CHAPTER 4

Cultural–Historical Activity Theory

In the preceding chapter, the philosophical lineages of contemporary cultural-historical activity theory have been laid bare. Goethe’s Romantic Science, Hegel’s idealist dialectic, and Marx’s practical-critical appropriation thereof, revealed the contours of a general theory of the subject, understood in constructivist and cultural-historical terms. In the following chapter three intertwined threads of thought – Vygotsky’s cultural psychology, Activity Theory, and Blunden’s ‘collaborative project’-approach – are shown to offer a clear framework of analysis to investigate human activity.

Unit of Analysis

The Russian Revolution of 1917 created a fertile climate for innovative and creative artistic, philosophical, and scientific production. Although Pavlov’s reflexology became the dominant trend in Soviet psychology – because of its ‘materialist’ rejection of the ‘idealist’ notion of consciousness – in the decade following the 1917 there was still room for heterodox ideas, even within the academic institutions of the young state. Soviet Cultural Psychology grew out of Lev Vygotsky’s immanent critique of Pavlovian behaviorism and reflexology. The consolidation and concentration of state power in the hands of Stalin who preferred the mechanical theories of Pavlov to Vygotsky’s dialectical approach, blocked the further development of a Marxist cultural psychology in the 1930s.

Even though evidence that Vygotsky was directly influenced by Hegel is, at best, tenuous, his methodology was formed through a profound engagement with Marx’s ‘early’ writings, “Capital,” Engels’s popularizations, and Lenin’s “Philosophical Notebooks,” which, for their part, presented a materialist critique of Hegelianism (Blunden 2010, 122–126). As a psychologist, Vygotsky’s object of study was the behavior and consciousness of the individual subject, which he approached as a whole of interconnected parts – i.e., as a Gestalt. Human speech, memory, perception, and so on, do not develop independently from each other: their formation is intertwined. Their individual function can only be understood through their reciprocal relation and to the connection of each part to the whole. Moreover, the structure of the individual subject could only be comprehended as a moment within a process of development: “[...] the
basic task of research obviously becomes a reconstruction of each stage in the development of the process: the process must be turned back to its initial stages” (Vygotsky 1978, 62).

Clearly, Vygotsky’s methodology was strongly influenced by the structural-genetic approach that was rooted in Goethe’s *Gestalt* and *Urphänomen*, Hegel’s formation of consciousness and Concept, and Marx’s social formation and cell-form. Unlike the *Gestalt* psychologists, whose starting point of psychological investigation was the whole mind, Vygotsky realized that the complex behavior and consciousness of the individual subject could not be grasped directly as a totality – the unfolding of its understanding had to be mediated by an archetype:

In our view, an entirely different form of analysis is fundamental to further development of theories of thinking and speech. This form of analysis relies on the partitioning of the complex whole into units. In contrast to the term ‘element’, the term ‘unit’ designates a product of analysis that possesses all the basic characteristics of the whole. The unit is a vital and irreducible part of the whole. The key to the explanation of the characteristics of water lies not in the investigation of its chemical formula but in the investigation of its molecular movements. In precisely the same sense, the living cell is the real unit of biological analysis because it preserves the basic characteristics of life that are inherent in the living organism.¹

Vygotsky 1987a, 46

According to Blunden, Vygotsky deployed ‘joint artifact-mediated action’ as his unit of analysis of individual consciousness (Blunden 2010, 191).² Vygotsky criticized the methodology of the subjective psychologists, as thought cannot be investigated directly by introspection – observation of one’s own consciousness remains a form of consciousness – it has to be studied objectively through behavior, i.e., activity. The basic unit of conscious activity is an action – an idea developed later on by Leontyev. However, Vygotsky also criticized the paradigm of the objective psychologists – the behaviorists and reflexologists – for it is equally impossible to investigate an action as a conscious, i.e., subjective action, from a purely objective standpoint. This criticism

¹ Also: Vygotsky 2012, 4–5, 11, 224.
² For the more advanced unity between thinking and speaking he deployed “word meaning” as a unit of analysis (Yasnitsky 2012, 127).