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What is “Cultural-Historical Psychology”? Or: Activity Theory as Methodology

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Abstract Referring to the ongoing discussion about the meaning of *Cultural-historical Psychology* I defend two theses: (1) Activity Theory is a methodology; (2) The core of what is called the *Cultural Historical School* is its specific methodology. Because in English speaking countries the term “methodology” commonly covers the sum of scientific methods, techniques, and procedures, I will try to explain his understanding of methodology – following E.G. Judin – as a historically developed complex comprising four different levels of knowledge, of which the fundamental basis and principal level is *philosophical* knowledge, although these philosophical principles may never be directly applied or transferred to the level of concrete scientific disciplines.

KEYWORDS: Methodological Knowledge; Philosophy of Psychology; Activity Theory; Cultural-historical Psychology; Vygotsky; Leontiev.

Riassunto *Che cos'è la “psicologia storico-culturale”? Ovvero: la Teoria dell'Attività come metodologia* – In relazione alle continue discussioni sul significato della *Psicologia Storico-culturale* propongo due tesi: (1) la Teoria dell'Attività è una metodologia; (2) la metodologia specifica della *Psicologia Storico-culturale* è il nucleo principale di quanto si definisce *Scuola Storico-culturale*. Dal momento che nei Paesi anglofoni il termine “metodologia” di copre solitamente il complesso delle tecniche, delle procedure e dei metodi scientifici, cercherò di illustrare il proprio modo di intendere la metodologia – seguendo E.G. Judin – come complesso storicamente emergente di quattro diversi livelli di conoscenza, la cui base fondamentale e il cui livello principale per ogni sistema metodologico è la conoscenza filosofica, per quanto i principi filosofici non possano mai essere direttamente applicati o trasposti sul piano della concreta prassi delle discipline scientifiche.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Conoscenza metodologica; Filosofia della psicologia; Teoria dell'attività; Psicologia storico-culturale; Vygotsky; Leontiev.



Introduction

WHAT LED LEV SEMĚNOVIČ VYGOTSKIJ to sympathize with the Bolshevik revolution when he entered the Moscow Institute of

Psychology remains one of the unanswered questions about his life. What caused him to adopt the aim of creating a “New Man”? Was it his close ties to the Moscow Psychoanalytic Society and its *Eros of the Impossible*?¹ Or his

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connection to the biocosmist movement of Bogdanov?² Or even his Jewish descent?³ And what was the political meaning of calling his work within this context “Cultural Historical Psychology”?

It is well known, however, that Vygotskij along with A.R. Lurija and A.N. Leont’ev, who soon joined him, ran into serious political problems despite their political affiliations when Stalin proclaimed the class-struggle on the so called Third Front (science, culture and education). They were blamed for a list of offences such as using culture as a central concept instead of class, focusing on appropriate cultural tools instead of class-struggle, studying the history of European psychology and bourgeois scientists instead of restricting their study to Historical and Dialectical Materialism, and, worst of all, considering human freedom to be the highest value instead of the Bolshevik party and the decisions of its supreme chief. They were subjected to the new political rituals of self-criticism, all lost their positions, and they could count themselves lucky not to share the fate of many of their colleagues who were banned or who disappeared.⁴

In other words, Vygotskij’s work was not only intended as a political approach but was also understood as such by his enemies. Meanwhile, a controversy arose as the world-wide reception of Vygotskij and his disciples’ work brought the question of how the political character of their writings, which was obvious in the context in the Soviet Union of the 1930s, should be interpreted in the widely differing social-political contexts of other modern societies at different stages of development.

It was self-evident to earlier and mostly Russian scholars that the “cultural historical school of Russian psychology” was the most adequate term to characterise the work of the “troika” as the three friends were often called. But for other scholars the differences, breaks, and even contradictions between Vygotskij’s general psychology, Lurija’s neuropsychology, and Leont’ev’s activity theory appeared so ob-

vious that they could not be encompassed by a single term. Most of these scholars insisted on talking of at least two different schools: the Vygotskij school which included Lurija, and the “Charkovites” a term that referred to the place where Leont’ev and his disciples began to work out the activity approach after Vygotskij’s death.

Moreover, some even more strict interpretations focussed on recently noted differences and changes across Vygotskij’s scientific development pointing out that the “cultural historical” approach was limited to a certain period of Vygotskij’s psychological thinking and therefore not suitable as a name for his work as a whole.

For the sake of completeness, it should also be mentioned that a recently published argument shows that the designation “cultural historical” was a polemical and defamatory slogan used by Vygotskij’s enemies only, and was never used by himself or by any of his disciples.⁵

All of these arguments are productive and useful but they lose sight of the original and most critical point in this discussion: How Vygotskij’s approach – whatever we call it – should be understood with regard to its political importance within its original societal context? And how it should be concretely interpreted in our current societal context? Considering this latter question we can state that the discussion referred to above, remained in essence academic in spite of its scientific results, providing few clues concerning the application of Vygotskian principles in the modern context

When you search the English Wikipedia for information on “Cultural-Historical Psychology” and “Activity Theory” you find the following explanation: “Cultural-historical psychology – also called the school of Vygotskij, sociocultural psychology, sociohistorical psychology, activity theory, cultural psychology, cultural historical activity theory and social development theory”. And when you search for “activity theory” the information provided is: “Activity Theory is an

umbrella term for a line of eclectic social sciences theories and research”.⁶

Is this just an over-simplification by Wikipedia? I am increasingly convinced that these findings are typical or perhaps even symptomatic of today’s reception and understanding of cultural-historical psychology and activity theory respectively. In any case, on the one hand, when reading the proceedings of the ISCAR congresses, you may find that many of the presented “research projects” are tied to Leont’ev’s name but are quite obviously based on behavioristic, constructivistic, cognitivistic or culturological theories which are by no means in accordance with Leont’ev’s activity approach and even, in a strict sense, contradict his fundamental theoretical assumptions. On the other hand, one increasingly finds projects which – using CHAT as a label for legitimizing their investigation – scarcely hide the fact that they use the famous triangle of Engeström only at the lowest level of methodological knowledge, that is the level of formal procedures and techniques – thus ignoring that procedures and techniques as a rule are dependent on theoretical and methodological assumptions and are not naturally in agreement with CHAT (whatever this means in particular contexts).

