

FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES IN CULTURAL-HISTORICAL RESEARCH: THE MARXIST CONNECTION

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AFIRSE, 9th November 2011

'On the one side there are workers and a majority of people and on the other are global capitalists, bankers, profiteers on stock exchanges, the big funds. It's a war between peoples and capitalism... and as in each war what happens on the frontline defines the battle. It will be decisive for the war elsewhere'. Alexis Tsipras, 19th May, 2012.¹

1 Issues

In this paper I intend to touch on a range of questions which I believe are fundamental for the further development of cultural-historical and activity theory research today. I have looked in more detail at these questions elsewhere (Jones, 2009, 2011a,b) and will, therefore, aim mainly to summarise this previous discussion. But I will also take the opportunity to make some further comments on the implications of these questions for educational theory and practice specifically.²

The issues which I will touch on here are the following:

1. The problem of the relevance of Marx to cultural-historical theory

¹ The quotation is taken from an interview between Tsipras, leader of Syriza, the Greek coalition party of the left, and the journalist Helena Smith (Guardian, 2012).

² I am especially indebted to my Brazilian friends and colleagues for the opportunity to discuss and reflect on these questions. In particular, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Professors Cecília Magalhaes and Fernanda Liberali of PUC, São Paulo for organizing and hosting my wonderful trip to Brazil in November 2011. At PUC I had the pleasure of leading a 4-day mini-course on the theme of 'Marx, Activity and Education' and would like to thank all those who took part in what was a very enjoyable, and, I hope, fruitful exchange of views on these matters. I am also extremely grateful to Professor Ivana Ibiapina of the Federal University of Piauí for her hospitality and her invitation to make a presentation on these questions at the 6th Colloquium of AFIRSE. The present paper is based on this presentation and is informed by the discussions we had in São Paulo and Teresina.

Recebido em: 10/08/2012 – Aceito em: 02/09/2012

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2. Marx, 'activity' and problems of methodology in cultural-historical research
 3. Marx and education: the relevance of Marx's work to educational theory and practice
 4. Perspectives for dialogue and development in cultural-historical work in education

2 The problem of the relevance of Marx to cultural-historical theory

It is often taken for granted in discussions of cultural-historical theory that the fundamental principles of this tradition are traceable to Marx's theoretical and scientific legacy. Did not Lev Vygotsky, after all, aspire to create a 'Marxist psychology', informed by the method of Marx's *Capital* (Vygotsky, 1986)? And was not A N Leont'ev's 'activity theory' (Leont'ev, 1978) a concretization of the concept of 'activity' which Marx set out most clearly in that same work? But the answers to these two questions, as the reader will know, are by no means straightforward or uncontroversial. Scholars differ on what aspects of Vygotsky's approach, for example, could be said to be 'Marxist' in origin or inspiration. Similar problems surround Leont'evan theory (Jones, 2009) and the alternative perspective offered by S L Rubiņštejn (1987), while the more recently developed version of 'Activity Theory' of Y Engeström (e. G., 1990) appears to mark a radical break with the Marxist tradition despite some terminological commonalities (Jones, 2009, 2011b). It seems sensible, therefore, not only to raise questions about the continuity between contemporary cultural-historical theory and Marx but also to ask whether such continuity is desirable any way. Does the Marxian connection actually matter any more? Is it perhaps time to acknowledge the limitations of Marx's theoretical concepts and analysis for our contemporary needs and explore the advantages of striking out in a different direction? But, if so, what direction should we go in? And what theoretical system should be our compass?

These are important and timely questions. One way to address them is to try to get as clear as we can on Marx's ideas on the crucial issues so that we can carefully evaluate their relevance and usefulness for us today. In that spirit, I hope this paper may offer a small contribution to the business of clarification.

3 Marx, 'activity' and problems of methodology in cultural-historical research

We know that a concept of 'activity' is key to Marx's philosophical and scientific explorations of the human condition generally and to his critique of political economy in *Capital* more specifically. We also know that 'Activity Theory' in its various manifestations has attempted to take a Marxian concept of 'activity' as a foundational principle for its analysis of modern forms of social practice. The big question, of course, is whether the same concept is in play here.

We have become accustomed, through our acquaintance with (or application of) 'Activity Theory', particularly in the version developed by Engeström and colleagues, (e. G, Engeström and Miettinen, 1999) to talk about the social



world today as if it could be broken down essentially into complex interconnected networks of ‘activities’ or ‘activity systems’, these being the irreducible building blocks of social practice and, hence, the starting point (or ‘unit of analysis’) for theoretical exploration and critical analysis. So: here we have educational activity, here medical activity, here scientific research activity, here industrial activity of some kind. Or we could zoom in even further: here is a lesson in school, here is an academic lecture, here is a doctor at work, here is a surgical operation in progress etc.

