Mind, Culture, and Activity, 18: 374–384, 2011
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on behalf of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition
ISSN 1074-9039 print / 1532-7884 online
DOI: 10.1080/10749039.2011.595037

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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BOOK REVIEWS

Activity Theory: Legacies, Standpoints, and Hopes: A discussion of Andy Blunden's *An Interdisciplinary Theory of Activity*

An Interdisciplinary Theory of Activity, by Andy Blunden, Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2010, 346 pp., $141.00 (cloth).

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INTRODUCTION

I was lucky to be recruited to do my first book review for *Mind, Culture, and Activity*. Not just because this was how I secured Mike Cole's review of the same book for my own journal, *Outlines — Critical Practice Studies* (a swap), but this also gave me the formal excuse to engage more in what I take to be a project I share with Andy Blunden—an exciting and important one, as I hope to demonstrate. Blunden hones in on it and raises its key issues, leaving plenty for the rest of us still to do.

Which project? Blunden has given a very precise outline of his main argument in a paper to the *Outlines* (Blunden, 2009), which the reader can access at no cost at http://www.outlines.dk. I am happy to refer to that article. For this discussion, I need only set the scene: Blunden retraces the roots of CHAT in Hegel's and Marx's continuation of Goethe's "romantic science," particularly regarding Vygotsky's fundamental concept of a "unit of analysis." From this background we learn that this concept was far from accidental or merely a technical methodological notion. Rather, it was a dialectical approach to constructing a Gestalt of human psyche, interaction, and culture. Unfolding the potentials of this way of thinking, Blunden performs an "immanent critique" of CHAT—mostly Leontiev, Engeström, and Cole—who in various ways developed, but failed to solve, the problem of CHAT's unit of analysis. Blunden arrives at the key concept of *collaborative project*, which he briefly sketches and relates to a set of current issues in philosophy and social theory.

From my perspective, not only does Blunden point to a long-standing and essential problem in CHAT—how do we delineate "an activity"?—and criticize usefully some attempts to solve it, but his own solution has the virtue that it takes us in the right direction yet demonstrates why some basic ideas in CHAT still prevent us from quite getting there. I aim to provide, on these lines, then, another attempt at an immanent critique.

IMMANENT CRITIQUE

What is immanence? A colleague whom I much respect declared recently that Blunden is so much of a newcomer to CHAT that he shouldn't be taken seriously at all. I disagreed. I tried to object with reference to Blunden's obvious credentials as key activist of the wonderful Marxist Internet Archive—see http://www.marxists.org (Some of Blunden's other academic virtues are on display at http://home.mira.net/~andy/). But the real reason is that, as I must confess, having been part of this debate for 30 years I still feel as though someone forgot to give me the keys. Why is it that we keep barging in from the outside, persuading those we take to be old-timers to revive century-old discussions? Is it that, as long as we haven't found that true unit of analysis, our science cannot cumulate (as we, perhaps secretly, believe that some other sciences do)? Or, rather, is it that some discussions must be reiterated because their meanings change with history, including those that concern this very issue of historicity itself?

I knew about the Marxist and Hegelian legacy to CHAT, which Blunden reconstructs. More specifically, he exhibits Hegel so meticulously that at some points the relevance escapes me, whereas Marx is rendered in such a simplifying way that it at once stirred my nostalgia for pre-post-modern Marxism and my urge to let us, finally, get beyond it—us Marxists, that is! Speaking of legacy: It would be such a pity if the CHAT philosophers were to go on ignoring the serious debates about how we learn from (Marxism and other Enlightenment) tradition in the (post- or late) modern condition, which one finds in works such as, for example, Foucault (1994), Latour (1993), or above all Derrida (1994). For such reasons, I should not conceal that I was put off by the very superficial and non-immanent critiques of some contemporary critical and postmodern theories—theories that represent legacies from which Blunden and his readers could have learned much more. These critiques litter the end of the book, and a better editor would have spotted them as a way to reduce its cost and improve its argument.[1] For example, to claim that "the notion of discourse carries the implication that projects are free creations of the mind" (p. 293) is to invoke an absurd caricature otherwise mostly entertained by people who have never read Foucault's writings on freedom. Frankly, it seems Blunden has not worked enough on this to make it worth the while for us to go into it any further, so let's just leave it there.