As for Vygotskij, Valsiner and Van der Veer argue that the majority of references to Vygotskij are actually nothing more than “declarations of faith”.⁷ Still in 2010, Yasnitsky reports that «the multitude and, even more important, the diversity of contemporary interpretations of Vygotskij make some authors discuss the “versions of Vygotskij” and go so far as to pessimistically question whether anybody actually reads Vygotskij’s own words these days». ⁸ The confusion could not be worse.

I think these findings are highly interesting in three respects: (1) They demonstrate a wide spread level of ignorance concerning methodological and philosophical problems in psychology, or in more general terms: the relation between psychology and philosophy; (2) They expose a frightening level of incomprehension

concerning the political (and ideological) implications of philosophical and even methodological decisions; (3) They reveal an irritating helplessness and inability to control one’s own ideological orientation (not to speak of carelessness in dealing with the scientific interpretation of historic texts).

Recalling what Leont’ev wrote in 1975 – that is 38 years ago – it seems like a commentary on the current state of the art diagnosis of the contradiction between the increasing number of facts collected by researchers on the one hand and the rather miserable state of their theoretical and methodological foundations on the other. Leont’ev noted an astonishing lack of concern with general theory in psychology, a certain methodological carelessness based on data fetishism and a kind of sloppiness and exaggeration concerning the importance of methods, procedures and techniques. Trying to find a term to characterise the underlying process we could call it a dismethodologisation.⁹ Today, insisting upon a clear and consistent theoretical basis seems to be “old school”, and to look for a vague kind of viability or connectivity seems to be state of the art.

Besides all of the other focal points of his work, Leont’ev tackled these deficiencies in contemporary psychological approaches in general and was concerned with the methodological meaning of activity in particular. He regarded the reported deficits as a threefold problem based in a failure of methodological reasoning concerning: (1) a clear philosophical orientation with methodological control; (2) a precise elaboration of the specific methodological problems of psychology as a specific discipline; (3) an explicit reasoning of the ideological function of psychology. Leont’ev was fully aware of the fact, «that in our world today psychology has an important ideological function [...] and that it is impossible not to take this into consideration». ¹⁰

The present contribution brings into focus Leont’ev’s main arguments, dealing with the two first problem complexes – neglecting for the moment Leont’ev’s third complex. This is

because this ideological function of psychology is of such enormous importance to present day psychology in general and to the reception of Activity Theory and cultural historical psychology in particular that it needs a special contribution of its own. Thus my two theses are: (1) Activity Theory is a methodology; (2) The core of what is called the “Cultural Historical School” is its specific methodology.

■ Activity Theory is a methodology

In the first line of this thesis I intend to make a clear demarcation from common phraseology. To start with what is rather obvious: Leont’ev is – neither in general nor in particular – aiming at a concrete description or an analysis of the contemporary Russian adult’s psyche or psychical development. He does not even attempt this. In other words: *Activity Theory* is not a psychology in itself but a proposal or perhaps an instruction of how to do psychology the right way, that is it is a “critique of psychology”¹¹ – not to be confused with critical psychology¹² – or following Jaroševskij and Gurgenidse, it is a *critique of psychological reason*¹³ in the methodological sense of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* or in the sense of Marx’s *Critique of Political Economy*.¹⁴

Activity Theory is not an affirmation of one or another concrete psychological approach or conception or tendency but a quest for a method of elaboration of a clear, consistent, and reflective theoretical position in psychology, a quest for a method of theory formation.

Activity Theory is not a psychological analysis of general activity but an activity oriented analysis of psychology’s system of notions in order to identify basic psychological concepts which represent its fundamental philosophical assumptions as e.g. reflection and human activity are an inseparable unity.

In other words, to Leont’ev it is not about a completion or addition but a total conversion or reconstruction of the entire conceptual system of psychology. So, what is precisely meant by *Activity Theory*?

■ Philosophy of psychology

It seems to be more appropriate to speak of *Activity Theory* as a *philosophy of psychology* or perhaps as a *philosophical psychology* like Aleksej A. Leont’ev and Dmitrij A. Leont’ev do giving this title to their collection of all of Leont’ev’s relevant contributions on activity as a basic category.¹⁵ Philosophy of psychology to Leont’ev means:

- ▶ to think about the understanding of nature in general and the nature of human beings in particular;
- ▶ to reason about consciousness, its nature and its relation to material reality;
- ▶ to understand that mind and matter are just different forms of a homogeneous and inseparable nature, and that putting them into an absolute contrast would be a flagrant, or in Leont’ev’s own words: a “screaming untruth”;¹⁶
- ▶ to accept that – although objective reality is basic and primary while consciousness is secondary – consciousness is not a closed box, but consciousness and reality are a unity of contradictions which pass into one another. «Consciousness and reflected reality are tied together by real processes rich in substance resulting in transmission and transformation of the material into the ideal, of objective reality into facts of consciousness and vice versa of facts of consciousness, of ideas into reality»;¹⁷
- ▶ to take into consideration that nature as well as reflection on the world are moving processes of emerging and dissolving contradictions, in other words, that consciousness is a product of the development of matter, a product of the development of life. Subsequently consciousness has to be conceived as a specifically human form of reflection which emerges through historical development and the transition to a

specifically human way of life, that is, to life in society;

- to realize that consciousness is not the only existing, only possible, only thinkable form of psychic reflection, but represents its most recent form up to the present.

All these thoughts are philosophical. They give reasons for a *philosophical* theory of consciousness which is basic and necessary but is quite different from a *psychological* theory of consciousness, more precisely, it is a general *method of theory formation* in psychology. And this requires methodological reasoning. Unfortunately, Leont’ev never used the term methodology in the titles of his published articles concerning activity as a basic category or explanatory principle although all of them deal with methodological questions.

