

Activity Theory - at the End of its Era?

Opening Lecture

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Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues!

The main focus of the First congress was to get together all scientists with interests in activity theory. We wanted to know who is working with the activity theoretical approach in which countries and which disciplines, we also wanted to know the problems being worked on and the results of this work. It was our Intention to bring about an international and interdisciplinary discussion on the question whether this activity theoretical approach met the expectations of those who considered it to be the most appropriate paradigm to deal with the current pressing problems. As this question was answered positively in general - although there were quite a few critical comments - it was decided that this second congress was to focus on these pressing problems of transformation and change at the individual and social level. In order to achieve this, the proposal was to ground the evolving discussion in the work of Vygotsky, Leontyev and Rubinstein. However, as I am sure we are all aware, there have been a multitude of events aggravating these problems of transformation and change. I am not going to repeat the detailed descriptions of these events ranging from holes in the ozone layer to holes in the Berlin wall, all these events are widely known. I rather want to turn your attention to the meaning these events have for activity theory and our own work. So what has happened since 1986? But to remind ourselves: There continues the thoughtless destruction of our forests and the reckless rooting out and burning down of the rain forest, the destructive practices of fishing carried out by some Asian countries, the contamination of the North Sea and the Baltic Sea by untreated industrial waste, the poisoning of the atmosphere by the use of cfc's and carbon dioxide, the annual increase of desert areas by 6 million square kilometers, the tenthousandfold increase of the rate of animal and plant extinction - all these processes have been recognized and discussed already in detail and are seen as unavoidable consequences of the speeding up and the globalisation of our industrial ways of working and living. It is also known that more than 50 percent of damage to the environment of the last 3 centuries has been caused in the last 3 decades. For years we have known that we are consuming the ecological capital of our planet faster than it is capable to reproduce itself. Really new is the assessment of these facts, new is what scientists think about the meaning of the fact that it is man who causes the global change and who is setting about to create a new world with new realities. Mihailo Mesarovic expresses this new point of view in a most impressive way. In his re-port to the Club of Rome he writes:

"Humankind has taken over a fundamentally different central role in the evolutionary process. This means, humankind is not just a product of evolution, but also integral to it. It is nature itself. Human kind is not only transformed by evolution, but also transforming evolution. Second, we are - so to speak - taking care of evolution, we are getting inside it. On one hand, this gives us the opportunity to direct evolution, but on the other hand it imposes a tremendous burden of responsibility for the direction evolution will take."(Mesarovic, 1990, p. 26)

If we accept this assessment there are two consequences. 1. First, this does not just imply a new range of responsibility as scientists but also requires a new paradigm for scientific explanation of those processes. This has consequences for activity theory itself. Previously questions of responsibility have been discussed morally, ideologically or nationalistically. Today responsibility faces a new turn. It is now a matter of survival for the human race and even more generally for life on this planet. Problems of this importance do not allow the freedom of deciding or not deciding. The time for decision has come and there is no further possibility evading it. Not to act in a certain moment would mean that doing nothing is the best alternative. Mesarovic again puts this most precisely :

"Mankind cannot steal away anymore from the responsibility of actively directing global evolution." (p. 26)

However, to understand evolution and its mechanisms of transformation and change requires - as Mesarovic argues - a totally new paradigm. A paradigm which doesn't confront man as an ensemble of the societal relations and nature as Marx did in his famous 6th thesis on Feuerbach. What we need is a paradigm conceiving nature not in a linear and deterministic way any-more but with self-organizing potential. Modern natural scientists like Prigogine and Eigen, Jantsch and Maturana show that complex systems of nature can only be explained appropriately in their development if one proceeds on the assumption that it is chaos and not order in nature which is to be explained. They also argue that it is not merely a matter of relativizing the Newtonian space and time system as Einstein did, but a matter of studying the multiplicity of space and time systems. But - by the way - science as traditionally conceived does not have a monopoly on such insights. In the work of modern artists such as Joseph Beuys or Peter Weiß we see a perception and presentation of this.

I feel that one of the consequences of this point of view in natural sciences and modern art is that the concept of

activity theory, as we currently know from Vygotsky, Luria, Leontyev and Rubinstein is Standing at an end of an era and, at the same time, at the beginning of its further development. We may feel that activity theory's original explanatory potential has not been exhausted. But the fact is that we are at an end of an era. A most urgent need is to reconnect activity theory to natural science without giving up its understanding of the special logics of societal Systems.

We think that the striking similarity of explanatory principles such as "activity" and "self-organisation" holds out the possibility that we can achieve this reconnection. In Vygotsky's first conceptualizations of activity we can see that he understands this connection of man and nature. This is revealed you will recall in one of his favorite quotations from Francis Bacon: "natura parendo vincitur" - by obeying nature it will be overcome. In other words: we only can direct evolution if we obey its laws. But obeying laws presupposes that they are known. So we see activity theory at the beginning of its further development if it is to stand the challenge and to incorporate new insights in the natural sciences.

