CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

GROUPS AS A MODEL OF SOCIALITY

The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. In epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes.
(Marx 1852)

On the face of it, the problem of identity and the constitution of social subjects, would seem amenable to an Activity Theory approach, given that a person’s system of social interactions and life activity is widely seen as being the medium of identity formation (e.g. Vygotsky 1998a: 43). Conversely, the formation of systems of activity necessarily draws upon individuals’ sense of identity and identity is surely central to the formation of social subjects—the formal or informal, collective self-conscious actors which mediate between the lives of individuals and the broader social terrain. But social subjects are far from being entities that one ‘belongs’ to in the narrow sense of belonging to a party or a team, though they may crystallize into a coherent group in critical situations.

Social life is inconceivable without the formation of social subjects, a process which was a central concern of Hegel, and which Marx dealt with in writings such as “The 18th Brumaire.” There is a vast modern literature on group dynamics, identity and other related topics tied up with the problems of identity which have come to be seen as central to late modernity.

But the problem of identity seems to have completely escaped Leontyev’s attention.

The archetypal scenario with which Leontyev illustrates the differentiation of action and activity is the primeval hunt organized by a tribal group. Leontyev never reflected for a moment on how and why it is that an individual tribal member sees themself as a member of the tribe and therefore agrees to participate in the collective hunt. Of course, under normal circumstances, every member will identify with the tribe, that is the nature of tribal life, but how is this achieved and sustained? On the other hand, instead of taking the identification of every individual with an arbitrarily selected group of which they are
deemed to be a member, as a premise of Activity Theory, the tribal group could be taken as an archetypal instance of the formation of a stable sense of identity. In this case, the collective hunt and the distribution of the product according to norms would seem to play a role in creating a sense of identity where it did not previously exist, rather than collective activity resting upon a pre-existing common identity. But either way, without that sense of identity on the part of the participants, it is senseless to even talk of the collective needs of the tribe, let alone those needs being the object of the activity.

But participants in modern society do not generally belong to tribes. Leontyev takes it for granted that the ‘objective’ meaning of labor is the provision for the needs of the whole ‘society’. What is this ‘society’? Leontyev presumes that every individual is essentially and objectively a member of the nation-state. But at the same time he presumes that a worker sees in their labor only wages, and the capitalist only profit. In other words he presumes that everyone is an individualist (notwithstanding undeveloped gestures to proletarian internationalism and worker solidarity, whose origin is quite inexplicable by means of his theory). So subjectively everyone is an individual, whilst objectively they are organs of the nation-state! How an individual thinks and acts to one degree or another as part of a group is a question which needs to be answered, not presupposed by Activity Theory.

From animal life to human life, Leontyev retained an individualistic definition of the subject. Even while he demonstrated how human consciousness arises through the use of cultural products in collective activity, the subject remained an individual organism pursuing individual goals. But as a Soviet citizen, he seemed to take it for granted that everyone works for the good of their nation-state.

The fact is that membership of a group of any kind is not something which Activity Theory can take as a given datum or as a means of explaining or expressing the social character of people’s activity—it is a phenomena which needs to be explained by Activity Theory. Why does the tribal person see themself as member of the tribe? Why do Soviet citizens identify themselves as Soviet citizens? Why do some workers see themselves as workers, and others not? Why does a woman see herself as a woman, or a wife or a citizen, and what does this mean for them? These are prime questions for social theory and psychology which Activity Theory needs to answer.

The kind of conception of sociality which Leontyev expresses—individual self-consciousness on one side, uncritical group-identity on