General psychology

At most we could call *Activity Theory* a “general psychology” – as Leont’ev himself does in his *Lectures on General Psychology*.¹⁸ But this essentially requires being aware of the sharp methodological distinction between – in Leont’ev’s terms – “general scientific theory” and *concrete* or “single scientific theory”. It helps to recall that the term “psychology as a general science” had been coined by Vygotskij much earlier. In his famous article on methodology, *The Crisis of Psychology in its Historical Meaning*¹⁹ – with the subtitle *A Methodological Study* written in 1927 – Vygotskij pointed out:

General science is the theory of the ultimate foundations, of the general principles and problems of the respective areas of science, and therefore its objects and methods of investigation, its criteria and its tasks are other than those of the special disciplines.²⁰

Similar to concrete sciences «which within their respective limits perform the function of

a funnel condensing facts by rules to laws and laws by theories to hypotheses, so general science does the same work with the same procedures and same goals for several concrete disciplines».²¹ About the specific status of a general science he stresses:

The principal deciding and so to speak higher function of general science is not based on its position above every other science, it does not come from above, so to say from the original basis of scientific knowledge, but from below, that is from the sciences themselves which delegate the confirmation of truth to general science. Therefore, general science emerges from its specific function with regard to the concrete sciences. General science accumulates their sovereignties and is their representative. If we conceive of the scientific system as a circle comprising every special discipline of psychology, then general science corresponds to the centre.²²

All this shows us that it is impossible to define the term general science in an absolute way but only with regard to the respective concrete scientific disciplines.²³

And with regard to psychology Vygotskij states (approvingly quoting Binswanger):

General psychology analyses how a theoretical psychology comes off and how the structure and efficiency of its concepts are about. So the problem of theory formation in psychology is the basic problem of general psychology.²⁴

For this purpose, a methodology is needed:

Methodology is the lever to help philosophy move science. Any attempt to bring science forward without methodology, to apply power directly without a lever [...] makes science impossible.²⁵

On the other hand:

The analysis of the crisis and of psychology's structure proves unerringly that no philosophical system will be able to master psychology immediately, without a methodology, that is, without creating a general science.²⁶

But anyone who attempts to skip methodology in order to immediately create any psychological discipline, will inevitably jump over the horse he wanted to sit down on.²⁷

This theory of psychological materialism, or the dialectic of psychology – is what I call general psychology.²⁸ Although until 1927 Vygotskij did not think a methodology for cultural historical psychology existed, he saw, as a result of his extensive study of methodology, certain “objective symptoms of a tendency” toward a general psychology,²⁹ and he was convinced:

For the moment we do not know what this methodology will be about, and whether it will come soon. But we know that psychology will not move far forward as long as this methodology has not been built, and it is without any doubt that the first step forward will be a methodology.³⁰

Two questions remain: Does this mean that general psychology and methodology are identical? If it is general psychology's proper function to distinguish between the empirical and the constituting object³¹ of psychology: What is then this basic constituting object? Who is responsible for this “reasonable abstraction” in the sense of Marx resulting in a clear definition of this proper object of psychology? Unfortunately, Vygotskij did not touch on these issues within his crisis article.

Levels of methodological knowledge.

This differentiation between the general and concrete science of psychology was used – right about the same time when Leont'ev pub-

lished his book *Activity. Consciousness. Personality*³² – by the well-known Russian scholar Erik G. Judin who was an expert in philosophy of science and epistemology, and who dealt explicitly with the activity approach in history of science and philosophy in general and with Leont'ev's previous works in particular.

For a better understanding of what “general theory” means in terms of methodology it may be useful to recall Judin's arguments.³³ Judin speaks of two types of knowledge: firstly, knowledge about the world, asking “*what is it?*”, and secondly: knowledge about knowledge, asking “*how is it?*” or: How do we come to know about knowledge?

The result of producing knowledge about the world we normally call a *theory* while the result of producing knowledge about the process or the means of producing knowledge we call a *methodology*.³⁴ Focussing on methodology, Judin distinguishes four levels of methodological knowledge and their functions:³⁵

- ▶ a *philosophical* level: the system of prerequisites and explanatory principles of scientific knowledge in general like “cosmos”, “nature”, or “activity”, that is, of world views and philosophies of life, and of general forms of scientific reasoning and their historical structure of categories;
- ▶ a *general scientific* level: principles and forms of general scientific research (like logic of science, systems theory, cybernetics, play theory or applied mathematics and their methods like analysis of scientific languages, modelling, formalising, idealizing, and so on), which are general because of their high importance to not only one but to an increasing number of scientific disciplines;
- ▶ a *single scientific* level: explanatory principles and genuine methods of specific scientific disciplines like e.g. psychology which may possibly be differentiated and concretized according to the special tasks of parts or sections of these disciplines;

- ▶ a level of *scientific practice*: systems of methods, techniques and procedures to guarantee solid empirical data according to the special needs of each scientific discipline.

Each level of methodological knowledge has its special function within the process of knowledge acquisition, and therefore together these levels build a historically changing complex system of relations and interdependencies which may however differ from one discipline to the other. At the same time, the fundamental basis and principal level for any methodological system is *philosophical* knowledge.

At the philosophical level and only here, the scientific attitudes of scientists are formed and shaped. Only on this level, the concrete historic limits of any scientific theory or method are established and can be detected, and emerging transitions or shifts within disciplines or areas of scientific research can be recognized. On the other hand, it has to be taken into account that these philosophical principles may never be directly applied or transferred to the level of concrete scientific disciplines, because the relation between general science and concrete science involves both a bottom up process of generalising facts in concrete scientific disciplines and a simultaneous top down process of controlling concepts and methods by general science – controlling in the sense of checking the adequacy between theories and concepts on the one hand and their philosophical foundations and their methods of investigation on the other hand, this means checking the adequacy between the different levels of methodological knowledge in question.

As for the importance of methodology, Judin stresses: Methodology is a complex function which cannot be reduced to just one special level but will be realised on each level, in a special form, and with special goals. Despite the interdependency of general and concrete scientific disciplines, the analysing

(or descriptive) and controlling (or normative) function of general science³⁶ within the process of theory formation cannot be overestimated. The methodological function of general psychology belongs to the third level. As for the issue of the identity of general science and general *psychology*, Judin sees an internal *methodological* difference in terms of the extent of competencies.

