

# The Origins of Cultural Historical Activity Theory

## Descartes and Consciousness

Psychology is the science of consciousness, so to explore the foundations of Psychology we must begin with Descartes. It is very fashionable nowadays, or at least until very recently, to denounce René Descartes for having been guilty of dualism, of a mind/body dichotomy, because *we* want to do away with *all* dichotomies. Things are never just black and white, good and bad, male and female; the edges are always blurred and there are always in between, and to deny this is deemed to be reactionary and oppressive. Who dares to say today, with Descartes, that thought is something categorically different from matter?

The point is that Descartes effectively *discovered* the category of ‘consciousness’, and thus laid the foundation for both modern philosophy and psychology, the science of consciousness.

Descartes stands at the very beginning of modern European philosophy. He was passionately hostile to all kinds of received knowledge – the literal truth of the Bible, the authority of the ancients in science, what ‘everyone knows’, ... Descartes began to reflect on the evidence we had for our beliefs, and he put no value on the inherited wisdom of the past. At the same time, the burgeoning interest in the observation of Nature, he found to be naïve. While the Empiricists also rejected the received authority of the ancients, they uncritically identified what they apprehended with their senses with what existed outside their consciousness.

Descartes brought a withering scepticism to bear on the Empiricists’ faith that their senses gave them direct access to objective reality, that if they laid all the old books to the side and used their own eyes, then they could discover the necessary laws governing Nature. But how could you be sure that what appeared to you was really the case? How could you know that you were not profoundly mistaken? Perhaps you were dreaming, and in reality you were the Queen of Sheba. Descartes was the first to draw attention to the fact that consciousness was *not* a faithful replica of what lay outside of consciousness and given to us in the form of sense-impressions; that consciousness and its forms were outside and distinct from matter and its forms.

But not only that. As the inventor of coordinate geometry he was able to do some calculations and algebra on a piece of paper and tell an artillery man at what angle to fire his cannon in order to send a cannon ball over the wall of a besieged city. How was this possible? How was it possible for the mind to represent in symbols and accurately predict the trajectory of an iron ball as it flew through the air? These symbols were not ‘mirroring’ the cannonball, and yet by thought alone, Descartes could know the movement of the cannon ball better than the cannoneer himself.

So Descartes was confronted by two problems: Firstly, was there *any* certain knowledge? Was there any firm starting point on which science could reliably build? Secondly, given the categorical difference between thought and matter, how were thought and matter *connected* so that the movement of cannon balls and stars could be predicted by Reason? If thought and matter were not connected at some point, then they would be inhabiting two different universes and science would be impossible. How *was* science possible?

In relation to the problem of certainty, Descartes observed that even though he could trust neither his senses, his own consciousness or received wisdom, he could at least be sure that his own consciousness *existed*, for that is what is immediately given to him, even when he is asleep and dreaming, and thus that he, Descartes, exists. He also reasoned that since he did not freely create what was in his consciousness, something *else* outside of his consciousness and greater than him must also exist. *This* was a certainty. From that starting point, remembered in the Latin maxim *cogito ergo sum*, “I think therefore I am,” Descartes built his system, including a theory of thinking and the emotions. He still saw consciousness as some kind of endowment given to human beings, while the human body, and the rest of the universe was governed by *mechanical* laws.

As is well known, this starting point, true and valuable in itself, led Descartes and those who followed him into intractable problems, summed up in the condemnation of Cartesian Dualism.

Spinoza tried to overcome Descartes’ dualism by declaring Nature, inclusive of human beings, to be, not the work of God, but God Himself, and that rather than matter and thought being distinct substances, Spinoza said there was only One substance, and thought and extension were but two *attributes* of that One substance. But this simply displaced the dualism of substances to a dualism of attributes. It also maintained Descartes’ *mechanical* conception of Nature, leaving human beings subject to an absolute mechanical fatalism. It also got Spinoza denounced as an Atheist and his works were effectively suppressed for more than a century.

The mainstream response to Descartes was a series of Rational critiques of Empiricism which eventually led to the profound scepticism of David Hume and the impossibility of any knowledge of necessity in Nature. If all we know are the images produced on our own sense organs, then we can know nothing with certainty *outside* of that. You cannot pair up objects and their reflections in a mirror world of thought.

Kant responded to this with his Critical philosophy which set out to determine the limits of knowledge, on the model of individuals processing the data of experience with an inborn faculty of Reason. Kant’s masterful system of concepts stands today as a monument of philosophical precision, and underpins the work of Kantians such as Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky. But 150 years after Descartes, Kant’s system remained dualistic, with appearances on one side, and unknowable things-in-themselves on the other, with the human subject split between faculties of Intuition and Reason and numerous other such dichotomies. Ridding philosophy of dichotomies proved to be not at all easy!

