

Chapter 6

Can the Concept of Activity Be Considered as a Theoretical Device for Critical Psychologies?



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Abstract Activity is an important concept for any critical approach to psychology. This chapter aims to discuss the metamorphosis that occurred in the concept of activity in its transition from a relevant concept for a cultural–historical psychology to its reification as a universal concept to explain all psychological phenomena, as used by A. N. Leontiev in his theoretical proposal of activity theory. During that transformation, activity became an ideological device for the definition of psychology as a Marxist dogmatic science. Further, the paper discusses the two different geneses of the concept of activity in Soviet psychology which, in turn, had historical, theoretical, and political consequences for the use of the concept. Having the critical potential to overcome behavioral psychology according to Rubinstein’s definition, the concept of activity, as defined by Leontiev, became a device for the passive adaptation of, and control over, human beings through external operations with objects that become motives of human behavior after meeting human needs.

Introduction

Concepts in the history of science are not static entities that carry the same meaning once and forever. Meanings change constantly in the development of any science, in a process in which new concepts emerge and others disappear or remain fixed to questions that the science transcends in its own development. This movement characterizes scientific development, which is closely intermingled with the cultural, social, and political contexts within which science itself develops. This fact takes a particular dramatic form in the social sciences during periods of repression and extreme conflict. Examples include the World Wars and ideological forms of power such as fascism, Stalinism, and states in which ideological and religious principles rule daily life and in which differences of opinion are strongly repressed.

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Soviet psychology was characterized from its very beginning as having one theoretical position that was recognized as the best expression of a Marxist psychology but which, in fact, was invested with a particular political and ideological orientation. That position was occupied in the first half of the 1920s by Pavlov's theory of conditioned reflexes and by Bechterev's reflexology. Despite the fact that the Soviet Revolution had been considered for a long time as a step forward in Russia for more progressive political circles, in fact it represented a conservative movement in many respects, including the development of science.

Pavlov's positions were the basis of American behaviorism since its very beginning; for both North American and Russian psychology, behavior and conditioned reflexes appeared closely integrated in the beginning of the 1920s as the basis of a behavioral-materialist psychology. After 1923, when Kornilov replaced Chelpanov as director of the Institute of Psychology in Moscow, the allegiance to such Materialism characterized the search for a Marxist psychology. That movement had two main expressions: Bechterev's reflexology and Kornilov's reactology, the first attempting to replace psychology by reflexology, while the second putting behavioral reactions to external stimuli at the center of psychology. The human psyche as such was not defined in its specific ontological character, appearing always as a result of other external, objective phenomena.

Paradoxically, Chelpanov, who was fiercely accused of idealism by his former students Kornilov and Basov, leading to his replacement as director of the Institute of Psychology of Moscow, was the only Russian psychologist oriented toward the study of consciousness, emphasizing the role of the cultural and of the social in the explanation of psychical processes. Topics such as personality, treated by some of the more important world psychologists at that time such as Janet, Bergson, and Lipps and the unit of consciousness and the unconscious, covered by Freud, characterized the Psychological Seminar officially held at the institute in 1914, its year of inauguration (Bostmanova, Guseva & Ravich-Schervo, 1994).

Unfortunately, the study of the history of Soviet psychology has endured two deficits that have contributed to the historical and theoretical distortions suffered by that psychology, both in Russia and in Western countries. These distortions have firstly resulted from institutional censures during the Soviet period that led to a poor historiography within Soviet psychology of its own course. After the Soviet period, the lack of interest in everything that had occurred in Soviet times extended to Soviet psychology. Consequently, there was no interest in dealing with the history of Soviet psychology (Bogdanshikov, 2008). These omissions have strongly influenced how that psychology has been introduced and developed in Western psychology.

Soviet psychology, split into different "schools," was an integrative movement with many points of contact, disagreement, and contradiction between these "schools." Its main concepts, including activity, had different geneses and were integrated within different theoretical systems, having different meanings as a result. However, all of these "schools" were based on Soviet Marxism, which was characterized by an overwhelming focus on materialism over the dialectic, a feature that was imposed on psychology. As a result of this, behavior and concepts closely

related to it, such as internalization, assimilation, and mediation, strongly influenced that psychology in the 1920s, but not all its streams and leaders responded in the same way to that influence.

From the very beginning of the 1920s, in 1922 to be exact, S. L. Rubinstein, after forming as doctor of philosophy in Germany, introduced the concept of activity into Soviet psychology (Zinchenko, 2012). Rubinstein represented a new pathway in relation to the dominant forces in Soviet psychology. Instead of separating activity from consciousness, Rubinstein introduced a more dialectical principle of the unity of consciousness and activity. Consciousness instead of behavior turned into the center of attention for Rubinstein.