This scheme of Judin’s may help us to better understand some important consequences. Each theory may realise methodological functions, and methodologies on the other hand sometimes make themselves independent as a theory. This is in particular what often happens with *Activity Theory*, and what makes methodological reasoning difficult because it turns out to be a special terminological or even concept-political problem. The designation of activity methodology as a theory has been introduced explicitly into scientific discussion in order to mark the difference between the activity approach and action theory and the theory of behaviour – which makes sense under certain conditions. Nevertheless, within the connection of theory and methodology the relation of goal and means remains all in all constant.

But this practice of calling the activity approach a theory tends to become a kind of *ontologising methodology*³⁷ thus confusing general science and concrete science, treating categories like real objects, and losing sight of the higher level functions of methodology that is, its analytical as well as controlling normative importance.

A consequence of this ontologising methodology especially in modern human sciences with wide practice is the requirement for advanced techniques of research and standardization of the research process, especially under the conditions in which mainly economic criteria dominate, for instance, in large-scale societal projects and nowadays in university projects addressing psychological topics as well. The specifically orienting form and function of methodology changes thereby into a form and function of regimentation replacing

the power for discovery inherent in methodology with a purely organizational function.³⁸

Leont'ev's idea

Back to Leont'ev's understanding concerning the methodological quality of *Activity Theory* as a general science of psychology, Leont'ev points out:

I try to reason out those categories which are of uppermost importance to a system of psychology as a concrete science free of contradictions.³⁹

This includes «we will not deal with the special [psychological] features which distinguish the different socioeconomic formations», in other words, not with problems of concrete psychology, but rather with «the general theory of individual consciousness» resulting in «a complete reconstruction of the whole conceptual system of psychology».⁴⁰

The difficulty with grasping the specific methodological status of Leont'ev's understanding of *Activity Theory* comes from the fact that Leont'ev in his works constantly switches not only between these two but between all of Judin's four levels of methodological knowledge.

Even worse, there seems to be a clear difference between Vygotskij and Leont'ev's understanding of general science as a meta-theory. To Vygotskij, general science or general psychology is a generalisation of the conceptual system of all special disciplines within psychology, such as e.g. genetic psychology or child psychology, defectology or psychopathology, pedagogical psychology or psychology of learning, psycholinguistics, psychotherapy and so on and so forth, which analyses and critiques their common philosophical and methodological foundations, conceptual structure and preconditions. To Leont'ev, general science seems to be a generalisation of the conceptual system of every "neighbouring discipline" that is of the human sciences in gen-

eral comprising psychology, anthropology, sociology, pedagogy, linguistics and so on, including their subdisciplines.

There even seems to be a further distinction between them concerning the main methodological goal of their reasoning. Vygotskij's main interest is analysis and description focussing on preconditions and consequences of the existing psychological approaches, and formulating what in all cases should be avoided in psychology. Leont'ev's concern is the steering or controlling of psychological investigation focussing on orientating psychological research by positively formulating the basic philosophical prerequisites, a concrete explanatory principle, concrete proposals on adequate methods and procedures, and so on.

Despite these differences – they may be right or wrong – Leont'ev's methodology realises the same function as Vygotskij's on a higher methodological level. I think that Leont'ev's motive or methodological purpose was to realise what Vygotskij had in mind when he repeatedly insisted on psychology considering what "stands behind" words or meaning or even consciousness and then referring to life, to "real historical processes",⁴¹ or to a "philosophy of practice", for "practice is what changes the whole methodology of sciences".⁴² In his famous quotation Vygotskij stresses:

The principle of interrelation of practice and philosophy is – I repeat this – the stone which had been thrown away by the workmen but became a cornerstone.⁴³

Object oriented activity including its philosophical meaning is the category to represent the methodological content of what the notion of "life" or the Vygotskijan concept of "practice" mean. Anyway, there is no further argument needed to confirm that: *Activity Theory is a methodology*.⁴⁴ But, of course, this proposition is still far from a final definition of what the specific constituting object of psychology really is.⁴⁵

Philosophy of practice as crucial point

In other words, if we want to define cultural historical psychology by its real essence in order to distinguish it from every other existing modern or historical appearance of psychology – or as stated in Wikipedia: behaviorism, constructivism, cognitivism, action theory, culturology, social development theory, psychoanalysis or whatever – then there is solely one theoretically consistent and sufficient way to do so: that is to look for its methodology.

Methodology is the very core or kernel to distinguish the genuine cultural historical approach – irrespective of its internal differences, divergences, terminological discrepancies or verbal contradictions – from any other psychological school or tendency.

Any other criterion – like personal relations of friendship or rivalry between schools, the relation of scholars and their disciples (the *troika* or *pjatjorka*), their common research program or even conceptual framework, not to speak of attempts to refer to the frequency of using the term activity or other notions – is external, secondary and not decisive. This does not mean that using such criteria is completely meaningless or unimportant, but they are not of primary importance compared with methodology, because methodology – as we already saw above – directs the formation of every scientific theory by virtue of its orienting and controlling functions.

To reduce possible expectations requires some restrictions: I will not prove the existence of all these criteria within the ongoing discussion of the understanding of the cultural historical school nor prove their failure in detail. Nor will I try to repeat the concrete methodological analysis of Vygotskij’s crisis article with respect to every contemporary psychological theory in order to set up my thesis. This – I agree – should be done to confirm the conclusiveness of my thesis in its full range, but would require a genius like Vygotskij himself.

Although several serious scholars, like A.A.

Leont’ev, V.V. Davydov, M.G. Jaroshevsky, or in Germany J. Lompscher, are convinced that besides its general methodology cultural historical psychology is mainly based on the category of object oriented activity, I am not sure that this assumption of activity as an explanatory principle does justice to Vygotskij. But despite Vygotskij’s ongoing search for an explanatory principle he is in agreement with Leont’ev concerning their common philosophy of practice which to me is even more important.

I will therefore deal with Vygotskij’s and Leont’ev’s general methodological foundation focussing on their commonalities and differences, in the hopes of satisfying some of the requirements for a justified assessment of the legitimacy of many of the psychological approaches or research projects relying on *Cultural Historical School*.