Descartes' mistake was *not* in making a categorical distinction between thought and matter, but in making this dichotomy between thought and matter the *starting point* for the solution of problems of *epistemology* (the theory of *knowledge*). Thought and Matter are ontological categories (Ontology is the study of the kinds of things that can exist). Thought, or Consciousness, is what we are given, immediately, whether asleep or awake, whether animal or human. Matter is simply everything outside of thought. That is the beginning and end of what can be deduced or proven from the categorical difference between thought and matter.

Consciousness is *not* something material, because the very *meaning* of the word 'material' is that it is *not* just in our mind, but *exists outside consciousness*. So it would be self-contradictory for me to say that my consciousness is material. But I can say that *your* consciousness is material, since it is outside of my consciousness; *your* consciousness is not given to me immediately, but on the contrary, like the force of gravity and the ambient temperature, has to be inferred from observation.

Human consciousness arises from the interaction of human physiology and human behavior; both these two processes are perfectly objective processes which are observable. Thought cannot be identified with neurons; a thought is not a neuron or any combination of neurons. And no matter how long I contemplate an object, my thought can never be identical to the object, either in form or content. But when my cat looks behind the mirror to find the other cat, I know what's in his mind; but it is an appearance, an illusion; it is not *my* illusion, but *his* illusion. But appearances can be studied scientifically.

The distinction which properly makes the beginning for the study of the sources and validity of knowledge is the *subject-object relation*. In this case it *is* false to treat subject and object in a dualistic or dichotomous way, there *are* halfway in between, the boundaries *are* blurred; subject and object are a mutually constituting unity of opposites. But the subject-object relation is one which can be found not only in relation to a person and the world they know, but even in the actions of a computer, an institution, or a natural process. The problem of knowledge is the problem of the subject/object relation.

Descartes was able to *pose* the problem of knowledge but he failed to suggest a fruitful method for its solution. It was only after Kant that philosophers began to get to grips with this problem and the foundations of Cultural Historical Activity Theory began to be laid down. But still, all materialist philosophers from Feuerbach to Marx, Plekhanov and Vygotsky up to present day participants in CHAT, have *sublated* Descartes' insight into their work. That is to say they have negated it, but also retained it and transcended it.

## **Herder and Culture**

To find the real roots of Cultural Historical Activity Theory we have to go to late 18th century Germany, and the Romantic Movement's philosophical reaction to the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, whose foremost philosopher was Immanuel Kant, had overthrown religion, superstition, privilege and narrow parochialism, but under the banner of the universal rights of man and universal laws of Nature, laws which could be determined by the exercise of Pure Reason, for which every person possessed the innate

capacity, alongside a separate capacity for sensuous observation, thus dividing the world into appearances on one side and unknowable things-in-themselves on the other. The human being was simultaneously *flattened out* into a uniform type and *broken up* and analysed into so many separate faculties.

The Romantic movement reacted against this aspect of the Enlightenment, and its first exponent in philosophy was Johann Gottfried Herder. He made his name in 1770 at age 26, with an *Essay on the Origin of Language*. Herder was the first philosopher to claim that Reason was *not* universal, that consciousness differed radically from one epoch to another, from one society to another and from one individual to another. How people think would be dependent on the cultural practices of which they were a part. He held that thinking was *working with symbols*, so thinking was intimately linked with language and culture generally.

Herder is largely remembered as a philosopher of history, through his enquiry into *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the times) and *Volksgeist* (the spirit of a people) and he approached the psychology of an individual as first of all a member of a definite people and class, with a shared history and culture, rather than proceeding the other way around, as if the nature of a society could be deduced by adding up the nature of its individual citizens.

So Herder was not only the first to propose the intimate connection between thinking and language but is credited as the founder of cultural anthropology, an important philosopher of art, linguist and I think properly, the founder of Cultural Historical Activity Theory. Herder was not a *systematic* philosopher however, and unlike Kant and Hegel he did not leave us an elaborate system. Most of his writings were virulent critiques of Enlightenment arrogance.

His friend Goethe rightly said that “The greatest discoveries are made not by individuals but by their age.” And it is probably more true to say that the basic philosophical ideas of CHAT emerged in Germany from the entire Romantic movement and the Classical movement which followed: Wm von Humboldt, the founder of modern linguistics and creator of the Prussian education system, Goethe – poet and scientist, the great dialectician, Hegel, Fichte who first made Activity the foundation of the psyche, Feuerbach, the first materialist critic of Hegel, Fichte’s follower, Moses Hess who wrote the “Philosophy of the Act” and introduced Marx to communism, and ultimately Karl Marx himself.

But before moving on, there are a couple of contributions of Herder’s which should be recalled.

