the fact that "cultural and activity research" in ISCAR's name does not refer to anybody's current or previous research practice! In this way, ISCAR can be understood as an open invitation for researchers to further the development of the theoretical tradition by engaging in a living, dialogical practice, including an exploration and assessment of theoretical sources that have historically motivated its development. I hope that further historical developments will result in 2002 being recognized as the beginning of the dialectical transformation of the cultural-historical tradition from a written period to an oral period that has an interiorised understanding of the theoretical commitments that motivate the research tradition.

The significance of the present volume can be understood against the background of this brief sketch of the historical dynamics in the development of the cultural-historical research tradition. Productive discussions presuppose a certain amount of common knowledge and common assumptions about what issues and problems need to be investigated and discussed. Two related historical conditions noted before were the diversity of knowledge about the cultural-historical tradition and the disjointedness among partially overlapping networks of researchers who have been interested in the cultural-historical tradition. The volume makes many important contributions to realising a new oral period by addressing the relevance of Marx's ideas for the further development of the cultural-historical tradition. Despite the generally acknowledged significance of Marx's ideas in the historical development of the cultural-historical tradition, it is still rare to find texts in the cultural-historical tradition that explicitly address Marx's ideas in relation to research about concrete, historical practices (such as education, work, and play). This volume helps to address this seemingly paradoxical situation, with its inspiringly wide range of topics and themes that are being considered or oriented by a dialectical perspective, as well as several different disciplinary perspectives.

In relation to overcoming disjointedness, it is good to see that the authors in this volume come from North America, South America, and Europe and that most, but not all, have participated in research communities that have formed ISCAR. It is also encouraging to see new participants in this "multi-disciplinary set of conversations" (editors' introductory chapter in this volume), which is important in creating an oral tradition, and I hope this dialogue will continue with other participants, including colleagues from Asia, Australia, and Africa who are already prepared for such discussions.

Finally, in the spirit of contributing to a living dialogue, I hope that readers will explore these chapters critically (i.e., not to passively accept the texts as authoritative sources to be strictly followed). For example, it would have been useful if this volume confronted more directly how the term "Marxist"

is to be understood, including some explicit discussion about the historical political systems that have referred to Marx's thought as a main source of justification and guidance.

The focus of this volume on Marx may explain, in part, why Hegel is not also included for examination, despite the great significance of Hegel's work for Marx, for Vygotsky (who had a working knowledge of Hegel that was drawn into his own works), and more recently for Davydov, who drew from Hegel in his analysis of theoretical thinking. Hegel is not easy to understand, and many commonly accepted misunderstandings make it all too easy to dismiss his work with casual mention of such phrases as "idealist" or "mystical shell." A recognition of Hegel's significance in the cultural-historical tradition allows us to understand this tradition as a continuation of this dialectical tradition, both substantively and methodologically.

Personally, I think the cultural-historical tradition is part of a dialectical tradition synthesised by Hegel and further developed by many others, including Marx's monumental contribution of a concrete historical analysis of the dialectical logic of political economy. One advantage of characterizing cultural-historical research as being in the dialectical tradition is that one can be committed to the concerns of Hegel and Marx to understand the consequences of humanly created institutions for supporting or hindering full human development, while seeking analyses that aim to understand the conceptual logic in relation to which these institutions develop in their concrete histories, including critical evaluation and development of Marx's analyses.

The unity of cultural-historical research as a living research tradition must be created through a dialogue among the diversity of its participants – a dialogue both about existing texts and ideas – but also through formulation of ideas and issues that are not yet sufficiently interiorised that they can be exteriorised again in texts. This volume formulates ideas and issues that need to be explored and interiorised (through critical discussion) as part of the tradition's further development. In years to come, I hope these issues will also become part of the living dialogue in the rise of a new oral cultural-historical tradition.

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In volumes like this one, one often presumes a pre-existing, tightly knit community of scholars with a significant foundation of shared understanding and communication. Our volume, however, began with only a modicum of these things. Some authors we'd worked with for years; others not. However, in the process of our discussions with individual authors, the bases for what we've called a "critical perspective on activity" have clearly been fortified. For these discussions, and for their creative and engaged chapters, we need to thank the contributors. We would also like to acknowledge the fine work of the editorial staff at Cambridge University Press and especially Phil Laughlin, whose interest, insight, and foresight allowed this work to come to fruition.

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