In 1923 after replacing Chelpanov as director of the Institute of Psychology of Moscow, Kornilov's reactology was politically empowered, and he organized around him an important group of young psychologists, among whom were Luria, Vygotsky, and Leontiev: the conscious search for a Marxist psychology became the priority of the institute. Luria was nominated by Kornilov as secretary of the institute in 1924, the same year that Vygotsky and Leontiev became members of Kornilov's group. The concept of activity was assumed only by Rubinstein, who always was a critic of Kornilov's position.

While the effort on behalf of a Marxist psychology was addressed to the development of an objective psychology based on stimulus, reactions, and behavior, the legacy from Russian idealistic philosophers was eliminated from the scenario of psychology. According to Budilova (disciple of Rubinstein), one of the more important Soviet authorities on the Russian sociopsychological questions was the doctoral thesis of M. M. Troitski, "The first Russian psychological work that carries an historical character." Troitski was head of the University of Moscow and the president of the Psychological Society of Moscow in 1885, (Budilova, 1983, p.19). Particularly impressive is a Troitski quotation highlighted by Budilova: "The concept of individuals is interrelated with signs.... In this way, concepts make up the cultural form of human thinking, appearing as a powerful organ of social relationships" (Budilova, 1983, p. 24). Troitski was one of the more influential idealistic philosophers attempting to advance psychology in the period before the October Russian Revolution.

The link between Russian philosophy and psychology was cut when Chelpanov was replaced by Kornilov. G. Shpet, close collaborator of Chelpanov and who organized the first Russian Cabinet of Ethnical Psychology in 1920, also was expelled from the institute. The institute took the path of a natural, behavioral, and instrumental psychology in Kornilov's effort to create a Marxist psychology. Paradoxically, that approximation to Marxism led to the separation of psychology from philosophy and the social sciences.

After Chelpanov's fall from the Institute of Psychology of Moscow, the picture of Soviet psychology drastically changed. While reflexology and reactology fought to be the main interpretation of Marxism of the human psyche, Rubinstein advanced important theoretical works on a new representation of human consciousness, in which it was inseparable from human activity. Activity, as the concept was discussed by Rubinstein, transforms into an important critical device to overcome the

concept of behavior central for the mainstream of Russian and American psychology respectively in the second half of the 1920s.

The importance of the concept of activity for psychology, as it was understood by Rubinstein, implied the unity of human action, consciousness, and sensuousness. Differently from behavior, and rather than being oriented by or to the object, activity supposed the inseparable unity between human action and human consciousness. Unity was the basis of two important shifts in the course of Soviet psychology: firstly, it created the basis for a new representation of consciousness, in which consciousness expresses and develops itself in human actions; secondly, human actions are never regulated from the outside, from the environment – a subject's actions always carry a psychological nature.

As part of Kornilov's group, Luria, Vygotsky, and Leontiev shared an objectivistic–instrumental position between 1927 and 1930, years in which they would focus on the study of higher psychological functions, stressing their mediated and internalized character, instead of their specific psychological nature and its integration within more complex psychological systems.

This chapter aims to discuss the metamorphosis that occurred in the concept of activity in its transition from a relevant concept for a cultural–historical psychology to its reification as a universal concept to explain all psychological phenomena, as used by A. N. Leontiev in his theoretical proposal of activity theory. During that transformation, activity became an ideological device for the definition of psychology as a Marxist science.

Another central claim of this paper is its support for the historical hypothesis of the two different geneses of the concept of activity in Soviet psychology which, in turn, had historical, theoretical, and political consequences for the use of the concept. Having the critical potential to overcome behavioral psychology according to Rubinstein's definition, the concept of activity, as defined by Leontiev, became a device for the passive adaptation of, and control over, human beings through external operations with objects that become motives of human behavior after meeting human needs.

Transforming the concept of activity into a universal concept and principle, through which other psychological concepts should be explained, Leontiev guaranteed the founding of an objective, concrete, materialist psychology according to the principles that had ruled Soviet Marxist philosophy since the 1920s, when the struggle between idealism and materialism was invested with a political connotation (Bostmanova et al., 1994).

The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology

As introduced above, Soviet psychology had two main influences from the Russian period, one due to the Russian neurology of higher nervous activity and the other due to idealistic philosophers. Nonetheless, the way in which Marxism was imposed as the official doctrine in Soviet universities in 1922 (Bostmanova et al., 1994) led

to the emergence, and dominance of a naïve naturalist materialist position which was echoed quickly in psychology.

Despite the fact that the Soviet State and the Russian Communist Party completely ruled the institutional and social order at the time, in psychology it was the internal climate in the Soviet scientific institutions that was an important factor in the fear, suspicion, and censure that ruled from that time on, even when the struggle against idealistic positions took on a political connotation from the beginning of the 1920s, contributing to the psychological institutional climate of tension.