But I was delighted to learn about how Vygotsky's legacy connected with Goethe's holistic romanticism through Hegel's logic. To some other readers, of course, this may be old news. But of course, most books are new versions of old news.

[1]For a price of £99, one would expect some careful editing to be done, and at least not quite so many typos.

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TWO OPPOSITE READINGS OF LEONTIEV

Yet again, other legacies are reduced or completely missing in Blunden's account. This will be the case with any reconstruction; but for me, there is a most striking blank space in Blunden's genealogy: the Continental and Scandinavian reception of CHAT from the 1960s on. This seems important to me, as it was one of the traditions that Engeström and his colleagues were to build on, and then partly forget about, but even more because it was easily as deep, wide, and rich as the Anglo-Saxon and Finnish tradition that has spread worldwide in recent decades. When it is lacking in Blunden's account—probably for the simple reason of language barriers—this speaks loudly of an impending cultural loss, as it is much closer to some of Blunden's concerns than the tradition he recounts, even though it sets off from a *directly opposite reading of the Russian legacy*![2]

Yes, indeed: *Opposite*. In particular, Blunden's Leontiev is so unrecognizable to a Danish Leontievian that I cannot resist the temptation to indulge in exegesis, to find the correct understanding of Leontiev's theory, even though Derrida and many other poststructuralists keep reminding me of lessons I already knew from a long Marxist epistemological tradition: that meanings are unstable, contradictory, and historical. Please forgive me, as I am overwhelmed by this temptation when Blunden explains,

> Thus we have on the one hand, *activities* which are directed towards objectively existing *objects*, the negation of each satisfying a need of the group, and it is this social need of the object which provides the socially constructed *motive* of the activity. And on the other hand, we have the *actions* which are carried out by individuals, directed toward their personal goals. . . . The personal meaning of the object is the goal to which their own action is directed. (p. 205)

and when he goes on,

> There is no such thing as objectless activity (Leontyev 2009: 28). It makes a lot of sense to develop a structure like this based on the teleology of activity. Also useful is the differentiation of the goal-oriented actions, carried out by individuals, from the underlying object-oriented social processes, which set individuals in motion and articulate their actions into coherent social processes. (p. 207)

This may appear straightforward, but the Leontiev I knew taught me something quite different: Even if we know the action of an individual, as dealing with an object (Gegenstand) using artifacts, and directed toward a socially given goal, we have yet to understand the activity which that individual is engaged in, as defined first of all by her motive. This subjective motive, in turn, is closely related to how the social meaning (Bedeutung) of the object is transformed into personal sense (Sinn), based on how it meets and defines her needs in the "system of individual consciousness," the "being-for-itself of the concrete subject" (Leontjew, 1979, p. 148).

> If in the consciousness of the subject external sensitivity connects meanings with the reality of the objective world, then the personal sense connects them with the reality of his own life in this world, with its motives. It is precisely *personal sense which makes human consciousness ardent*. (Leontjew, 1979, p. 148)

[2]Perhaps I should note that, although, evidently, much was lost in translation from the Russian, too, this is likely less fatal because the CHAT scholars built directly on a philosophical tradition coming from Germany.