With these explanations, I can specify my second thesis as follows: *Vygotskij and Leont’ev use the same methodology with respect to Judin’s first and second level of methodological knowledge*. Or even more provocatively: *The most important orientation and characteristic of the “Cultural Historical School” is its philosophy of practice*. This means in particular: The cultural historical school of Vygotskij in a narrow sense as well as the Char’kov school of Leont’ev use the same philosophy of practice as their methodological basis. The refutation of this argument requires evidence of the existence of a different central idea.

All other existing differences between Vygotskij and Leont’ev and their respective disciples remain inside the limits of this criterion. That is, they do not reflect the core of their common methodology but establish internal differentiations within the cultural historical school by virtue of using lower levels of methodology or other less important or even external or secondary criteria.

On the other hand, if any member of the closer personal circle of the *troika* used clearly divergent methodological principles – e.g. Lurija in his early articles on the compatibility of psychoanalysis and Marxism or Vygotskij’s disciples Zankov and Solov’ev⁴⁶ – they then in

this regard do not belong to cultural historical school in the above defined sense. This understanding, however, has to prove its plausibility by explaining the commonalities and differences between Vygotskij's and Leont'ev's views on methodology.

■ Vygotskij and Leont'ev: Commonalities and differences

I start with a description of their shared philosophical orientation – more precisely: with their personal interpretation of what was called dialectical materialism.

But first I should remind you that Vygotskij was already a Marxist when he came to Moscow. He had read Hegel and Marx in German, he was a scholar highly educated in dialectical and historical materialism, and he was an experienced expert of the Marxian historico-logical method. What is even more important, with respect to his scientific relationship to Lurija and Leont'ev he was their philosophical teacher and sometimes their sharp critic. During his lifetime he had more jobs with political responsibility than Leont'ev and Lurija put together. It is therefore a totally ignorant and absurd allegation and a silly distortion of facts to argue that Lurija and Leont'ev had a Marxist influence on Vygotskij.⁴⁷

In this respect, it should be mentioned that Vygotskij and Leont'ev explained their (sometimes literally identical) philosophical convictions only in the form of manuscripts they never published – Vygotskij in his famous crisis article,⁴⁸ and Leont'ev mainly in *Materials on Consciousness*⁴⁹ and *Methodological Diary*.⁵⁰ The reason is quite obvious: Their philosophical interpretation of Marxism was so clearly in contradiction to the official phraseology of the Communist Party and its Central Committee⁵¹ that to publish it would have been extremely dangerous. In other words, if we do not find detailed explanations of their philosophical prerequisites explicitly published in their writings this is only because of political circumstances.

The main philosophical basis for both

Vygotskij and Leont'ev was Marx' and Engels' dialectical theory of the unity and difference of nature, that is, of being and thinking or nature and consciousness. In the words of Lenin, quoted by Leont'ev, matter and reflection or spirit are different forms of a “homogeneous and inseparable nature”. This implies two important ideas seeing movement and reflection as the most general characteristics of any matter.

Concerning *movement*: There is nothing in the world but moving and interacting matter, and therefore we do not need to look for any additional supernatural forces in order to explain either the moving nor the interaction of nature, because the inevitably emerging contradictions in the course of moving things are simultaneously the result and cause of moving, in other words, movement is a never ending process of emerging and dissolving contradictions – or in the words of Engels: they are “causa finalis” of things. Or in Leont'ev's own words: The object of science is «not things, not “bodies” outside of or beyond movement, outside their relations to other “bodies”, but *moving bodies* – forms of moving matter». ⁵²And Vygotskij stresses:

that the dialectics of psychology – naming general psychology (...) in short – is a science of the most general forms of moving.⁵³

During the historical development of movement, there emerge new and more complex forms which require special notions and concepts with respect to material formations like inorganic and organic nature, or animal and human nature. With special respect to the formation of organic nature, movement is to be considered as “self movement”, or in modern terminology: as autopoiesis. The highest, human, level of self movement is societal practice.⁵⁴ In terms of methodology, this view may be called a *process ontology*.

Concerning *reflection*: Any interaction of things is at the same time a reflection. In interacting with each other, things retain an imprint of their mutual impacts. In other words, reflection is produced by reality, and simulta-

neously it is in itself a form of reality. During the historical development of self-movement new and more complex forms of reflection emerge as do new forms of interaction and interrelation with those historical forms of self-movement which require special notions and concepts of reflection with respect to material formations like inorganic and organic nature, or animal and human nature. In Leont’ev’s terms: with respect to the formation of organic nature this reflection has to be considered as “psyche”. The highest level of reflection is consciousness.

To sum up Vygotskij’s and Leont’ev’s philosophical commonalities, it can be said that they share the following convictions:

Human practice is

- ▶ not a special ability which is to be acquired in the course of ontogenesis but is a general characteristic of human life. It’s realization by any individual will necessarily acquire the existing historical forms of societal practice;
- ▶ not a biological or physical possibility only which will be realised by adaptation to cultural contents but is a self-moving process which is historically and culturally defined from its very beginning and works on a biological and physical basis;
- ▶ not purely individual but historically and ontogenetically from its very beginning societal. Even in its initial ontogenetic development this basic historical and societal quality has to be considered;
- ▶ not separable from consciousness. Practice produces consciousness and is simultaneously its product. Even with mentally handicapped people, we have to assume the full quality of human practice;
- ▶ not a more or less successful realization or ratification of a running ahead theory but always more rich in substance and more

true than the theory or consciousness anticipating it.⁵⁵

This implies – as Schürmann puts it – the inconceivability and inexhaustibility of practice, that is its unfathomable historicism.⁵⁶

Consciousness is

- ▶ not a super or supernatural entity, but a special historical appearance of nature;⁵⁷
- ▶ not an assumed a priori of abstract metaphysical thinking but produced by reality itself;
- ▶ not a fixed or closed system but permanently combined and tied up with the objective reality of human societal practice by real material processes, realising the permanent transmission of the material into the ideal, of objective reality into consciousness, and vice versa the transfer of the idea into reality;
- ▶ not an appearance existing independently from individual persons but a quality of a real material person realising his material process of life;
- ▶ not the essential or constituting object⁵⁸ of psychology only, but the object of several different sciences.