The beginning of the 1930s was a difficult period in the history of the Soviet Union: Stalin's repression extended to all spheres of Soviet society. Under these circumstances a group of Vygotsky's collaborators and students moved to Kharkov in the early years of the 1930s, with A. N. Leontiev as their leader. That movement, and the fact that Vygotsky stayed in Moscow, has never had a convincing historical explanation. In Kharkov, the group began to center on the concept of object-based activity over language, speech, and motivation, leading progressively to a split between Vygotsky and Leontiev (Bratus 2013; Zinchenko, 2009, 2012; Zavershneva, 2016).

It was in Kharkov that Leontiev's definition of activity began to transform into the distinctive theoretical feature of that group. This new definition of activity centered on material activities with objects. The genesis of psychological functions was understood mainly as the result of the child's manipulation of objects. Operations with objects gradually became the only principle to explain the genesis of the human psyche. Psychological functions came to be defined as internal activity resulting from the internalization of external operations.

In relation to the 1930s, Zinchenko stressed:

In the 1930s, to all intent and purposes, the country lost consciousness and unconsciousness both literally and figuratively [...] Consciousness was declared to be something secondary, second-class, and was then replaced by an ideology that was shaping not a "new man", according to M. Gorky, but a "dull man" according to M. Zoshchenko. (Zinchenko, 2009, p.50)

That situation clearly influenced the path taken by the Kharkov school. Consciousness and speech came to be understood as epiphenomena of activities with objects. On this basis the first strong criticisms of Vygotsky were oriented toward the role attributed by him to speech in the definition of human consciousness.

As Davydov critically pointed out:

At the time, A. N. Leontiev, with his group of Kharkov collaborators, did not follow Vygotsky's orientation toward the study of the structure of consciousness, and did not recognize the developmental functions of emotions, but remained in a position to study the genesis and development of consciousness in practical activity in terms of research on the structure of their own activity. (Davydov, 1996, p.6. – my translation from Russian)

Nonetheless, in 1930 the topic of consciousness continued to be central in Rubinstein's work. His book, "The Foundations of Psychology," originally published in 1935, had a great impact on Soviet psychology at the time and

consciousness was one of the book's key concepts. Besides this, in 1931 Rubinstein invited Vygotsky to take the place of Basov in the chair of psychology of the Herten Pedagogical Institute due to his premature death. Vygotsky began to travel periodically from Moscow to Leningrad to give his lectures, and despite the lack of historical attention to this fact, this was the time during which Vygotsky turned to consciousness as the main topic of psychology. That turning point during the last years of his life led to the radical rupture with Leontiev (Zavershneva, 2016).

Vygotsky's turning point began in 1932 with his work, "On the problem of the psychology of the actor's creative work," in which he recognized the active and generative character of emotions in the genesis of new psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1999). Until 1930, Vygotsky, like Luria and Leontiev, expressed a strong behavioral orientation, understanding higher psychological functions through the mediation of signs, without giving any attention to their psychological nature. As noted by Seniushenko: "For L. S. Vygotsky the key question (his reference is to 1931 – my note; FGR) was not how higher psychological function become 'physiologically internal', but how they emerge as a new kind of individual form of child's behavior" (Seniushenkov, 2006, p.14). Behavioral orientation was also the basis of Leontiev's definition of activity as follows: "Not from stimulus to reaction, but from stimulus through instrument (drawing a triangle) to reaction. The reaction is mediated" (Leontiev, 1986, p.111).

Activity is taken by Leontiev as a system in itself, appearing as an ontological presupposition, on which basis the psychological, including consciousness and personality, was considered a mere result, and sociality was omitted since communication was explained through the same scheme as activity with objective, material objects. Leontiev's comprehension of activity is defined by a specific sequence of actions and operations oriented by one motive, defined by him as the object of activity, toward which the activity advances as a goal-oriented system. That position characterized Leontiev's works from the Kharkov period, stressing activity and not consciousness as the system to be studied by psychology: "Objects themselves can become stimuli, goals, or tools only in a system of human activity" (Leontiev, 1978, p.67). The subject of activity is completely omitted; the activity is the basis of psychological functions and from such a condition regulates human behavior; feelings, reflections, and the living network of the subject's existence have no room within Leontiev's definition of activity.

Where in this narrow objective and object-based definition of activity do individuals stand, with their complex and singular histories, their dreams and fantasies, their different forms of engagement within institutional networks, their forms of sociality within the symbolical-historical constructions within which all human systems function? The human as depicted by Leontiev appeared in terms of stimuli, with goals understood within the structure of activity and tools, which was a very strong remnant of the behavioral period of Kornilov's group.

Thus, the object of activity is twofold: first, in its independent existence as subordinated to itself and transforming the activity of the subject; second as an image of the object, as a

product of the psychological reflection of its nature that is realized as an activity of the subject and cannot exist otherwise. (Leontiev, 1978, p.52)¹

The above statement by Leontiev is a clear expression of the complete subordination of human psychological processes to external, material objects and of how the object can have an independent existence. There are no relations that characterize how humans deal with objects, rather than the objects in themselves transforming the activity of the subject. Even the image of the object is defined by Leontiev as a reflection, so nothing new is created through human perception.