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On the objective side, then, there are action, goal, and meaning; subjectively, we have activity, motive, and sense. The goal-directed and object-oriented actions that form part of social structures of meaning can also be regarded psychologically, in terms of how they are driven by motives to make personal sense. Thus, in Leontiev's famous example, we can easily identify the action of a pupil reading a book. But if we want to understand it psychologically, we might tell her that the book has been taken off the syllabus: If she then puts it down, her motive was to pass the exam; if not, it was to acquire its contents. Two different kinds of activity! This psychological understanding, this recognition of subjectivity, was precisely Leontiev's main project. This is what made Klaus Holzkamp dedicate the *magnum opus* of his *Subjekt-Wissenschaft* (subject-science) to Leontiev (Holzkamp, 1983). Leontiev did not, as Blunden claims without any reference (pp. 197–198)—only reiterating a point that Engeström (1987) implies should follow from Leontiev (as a next generation) but is more careful not to attribute to him directly—set out to add a "social motivation" to Vygotsky's "action with its immediate goals" and thus establish activity as a collective unit of analysis. Leontiev was critical of a certain intellectualism in Vygotsky's focus on language, not of his idea of artifact-mediated action as such. His theory of the structure of the activity was built at once to distinguish and to relate subjective activity, based in the materiality of the body and its needs, with social practice and its objective cultural forms and meanings. This ambition was Leontiev's greatest insight and, as we shall see that Blunden is right to point out, his most important weakness.

But first, note the differences here to Blunden's rendering of Leontiev. In the latter, Leontiev's key distinction, taken up and revised from Vygotsky, between objective social meaning and subjective personal sense is ignored and replaced with "personal meaning." Motive and need have been moved from the subject to the other side of the equation, as "social needs" that provide an "underlying" motive that is somehow identical with an object and thus objective but differs from individuals' goals. All completely upside down!

Of course, there are numerous translation issues. For instance, it appears that Blunden finds support for his notion of "personal meanings" by quoting a chapter of *Problems of the Development of Mind* (Leont'ev, 1981), which has been added in the Marxist Internet Archive version (which, incidentally, is edited by Blunden) and where the Russian *smysl* appears to be translated as *meaning*, rather than as *sense*, as it is in the rest of the book (and in other translations of CHAT from the Russian). Or the ease with which "object" can mean both a thing we deal with and a goal we are striving for, and thus the word can secretly slide between the two meanings (as we see in the first quote from Blunden above)—in English: This is particular to the English language and not present in German or in Scandinavian languages. This will ring a bell to readers of *MCA* who remember the special issue of the journal devoted to the concept of "object" (Vol. 12, Issue 1, 2005).

But the same special issue should remind us that behind this terminological trouble lies a deep theoretical problem in Leontiev's social theory. This problem was identified in the German and Scandinavian reception (Axel & Nissen, 1993; Holzkamp, 1979; Osterkamp, 1976) but almost completely ignored in the Anglo-Finnish (with Miettinen, 2005, and Kaptelinin, 2005, as the noble exceptions to the rule)—and Blunden, as it were, attacks it from the "opposite" side: the functionalism of Leontiev's way of relating subject with society. This has to do with how objects and motives appear to coincide in Leontiev's idealized image of the true society, that is, the society of original communism and that of the Soviet Union.

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In another of Leontiev's famous examples, the beater chases away the game for the hunter to kill—here, the object is the game, which is what is dealt with (Gegenstand) and is at the same time the common objective, which is obviously identical with the motive of the beater, who is just as hungry as the rest of the group. A distinction, perhaps, but also an utter harmony, of sense and meaning, object and motive—a harmony so complete that one understands how Engeström (1987) could take off from this utopia to build the notion of "activity systems," with its cumbersome references to the vague notion of "object-motive." From the perspective of this functionalist utopia, a psychology could become relevant only in the face of the undeveloped and the deviant: as in fact, according to Leontiev (1978), children and disturbed provide the tasks of psychology in the institutions of the Soviet Union. To paraphrase: The child who puts down her book still has not grasped the harmony of society's needs with the desire to learn that she *must* develop—she has not yet developed those "higher cultural needs." Bourgeois society is another matter, where sense and meaning are divided in principle, but this matter—that of ideology and social critique—Leontiev sets aside and forgets.