Herder, like Goethe, was a pantheist, and as such he risked denunciation as an atheist. This had been Spinoza’s fate. For a century after Spinoza’s death in 1677, Spinoza was a ‘dead dog’, he was anathema. In 1787, Herder published “God, some Conversations” in which he not only rehabilitated Spinoza but he also modified Spinoza’s pantheism. According to Herder, God, i.e., Nature, was *active*; Nature was not just some gigantic machine, but was full of intentions, of striving, of opposing forces, and human beings were a part of that striving and activity. Activity was *natural*, and didn’t need to be explained by some life-force or suchlike. It was this revised Pantheism which expressed the spirit of Classical German Philosophy and which inspired humanist philosophers who sought scientific explanations for Nature and

human life for a century afterwards. Particularly through the popularity and literary brilliance of Goethe, this naturalistic Pantheism became respectable.

Before moving on: in his studies of national character, Herder said that every people (and every person) had their *Schwerpunkt*, which was uniquely theirs and made them what and who they were, and which they could not be forced to part with. *Schwerpunkt* is one of those untranslatable German words, but I take it as ‘strong point’: every people, every person has their characteristic ‘strong point’, the activity in which they had the home ground advantage so to speak. This idea was further developed by Goethe.

## **Goethe, the Urphänomen and Romantic Science**

Goethe was the first European celebrity. He became world famous at the age of 25 with his romantic novel, “The Sorrows of Young Werther,” but he also ran the civil service in Weimar for a decade and was a natural scientist throughout his life. He aimed to develop a completely different approach to natural science, which is known as Romantic Science. Goethe’s influence on culture in the German-speaking world and in Russia, was enormous, his influence was felt over the education of German speakers from Marx and Wundt to Freud and Jung. Even Vygotsky quotes Goethe more often than he quotes Hegel, and Luria identified himself as a proponent of Romantic Science. Romantic Science entailed beginning by grasping a process as a whole, rather than analysing it into parts, and emphasised patient observation against artificial experimentation and the invention of invisible forces and arbitrary principles to explain phenomena. Recognizing that the practice of science formed part of a community’s metaphysical rationale for its own cultural identity, Romantic scientists also sought methods which were accessible to the participation of non-specialists.

One of the main problems of science to which Goethe addressed himself was the problem of how to conceive of a complex process in such a way as to allow you to understand it *as a whole*, from which all the parts can be understood. The word for such a whole in German is *Gestalt*. At the same time as Herder was writing his book on Spinoza, Goethe was touring through Italy making botanical sketches, noting the changing form of plants at different altitudes and latitudes. His aim was to find the simplest or archetypal form of plant, the simplest plant which exhibited the properties of all plants, but was modified in the formation of this or that particular plant. Goethe arrived at an idea which he called the *Urphänomen*, or archetypal phenomenon, the smallest, simplest imaginable, single example of the phenomenon, stripped of all its particular, contingent attributes. In that one simple cell, you see the whole process.

Let’s look for a moment at possible alternative ways of conceiving of a complex whole. For example, we could pick out some attribute of things and see the collective as everything that has such and such an attribute. That is the method of abstract empiricism. It displaces the problem of understanding an entity with that of understanding a contingent attribute, and fails to comprehend either part or whole; by this process the world is broken down into small pieces and put back together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Or, according to the hypothetico-deductive method, we can invent some force or principle, which is in principle unobservable (like the force of gravity, or IQ) and then

deem the complex process to be caused by this unseen force. This merely shifts the problem away from something we can see to some intangible metaphysical entity. Or we devise structural explanations which take away any content from the parts, such as individual people, and put everything into a hidden structure. Or we can take the functional approach, and reduce the problem of understanding the whole to that of understanding its functional parts, again simply replacing one problem with another of much the same kind.

Goethe's most successful work was in morphology, the study of the forms of living things and their interrelations. Unfortunately, he died before the invention of microscopes which were sufficiently powerful to allow us to see *cells*; the cell was discovered 5 years after his death, in 1837. But it is generally conceded that the cell fulfilled Goethe's idea of the *Urphänomen*. The point is that the *Urphänomen* is a phenomenon, that is, something given to the senses and which is simple enough to be understood *viscerally*. It is so simple and self-evident, that it does not require some explanatory principle *separate* from itself. For example, if you want to understand the principle of mechanical advantage, it is only necessary to look at a simple lever and play with it a bit; you don't need to know Archimedes Law of Leverage or know anything about the concepts of force to get it.

This idea, of understanding a complex whole through its simplest part is Goethe's great gift to science and it marks genuine humanistic science off from the abstract empiricist and analytical science which has dominated the world since the days of Isaac Newton and Francis Bacon. Goethe's idea was welcomed by Hegel who made it the *Urphänomen* of his own philosophy.