For Rubinstein, unlike Leontiev, activity as a concept was integrated within other psychological concepts that remained fragmented in the psychology of that time, which mostly designed its concepts as enclosed within an internal representation of mind outside of culture and social life and without considering their historical character.

The concept of activity as defined by Rubinstein was aimed at transcending the natural study of psychological functions and the dichotomy between stimulus and response. Activity allows the understanding of consciousness, sensuousness, and environment as an inseparable unit, having as its basis a dialectical comprehension of the integration of culture and life, as defined through the principle of the unity of activity and consciousness. This definition of activity could be represented as a first step in advancing a representation of consciousness as a psychical system in process, toward which Vygotsky seemed to be oriented through his concepts of the word's sense and *perezhivanie* in the last period of his work.

Rubinstein's definition of activity emphasized its subjects, its shared character, stressing the presence of others in human activity, and his definition also stressed the creative feature of activity. Rubinstein stated: "Within a creation, its very creator is created. There is always one path – if it is there – for the creation of a big personality: a lot of work with a lot of creation. A personality will be more relevant, the wider its sphere of actions, the wider the world in which it lives" (Rubinstein, 1986, p.106 – my translation from Russian). Activity in Rubinstein's definition was not a system in itself, with its own structure and processes, but was understood as a subject's activity, as a concept through which consciousness and psychological processes were always in action in different spheres of human life.

Rubinstein's definition of activity was shared by most Soviet psychologists, including some of the closer collaborators of Leontiev at different times, such as Bozhovich (1968), and later by Davydov (1996) and Zinchenko (2009). For Rubinstein, psychological processes and phenomena belong to the psychological realm, being inseparable from one psychological system, whether personality or consciousness, concepts which at that time were only vaguely defined in Soviet

¹I made a small change in the original English translation based on the original Russian publication (Leontiev, 1975, p.84). Instead of "as an image of the object, as a product of its property of psychological reflection," there appears "as a product of the psychological reflection of its nature." This change had a twofold motivation, firstly because this is how it appeared in the Russian version and, secondly, because it stressed an important theoretical position of Leontiev's throughout his work; reflection is understood as a reproduction of the quality of the "real world" in the image.

psychology (Tolstyx, 2008; Osipov, 2012). Rubinstein always referred activity to actions and acts: “The unity of activity that integrates actions and acts, takes place in the unity of its starting motives and ending goals, which are the motives and goals of personality. Therefore, the study of the psychological side of activity is the study of personality in the course of its activity” (Rubinstein, 1946, pp.619–622).

In the quotation above, Rubinstein pointed out the main value of the concept of activity as being inseparable from consciousness and personality; such a definition of the concept allowed the overcoming of the representation of the human psyche in isolated elements or separate functions, which, even today, is how the psyche is taken in much empirical research. What Rubinstein defined as motives and goals of personality were transformed by Leontiev into motives and goals of activity, personality and motives both being explained in terms of activity, motives as the object of activity and personality as a moment and result of activity: “A study of personality as a moment of activity and its product constitutes a special, although not *isolated* psychological problem” (Leontiev, 1978, p.91).

The transition from the concept of activity to activity theory occurred as a result of the transformation of activity into the primary and main concept of Leontiev’s theoretical proposal. Leontiev’s last book, “Activity, Consciousness and Personality,” represented a more decisive and mature step in the formulation of activity theory. The book compiled three papers published by Leontiev in three different issues of the Soviet journal, “Questions of Philosophy.” More clearly than ever before, Leontiev explained how consciousness, motive, subject, personality, and psychological functions must be explained primarily through their genesis in activity with material objects from the “real world.” Also more clearly than ever before, he made explicit the main difference between his comprehension of activity and that defined by Rubinstein:

The concept of the subject of activity is another matter. In the first place, that is, before the more important moments that form the process of activity are explained, the subject remains outside the limits of investigation. He appears only as a prerequisite of activity and the forms of psychic reflections elicited by it makes it necessary to introduce the concept of the concrete subject, of the personality as of an internal moment of activity. (Leontiev, 1978, p.91)

The main principles of the activity theory were summarized by D. Leontiev, Leontiev’s grandson, as follows:

The key explanatory concept he used to make sense of life was the concept of object-related activity... The two key principles of activity theory can be articulated as follows: (1) All human mental processes, functions and structures emerge, develop, and change in an object-related activity that links individuals to the world. (2) All human mental processes and functions are derivatives of external activities, and as such they are themselves the forms of object-related activities, by maintaining within themselves the reduced structure of external activity. (D. Leontiev, 2002, pp. 50–51)

Leontiev’s reductionist position in relation to activity as a theoretical principle had force not only as a theoretical matter, but also as a political position, because it detached from human beings any capacity to create, to subvert the order that is dominant in the system of external activity. At the same time being oriented to

operations with objects, activity, in Leontiev's definition, also detached individuals and groups from their complex networks of social relationships, within which individual positions are always in the tension of possible changes. To state that all human mental processes and functions maintain within themselves the reduced structure of external activity implies the exclusion of the generative character of human subjectivity and the complete subordination of individuals to the dominant order within which the current structure of human activity emerges.