An elaborate critique of Leontiev's functionalism was given already in 1980 (Haug, Nemitz, & Waldhubel, 1980), and the background was explained by Osterkamp (1976) in her groundbreaking work on the theory of motivation. Why is the reading child in Leontiev's narrative so defenseless against the teachers' ideas about what she *ought to want*—when his project was precisely to demarcate a psychological domain, to urge us to understand a possible difference? According to Osterkamp, part of the answer lies in a reductionistic concept of the needs that were supposed to ground the motives of the individual (incidentally, this is quite similar to Western sociological functionalisms such as that of Parsons, who drew on Freud and his libido). Leontiev wrote vaguely about "higher cultural needs" without any foundation in biology—and without any explanation—but apart from those, he knew only needs that phylogenetically derived from the functions of survival and procreation; their cultural formation in humans was only a matter of being satisfied by socially produced objects. Osterkamp's achievement was to reconstruct the prehistorical emergence of human needs for developing agency: for the enhancement of participation in praxis. Only with such a "productive need" for agency could an individual be conceived to have premises on which to engage with her activity in social practices—premises that were not reducible to sex, survival, or deficits; premises that would develop through participation to ever "higher" cultural forms, yet still premises.

According to Osterkamp, Leontiev's natural history of needs

> overlooks the autonomous need-basis for curiosity and explorative behavior and for social tendencies, as a precondition for the learning of abilities necessary for survival. With such an incomplete reconstruction of the natural history of the biological basis of needs, and with the resulting identification of organismic needs and "deficits", Leontiev is also only able to understand human social needs as organismic needs. The independent biological need-basis of human productivity, which drives spontaneous activities of exploration, and which acquire a new quality as 'productive needs', remain beyond him. Thus Leontiev's statement [which UO has just praised as foundational to any Marxist theory of needs, MN], that "in human society, the objects to satisfy needs are *produced*, and that as a result, the needs are also produced", is given a narrow and one-sided meaning, since the dialectical unity of production and consumption are torn apart, and only consumption is based in human needs, whereas production appears as an objective social necessity. (Osterkamp, 1976, pp. 136–137; my translation from the German)

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Incidentally, we find here a nice example of the usefulness of a reconstruction of natural history—the method that Leontiev introduced and that was taken up by Osterkamp and many others (e.g., Burkitt, 1999; Engelsted, 1989, 1994; Schurig, 1975) but that Blunden dismisses offhand as having contributed nothing to psychology (p. 214): Just as Leontiev, by this method, had overcome the biologistic reductionism *and* idealism in the notions of cognition and action of a behaviorism that had chosen to be ignorant of evolution, so Osterkamp could reconstruct the emergence and sublation into a human form of a kind of needs that would overcome the dichotomy of spirit from nature in which Leontiev was still caught—and which she also identified in Marx's concept of needs.

And what about Blunden? He doesn't appear to fancy a concept of activity driven by needs at all. He asks rhetorically, "Is this what life is about? Individuals pursuing their needs?" (p. 233). We might ask him right back: Are "social needs" any better, then? Not really. . . . For Blunden, needs seem to be something we should put behind us altogether—just as it was the case in Marx's utopian vision in the Communist Manifesto. We return to this utopianism next.

Let us first conclude the exegetic detour by suggesting that it was this functionalism that made it possible for two opposite readings of Leontiev's core concepts to emerge in his aftermath—both of them respectable, I should add, even though the urge to correct the heretics cannot always be curbed.

PSYCHOLOGY AS A FOUNDATIONAL ABSENSE: A CRITIQUE OF MARX

Second, we might wonder whether Blunden is really suggesting an interdisciplinary theory, as he claims—distinct from a transdisciplinary theory in that it begins with an immanent critique of each discipline. This is because, although Leontiev sought to overcome psychologism through his concept of activity, he also used the same concept to demarcate a psychological domain, through the notions of motive and need. This was quite reasonable, as psychology is distinguished among the social sciences by the simple fact of embodiment: Psychological matters are at once bodily and sociocultural-historical. But Leontiev's reductionistic concept of needs meant that, against his own intentions, he could establish a psychological domain only by cutting it off from the social. This is where Osterkamp's critique paved the way, through an immanent critique of Leontiev's psychology to a truly transdisciplinary theory with which disciplinary boundaries could be understood and overcome. But for Blunden, there is just nothing psychological whatsoever in the first place—he seems to jump directly to a transdisciplinary conceptualization without really taking seriously the disciplines as problematics and practices.