It is often claimed, or assumed, that this notion of ‘activity’ or ‘activity system’ is ultimately due to Marx himself since it emerges from and builds on the ‘psychological theory of activity’ which A N Leont’ev sought to construct on the basis of Marx’s conception of activity as the distinctive, or even defining, characteristic of human existence.

But if we look back at Marx’s work from the perspective of this assumption, then his way of going about things in *Capital* must appear especially odd. In particular, why does Marx not begin this celebrated work with a detailed list and description of all the ‘activities’ and ‘activity systems’ on display in his day and then try to connect them all up into one mega ‘system’? Why did he not start with, say, separate types of profession or employment – factory work, management, transport, banking, teaching, trading etc –, and, from there, put together a composite picture of ‘activity’ and ‘activity systems’ on the scale of social practice as a whole? Why, in other words, does he start his analysis in *Capital* with the commodity?

One might easily conclude from this that Marx’s approach and the ‘activity system’ approach are simply not methodologically compatible. And indeed, it should be noted that the concept of ‘activity system’ as a ‘unit of analysis’ was actually proposed as an alternative to Marx’s methodology. Evaluating the relevance of Marx’s commodity-based methodology to the complexities of contemporary social practice, Engeström and Miettinen (1999: 9) draw the conclusion that ‘there is a demand for a new unit of analysis’, a demand which their new concept of ‘activity system’ is designed to meet.

In order to appreciate the reasons for this methodological divergence between Marx and ‘Activity Theory’ I believe it is necessary to understand the very special meaning that Marx gave to his concept of ‘activity’ in *Capital*. Here, Marx (at least in the English translation) uses the three terms ‘activity’, ‘labour process’, and ‘work’ as synonyms. For instance, at one point he announces:

“Work is the eternal natural condition of human existence. The process of labour is nothing but work itself, viewed at the moment of its creative activity” (1976: 998).

Marx goes on to examine human activity, or the ‘labour process’, more carefully, arguing that the ‘simple elements of the labour process’ (1976: 284) are ‘independent of every specific social development’ (1976: 998).





It seems obvious, then, that Marx could not have used an analytical category which is 'independent of every specific social development' as a means of uncovering what is historically and socially specific about capitalist production or indeed about any actually existing form of society. Life-affirming, life-sustaining activity serving human needs and pleasures is the common underpinning of all forms of social organization, he argues, and cannot therefore in itself serve as a criterion or method for distinguishing different forms of social organization from one another.

On the contrary, Marx finds the distinctiveness of capitalist production not in the fact that 'activity' (the 'labour process') is going on within it, but in the incorporation of the labour process within another process, which he calls the 'valorization process' (1976: 293). Capitalist production produces useful goods which serve human needs, but

'production is also a process of valorization, and here the capitalist devours the labour-power of the worker, or appropriates his living labour as the life-blood of capitalism. Raw materials and the object of labour in general exist only to absorb the work of others, and the instrument of labour serves only as a conductor, an agency, for this process of absorption' (1976: 1007).

The 'capitalist labour process', Marx explains, 'does not cancel the general definitions of the labour process' since it 'produces both product and commodity' (things which are useful but also have a price). However, 'the labour process is merely a means for the self-valorization of capital' (1976: 1039).

In Marx's analysis, then, it is not 'activity' (or 'the labour process') as such but, rather, the specific relationship (the 'unity') between labour process and valorization process which is the foundation and impetus for the development of all the historically specific work practices in all spheres within capitalist production.

The capitalist production process feeds on the labour process; it exploits it; it is parasitic on that process. Like every parasite it has to keep its host alive but it uses its host and subordinates it to its own purposes and aims. And because the valorization process exists only in and through the labour process, it is not easy to distinguish the two processes: they look like the same thing. A car plant looks like a factory for producing cars but it is also – and more importantly – a factory for producing surplus value from living labour; it is the site where the creative capacities of human agents are captured (via the commodity) and subordinated to the production of profit. Marx emphasised this difficulty in seeing through to the valorization process and expressly warned against 'confusing the appropriation of the labour process by capital with the labour process itself' (1976: 998).

