

Alex Levant, Kyoko Murakami, Miriam McSweeney (Eds.)

Activity Theory

An Introduction

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“The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice.” (Marx 1969 [1888])

Forewords

My journey exploring this remarkable body of thought began through my research on the work of the philosopher Evald Ilyenkov. He developed an original materialist conception of “the ideal” – immaterial phenomena like mathematical truths, moral imperatives, concepts, rituals, and so on. In contrast to views of these phenomena as either mere social constructions based entirely on convention or eternal facts with truth-value independent of society, he saw them as products of human activity. For Ilyenkov, the ideal emerges from the ongoing practices of human beings, but it also acts as a blueprint that shapes future practice. Individuals encounter these ideal phenomena as having material force, even though they are human made. When detached from their grounding in human activity, they appear in reduced form, as either conventions or immutable facts. In contrast, Ilyenkov's perspective sees immaterial phenomena as neither arbitrary conventions nor eternal truths. Instead, they originate from collective human practice over time, while also guiding the activities of individuals in the present. This “activity approach” provides an original way of analyzing the emergence and power of ideal phenomena in social life.

Despite its highly theoretical origins, this approach that prioritizes activity as a means of understanding the genesis and nature of knowledge, has proven to be remarkably effective in practical applications. I was aware of its break-through in disability education in relation to the achievements of the Zagorsk experiment with deaf-blind children in the 1970s. (Please see chapters 1, 2, and 4, for details.) However, at that time I did not yet know how these ideas had spread beyond the Soviet Union and how they were developed in very different directions and applied in different fields. My work

on Ilyenkov brought me into contact with figures like Meshcheryakov, Vygotsky, and Leontiev (who coined the term “activity theory”), but at that time I was not yet aware of the contributions of Michael Cole and Yrjö Engeström, and the development of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). I became fascinated by its global proliferation and its application in such diverse fields as social movement theory, human-computer interaction, and even business management.

At the same time, I also noted some of the profound differences between how activity theory developed in the West and in Soviet philosophy and psychology. Reflecting on these differences, David Bakhurst writes: “While the latter saw the concept of activity as a fundamental category to address profound philosophical questions about the possibility of mind, activity theory in the West has principally become an empirical method for modeling activity systems” (2009, p. 197). Indeed, a reader familiar with activity theory through the work of Ilyenkov, Vygotsky, and other Soviet thinkers may find it surprising how their ideas have been retooled and applied in ways they could not have imagined. Nevertheless, regardless of their specific content, these real-world applications of activity theory highlight its power and remind us of its untapped potential. Moreover, it is important to also recognize, as we do in this volume, that, despite its focus on modeling activity systems, CHAT has also been applied to research oriented on larger political issues. Overall, as I wrote in “Two, three, many strands of activity theory!”: “I see activity theory as a broad tent, a theoretical tradition in the making... and I agree with Engeström and Miettinen (1999, 8) who write: ‘Activity theory should not be regarded as a narrowly psychological theory but rather as a broad approach that takes a new perspective on and develops novel conceptual tools for tackling many of the theoretical and methodological questions that cut across the social sciences today’” (p. 107).

It is the vast potential of this approach that drew me to this work. Today we find activity theory consisting of a loose-knit, eclectic body of theorists, working in various fields around the world. What

binds them is a common tradition rooted in a particular approach that has considerable, virtually untapped, methodological value for understanding social phenomena. Activity theory has vast potential for tackling theoretical and methodological questions cutting across the social sciences today, as it illuminates a special reality with a peculiar objectivity, which otherwise remains obscured. My hope is that this collection will contribute to the expansion and self-clarification of this tradition, facilitating its transformation into a method that can stand alongside other established research methods typically used in the social sciences.