The main principles outlined by Leontiev's activity theory implicitly or explicitly led to the following consequences in Soviet psychology: (1) Activity was understood, above all, as external, objective, and practical activity, and its influence defined consciousness, personality, and psychological functions; (2) this definition of activity as material-practical activity left aside other kinds of human activities, such as intellectual creative activities, sporting activities, musical activities, and many others; (3) the split between activity and communication, overvaluing the material side of human activity was made to the detriment of its affective, symbolic, and relational side; (4) the identity of external and internal activity by structure made internal activity an epiphenomenon of the external; and (5) there was a complete omission of the subject's active character, which was replaced by the mechanism of internalization as the main process to explain how external, practical activity is turned into internal activity.

The polemic between Leontiev and Rubinstein, instead of leading to the advancement of two different lines of thought, upon which new research and ideas could be developed, ended in a dramatic purge against Rubinstein, in which Leontiev and Galperin actively participated as accusers (State University of Moscow, 1989; Brushlinsky, 2001). This purge was one of many that took place in the Soviet sciences as a result of the campaign begun by Lysenko in relation to Soviet genetics, extending to all Soviet sciences in the name of Marxism and against cosmopolitanism. As result of such a process, in April of 1949, Rubinstein was removed from all his responsibilities in the main institutions of teaching and research in Soviet psychology: the chair of psychology in the Faculty of Philosophy of the Moscow State University, head of the Department of Psychology in the Institute of Psychology of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union, and corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union.

Activity Theory: A New Attempt to Monopolize the Definition of a Marxist Psychology with Official Political Support

After the 1920s, during the period in which Rubinstein was the main scholar and recognized institutional figure of Soviet psychology, between 1931 and 1949, and despite the Communist Party's decrees that directly affected psychology, there was an epoch in which the institutional climate in psychological institutions was, paradoxically, less repressive than in the second half of the 1920s. This period was

characterized by representatives from different theoretical tendencies occupying important academic and institutional positions. As Antsiferova and Brushlinsky remembered:

Rubinstein, his students and collaborators worked in close creative contact with many other Soviet psychologists. According to M. G. Yarochevsky, in Leningrad of the 1930s, “there were broad possibilities for informal communication between scientists. To Rubinstein’s two bedroom apartment in Salovoi, Vygotsky and Leontiev, Ananiev and Roguinsky came to share their ideas. His Chair in the Hertzen Pedagogical Institute was visited by Luria, Sankov and Kravkov, among others. (Yarochevsky, 2007, as cited in Antsiferova & Brushlinsky, 1997, p.226 – my translation from Russian)

Rubinstein was referred to in very similar terms by other Russian psychologists, such as V. P. Zinchenko (2012) and I. S. Yakimanskaya (2012), who had been his students at the Moscow State University. Rubinstein was centered on the development of science; his institutional leadership was used to integrate people. Examples of his willingness and openness to all positions that were simultaneously advanced in Soviet psychology at that time include: his conference with the Kharkov group in 1938 (Zinchenko, 2012); his invitation to Vygotsky in 1931 to occupy the position held by Basov until his death; the organization of Leontiev’s defense of his doctoral thesis in the Department of Psychology that he headed in the Hertzen Pedagogical Institute in 1942, despite his disagreements with Leontiev’s position in relation to activity; and his invitation to Galperin and Leontiev to be part of the Department of Psychology in the Faculty of Philosophy at the Moscow State University, after he was named head of the chair of psychology in the Faculty of Philosophy of that university. These are a few from among many other examples of his open and democratic position in times when democracy characterized neither society nor science.

Rubinstein continued as professor in the Department of Psychology at the Moscow State University until his death in 1960. After his death his laboratory was under threat of closure, while his old colleagues supported the “leftist” movement of Ilyenkov and Zinoviev in the Faculty of Philosophy (Abuljanova & Volovnikova, 2003). As a result of this, some of Rubinstein’s young students, such as Brushlinsky, could only defend their doctoral theses in 1972 when the Institute of Psychology at the Academy of Sciences was opened.

The definition of Leontiev’s activity theory expressed a political meaning, which, intentionally or not, had two important consequences. The first was to separate his own theoretical position from Vygotsky’s in order to appear as the only authentic Marxist position in Soviet psychology. The second consequence was to separate himself from other Soviet psychologists beyond his group, such as Ananiev, Miasichev, Bozhovich, and her group and Rubinstein and his group, who were widely ignored during the period in which Leontiev and his activity theory appeared as the official version of Soviet psychology, between the beginning of 1960 until the middle of the 1970s.