### **Hegel, Thought-objects and the Concept**

Kant had moved the problem of knowledge from a problem of natural science, of interactions between substances, to one of philosophy, in particular, the *subject-object relation*. But even as a purely philosophical problem, we were still stuck with a dichotomy. Human beings could only ever know the *appearances* of things, and could never have direct access to things as they were in themselves, independently of human activity. Certain problems *were* amenable to pure reason however, or so Kant believed, such as geometry and logic, leaving human beings processing the data of the senses with an innate logical processor, with the so-called subject, standing outside the object of knowledge (taken to be a natural process) – a philosophical construct, isolated from culture and history.

Hegel resolved this problem by drawing on Herder's idea of thought as 'working with symbols' and consequently people were not just observers of culture, but on the contrary, were both products of and participants in culture. Hegel *sublated* the problems of epistemology and ontology which had tortured the minds of previous generations of philosophers by taking the subject and object together, a whole *subject-object* which differentiated itself, rather than having to stick together two entities which were foreign to one another to begin with. The human mind was able to represent the objects of culture, because it was after all the activity of the human mind which created and constituted them.

The key to this move was Hegel's idea of the *'thought object'*. Thought objects are the artefacts which are created and given meaning by human beings, and in turn, become the content of their thoughts as they use the artefacts and participate in the various social practices of which their culture is composed. Thus as the object (material culture) changes, so the subject (consciousness) changes, and the differences between the two are important, but are secondary to their relatedness.

Hegel's conception rested, not on the idea of we human beings and an outside nature, but rather of the relation between human beings and the cultural world that *they themselves create*. So the problem of mind became the problem of understanding the *internal dynamics* of a community.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel tells the story of European civilisation, through a series of such subject-objects beginning with the first philosophical reflections up to modern (i.e., Hegelian) philosophy from three different aspects. Each stage in this story is what Hegel calls a 'formation of consciousness' (*Gestalt des Bewußtseins*), which is the identity of three things: a way of thinking, a way of life and the constellation of artefacts through which people reflect on their of activity. A formation of consciousness is best understood, not as a whole society, but as a *project*, which could be anything from a developing nation to a social movement, a science or a family saga.

To tackle this problem, Hegel appropriated Goethe's idea of *Urphänomen*. At the centre of each *Gestalt* is a *concept* which functions as the ultimate criterion of truth or rules of inference within the project. That logically primitive concept, cannot be proved or reduced to anything more fundamental, within the scope of that project. Every project has some ideal or social function which constitutes the key concept, the *Schwerpunkt* or *Urphänomen* of the whole project.

Every problem that arises in the life of some project causes contradictions and disputes which ripple through the whole formation until it comes up against this key concept. Here the concept is subject to internal, sceptical critique, and at some point it proves unable to resolve the crisis, unable to withstand sceptical attack and fails. The whole project then falls into crisis and eventually collapses, and is ultimately overtaken by a new formation which is able to withstand sceptical attack under the new conditions.

Hegel's Logic elaborates the dynamics of *Gestalten* which he demonstrated in the *Phenomenology*. Hegel has appropriated Goethe's *Urphänomen* in the form of a concept, which is the basic unit of a *Gestalt*. The simple, archetypal concept forms the starting point for any science which seeks to understand or work upon some complex of phenomena. As Hegel said in a letter to Goethe (21/02/1827):

“What is simple and abstract, what you strikingly call the *Urphänomen*, you place at the very beginning. You then show how the intervention of further spheres of influence and circumstances generates the concrete phenomena, and you regulate the whole progression so that the succession proceeds from simple conditions to the more composite, and so that the complex now appears in full clarity through this decomposition. To ferret out the *Urphänomen*, to free it from those further environs

which are accidental to it, to apprehend as we say abstractly - this I take ... to be the truly scientific knowledge.”

This was the model of science which Hegel appropriated from Goethe and on which he constructed each part of his Logic and the other components of his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. But instead of setting off from a simple *phenomena* like Goethe, Hegel made the beginning of a science, a *concept* of the subject matter.

But for Hegel, a concept is not just a word signifying something according to convention or some chimera existing only in the psyche, but on the contrary was as much an object of experience as anything else. But to understand how Hegel finally overcame the dichotomies which had plagued philosophy up to then we have to grasp the structure of the concept as Hegel saw it.

Hegel observed that a concept is the identity of a *Universal* representation (such as a word or other artefact or form), an *Individual* instance of the concept and a *Particular* social practice or action which normatively subsumes the individual under the universal. There can be no meaning of a word except insofar as there are individual people who know it and use it, and it is only through some social interaction of such people, involving the word, that its meaning can be constituted, acquired or transmitted. Hegel elaborated this idea in the form of logical judgments and syllogisms, demonstrating that a concept was incomplete until all possible relations between individual, universal and particular were established and brought together. A culture is not just a pile of artefacts such as found in an archaeological dig, nor is it just a collection of people externally united by some fixed or contingent attribute, and a system of social practices is inconceivable independently of the language and material culture generally utilised. The smallest unit of a cultural formation is a concept only when we understand a concept in this mediated way, as a culturally mediated social practice.

