CHAPTER THIRTY

MARX’S CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY AND ACTIVITY THEORY

The bourgeoisie has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors’, and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment’… and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade. (Marx 1848)

We saw in Chapter 23 that Leontyev’s Activity Theory is incompatible with Marx’s critique of political economy. The incompatibility arises essentially from Leontyev’s claim that each system of activity is objectively motivated by an object, which is a need of the whole society. This implies that any system of activity objectively tends towards the satisfaction of some definite social need. For Leontyev, this is not something peculiar to capitalism, but applies to all social formations between the Arcadian communism of the past and the socialist utopia of the future.

For Marx, on the other hand, capital is an historically specific system of activity within which all activity tends to the expansion of capital, that is, towards the command of a larger and larger proportion of the total social labor under capital. If social needs are to be met, then this is something that must be assured by other means, for the needs of individuals and whatever is required for the nation-state to reproduce itself are provided for as a by-product of or despite the activity of capital itself.

In effect, Leontyev tried to extend CHAT into a social theory without a concept of the subject matter, retaining only a unit which had been developed for the purposes of psychology. His concept of societal action—an activity—was misconceived. The point is not to rewrite “Capital” with activity taking the place of commodity production, but rather to see that Marx gave us a scientific and critical diagnosis of one tendency in modern society, which, as he foresaw, was bound to become dominant and drive out its rivals. This tendency was the market, i.e., production for exchange, capital. But this is still, even to this
day, not all that there is in modern society. In fact, were it ever to come to pass that the market subsumed *all* human life, then human life along with the natural conditions for human life on Earth would come to an end.

**Collaboration and Exchange**

As early as 1843, in his “Comment on James Mill” (1975d), Marx appeared to regard the commodity relation as the central problem of bourgeois society. But in beginning “Capital” from the ‘economic cell-form’, Marx quite explicitly indicated that the exchange relation was the Urphänomen, the prototypical relation of bourgeois society. This means that “Capital” is not about modernity *in toto*, but quite specifically about bourgeois society, even while Marx showed how bourgeois society was swallowing up all its rivals (state, family and voluntary activity).

In the preceding chapters, we have proposed that ‘collaboration’ be taken as the fundamental human relationship, and that this notion entails both the normative conception and limiting cases, that is, modes of collaboration which are ‘not collaborative’. As also noted, we live in times when exchange of labor is the dominant mode of collaboration, eclipsing the formerly dominant mode of traditional and meritocratic hierarchical command, but a tendency towards normative collaboration can nonetheless be witnessed. The market does not and never will subsume the whole of social life. Marx has described exhaustively the dynamics of that sector of social life which is subsumed under the commodity relation; what remains is to develop an understanding of that part of social life which is subsumed under collaboration. Cultural Historical Activity Theory has a role to play here. The science of collaborative life is not like economics; it is all too human, not subject to quasi-natural laws nor fostering quasi-religious forms of fetishism and mutual manipulation. CHAT is already to a great extent a science which is interested in building a truly human life-world. But the world is not simply divided between sectors of market relations, collaborative relations and hierarchical relations: all three principal modes of working together mutually interpenetrate and subsume one another.

At the widest level, the UN, governments, regulatory bodies, NGOs and other voluntary organizations are essentially collaborative, for all their faults. The extent to which money is able to buy legislation var-