Marx begins his account of capitalist production in *Capital* with the commodity, a product of labour, in order to pin down precisely what is distinctive about capitalist production. Now, of course, it is not the case that commodity production per se is capitalist production: commodity production has existed





for thousands of years in different forms and within quite different forms of social organization. But Marx's analysis shows that capitalist production needs commodity production and is impossible without it. The commodity absorbs the labour of the producer in a 'portable' form, a form which can be separated from ('alienated' from) the active producer, and it is this socially achieved separating of product from producer which is the necessary premise for the exploitation of productive activity within specifically capitalist relations.

Marx starts here and shows how capitalist production emerges as a system of general commodity production where all things are commodified, including labour power itself. And once labour power is a commodity then we get not only value (appearing in exchange value) but surplus value as the wealth created by living labour is drawn off in the production process and absorbed into commodities which contain more value than the wages offered to the producers in return.

This brief summary of Marx's approach allows us to appreciate the key difference between his concept of 'activity' and that in circulation within 'Activity Theory'. 'Activity' (or 'the labour process') in Marx's work is not meant as a generic description or descriptive-analytic framework for all the concrete work practices within capitalist society (or any society): it is used to show us the difference between acting freely, acting humanly, acting in accordance with human needs on the one hand and acting as per the dictates of capital on the other. It is a concept which allows us to see our creative potential as a species as being trapped, confined and degraded by another process. 'Activity' in Marx is, therefore, not a description of contemporary work practices but a critique of them; it is a criterion by which we can evaluate our social practices in relation to human needs and change them in order to free our creative capacities from their temporary imprisonment in inhuman forms of life. If 'Activity Theory' takes 'activity' or 'activity system' as a 'unit of analysis' for contemporary forms of social organization and work practices then Marx, by contrast, shows that it is the exploitation of activity by capital which is the foundation of such forms and practices – a foundation which must be removed if people are to act towards each other in a way that does justice to their human potential.

Marx's concept of 'activity' (or 'labour process'), therefore, must always be understood in opposition to the concept of the valorization process, that is the process of exploitation of the labour process, however difficult it may be to distinguish these two processes on the basis of immediate appearances or experience. The distinction in fact becomes all the more crucial as capitalist development proceeds, giving rise to forms of value that are increasingly distant from the actual creation of value in the production process: here we have in particular what Marx calls 'fictitious capital', including the mountains of debt now crushing the productive life out of the world economy, and all the financial 'instruments' within contemporary capital movement and banking practice – the shadow banking system, hedge funds, futures, derivatives and so on (see Harvey, 2011: 280-1). The quotation from Alexis Tsipras with which I began this paper vividly, and pithily, puts all this into perspective.

No sphere of social life anywhere in the world escapes from or is immune from the direct or indirect consequences of the rule of capital over social production, over activity. While Marx's work puts the struggle to free creative





labour from capitalist exploitation at the centre of his analysis, that struggle, along with the distinguishing characteristics of capitalist work practices, disappears from the picture altogether when a bland and generic concept of 'activity' or 'activity system' (see Bakhurst, 2009) is made into the point of departure, and overarching framework, for analysis.

However, these comments are not intended as a dismissal of the insights and achievements of any brand of 'Activity Theory' from some doctrinaire 'Marxist' perspective, but in order to provoke a discussion about where our theories are leading us and what we want from them. More specifically, I believe we need to clarify a number of things: a) the scope, advantages and limitations of versions of 'Activity Theory' in relation to Marx's project in *Capital* and b) the relationship of 'Activity Theory' as developed by Engeström and colleagues to the activity psychologies of A N Leont'ev and S L Rubínštejn in particular.

4 Marx and education: the relevance of Marx's work to educational theory and practice

The general problem we are addressing is the basic question of how we understand what is going on in society and how we work out what to do about it. More specifically, we are concerned with how we approach the task of understanding the specific social role and social function of educational institutions and educational practices within society today, what we might do to transform them, and how that transformation may contribute to the transformation of social relations more generally. In that context, what are the implications of the method and ideas of Marx discussed above for an understanding of education within capitalist society?

We have seen that Marx's analysis in *Capital* begins with the commodity, and we have seen why. But Marx's analysis does not end there; it is simply the starting point for a systematic re-creation of all the social relations, functions and practices peculiar to a society based on the exploitation of human activity via commodity production. His initial analysis takes the process of production in isolation from all the other processes and forms of 'activity' in a more general sense, including education, law, politics and so on, in which it is necessarily embedded. Such isolation, or 'abstraction', is viewed by Marx as essential to constructing a fully 'concrete' picture of capitalist society, on the assumption that capitalist production in its ascendancy strives to reshape and redesign all domains of social life to serve the interests of capital and to quell or suborn all forms of resistance to that dominance. At the same time the agents of the labour process struggle to protect themselves from exploitation, to get a bigger share of the product of their own labour in the shape of higher wages, housing, education, health care and so on and develop their own forms of organization – trade unions and political parties – to enhance and amplify through collectivity their powers of resistance and to articulate an alternative vision.