Finally, human practice – in the sense of self moving process – is not the required explanatory principle but the decisive starting point of general psychological research, the cornerstone of special methodological studies.

■ Process ontology

The crucial point on which Vygotskij’s and Leont’ev’s agree is their understanding of process ontology.⁵⁹ Process ontology means a theory explaining nature by nothing else but processes assuming movement as explanatory principle which is not to be explained itself.

An explanation is not needed for the actuality or reality of processes but rather for why and how identities, invariabilities, stagnation, stabilities, calmness, and standstill are possible. What we formerly used to view as things are now and solely *products* and these products are nothing but “coagulated”, or “frozen” *processes*.

Processes are involved with each other as far as any unity of a process is at the same time a variety of processes producing a variety of products. Processes are always moving by themselves. Forces or factors are no more causes but *aspects* of processes which can also be viewed as causalities to forces, and forces are nothing else than *inner differentiations of processes*. Processes show internal and external qualities thus forming a hierarchic and systemic structure of levels making it possible that any external aspect appears on another level as internal and vice versa. Processes are permanently tied up with their complementary opposing processes whose totality forms a similarly structured world. With regard to the title of our contribution we may say – quoting Schürmann:

Activity Theory is the explanation and representation of a complete process ontology. To Leont’ev of 1959 activity is the concrete form of process concerning the level of organic nature; to Leont’ev of 1982 *human activity* is the concrete form of process concerning the level of society.⁶⁰

The essential point of their common methodological views – even when referring to Engels’ *Dialectic of Nature* – is their then revolutionary standpoint that process ontology was just a form of *conceptualisation* and by no means a *naturalisation* of process in which processes are objective in the sense of independent from our perception and theory being a sort of hoard or stronghold of truth about human practice from which we can deduce what human consciousness is, as was the official and obligatory interpretation of Marxism by the communist party.⁶¹ Schürmann ex-

pressed his summary of the general philosophy of practice in the cultural historical school in the formula:

The logic of practice is not the logic of theory and it is a fundamental scholastic error to consider the logic of theory the origin of the logic of practice.

He explains his understanding using critical psychology as an example. A central argument underpinning critical psychology’s main concept of “action potency”⁶² is the realisation of the existing *abilities* of man, that is, of *given possibilities*⁶³ whereas the cultural historical school proceeds from existing *realities* in order to find out their *open possibilities*. Human practice is not the capacity for a certain *potential* of acting but is primarily the reality of its *performance*. This reveals the difference between a deterministic and an indeterministic model. We speak of a deterministic approach when arguing that human practice can only be understood and explained as the result of multiple effecting conditions that can be directly and unequivocally deduced from determining factors.

In contrast to these deterministic models of action *Activity Theory* recognizes and stresses the difference between autarky and autonomy importantly preserving the self-movement of any active organism as has been perfectly expressed by Leont’ev’s methodological warning:

There is no development at all deducible from forms of its necessary prerequisites only. The dialectical method of Marxism requires us to study development as a process of self movement, of analysing its internal moving relations, contradictions and mutual transitions as well as its prerequisites as its in itself transforming essential moments.⁶⁴

Conclusions

It is essential to the activity approach and

its theory of practice that societal meaning can by no means be indoctrinated. Stalin’s idea of producing the New Man was totally incompatible with this view because of activity theory’s process ontology, and because learning is always a process of self movement and a matter of personal sense. In other words, the indeterministic model of self movement expresses in contrast with determinism a particular understanding of freedom regarding the respective ruling conditions which do not function as restrictions but rather as possibilities for taking certain liberties and enabling practice. Schürmann is right in calling activity theory a political anthropology.⁶⁵

It is therefore in the last analysis a political decision to set Leont’ev against Vygotskij, and to neglect the methodological status of their work as well as the process ontology of their common theory of practice is to incur severe political consequences. It is not enough to plead for reading “Vygotskij’s own words”, it is rather a question of understanding them. But at least this point opens up far reaching perspectives on the ideological functions of cultural historical psychology I mentioned at the beginning.

Notes

¹ See A. ETKIND, *Eros of the Impossible: The History of Psychoanalysis in Russia*, Westview, Boulder-Oxford 1996.

² See B. GROYS, M. HAGEMEISTER, *Die Neue Menschheit. Biopolitische Utopien in Russland zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts. Übersetzt aus dem Russischen von Dagmar Kassek*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. 2005.

³ See B.S. KOTIK-FRIEDGUT, T.H. FRIEDGUT, *A Man of his Country and his Time: Jewish Influences on the Personality and Outlook of Lev Semionovich Vygotskij*, in: «History of Psychology», vol. XI, n. 1, 2008, pp. 15-39.

⁴ For more details see A.A. LEONT’EV, *Politische und rhetorische Kultur in Rußland: eine verlorene Kultur*, in: H. GEISNER, A. HERBIG, R. DAHMEN (Hrsg.), *Europäische Versammlungskultur*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1995, pp. 119-130; J. LOMPSCHER, G. RÜCKRIEM, *Leont’evs Arbeiten der 30er Jahre. Schwierigkeiten und Hypothesen zur*

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⁵ See P. KEILER, *Cultural-Historical Theory and Cultural-Historical School: From Myth (Back) to Reality*, in: «Dubna Psychological Journal», vol. I, n. 1, 2012, pp. 1-33.

⁶ If you search for CHAT - the well-known abbreviation for “Cultural Historical Activity Theory” (most commonly used in the ISCAR congresses) - then you get the answer: “To chat is to talk about ordinary things that are not very important.” And when you look into a common psychological dictionary the answer is: “CHAT means Checklist for Autism with Toddlers”.

⁷ J. VALSINER, R. VAN DER VEER, *The Social Mind: Construction of the Idea*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 3-4.

