

The Activity Approach in Soviet Philosophy and Contemporary Cognitive Studies

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The activity approach was a popular part of Soviet philosophy and psychology between the 1960s and the 1980s, after which it was somewhat forgotten and criticised, even by some of its former followers. Nowadays, there is reason to attempt to understand some specific features of this approach in a contemporary context. At least three factors are connected with this re-examination of the activity approach.

Firstly, concepts such as ‘embodied cognition’ and ‘enacted cognition’, which stress the close relations between activity, cognition and cultural objectivations, are very popular in contemporary cognitive science and are subject to intense discussion. There are two variants of these concepts. The first, which is connected with the works of Francisco Varela, uses some ideas of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty.¹ The second, represented primarily by the American philosopher Andy Clark, refers to the ecological theory of visual perception of James Gibson² and to the ideas of Lev Vygotsky, as well as of the Soviet school of cultural-historical and activity-psychology.³ In connection with an analysis of the current situation in cognitive science, the famous Russian psychologist and specialist in cognitive science Boris Velichkovsky wrote about the need to return to the activity approach.⁴

Secondly, a number of Russian philosophers, psychologists and specialists in human sciences now share different constructivist conceptions (radical epistemological constructivism, social constructionism, and so on). From their point of view, constructivism is a more adequate interpretation of those phenomena that the activity approach dealt with previously. It is of interest to analyse the relations of the activity approach in Soviet philosophy in the 1960s–1980s and contemporary constructivism in epistemology and the human sciences.

1 Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1992.

2 Gibson 1979.

3 Clark 1997, especially p. 45.

4 Velichkovsky, vol. 2, p. 370.

Thirdly, there are nowadays several interesting examples of the fruitful application of a cultural-historical activity approach in psychology and other human sciences. Particularly relevant is the conception of the renowned Finnish psychologist Yrjö Engeström, who elaborated an original theory using ideas from the Soviet psychologist Aleksey Leontiev and the Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov.⁵ Every three years, the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research organises an international congress that includes psychologists, specialists in education and philosophers from different countries who share ideas about the current of cultural-historical psychology in the Vygotskian tradition and the activity approach.

This chapter attempts to analyse the main ideas of Soviet philosophers on the problems of activity and the activity approach between the 1960s and the 1980s in the context of their contemporary meaning and of the current discussions in epistemology and cognitive sciences.

An Early Variant of the Activity Approach in Soviet Philosophy and Psychology: S.L. Rubinshtein

In 1934, the well-known philosopher and psychologist S.L. Rubinshtein, referring to early works by Marx, formulated a conception of the unity of consciousness and activity. Rubinshtein stressed that, contrary to the ideas of introspective psychology about the immediacy of psychic life (claiming a direct access to subjectivity), consciousness is in reality mediated by activity: 'a new possibility is arising: to examine consciousness through human activity, in which consciousness is formed and developed'.⁶ Rubinshtein drew special attention to one of the principal ideas in Marx's early works regarding the role of human-made things. Specifically, the human being does not simply double himself in things he makes and create a peculiar mirror in which he can see himself, but creates himself for the first time by this activity. This is the meaning of Marx's famous assertion, in the third thesis on Feuerbach, that practice must be understood as 'the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change [*Selbstveränderung*]'.⁷ Proceeding from these philosophical principles, Rubinshtein elaborated a psychological conception according to which the psychological subject is formed in the process of his

5 Engeström 2005.

6 Rubinshtein 1934, p. 8.

7 Marx 1975, p. 422.