Again, we should grant him: This is very much like Marx. As Blunden repeats several times, Marx and Engels claimed to ground their theory on the "real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity"—premises to "be verified in a purely empirical way" (Marx & Engels, 2000, p. 6). But in fact, even though "the first fact to be established is the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature" (Marx & Engels, 2000, p. 6), those empirically existing flesh and blood creatures remained an utterly abstract declaration of concreteness, a foundational absence that would haunt subsequent attempts to develop a Marxist trans-psychology. As indeed it messes up Blunden's attempt.

I apologize if I insult some readers with my critique of Marx himself. A critique of Marx was beyond the reach of the CHAT founders, for many reasons, and Blunden's philosophy, too,

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appears to remain within the confines of interpretation. But the point is, we need to get beyond Marx, the sociologist, in order to develop Marx, the emancipatory social theorist. If it is perhaps unfair to blame Marx for taking the first steps toward a sociology, innocent of how this would set up disciplinary frontiers against a psychology to come, which were to block the reflection of activity, then Blunden ought not be allowed the same innocence 150 years later.

WHAT IS THIS "SOCIETY"?

Yet this critique takes us back to the greatest virtue in Blunden's theory: The problematization of the unit of analysis, and thus the unit of activity, and the suggestion that this unit should be conceived not only dynamically and historically but also counterfactually, in terms of anticipations, projects, and hopes of social transformation.

When Blunden asks, "What is this 'society'?" (p. 224), he is doing an extremely important job that helps us surpass Marx's sociological kind of Marxism. Like the sociology later founded by Durkheim, Tönnies, and others, Marx precisely does not stop to ask this question. We learn much about "society," the substance of social life, but nothing about how any singular society is delineated, as distinct from other societies, and thus how a unit of analysis is established, beyond the historical circumstance that remains untheorized. The traumatic fact about this unit, "a society"—that it is established by states and armies—appears to be transitory and is thus denied as untrue, just like the state itself. For Marx, whenever a unit is forged, it is always a forgery. Another disciplinary boundary, that with political science, fits in here to freeze Marx's reaction against Hegel's idealization of the state. But the theoretical purity of this social substance does not protect us from the tragic and very real consequences of the units that this substance keeps coming up with, false and dirty though they may be. Since Marx, we have vainly cried that the state is a mere ghost, a false version of society, each time the historical fact of state sovereignty has led to disasters such as the World Wars, Fascism, and Stalinism. We have not done much better with such units as the Party or the Family.

No doubt, then, this is an immensely deep problem in Marxism; it is no surprise, consequently, that the same problem haunts not only Leontiev's activity theory but even today's most developed versions of CHAT. Engeström's adaptation of the concept of "system" is a stealthy way of refusing to address the issue, because a "system" can be established as a unit only by positing (from the outside) a cycle of communication, a reproduction of pattern. At the other end of the CHAT spectrum, the otherwise refreshingly antifunctionalistic theory of "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998)—another CHAT branch about which Blunden is strangely silent—refuses the issue of unit explicitly, holding on to the idea of "substance" in the shape of "everyday life," pointing to how practices are always emerging and transforming, and pretending that the concept is strictly analytical (Lave, 2008), that is, not really of this world. Similarly, Blunden relevantly criticizes Mike Cole's and others' adaptation of the concept of context, an open-ended totality that is taken as a unit of analysis.

THE UTOPIAN SUBSTANCE

Yet Blunden repeats the underlying utopianism of clinging to the ontology of a truly human "substance"—again, the Marxian abstractly concrete interactions of real human

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individuals—below the disturbing realities of power that forge its units (p. 180). In fact, he does it so explicitly that it becomes easier to see what a tremendous rift this problem has created through CHAT, and how this bottomless crack was already opening at the founding of CHAT on a Marxism that insisted on the eschatological essentialism of identifying the true substance of human life in circumscribed domains such as original communism, realized socialism, or those particular excerpts of everyday life we study. Blunden balks at the edge of this abyss, but he is able to sketch the contours on the other side, as projections of the Hegelian theory he has brought with him—of the subject as concept, reinterpreted as human practical projects, reflecting themselves as holistic Gestalts, units of mediated and self-overcoming collective activity.