⁸ A. YASNITSKY, *Guest Editor’s Introduction. “Archival Revolution” in Vygotskian Studies? Uncovering Vygotsky’s Archives*, in: «Journal of Russian and East European Psychology», vol. XLVIII, n. 1, 2010, pp. 3-13, here p. 5.

⁹ L.S. VYGOTSKIJ criticized similar phenomena as a process of separating procedures, operations, and technical applications from scientific thinking and called it a decay of scientific speech: «Like every thinking psychology knows: with methodological studies the lion’s share is allotted to the problem of terminology, that affords a most complicated analysis» (L.S. VYGOTSKIJ, *Die Krise der Psychologie in ihrer historischen Bedeutung*, in: L.S. VYGOTSKIJ, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, Bd. I, hrsg. von J. LOMPSCHER, Lehmanns Media Berlin 2003, 57-277, here p. 170, similarly p. 89: «Every word is a theory». (All quotations of Vygotskij’s and Leont’ev’s works stem from German editions, and their translation into English comes from the author.)

¹⁰ A.N. LEONT’EV, *Tätigkeit. Bewußtsein. Persönlichkeit* (1975), hrsg. von G. RÜCKRIEM, Lehmanns Media, Berlin 2012, II ed., p. 19.

¹¹ L.S. VYGOTSKIJ, *Die Krise der Psychologie in ihrer historischen Bedeutung*, cit., p. 253.

¹² K. HOLZKAMP, *Lernen: Subjektwissenschaftliche Grundlagen*, Campus, Frankfurt a.M. 1995.

¹³ M. JAROŠEVSKIJ, G.S. GURGENIDSE, *Nachwort*,

in: J. LOMPSCHER (Hrsg.), *Lev Vygotskij. Ausgewählte Schriften*. Bd. I, Lehmanns Media, Berlin 2003, pp. 383-415, here 413.

¹⁴ See V. SCHÜRMAN, *Naturdialektik als System eigentümlicher Logiken eigentümlicher Gegenstände*, in: R.E. ZIMMERMANN (Hrsg.), *Naturdialektik heute*, Junghans, Cuxhaven-Dartfort 1995, pp. 33-51.

¹⁵ See A.N. LEONT'EV, *Filosofija psihologii. Iz naučnogo naslednija [Philosophy of Psychology. The Scientific Legacy]*, hrsg. von A.A. LEONT'EV, D.A. LEONT'EV, Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, Moskva 1994.

¹⁶ A.N. LEONT'EV, *Materialien über das Bewußtsein* (1988), in: A.N. LEONT'EV, *Frühe Schriften*, Bd. II, hrsg. von G. RÜCKRIEM, Lehmanns Media, Berlin 2005, pp. 441-467, here p. 442.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ A.N. LEONT'EV, *Lekcii po obščej psihologii [Lectures on General Psychology]*, Smysl, Moskva 2004.

¹⁹ L.S. VYGOTSKIJ, *Die Krise der Psychologie in ihrer historischen Bedeutung* (1927), in: L.S. VYGOTSKIJ, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, Bd. I, hrsg. von J. LOMPSCHER, Lehmanns Media, Berlin 2003, pp. 57-278.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 85.

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 97.

²² *Ivi*, p. 104.

²³ *Ivi*, p. 99.

²⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 65-66.

²⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 250 and 248: «Whether psychology could be a science, is first of all a methodological problem».

²⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 250-251.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 249.

²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 252.

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 182.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 256.

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 173: «Choosing a word is already a methodological process [...] Thus science in general is philosophical up to its last elements, its words, it is saturated by methodology». Unfortunately in the English language there is no distinction corresponding to that between *ob'ekt* and *predmet* in Russian and that between *Objekt* and *Gegenstand* in German. I try to preserve this very important theoretical difference by using the terms *empirical object* and *constituting object*.

³² A.N. LEONT'EV, *Tätigkeit. Bewußtsein. Persönlichkeit* (1975), hrsg. von G. RÜCKRIEM, Lehmanns Media, Berlin 2012, II ed.

³³ For details see E.G. JUDIN, *Sistemnyj podchod i princip dejatel'nosti*, Moskva: Nauka, Moskva 1978 (ger. trans. *Systemansatz und Tätigkeit-sprinzip. Methodologische Probleme der modernen Wissenschaft*, hrsg. von G. RÜCKRIEM, Lehmanns Media, Berlin 2009). For details see chapter II, *Main tasks and forms of methodological analysis*, pp. 87-115, and chapter III: *The relation of philosophy and science as a methodological problem*, pp. 119-144.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 87.

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 94ff.

³⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 94-95.

³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 102.

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 103.

³⁹ A.N. LEONT'EV, *Tätigkeit. Bewußtsein. Persönlichkeit*, cit., p. 24.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*. But his attempts to unequivocally define the constituting object of psychology failed, or changed throughout the development of his work. See E.E. SOKOLOVA, *K probleme neprotivorečivogo opredelenija predmeta psihologii v škole A.N. Leont'eva [On the Problem of a non-contradictory Definition of the Object of Psychology in A.N. Leont'ev's School]* in: «Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta», Serija 14, Psychologija, 2003, n. 2, pp. 32-49.

⁴¹ L.S. VYGOTSKY, *Die Krise der Psychologie in ihrer historischen Bedeutung*, cit., p. 253.

⁴² *Ivi*, p. 203.

⁴³ *Ibidem*. For more details concerning the philosophy of practice in cultural historical psychology see V. SCHÜRMAN, *Die Unergründlichkeit des Lebens. Lebens-Politik zwischen Biomacht und Kulturkritik*, Transcript, Bielefeldt 2011; G. RÜCKRIEM, „Die realisierte Tätigkeit ist reicher, wahrer als das sie vorwegnehmende Bewusstsein“. Zum Verständnis der Tätigkeit bei Leont'ev. Vortrag auf der Arbeitstagung „Praxiskonzeptionen“, in: «Tätigkeitstheorie», vol. X, 2014, pp. 75-112.