But whether that challenge is tackled or not is a question that awaits to be answered by the scientific community. It is very clear how difficult this task is. We will have to deal with the effects of the multiplicity of time for the conceptualisation of individual and social transformation processes, and of perception and cognition within them. We have to deal with the effects of different time systems for a new understanding of the historical forming of personal sense and societal meaning and their mutual relationship. But the most important effect as I see it concerns the center of all this: a new understanding of the actual importance of personality and its development. More generally: we will have to deal with the further development of categories and methods and, at the same time, their application when studying the concrete consequences of the global problems we face in every-day life. We will have to develop multidisciplinary and international projects before we have had time to study adequately the intra-disciplinary and national questions sufficiently. And all this under the pressure of time getting more and more limited and of responsibility getting heavier and heavier.

2. The second consequence of the new assessment of the global processes concerns - as I see it - the social implications and effects. It has become irrevocably clear that the Third World carries the real costs of global industrialization and the consequent destruction of nature. We have to face the fact that the process of suffering connected with such continued transformations already hits billions of people and - as recent psychological reports show - it concerns the majority of children in the industrialized countries. As things are, the Third World will have to carry the main load even if the industrialized countries should find ways of producing which are more compatible to environment. Any re-construction will hit the developing countries in a time when they are trying to make up for differentials between themselves and the industrialized countries. Everybody can easily see that this process multiplies the following costs and that the interest of the species in its surviving makes it necessary to stop that process of multiplication. The unlimited industrialization of the developing countries would mean the final ecological break-down of the earth. The consequences of the climate catastrophe can be already witnessed: we have worldwide famines, migration of peoples and nations, grave and unpredictable disturbances of eco-logical cycles. These are consequences which will neither be mastered by traditional manipulation and regulation of market and state nor by transnational systems that balance power, because the contradiction between social or class interests on the one side and the interest of the species to survive on the other side is tearing the whole human kind apart and makes it act together at the same time. In this Situation two different possibilities to act are being discussed: the model of an ecological dictatorship and the model of a qualitative development of democracy.

Michael Müller and Klaus Meyer-Abich — both members of the Westgerman governmental committee for the protection of the earth atmosphere - describe two different arguments in favour of the first model:

The most commonly used ideological argument is that the biological interest in survival can only be guaranteed by a form of multinational emergency administration, this being the only way of enforcing the general interests in survival against the resistance of partial interests of different groups, nations or peoples. The other argument points out the economical interest of multinational business corporations which are - in the fight for the distribution of the decreasing ecological sources - trying to put the brakes on the development of the Third world.

Both arguments - as Müller and Meyer-Abich emphasize - require an authoritarian limitation of freedom: either in the sense of a biological leviathan forced upon the ignorant members of society by a seemingly all-knowing super authority, or in the form of a political or economical oppression including the possibility of military conflicts.

The Conference on economy of the KSZE-states in Bonn in March 1990 and the talks on consolidation of Daimler-Benz and Mitsubishi seem to confirm the mode is predicted by the authors. "Die Zeit", the biggest weekly newspaper in the Federal Republic of Germany, even sees a connection between these two events and gives Edzard

Reuter, the Daimler-Benz chairman, the opportunity to present his personal model of a peaceful world which is being "welded together step by step into a unity by multinational business corporations". Reuter makes it quite plain that the multinational business corporations are more able to solve the ecological problems than any state or national societies. I think one might have some doubts if this postulated identity between the economical interests of business corporations and the general interest of human kind really exists. Just a few weeks ago the Environmental Conference of Bergen in Norway has finished its work. The intended agreement of 34 countries from Europe and the USA on the limitation of carbon dioxide emissions has been devaluated by the obstinate resistance of the USA, although such an agreement would have no binding under the international law. There is only to add that almost 25% of world wide carbon dioxide emissions are produced in the USA. This should lead us to prefer the other Option, the qualitative development of democracy. This would mean at least a radical re-structuring of the industrial society, a reform of the international economical system, an ecological equalization of burdens with the developing countries, and a lasting and sustainable development towards an international society. However, it is clear that such an aim cannot be realized without active citizens in an active society. This changing importance of every single individual has one central precondition: the scientists' findings concerning these global Problems have to be appropriated by all human beings, that means they have to become general knowledge. Only then the idea of an active citizen in an active society may become a reality. Speaking of knowledge I mean - following the sociocultural school's understanding - the unity of cognition, commitment and ability to act. The Russian and the German language have a special term for this unity: "obrazovanie" respectively "Bildung".

Concerning the consequences for activity theory I should like to say, proceeding from this political-educational point of view:

Vygotsky's paradigm of mediation must not only remain a means of explaining world in itself but must become a means to explain world for us.

Activity theory has to add the dimension of didactical meaning to the methodological or epistemological meaning of the category of mediation. This is valid for all sciences, not only for the educational sciences. Didactics in the educational sciences reflects the mediation of knowledge in relation to particular institutional conditions - for instance in the form of school didactics or pre-school didactics. But what we need today is didactics of science itself. Every single discipline has to make efforts to present its findings in such a way that they may become general. The sciences and the scientists should no longer shift their responsibility for the way of presenting their findings over to a single discipline. If the assessment is right that earth can only be saved if all human beings act having the whole know-ledge of possible solutions, then the mediation of that knowledge is an absolutely necessary and integral part of every scientist's work.

Perhaps this congress will manage to make a Step on this direction.

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