With this Hegelian approach, activity is conceived in a way that allows for a reflexive reintroduction of the subject of theorizing, of analysis, and of practice—that subject who is always absent in functionalist approaches. This is evident when, for instance, Blunden views the notion of "double stimulation" as first of all characterized by the researcher's active participation in the activity and the development studied (p. 199). Including the subject of knowing and theorizing in the theory and its methodology is an important achievement that otherwise, within CHAT, has been almost exclusive to the German-Scandinavian critical psychology.

But perhaps it is the idea of a sacred substance that prevents the unfolding of this reflexivity to the point where it would match Hegel's and Marx's conceptualizations of the historical relevance of their philosophies:[3] Blunden does not ask himself why his theory should rise to relevance at this time in history; although he can criticize Leontiev for assuming, with his functionalism, "the standpoint of those who manage society" (p. 210), we do not learn much about Blunden's standpoint by his claim to take the side of survival, pitting his holistic Gestalt against the economic and ecological crises resulting from today's specialized institutions (p. 324).

Still, I would agree that the idea of a—social and at the same time psychologically relevant—unit of activity as not a thing but a project, to which the researcher cannot be neutral, points a useful way. It is through the counterfactuality of practice, its directedness toward a horizon, a hope (rather than an "object" defined by a researcher who pretends neutrality), that subjectivity and intersubjectivity can be addressed, opening fertile points of dialogue with other contemporary approaches to subjectivity (e.g., Lacanian and existentialist theories). A propos of the soon-forgotten German tradition, I suggest there are immense yields to be gained by reconnecting this dynamic and reflexive concept of activity with Ernst Bloch's philosophy of "hope" that reinterprets key epistemological and ontological problems into a framework of transformative practice (Bloch, 1967/1995). Dealing head-on with the anticipatory images that guide our practices, Bloch facilitates a reflexive overcoming of utopianist temptations.

Such a more solid and unfolded philosophy of practice would make it obvious that it is not sufficient to dress up substance as unit of analysis, as Blunden does—even as he emphasizes that distinction himself—simply by counterposing it, as a utopian domain of realized hope, to forms of human interaction that are less developed: The central conceptual structure in Blunden's theory is made of the distinctions between hierarchy, collaboration, and exchange. The former and the latter are the extreme forms of collaborative projects where their essence is negated, either by too little or too much autonomy of participants. Although Blunden regrettably does not venture to really historicize the concepts, it is hard not to associate hierarchy with Feudalism and

[3]Or, of course, the similar reflections of Vygotsky, or of Haug, Osterkamp and others.

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exchange with Capitalism. These, then, are the false forms that deny the substance that is to be emancipated but that already lies there as the basic truth of such social units as Christianity or Australia. Thus, the radically counterintuitive and fruitful approach to such entities, regarding them as collaborative projects, is achieved only by pushing aside the false images, and the false cultural forms, of hierarchy and exchange.

This way, the theory does not, after all, help us approach, identify, and analyze activities. This is probably why Blunden provides an incoherent listing of social forms described by different theorists, without theorizing their contents or their relations with each other, under the pretentious heading of "taxonomy" (pp. 281–287). The problem is not that it is normative; it is rather that it rests with proposing that normativity instead of dialectically unfolding a conceptual structure through overcoming itself to address the issues that contradict it.

But we do get hints along the way. Let me point to these in two levels, two steps that could be taken further along the road that Blunden opens up—steps to realize and develop activity in itself through following its alienation, its framing for itself, and then its self-mastery in and for itself.