If the exploitation of living labour is the basic economic ‘fact’ of capitalist production then this ‘fact’ is continually contested, a contest which plays out everywhere in society since all spheres of life and work are interconnected on the basis of this ‘fact’.

Marx himself was no doctrinaire ‘maximalist’ but the staunchest supporter of any attempt to improve working conditions and practices or conditions of life generally within the framework of existing exploitative relations of production. Any humane measure, including legal or constitutional change, which would encroach on and limit the demands and dominance of capital was taken as a positive step towards the affirmation and assertion of human values, of human potential. All such struggles, however small scale, offered scope for a contest of political aims and priorities and any achievements made created staging posts for wider and deeper social change and transformation.

Accordingly, Marx’s method does not involve reducing each and every sphere of production or working practice in society to the same abstract model but in tracing how these spheres and practices grow up as inter-dependent and inter-related on the basis of the struggle to impose, and to resist, capitalist exploitation of labour. Indeed many spheres of professional life do not appear to involve the production of surplus value at all, or even commodities, although of course they are dependent on, and connected to, commodities and commodity production at every point. The very labour power of the professionals who work within these spheres is commodified (they work for a wage) after all. Schools, while ‘serving’ students, are ‘business entities’ wholly reliant on budgets for purchase and consumption of commodities in addition to paying wages. But who sets the budget and where does the money come from? What strings (political or strategic) are attached? And what effects, what results and consequences do the practices of education have within society? In all such cases the analytical problem is not simply to notice that commodities are consumed (since commodities are everywhere), or that resources are tight and their allocation contested, but to see how this particular social sphere is connected to the broader but also deeper spheres of economic activity and the exploitation of labour by capital. Marx’s approach is not about applying a generic analytical template or formula but about tracing and analysing inter-connection, interaction and possibilities for change within the whole system. In other words, even if we grant that teachers within the public education sector, for example, are not “productive workers” (MARX, 1976: 1044) (i. E. producing surplus value), then the primary task of analysis is to understand their position within the social formation that is built around “productive work”.

What, then, is specific to ‘education’ under capitalist conditions? What is the concrete role played by educational institutions and practices in societies built up around the exploitation of labour? First of all, it would be unwise from Marx’s perspective to take the self-proclaimed values and virtues of educational institutions themselves at face value, or as a starting point for analysis. The car plant, we noted, is producing cars (when times are good) but, more to the point, it is a site for the production of surplus value. What exactly is being ‘produced’, then, in schools and classrooms?





Here is one view, from Reimer's classic work on global education (1971: 23):

'Different schools do different things, of course, but increasingly, schools in all nations, of all kinds, at all levels, combine four distinct social functions: custodial care, social-role selection, indoctrination, and education as usually defined in terms of the development of skills and knowledge. It is the combination of these functions which makes schooling so expensive. It is conflict among these functions which makes schools educationally inefficient'.

It is interesting that 'education as usually defined' comes last, and least, in Reimer's list of functions. Reimer's analysis is not based on Marx, although it would not be too difficult to critically re-work it from a Marxian perspective. And, indeed, there is no shortage of Marxist scholarship on education and its social role and potential (see Green, Rikowski & Raduntz, 2007).

As noted in Jones (2011a), Marx didn't see compulsory schooling as a capitalist conspiracy to ideologically enslave the working class but as a necessary and progressive reform which protected the children of working class families from exploitation in factories and mines, sparing their lives and health in the process. This move also protected them at the same time from their own families who, as a result of poverty and exhaustion, were obliged to force their own children into abusive and exploitative work. In Marx, Reimer's 'custodial function' is a shield, a humanitarian measure, a mitigation of the exploitative forces at work in society and, by that same measure, represents both a cultural as well as an economic inroad into capitalist hegemony. This legally enforced separation of (child) labour from both capital and the pressures of domestic poverty creates a space of possibilities for intellectual and practical action in relation to social relations inside and outside the school. Exactly what goes on at school is therefore from the very beginning also a contest or, rather, is part of the wider contest between labour and capital. At the same time, the separation of school systems from the world of work turns 'education' into a very peculiar, problematic and deeply conflicted business, as cultural-historical theory has been careful to point out (see the discussion in Jones, 2011a). Thus, concrete school systems are always the outcome of a complex balance of competing and conflicting forces within society overall.