This may seem a really arcane way of resolving the matter of human thought and practice, but on the contrary it is extremely powerful and relies on no fallible hypotheses about human biology or physics or anything else.

So Hegel appropriated Goethe's idea of *Urphänomen* as the *concept*. But the concept is not a simple name, or an attribute for the purpose of collecting like things together in a set, but a *cell* in which the relationship between a universal representation (such as a word or tool) to an individual instance or thought is mediated by particular on-going social practices. Likewise the relation between social practices or institutions and individuals is mediated by artefacts such as signs, buildings, body language and clothing, etc.. And the relation between particular institutions and the universal ideals that govern them is mediated by individuals.

Hegel *was* an idealist: he saw the motive force of human life in terms of thought-forms and assigned the key role in human history to ideologues: philosophers, artists and political leaders. But nonetheless he had discovered the key philosophical ideas needed to resolve the problems of psychology.

Hegel had his own theory of Psychology as well, which is contained in the much misunderstood master-servant dialectic, in which Hegel presents individual freedom and self-consciousness as an achievement of civilization rather than belonging to the “state



of Nature.” George Herbert Mead presented Hegel’s psychology in a more accessible form with his I/Me dialectic: our relationship to ourselves is mediated by our interactions with other people.

## Marx and Activity

### Marx’s Critique of Hegel

Between Hegel’s death in 1831 and Marx’s earliest philosophical writings in 1841, Europe had completely changed. In common with his contemporaries, Hegel had assumed the educated and privileged classes to be the vehicle of social progress; sporadic outbreaks of protest amongst the rabble were just seen as social problems which the participants in political life needed to deal with. But during the 1830s, with the Chartist uprisings in Britain and proletarian uprisings in France, the scene had completely changed. The proletariat was appointing its own leaders and writing its own programs and despite their exclusion from the political process, were now the leading agent of social change.

Only a genuinely *emancipatory* philosophy was viable now; anything else would be a reactionary *apology*. The philosophy which had been developed by the Romantic and Classical philosophers was humanist, in that they respected the integrity of the whole subject as a human being, but Hegel’s totalizing idealist system essentially left the poor masses, who were excluded from the political system, as playthings of spirit which in any case acted behind the backs of the actors in history. Hegel’s view of society lumped agricultural labourers together with landowners in an “Agricultural Class,” and wage-workers were lumped together with capitalists in the “Business Class.” Hegel did not understand that workers did not take any joy from seeing their employer grow rich on *their* backs. People did not automatically identify themselves according to their place in society; class differences alienated people from the state.

But for Hegel, all production was objectification, and the word ‘alienation’ carried no pejorative connotation (it just meant disposing of something), whereas Marx saw that because the worker’s product became the property of an *alien* class, production was not simply the objectification of their powers, something to be proud of, but rather they saw that their productive activity was turned against them, that they made a rod for their own back.

Similarly, Hegel held that thought-forms realized themselves in activity; but this is upside down; thought forms reflect activity that is already developing in advance of our thinking, which must *reflect* activity. It is not the philosophers who are changing the world, but the people who are creating it and reproducing it in their daily activity, who change the world. Nonetheless, in order to change the world, philosophy is necessary to get beyond appearances and see beyond ideology.

When those without a voice, those who are invisible in the official view of society, come to be seen as the real agents of social progress, a completely different view of history and social change, and a completely new kind of philosophy, is necessary and Hegel’s idealist construction became outmoded almost overnight, just as the Young Hegelians began to become genuinely revolutionary.

Hegel was the supreme cultural critic; everything, it seemed, was a social construct for him. But in fact, his greatest error was that he took the human body as a fixed and given product of nature. He absolutely rejected the idea of evolution (which he knew from Lamarck of course, not Darwin) and insisted that in Nature, there was nothing new under the Sun. He naïvely took the human body itself as given by Nature. As a result he *naturalised* the difference between the genders, racial and class differences, and failed to understand that the human body, including *these* differences, were products of both labour and nature, that is to say that the human body is itself an artefact, a cultural product. But taking gender differences, for example, as natural, Hegel was impelled to prove that these differences were *logically necessary*.

It was the Young Hegelian, Ludwig Feuerbach, who first criticized Hegel from a materialist standpoint, insisting that human beings were natural, striving, suffering and loving organisms. Feuerbach also showed how ideology functioned to reinforce social relations. Consequently, Hegel's system acted as a justification and apology for the *status quo*. The young Marx was instantly won over to Feuerbach's position.