TWO STEPS TO DEVELOP THE IDEA OF COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

The first step is genre, frame, field, or discursive order. Blunden identifies these concepts as ways of defining projects from above (e.g., p. 286 ff.). They are thus not identical with collaborative projects: True, but the point is, people actually use them when they constitute their projects from below. There is a constant practice of framing. If we are to understand people's participation in the project of, say, Christianity, and the ways in which this project is actually circumscribed, delimited, distinguished from other projects (not least, other Christianities), then we must look at how people from below take on ideal positions to redefine their collaboration through the from above and, in this, understand themselves. In the case of Christianity, one project is distinct from another by the way it is viewed as sanctioned by God himself. No matter how much lived practice can be distinguished from ideal discursive forms, the fact is that we frame it, that is, we define and regulate our material practices mediated by (secondary and tertiary) ideal artifacts in the sense of Ilyenkov (1977a, 1977b) and Wartofsky (1979). The Hegelian idea of "subject as a concept" does not reduce the living subject to a category, but it recognizes that subjectivity is framed.

The second is conflict, power, and recognition. Blunden admits that projects include conflict (p. 258), but nothing seems to come of it. The inability to theorize power and conflict has always been a weakness of CHAT, because we have preferred to posit a utopian substance and push aside its negation. Now is the time to change tactics and overcome this limitation. Repeated ritual confirmations of the empirical reality of conflict will not suffice to exorcize the evil contradiction. A daring way to go could be to follow the track from Hegel to Marx and reconceptualize recognition. From a CHAT perspective, Blunden is quite justified in criticizing the psychologizing versions of recognition coming from Kojève and Honneth, but a more thorough and more immanent critique might have yielded a more productive way of reading their insights. After all, Hegel's seminal chapter on recognition is all about how power, through submission, is sublated by mediation and labor (Hegel, 1807/1997). If the Lacanians and Critical Theorists could not develop this understanding, given their lack of a conceptualization of practice, we stand a better chance, coming from CHAT. This is actually almost what Blunden says (e.g., p. 323), but, here as at other points, he doesn't follow up on his brilliant ideas. What we might end up with is the idea

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that our unit of analysis, of activity, is constituted, mediated by given cultural forms or frames, and transforming them, but constituted as a singular collective in processes of recognition where simple power is either exercised or sublated through collaborative labor, perhaps organized in various structures of command and exchange, for better or for worse.

It is far from accidental that I have proposed to enhance Blunden's concept of project collaboration in these two steps. This is just what I am trying to do in my own contribution to the project I propose to share with Blunden, in a book that is scheduled to appear in January 2012 (Nissen, in press).

THE PROMETHEAN DILEMMA

I suggest that we must go through these theoretical steps to finally face the Promethean dilemma of social engineering that lies at the root of any social theory: If, at the base, we create our world and ourselves (as collectives and participants), how can we stop that process from running amok and becoming arbitrary? Abstract utopias appear to authorize our projects as ethical, as more than simply what we happen to prefer to want (to be). This would include the abstract utopia of elevating collaborative projects as such to a sacred status—as Blunden does, much echoing MacIntyre's (1984) communitarian ethics. Is this what holds back Blunden from the most radical implications of his theory?

A collaborative ethics is necessary, but if it is only to be achieved by turning our backs on framing and recognition, it becomes impossible and undesirable. On the other hand, it is precisely the fact that we needn't do this which points to the historical relevance of our common project—that project on which we collaborate mostly through exchange; the project we are working to frame as a trans-disciplinary cultural-historical activity theory; the project on behalf of which we struggle together for recognition in academia and beyond. Increasingly throughout Modernity, we are already framing and constituting collectives and participants reflexively. Given forms of collective are problematized more than ever, and ever new forms are prototyped. If nothing else, the fall of the Berlin Wall taught us, the hard way, to distrust not just any state—this we had known since Marx—but any purported "society" beneath or inside it. It must all be built anew. But not from scratch. The conditions given to us, under which we can create such history, are not just malleable building materials scattered on a virgin field but include potentials and propensities developed in natural history as well as deep cultural legacies and tendencies that we may identify with and attempt to further (Bloch's "concrete utopia"). If we struggle for a better future, it is not just in the name of the survival of humanity, and neither is it to emancipate the substance of a true society; it is to continue and realize specific projects of who we are to become.

The real substance, in the name of which we might regulate who we are and who we should become, is the everlasting struggle to cultivate our world, each other, and ourselves.

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