⁴⁴ See also A.A. LEONT'EV, *Ecce Homo: Methodological Problems of the Activity Theoretical Approach* (1992), in: «Journal of Russian and East European Psychology», vol. XXXIII, n. 4, 1995, pp. 35-48; A.A. LEONT'EV, *Politische und rhetorische Kultur in Rußland: eine verlorene Kultur*, in: H. GEISNER, A. HERBIG, R. DAHMEN (Hrsg.), *Europäische Versammlungskultur*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1995, pp. 119-130.

⁴⁵ For the differences between Rubinštejn and Leont'ev or between Leont'ev and Gal'perin see E.E. SOKOLOVA, *K opredeleniju ponjatija „psichičeskaj dejatel'nost“: Teoretičeskij analiz diskussij meždu*

A.N. Leont'evym i P.Ja. Gal'perinym [On the Definition of “Psychic Activity”], in: «Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta», Serija 14, Psihologija, 1998, Nr. 4, pp. 3-13; E.E. SOKOLOVA, „Neklassičeskija“ psihologija A.N. Leont'eva i ego školy [The “Non-classical” Psychology of A.N. Leont'ev and his School], in: «Psihologičeskij žurnal», vol. XXII, n. 6, 2001, pp. 14-24; E.E. SOKOLOVA, *K probleme neprotivorečivogo opredelenija predmeta psihologii v škole A.N. Leont'eva*, cit.

⁴⁶ See Vygotskij's sharp critic in his letter to Leont'ev of Juli 23th Juli, 1929 in: L.S. VYGOTSKIJ, *Briefe/Letters 1924-1934*, edited by G. RÜCKRIEM, Lehmanns Media, Berlin 2008, II ed., pp. 237-238.

⁴⁷ See H. HÖRMANN, *Meinen und Verstehen*, Frankfurt a.M. 1976, p. 287. This claim corresponds with a second distortion of facts already emerging at the very beginning of Vygotskij's reception in the USA featuring Vygotskij as a non-political scientist, a “pure” psychologist and a theoretician of semiotics only, whereas – particularly in West Berlin – Leont'ev was considered a politician and an ideologist. In line with this view, Vygotskij was the genuine founder of the cultural historical school whereas Leont'ev was a traitor to his teacher and corrupted his work. See e.g. A. Kozulin's critique of “Leont'ev's revisionism” and “ideological benefits” (A. KOZULIN, *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology: Vygotsky, his Disciples and Critics*, in: «American Psychologist», Vol. XLI, n. 3, 1986, pp. 265-274, here p. 270).

⁴⁸ L.S. VYGOTSKIJ, *Die Krise der Psychologie in ihrer historischen Bedeutung*, cit.

⁴⁹ A.N. LEONT'EV, *Materialien über das Bewußtsein* (1988), in: A.N. LEONT'EV, *Frühe Schriften*, Bd. II, hrsg. von G. RÜCKRIEM, Lehmanns Media, Berlin 2006, pp. 441-467.

⁵⁰ A.N. LEONT'EV, *Methodologische Hefte*, in: A.N. LEONT'EV, *Frühe Schriften*, Bd. I, hrsg. von G. RÜCKRIEM Lehmanns Media, Berlin, II ed., in press.

⁵¹ To describe this in detail would require a special paper.

⁵² A.N. LEONT'EV, *Psihologija i pedagogika*, in: «Sovetskaja pedagogika», vol. I, n. 2, 1937, pp. 54-67 (ger. transl. *Psychologie und Pädagogik*, in: A.N. LEONT'EV, *Frühe Schriften*, Bd. II, hrsg. von G. RÜCKRIEM, Lehmanns Media, Berlin 2005, pp.

405-424, here p. 419. Leont'ev quotes from Lenin: «not things, but the laws of their movement» (*ibidem*, footnote 17).

⁵³ L.S. VYGOTSKIJ, *Die Krise der Psychologie in ihrer historischen Bedeutung*, cit. 103.

⁵⁴ See E.E. SOKOLOVA, *K probleme neprotivorečivogo opredelenija predmeta psihologii v škole A.N. Leont'eva*, cit.

⁵⁵ See A. N. LEONT'EV, *Tätigkeit. Bewusstsein. Persönlichkeit*, cit., p. 117.

⁵⁶ See V. SCHÜRMAN, *Die Unergründlichkeit des Lebens. Lebens-Politik zwischen Biomacht und Kulturkritik*, cit.

⁵⁷ Leont'ev calls the attempt to oppose psyche to matter «a huge error» (A.N. LEONT'EV, *Frühe Schriften*, Bd. II, cit., p. 471).

⁵⁸ In Russian: *predmet*; in German: *Gegenstand*.

⁵⁹ See V. SCHÜRMAN, *Prozess und Tätigkeit. Zur Spezifik der Tätigkeitstheorie*, in: «Behindertenpädagogik», XLVII, n. 1, 2008, pp. 21-30.

⁶⁰ V. SCHÜRMAN, *My Understanding of Activity Theory*, 2003, Unpublished Manuscript, p. 9. Schürmann is totally right: «It is a big tactical failure of this theory not to establish stable terms concerning those respective material definitions. Thus activity is “primary abstraction” sometimes with respect to the science of the organic, and at other times with respect to the science of the human organic or the science of consciousness» (V. SCHÜRMAN, *Naturdialektik als System eigentümlicher Logiken eigentümlicher Gegenstände*, cit., p. 47).

⁶¹ As far as I know, this interpretation was formulated for the first time in 1990 by Volker Schürmann who today is one of the most important philosophers of activity theory in Germany.

⁶² With Holzkamp: “Handlungsfähigkeit”. See K. HOLZKAMP, *Lernen. Subjektwissenschaftliche Grundlegung*, cit.

⁶³ For more details concerning critical psychology see V. SCHÜRMAN, *Praxis des Abstrahierens. Naturdialektik als relationsontologischer Monismus*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt a.M. 1993, pp. 93-100.

⁶⁴ A.N. LEONT'EV, *Tätigkeit. Bewußtsein. Persönlichkeit*, cit., p. 151.

⁶⁵ V. SCHÜRMAN, *Personalität – Tätigkeitstheorie als politische Anthropologie. Wie modern ist die Tätigkeitstheorie?*, in: «Tätigkeitstheorie», vol. IX, 2012, pp. 73-85.