Alex Levant, August 2023

The current book has undergone many different stages of development. It is an understatement that it has been a long, taxing journey, but I believe it is a worthy one. I joined this book project, first as a chapter contributor, then as a co-editor in 2020 together with Miriam McSweeney. It has been a privilege to be part of the editorial team as it gave me an opportunity to deepen my understanding of Activity Theory and to explore its potential beyond the way it is used. Looking back on my intellectual journey so far, it was the dialectical research tradition, underpinning sociocultural theory/CHAT that appealed to me. The perspective informed by this tradition steered from the problematic of the individual and shifted to the focus of the social and collective and its interface with the individual. It felt like a serendipity at the time, but it was not by coincidence that Activity Theory came to me. I ‘bumped’ into colleagues, who were taking the journey according to CHAT whilst my academic career took me to the CSAT (Centre for Sociocultural and Activity Theory) at the University of Bath, and to Denmark, the research group named PPUK (Person, Praktise, Udvikling, Kultur). I walked the CHAT road for however brief or long the shared paths lasted under our professional circumstances. In that juncture, Harry Daniels, Seth Chaiklin, Mariane Hedegaard and Katsu Yamazumi, amongst many others unnamed, were my dear ‘teachers’. Furthermore, I had the pleasure of learning from those

pioneering scholars interviewed and chapter authors in the editorial process. They are the teachers of otherwise inaccessible thoughts, Soviet philosophy for someone like me, who does not have an obvious Soviet or Russian connection. Working with the editors and chapter authors of the book, it felt as if pieces of the puzzle were being put together in terms of the history of Activity Theory, its theoretical development and empirical application to various social science disciplines.

Again, perhaps out of serendipity, the joining of the editorial team marked a special turning point in my intellectual journey which destabilised my thinking. It was now time for me to evolve. I am grateful that I met Alex Levant, the book's editor, in the seminar organised by Catharine Hasse, a contributing author, in 2015 in Copenhagen. As Alex says, CHAT research is prolific and global. One can become complacent with CHAT for what it is capable of and its powerful claims for transformation of practice and societies. Despite the ongoing critical debates about CHAT, the diffusion of CHAT research to other fields beyond psychology and education is astounding. Its practical application to understanding the process of how our practices in workplaces and classroom alike can be transformed for the better strikes a chord to many. One cannot keep being complacent with the legacy of CHAT and its popularity. Whilst working with the contributing chapter authors in this edited book project, I was keenly reminded of my own knowledge gap in the vast and profound theoretical tradition that Activity Theory embraces. To put it humbly, I gained the deepest insight into Activity Theory – its origin, history, development and potential for future advancement, by working with the contributing authors, especially in the way the theory was read and debated by philosophers. It is my earnest hope that this book will simulate, provoke and encourage debates and discussions by scholars, both emerging and experienced, together with research students, to sustain the activity theory approach and develop its potential in the widest possible way. For those educational and psychological researchers, no one theory solves the complex problems of humanity. Activity Theory is evolving, as shown by the chapter authors of the book, rooted in

a rich history, widening its scope and presenting more questions for theoretical advancement and empirical application.

Kyoko Murakami, August 2023

It was a curiosity about the cultural context in which I work that brought me to Activity Theory. I came to higher education as a lecturer having worked in the information technology industry. Working in a multi-campus environment I noticed there was a low and slow uptake of teaching and learning technologies among lecturers across different schools and campuses where I worked. I believed that the technologies themselves were not the problem but that something about the lecturers' work context may have been contributing to the complex phenomenon I observed. In a bid to understand how the cultural context might have been impacting on human thinking and activity I undertook my PhD journey at the University of Bath under Harry Daniels and Kyoko at the Centre for Sociocultural and Activity Theory. It was Harry and Kyoko who introduced me to Activity Theory. I had come from a background in Business and Information Technology and so I had a lot to learn about Soviet psychologists. My PhD studies brought me to Helsinki where I met with Yrjö Engeström and Annalisa Sannino and continued learning about Developmental Work Research (DWR) and the practical application of Activity Theory in a diversity of fields. I was more drawn to Activity Theory, particularly noting its potential as a framework from which a broad range of social contexts could be understood. Today, I can introduce my own students to Activity Theory as a conceptual framework in the fields of Business and Information Technology.

Kyoko introduced me to Alex and I was delighted when they invited me to join them in editing this book. It has given me a valuable opportunity to continue my journey with Activity Theory. The privilege of working with the contributing authors has been an insightful learning experience. The range of contributions signifies both the rich tradition and the vast potential that yet lies in Activity

Theory. My hope is that those who come to Activity Theory like I did, from a place of curiosity about human activity, will find here a collection of thought-provoking contributions. For new and seasoned scholars alike I hope it will be a place where they can read about the historical roots, the many practical applications, along with thought provoking ideas for the future evolution of Activity Theory. If scholars are inspired to question and think more deeply about collective human activity then that is a just reward.

Miriam McSweeney, August 2023.