Any educational system or institution, therefore, represents an unstable confluence of various social functions representing conflicting social interests. That also means that the role of the school, or of the individual teacher, with respect to these wider social struggles, is neither pre-determined nor set in stone: the social role of the school is up for grabs. To affirm, for instance, that education is a right for all, that it should really educate, motivate and inspire, that it should help protect us from exploitation and poverty, that it should not reproduce but counter social inequality – all of this is also a call to arms: it says what education should be, what it can be, and leads us to find ways and means to make it so. Just as, for example, to say that good clean water should be accessible and free to everyone is at the same time a challenge to the





private utilities (and their political backers) who profit from natural resources while leaving billions of people worldwide without proper drinking water. From Marx's perspective the struggle against exploitation is one to be carried out on all fronts and may begin anywhere, since all challenges to the status quo can become, in Harvey's (2011: 231) words, 'the co-revolutionary points around which social action could converge and rotate'.

This means that teachers have the chance, when circumstances are propitious, to make a real difference to their communities and their class. Schools can provide safe opportunities to learn outside of the home, outside of the workplace, off the streets; they can help to raise awareness in children and their families of basic health issues; they can become catalysts of community self-education; they can help communities to organize, to help them find their voice and have a voice; they can help communities gain confidence and strengthen their sense of identity; they can help to create a vision of an alternative future for the working people and poorest sections of society and challenge the inequalities of wealth that determine life chances and, indeed, life expectancy; and they can help to create a new vision of what real learning is and how it should be developed and rewarded. If opportunities of this kind can be made or seized, then schooling becomes a powerful transformative practice. In these circumstances teachers can become role models for empowerment and social conscience, just as enlightened employers, in providing conditions for labour to take place with dignity and in spaces where personal learning and growth can take place, can also play a part in advancing the cause of progressive social change.

5 Perspectives for dialogue and development in cultural-historical work in education

I began with some rather abstruse theoretical considerations and then moved on to talk, hopefully in more concrete terms, about the implications of these issues for an understanding of education and the potential role that schools may play within the wider social contest over the exploitation of labour. In this discussion, I have tried to emphasise what I think are the advantages, or at least possibilities, in Marx's approach to social processes in relation to an 'activity' or 'activity system' approach as developed by 'Activity Theory'.

However, it should be acknowledged that cultural-historical theory, and 'Activity Theory' specifically, have already made considerable and significant contributions both to the critique of contemporary educational practices and to their change and improvement in practice (e. G., Engeström, 1999, 1991 and see Jones, 2011a). In that light, perhaps it would be sensible not just to highlight divergence between Marx and the 'activity' approaches but to explore convergence or complementarity, at least within certain limits.

It might perhaps be better, then, not to take 'Activity Theory' as an alternative to Marx's theory or methodology in terms of a 'grand theory'. Rather than criticising this approach for not providing a view of capitalist social relations, or of the specificity of these relations, perhaps we should positively





emphasise its useful role in relation to local issues of work organization where exploitation of labour in Marx's sense is not taking place, i. E. in public health care and education or within other working teams which are at some distance from or have some degree of autonomy in relation to the labour-capital relationship? After all there are many problems which arise and which can be solved on a day to day basis to be solved and which can be solved without making a revolution. There are many ways to improve working conditions, to improve the quality of service, to improve people's lives and their health and general social status without overthrowing capitalism. The 'activity approach' has undoubtedly served as a useful tool for 'fair weather' exploration and intervention in public sector environments where value is consumed rather than created. But fair weather conditions are not guaranteed, of course: you may work hard to improve patient care in the clinic or to improve literacy teaching in the classroom only to find that your clinic has disappeared thanks to 'austerity measures' or your literacy programme has been replaced by a government-imposed (and privately contracted) 'synthetic phonics' regime.

But this is exactly where Marx comes into his own, i. E. where we need to see the bigger picture into which our own professional practices and aspirations fit. The apparently very concrete work 'activity' of any particular professional sphere or branch of the social division of labour may then strike us as a rather abstract and, consequently unhelpful, starting point for trying to find a clear understanding of the deeper societal processes and conflicts which shape, often drastically and without compromise, the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people. When we reach these major crises in social life it becomes perhaps rather more obvious that 'Activity Theory' is not so much a continuation of Marx's approach as a kind of theoretical fudge which blurs the clear conceptual lines that Marx drew and papers over the cracks and faultlines within social reality which Marx sought to expose.

However, others may disagree with this evaluation. I hope, therefore, that discussion and debate around these issues will continue.

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