As Vassilieva stressed, “The strong ideological underpinning no doubt contributed to the rise of the theory of activity to the status of the official Soviet psychological doctrine” (Vassilieva, 2010, p.150). Leontiev’s search for political visibility seemed to have appeared via a sequence of criticisms addressed against Vygotsky

from 1937 onward, having as their basis ideological arguments. Taking advantage of the opportune political moment created by the Decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party against Pedology in 1936, Leontiev addressed a strong criticism at Vygotsky's ideological deviations, having as the central point the criticism of Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie*, environment, and his proximity to Durkheim's positions (Leontiev, 1937/1998). From that moment on, as this article will demonstrate, Leontiev's positions were addressed toward relegating the figure of Vygotsky to second place. Criticism based on political arguments was the best way to diminish any scientist during the Soviet period, and this is what Leontiev did in his criticisms of Vygotsky, as is evident in the next accusation against him:

Durkheim openly declared: "a person is a dual being: an individual being has its roots in an organism and has a circle of activity that turns out to be very limited, while a social being represents the highest reality of the intellectual and moral order that we can learn by observation – I mean society." This declaration can serve as the banner of neopositivism, but it can be transformed into a verdict on the Vygotskian theory of environment. (Leontiev, 1998, p.119)

Leontiev's pretense of being the only Soviet psychologist to achieve a psychology capable of embodying Marxist–Leninist principles is clear by the way his own family² represented such a matter. A. A. Leontiev wrote:

Leontiev's work was inseparably bound up with two other themes, namely the development of the problem of activity, and the problem of consciousness. All these different directions were aimed at the accomplishment of the extremely important task of reorganizing psychology along consistent Marxist-Leninist lines, a task that Vygotsky formulated, but never accomplished. (Leontiev, 1984, p.28)

This quotation clearly remarks on the failure of Vygotsky in this regard. Since his open criticism of Vygotsky in 1937, Leontiev's political career quickly thrived. After Rubinstein was pushed out, Teplov was provisionally the chair of psychology at the Department of Psychology in the Faculty of Philosophy of the Moscow State University. In 1951, Leontiev replaced Teplov as the head of that department (Moscow State University, 1989). From that moment onward, his political career grew meteorically; in 1953 he was awarded the K. D. Ushinskii medal, and his career peaked when he was laureate for the Lenin Prize in 1963.

It is quite astonishing that, despite these important historical facts being in publication since 1989, there has been no reference to them within the circles of Vygotskian studies in Western psychology.

Despite the relevance of Vygotsky's entrance to the United States and his promotion from there to almost all of the countries in which Vygotsky has achieved relevance, making him accessible to the public in different Western countries, that interpretation was made through the lenses of American philosophical and psychological traditions. Instead of that interpretation being considered as a first step in the development of new interpretations of Vygotsky and Soviet psychology, it was assumed in a very a-critical way in many Western countries.

²Leontiev's son and grandson were also highly recognized within Soviet psychology.

Despite the high political power of Leontiev in the 1960s, Vygotsky's selected works, which were ready for publication at that time, were only published after Leontiev's death in the 1980s (Yasnitsky, 2016). Moreover, in his preface to the 1965 edition of "The Psychology of Art," Leontiev continued to discredit Vygotsky:

After forty years of claiming that Soviet psychologists had done much with Vygotsky and after him, many of the positions of this psychological book should be interpreted in another way – from the position of contemporary representations of activity and human consciousness. (Leontiev, 1965, p. X; my translation from Russian)

The message in this quotation is clear; it is not Vygotsky that is the main reference point for Soviet psychology; his positions were transcended by Leontiev's definitions of activity and consciousness, the latter being understood as an epiphenomenon of the former. In that critical preface, Leontiev continued to render cult status to the official political slogans in fashion at that time.

The Soviet knowledge of art was still taking its first steps. This was a period of over-evaluation of old values and a period in which a huge analysis began in literature and art: in the circles of Soviet intellectualism there reigned an atmosphere that stimulated many aspirations. The word "socialist realism" was still not pronounced. (Leontiev, 1965, p.IV – my translation from Russian)

Using the same terminology based on ideological dogmas prevailing in the Soviet political climate at the time, some years after Rubinstein's fall, he continued attacking Rubinstein on the basis of Lysenko's positions, something that any honorable Soviet scientist would be incapable of defending at that time. Criticizing Rubinstein, Leontiev stressed:

Thus, Rubinstein (criticizing his book "Principles of Psychology") presented the theories of "morganists" (followers of Morgan) and Lysenko as having the same importance, when indeed they are completely opposed to each other. The theories of Morgan, Weismann and Mendel were quoted and applied in Soviet psychology before the Resolution of the July 4th 1936 of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party was approved. (Leontiev, 1965, p.23 – my translation from Spanish)

The cultural–historical tradition, as its definition suggests, must be capable of discussing theories within their cultural and historical times. Nonetheless, Soviet psychology and its authors have never been discussed by taking into consideration their different historical moments. This fact not only led to the omission of that history, but also to theoretical distortions in the way these theories were assumed by Western psychology.