Although Hegel had begun with Herder's unsystematic, bottom-up view of culture and social change, and his idea of Spirit had begun as simply the 'activity of human beings en masse', the drive towards system-building led him into a situation where history was 'the work of spirit'. Marx on the contrary, insisted that "History does nothing, it 'possesses no immense wealth', it 'wages no battles'. It is man, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights." Marx therefore committed himself to explaining history and society from the bottom up, of refusing any kind of laws of history, social structures and so on, governing the activity of human beings.

Herder, Goethe and Hegel had shown how a complex whole, such as bourgeois society, can be understood as a *Gestalt*, at the same time as basing oneself on the simplest relation. This is the central methodological line that Marx continued: in order to understand capitalism he needed to grasp its *Schwerpunkt*, or *Urphänomen* or concept.

I now want to review six passages of Marx's work which bring out the important things we have to learn from him, but you should read these for yourself in good time.

### **Theses on Feuerbach**

Before looking at these 11 dot-points which Marx scribbled on a piece of paper in 1845, we should take note of where Marx would have acquired the concept of 'Activity'. We have mentioned that Herder introduced the idea of Activity in his conception of Nature as inclusive of intentions, striving, opposing forces and so on, as opposed to Spinoza's conception of Nature as a giant machine with consciousness.

Fichte, the philosopher of the Ego and a predecessor of Hegel, took Activity as the basic substance of his philosophy. He defined the Ego as Pure Activity, and by this means he endeavoured to overcome Kant's dichotomy between subject and object, because Activity is both subjective and objective. Hegel sublated this definition of the Ego into his social theory, but he left in the background his original idea of Spirit as the activity of human beings en masse.

Moses Hess was an older contemporary of Marx, a Young Hegelian, who introduced Marx to Communism. Hess had written a book called *Philosophie der Tat*, “Philosophy of the Act,” *Tat* has the same root which gives us *Tätigkeit*, or Activity. Here Hess introduced the idea of appropriating Hegel by taking Activity rather than Spirit as the fundamental substance, and he gave his idea a militant spin: the philosophy of the act saw the world not as an accumulation of beings but as *actions*.

In the first thesis Marx makes the point that it is the idealists (Hegel and Fichte in particular) who have grasped the *active* side of human life. And he makes this point again in §3, “the materialist doctrine that people are products of circumstances ... forgets that it is people who change circumstances,” and that this point of view (i.e., the materialist) pretends to look down from above on a passive society, “but who is to educate the educators?” And in §8 he says that “all mysteries find their rational solution in human practice and the comprehension of this practice.” So it is clear enough, isn’t it, that Marx is taking as his starting point the idea that people are not just products of their cultural environment (though they are this too) but are the active agents of changing their culture. And furthermore, he points out that *perception* is an *active* process, an active, practical process of learning about an object, not just a passive one of reflecting it in contemplation. Marx’s point of view is that we cannot just take the world to be so many objects which we can contemplate; on the contrary, ‘practical-critical’ activity is the only way we can get to know the world. We are not subjects living in a world surrounded by natural objects, but rather, objects have meaning for us because we create them and use them in our own activity.

He criticised Feuerbach for taking a (typically Christian) ‘theoretical attitude’, believing that the truth can be proved in theory. But ideas, however mistaken, arise for a reason and serve social functions. Feuerbach himself finally proves to be a kind of idealist. He thinks that just because he shows that Christian beliefs are just a reflection of secular institutions on Earth, serving to justify them, then such an exposé will bring the whole thing down. No, says Marx, religion, or any ideology, arises for a reason, because of certain social problems, certain contradictions, and it is only by resolving these practical problems that we can bring about a change in thinking, in ideology. Denouncing the Holy Family as a myth does nothing to change the earthly family, but equal pay just might. Thus we see that Marx set off not from matter in motion or any such abstraction but from Activity. Marx did not have a precise concept of Activity, such as was developed later by Activity theorists. It is just a generalized conception of purposive human activity, a unity of theory and practice which permeated human life from top to bottom.

## **German Ideology**

At about the same time as Marx wrote the *Theses on Feuerbach*, he also wrote with Engels a vast manuscript which was never published, but contains much of interest to us. In particular the first chapter on Feuerbach. Under the heading “First Premises of Materialist Method,” we find the following:

“The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those

which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way.”

Here Marx concisely defines the standpoint of Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory. We do not set off from any assumptions or abstractions about history or language or class struggle, or some kind of foundation myth, but simply from “the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live.” In these simple words Marx also confirms the interpretation that we have made of Hegel’s idea of the Concept. That is, he specifies three components to his premises:

1. *Real individuals* – not hypothetical or mythical figures from the past, not animal life or idealised images, but real, empirically-given human beings,

2. Their *activity* – which we understand as a generalized concept of purposive action, particularly social action which takes both its means and ends from society, and

3. *Material conditions* – and this means all the artefacts they use in their activity, whether factories, spoken words, weapons, foodstuff or whatever.