After the criticisms were addressed toward Vygotsky and Rubinstein by Leontiev, which were based on political and ideological reasons, the following question has to be answered: Is it possible to consider activity theory as a scientific theory? Theories are generative systems that represent an assembly of living concepts that, in their "play" and relations, allow the generation of new meanings related to different questions, opening up intelligibility on the subject of study. Theories must be in continuous movement, through which a progression of new questions appears. Concepts in any theory are always in process leaving room for new theoretical constructions and for their own improvement. Theories are models of thinking within

which concepts represent moments in the general movement of the model. Is this requirement fulfilled by Leontiev's activity theory? Leontiev, in fact, saw theory, as well as consciousness, not as a human construction but as a reflection of "reality."

Activity theory has not advanced in its explanatory capacity; internalized operations do not represent different qualitative phenomena in relation to external activity. Leontiev's lack of theorization and the empirical character of the research developed by his group were mainly oriented toward the study of cognitive psychological functions. In fact, psychological functions, according to their experimental research, are separated from the subject of the functions, as well as from the social-cultural settings within which individuals as subjects of these functions live. Rather than understanding the diversity of human activities entrenched into complex systems of social relations in such a process from which subjectivity emerges, Leontiev stressed material activities as a primary and specific set of actions with material objects from which emerge psychological processes. Leontiev stated: "It is hardly necessary now to prove that at initial stages of its development, activity necessarily has the form of external processes and that correspondingly, the psychic image is a product of these processes connecting the subject in a practical way with objective reality" (Leontiev, 1978, p.56).

For Leontiev, external processes connect the subject and realities. Once again, it would be pertinent to ask ourselves which reality the author is thinking of. There are no material realities split from the human relationships within which these realities emerge and exist. Leontiev, in this last book, maintained the same language as in his works from the 1930s. He always used 'psychic image' as the best term to express the psyche as a reflection of the objective world.

Activity theory was a set of interrelated concepts, sensitive only to study by empirical and objective experimental methods; descriptions based on experimental data allowed the concepts used to be made explicit. Any theoretical idea inferred from theoretical constructions was omitted. So it is very difficult to speak about activity theory in the terms by which it was defined by Leontiev, despite the fact that he and his followers coined the term.

The timeline of Leontiev's position in relation to activity is easy to follow since it has not changed from the Kharkov period. As Davydov stated:

The solution given by Vygotsky to this problem (the author referred to the problem of external activity becoming internal. My note) his disciples did not adequately understand. They opted for another solution – they followed the "psychologization" of the methodological approach to activity ruled by the idea of individual activity as a 'carrier' of external activity on its way to individual activity. This idea was on the basis of the Leontiev's works and that of his collaborators from the 1930s to the 1970s. (Davydov & Radzizovsky, 1981, p. 76)

The main orientation of Leontiev and his collaborators during the 1960s and 1970s, the more powerful political period in the career of Leontiev, was also recognized by one of his younger collaborators, B. S. Bratus, who stated:

In the 1960s–1970s the priority was the study of sensation, perception, memory and thinking from the position of activity theory. In a certain way, until recently at the well instructed Faculty of Psychology from the Moscow State University, a stronger group of researchers

and the best installation of the Faculty were dedicated to the topic of perception. (This research was mainly done in response to demands and decrees of the Ministry of Education). Those research leaders frequently engaged in sharp polemics with to each other (Some of the leaders of these groups were V. P. Zinchenko, Yu. B. Gippenreiter and A. N. Leontiev himself). (Bratus, B.S, 2013, p. 20)

Topics like communication, institutions, societal processes, subject, and subjectivity that in one way or another were part of the critical approaches discussed in this book were completely absent from Leontiev's activity theory.

The Concept of Activity as a Theoretical Device for a Critical Cultural–Historical Psychology

In the polarized world of the Cold War, Leontiev, who was one of the main interlocutors in the American discovery of Russian psychology, gained a place as representative of a psychology oriented toward subverting the mainstream of world psychology in the 1960s. He was even presented as an opponent of Pavlov, when Pavlov was no longer dominant in any way in the Soviet Union at that time. That idealized image of the “troika” was expressed by Bruner after his visit to the Soviet Union in the following terms: “I found these young Russian scholars in cognitive science, who were battling against Pavlov in much the same way I had been battling against the Skinnerian approach” (Amrein-Beardsley, 2012, p. 5).

The place given to Leontiev in Western psychology to some extent resulted from the picture of Russian psychology seen through the lenses that Luria and Leontiev offered to American psychologists (mainly Bruner, Cole, and Wertsch, the pioneers in bringing Russian psychology to the American people) which presented Luria and Leontiev as inseparable from Vygotsky.