In any study, these are the three things we have to go on. To form a concept of the problem, we have to determine the relation between real individuals, their activity and the artefacts they use, that is to say, a concept of the subject matter. Once we can determine such a relationship, then we ought to be able to understand the development of the object.

People should read the whole of this first chapter.

## **Method of Political Economy**

Next we turn to section (3) of the Introduction to Marx’s 1857 *Grundrisse*, where Marx was working over the concepts of political economy, struggling to develop an approach to the subject matter. His thinking is still in the process of development, but he makes some points which are important to Activity Theory.

The first point Marx makes is that in order to understand a complex whole (such as bourgeois society), we have to begin with the abstract concepts which have been produced in this social formation, and then reconstruct, in thought, a picture of the concrete whole. Thus we would start with concepts like production, division of labour, value, and so on, and reconstruct a picture of the whole population, the state and so on. But on the other hand, such abstractions were themselves the product of a protracted period of social development. So science proceeds in a two-stage process: first from the concrete (direct perception of an unorganised mass of data) moving to thinner and thinner abstractions (value, division of labour, etc), and then from the abstract to the concrete again, reconstructing the original vision, but this time in conceptual form, rather than as a stream of sense impressions.

But here he parts company with Hegel. Hegel saw these scientific abstractions as the product of professional thinkers, mulling over the material year after year, admittedly as part of their community and their age, until they come up with the best theory. On the contrary, says Marx. The thinker can only appropriate what already

exists in social practice, and grasp it in thought forms. The development of new abstractions is the result of the development of activity. Abstractions formed in the head are reflections of *abstract* forms of activity! The most thoroughgoing explanation of this process is provided by Evald Ilyenkov, most succinctly in his essay “On the Concept of the Ideal.”

The business of changing the world is not just a job for philosophers, since (as Hegel said himself) philosophy can only tell us what is; it cannot predict or by itself change the world, because it always arrives too late! But *philosophy is necessary* because if we are not able to clearly see how abstractions are formed in social practice, then we remain prisoners of the dominant ideology, which seeps from the pores of social life.

### **Preface to *Capital***

After 24 years of labour, in 1867 Marx was at last able to send the manuscript for *Capital* to the printer. He had been frustrated because even his closest collaborators could not understand his first chapter. “Every beginning is difficult,” he says in the Preface, “the human mind has for more than 2,000 years sought in vain to get to the bottom of it all,” and then in a direct acknowledgement to Hegel and Goethe, he says: “But in bourgeois society, the commodity-form of the product of labour – or value-form of the commodity – is the economic *cell-form*.”

Thus Marx followed Hegel and Goethe’s model of science and began with a simple, empirically verifiable concept of the complex whole of bourgeois society: the exchange of a commodity. It is striking that not only does Marx begin with this simple relation, which actually hardly ever occurs in modern bourgeois society where money has replaced the direct exchange of products, but this cell of bourgeois society is a simple relation between two people, mediated by a product of labour, an artefact: “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.” That is the essence of capitalism.

A relationship between people which is mediated by an artefact, this is the foundation of the approach Marx took to understanding bourgeois society. The main work of Marx which Vygotsky had studied exhaustively and which he took as his model for a scientific psychology was Volume One of *Capital*. Now Hegel believed that once the concept of a complex whole is determined, then it is possible to unfold the entire content from that concept. He did not deny that such “unfolding” relies on observation. But a science is not just a collection of facts; a process is not understood scientifically until all aspects of the phenomena can be shown to follow necessarily from its fundamental concept.

Marx understood that the concepts reflecting social formations were themselves products of that social formation, and new concepts were developed through intervention in the process. Further, with or without intervention by the theorist themselves, human activity is always developing, and new concepts are always going to be brought to the surface, and any concept we have formed of the process has to be revised and improved. But with these important qualifications, the process of working out the science is one of interrogating the concept of the subject matter by means of which the subject matter of the science is grasped.

### **Chapter One, Volume One of *Capital***

Marx begins *Capital* with the commodity relation. He is able to unfold the entire phenomena of bourgeois society from this cell only because he discovers within the commodity relation an internal contradiction. In the first section of Chapter One, Marx describes two kinds of value: exchange-value and use value. Exchange value is what the commodity is worth on the market, and use value is the usefulness of the commodity for whoever wants it. Exchange-value is quantitative, use value is qualitative. These two values are quite distinct. A moderately useless object like a pearl can have a high exchange value because of the difficulty of extracting pearls from the sea; whilst rainwater is priceless but has zero exchange value so long as it is freely available to all.

In section 3, Marx speculatively traces the development of value from its primitive beginnings in exchange between mutually isolated communities who each produce a surplus and therefore find benefit in exchanging their surplus produce. Marx shows how the further development of commodity production leads to the crystallisation out of one commodity (gold) whose use is as bearer of exchange-value. Value is an abstraction, but value takes on a material form in money. Likewise, the development of commodity production leads to the development of a specific kind of labour which is 'abstract', namely wage-labour in factories where no special skill is required, and people are paid by the hour producing commodities of uniform quality in factory conditions.

Marx also pointed out how the form of economic activity conditions the entire ethos of a society, and thereby the conditions necessary for the understanding of the workings of the economy:

“The secret of the expression of value, namely, that all kinds of labour are equal and equivalent, because, and so far as they are human labour in general, cannot be deciphered, until the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice. This, however, is possible only in a society in which the great mass of the produce of labour takes the form of commodities, in which, consequently, the dominant relation between man and man, is that of owners of commodities.”

In the final section 4, Marx comes as near as he does anywhere to a psychological theory of capitalism. He shows how the material products of labour, commodities, once they leave the labourer's hands and enter the market, are no longer under the control of the producer and because they are bearers of exchange-value they exert social power. In reality, a commodity is the materialization of the relation between two people, one of whom has laboured to meet the needs of the other, who pays for it at value. But because of the market, this relation between people becomes mystified, and the commodities themselves appear to have acquired human, social power. By analogy with religious cults who invest objects with spiritual power, Marx calls this the 'fetishism of commodities'.

From this beginning Marx goes on to trace the development of *all* the phenomena of bourgeois society: credit, money, capital, banking, business cycles and so forth. And this is the model of science which Vygotsky adopted for his approach to psychology.

## **Eighteenth Brumaire, Chapter One**

Finally, I want to draw attention to one of Marx's few developed studies on history and politics, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In this study of the crisis in France which led up to the 1848 Revolution, Marx uses a dramaturgical metaphor.

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language.”

He goes on to show how political agents are formed by people rallying around this or that personage who has dressed themselves up in the ‘costume’ of some hero from the past, complete with appropriate posture, symbols and poetry. Political groups crystallize by people identifying with the ideals and forms of activity represented symbolically, and coming together around a banner representing these values.

Thus once again, Marx brings out the importance of symbolic mediation in the construction of social phenomena. It is entirely wrong to think, as some do, that purely and simply by means of their social position, for example as poor wage-labourers, people develop a political consciousness and as a consequence adhere to this or that program and party. This was never Marx's position. Politics is at heart a semiotic process (though Marx did not have access to this word or concept), and the formation of class consciousness out of an amorphous mass of individuals sharing the same material conditions is a process in which people witness and participate in a drama and recognize their own place in the drama, and adopt the role of this or that character in the drama. The stage is set and people must now improvise the next scene in the drama.

In the *Eighteenth Brumaire* there is nothing of economic determinism; dozens of different political and social agents are mentioned by Marx and their trajectory during the crisis is described in terms of the multiplicity of different attributes and collectivities that go into the formation of social groups and their collective psychology.

Thus, Marx has given just a couple of examples of his approach to psychology – commodity fetishism and political drama – in addition to the model of science which he developed from Hegel and his predecessors. These are the resources which Vygotsky drew upon in founding the current of Cultural Historical Activity Theory.

## **In Conclusion**

In closing I should note that while I have outlined the direct line of origin of Vygotsky's psychology in Classical German philosophy, this is by no means the only source contributing to the creation of Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory. The first physiological investigations of the nervous system by German natural scientists such as Helmholtz, Stumpf and Wundt, the American pragmatists such as James, Dewey, Peirce and Mead, the Gestalt Psychologists Ehrenfels, Koffka, German psychologists such as Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Lewin, Husserl's Phenomenology,

and the Russian school of linguistics including Vygotsky's teacher Gustav Shpet and French social theory including Durkheim, Janet, Bergson, Marcel Mauss, Henri Wallon and many others.

### **Recommended Reading**

Ilyenkov, E., (2009) *The Ideal in Human Activity*, [Erythrós Press](#).  
Hegel (2009), *Hegel's Logic* with a Foreword by Andy Blunden, [Erythrós Press](#).

### **Marx Readings**

Marx, K. [1845] *Theses on Feuerbach*.

Marx, K. [1845] Chapter 1, *The German Ideology*.

Marx, K. [1852] *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Chapter 1.

Marx, K. [1857] Introduction. Method of Political Economy, *The Grundrisse*.

Marx, K. [1859] Preface, *Contribution to Critique of Political Economy*.

Marx, K. [1867] *Capital*, Volume I, Preface to first German edition, and Chapter One.

Engels, F. [1876] *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*.

[Genealogy of CHAT](#), diagram.