The same occurred in some of the critical movements in Latin America and in some parts of Europe between the 1960s and 1980s, which, influenced by Marxism, found in Leontiev an expression of Marxist psychology. In such a way, he was integrated into the work of these different critical streams (such as Holzkamp and Lane, among other representatives of critical psychologies). I. Parker has been one exception in this respect. Drawing a picture of some of the critical devices that are at the same time expressions of conservative positions, he stated: “Activity theory has been one of the important resources for radical work, in France for example (Seve, 1978), and even for a current called ‘Critical Psychology’ (Tolman & Maiers, 1994) in Germany and, to an extent, in Denmark, but it still functioned as a mainstream psychology in the bureaucratized states of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe until the 1990s” (Parker, 1999, p. 4).

Specifically, this chapter has attempted to highlight the difference between activity theory, which aimed to monopolize the use of the concept of activity in Soviet psychology, and the use of the concept by other Russian psychologists, mainly S. L. Rubinstein, who introduced the concept into Soviet psychology. He introduced it as a concept that was inseparable from consciousness, opening up space to

understand activity as conscious productions within which the objective and subjective sides of human action were in such a dialectical relation that one became inseparable from the other. Vygotsky, in his last works, also advanced a new definition of concepts closely related to his definitions of *perezhivanie* and sense as these concepts appeared in the last stages of his work, between 1931 and 1934. However, only his outline for a book focused on consciousness has remained as a historical testimony through the table of contents that Vygotsky intended to develop (Zavershneva, 2016).

Activity, from my point of view, is an important concept for any critical approach due to the following arguments:

- First, this concept leads to the overcoming of the naturalized and individualistic concepts of the mainstream of psychology in different historical moments, since activity stresses the active action of individuals and groups on their lived conditions. Instead of the concept of behavior, activity permits an advance beyond the current moment of action, implying in this way the history of individuals, of groups, and of the same context within which any activity takes place. This characteristic, of course, leads to the integration of subjectivity and not consciousness within the comprehension of activity as a concept.
- Activity permits an understanding of the system of human subjectivity in process, overcoming the split between practice and subjective systems, whether social or individual (González Rey, 2009, 2014a,b, 2016, 2017). From this point of view, activity necessarily has to be assembled within a system of concepts that implies a new qualitative comprehension of the human psyche as such. This system, for us, is human subjectivity. Due to the repression within psychology during Soviet times, this system appeared in Vygotsky’s and Rubinstein’s work as consciousness.
- Activity theory made the concept of activity the main psychological concept from which all psychological explanations found their genesis, but, as was exemplified above in Bratus’ own words, this position only found its expression during the 1960s and 1970s in the experimental studies of cognitive psychological functions, which were required by the Ministry of Education at that time. Activity theory was a counterweight for other strands of psychology, keeping the behavioral character of the theoretical foundations within which Leontiev was formed as a scientist, Kornilov’s reactology and the behavioral–instrumental period of Vygotsky’s work; both Kornilov and Vygotsky supervised Leontiev’s work until the 1930s.

Final Remarks

- The concept of activity was one of the key concepts of Soviet psychological positions and was used by all of its different “schools.” However, it was only Leontiev who proposed a theory centered on this concept, taking object-based activity as

the main system to be studied by psychology. The other approaches in Soviet psychology were oriented toward a focus on psychical systems, such as consciousness or personality. Activity allowed those systems to be understood, not as intrapsychical entities, but as systems in process during human actions.

- A. N. Leontiev, in his attempt to be politically hegemonic, criticized and attempted to diminish both Vygotsky and Rubinstein, who were his most serious competitors in the proposal described above. As has been sufficiently demonstrated throughout this paper, Leontiev separated himself from Vygotsky's positions from the time of the foundation of the Kharkov group. This process deepened further in the last years of Vygotsky's life as a result of his turn toward the study of consciousness as the main goal of psychology (Zavershneva, 2016).
- Soviet Marxism represented a mechanical materialism, and activity theory was completely based on its main principles, instead of looking for a creative way to explain the materialist character of cultural phenomena, including human subjectivity. The ideal, as such, was reduced to a reflection of the material, excluding the generative character of the human mind.
- The proclamation by Leontiev of identity between external and internal activities, due to their structure, inevitably led to a mechanical and dogmatic explanation of the genesis of human psyche; any internal activity, properly psychological, first had to be external and only later became internal. So mental operations must be preceded by material operations with objects, overlooking the important role of communication in the genesis and development of human consciousness.
- Methodologically, Soviet Marxism prioritized the search for objectivity over the dialectic, a fact that influenced Soviet psychology in general. However, for Leontiev it appeared not only as a methodological orientation, but as a theoretical position. The focus of activity theory was the study of cognitive functions through object-based activities. The absence of, or the secondary treatment of, topics such as communication, personality, consciousness, and social systems as symbolical realities in Soviet psychology, to some extent, resulted from limitations in activity theory, which received strong political support during its dominant period.

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