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Editorial: Researching in a world in collapse

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Crises like the ones we are living in now are times in which the unstable and uncertain nature of the status quo is made all the more explicit. All the abrupt disruptions and changes brought forth and demanded by the apocalyptic collapse in global scale wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly reminded us how quick sweeping and world-shattering change can come that profoundly alters the current state of affairs. The pandemic has asked us to revise ideas, scrutinize the limits of our practices, and interrogate the methods and tools we are using to agentively transform community and societal practices. The four papers published in this issue, perhaps reflecting this urgency of change, interrogate long-established concepts and notions in cultural-historical activity theory as they each seek to, in the context of their respective practice studies, engage and overcome theoretical and methodological obstacles to the transformation of those societal practices.

In his thought-provoking article, “Where is the primary contradiction? Reflections on the intricacies of research predicated on activity theory”, Paulo Rocha revives the discussion of contradictions in activity theory and its relevance for research. As he cogently argues,

distinguishing the primary contradiction, which pervades all activity systems is capitalism, “bears an impact on empirical research, as the precise understanding of what constitutes a primary contradiction has the capacity to determine the development of an entire research project.” Rocha suggests that Activity Theory tends to bypass commodity as the germ-cell and thus focuses on concrete developmental contradictions of local activities in society as the unity of analysis. According to him, this has led to studies that mechanically apply Activity Theory’s triangular representation of activity systems. The author argues that “[i]n its current form, Activity Theory does not seem to provide a sound ethical critique to capitalism inasmuch as it is grounded in characteristics of activity within a capitalist social formation.” Rocha emphasizes that empirical research must take into account broader notions of social antagonism and break away from the limited analysis of contextualized technical practices. In a remarkably candid critical examination of his previous work on the rehabilitation of offenders at the intersection of the criminal justice and welfare systems, the author concludes that, by following Engestrom’s version of Activity Theory, his analysis was narrowed down into the intricacies of the activity system and fell short of accounting for wider notions of social antagonism. A return to Marx would then demonstrate how human potential is subordinated to oppressive capitalist production processes.

The topic of contradictions is also pursued in Jenny Ros and Michèle Grossen’s article titled "Learning through obstacles in an interprofessional team meeting: A discursive analysis of a systemic contradiction". Their focus is the major challenge of interprofessional collaboration in workplaces, such as healthcare settings. Their claim is that expansive learning cannot occur if workers, for instance, do not agree on what constitutes an obstacle. In their study, they proposed to overcome this limitation by “analyzing the discursive processes through which the participants identified obstacles, negotiated their meanings and elaborated a solution leading to professional learning.” Through a step-by-step analysis of

the discursive dynamics of team meetings in a healthcare facility, they provide a window into the actual process of how participants collectively coped, moment-to-moment, with a dilemma and came to define it as a problem related to work organization, and not only to interpersonal relationships. The authors conclude by demonstrating that interprofessional collaboration requires the development of relational agency, a topic whose growing prominence in Activity Theory reflects our urgent need to pursue and commit to broad social change.

Another major concept from cultural-historical activity theory, mediation, is under scrutiny in Wolff-Michael Roth's article titled "The Ideal in Mathematics: A Spinozist-Marxian Elaboration and Revision of the Theory of Knowledge Objectification". His specific goal is to propose changes to the theory of knowledge objectification, which has been developed as part of cultural-historical activity theory in mathematics education by Radford and colleagues, including the author himself. Roth argues that the theory of knowledge objectification makes a "connection between the individual and objective mathematical (abstract) ideas, conceived as historically developed cultural forms, and school mathematics, that is, "students' encounters with historically constituted mathematical meanings." However, he is wary that this theory ends up conflating the concrete with the sensually given and lends itself to individualist views of knowledge, so that "[s]uch uses theory of knowledge objectification lead to metaphysical (mentalist) materialism that Marx explicitly rejected.". He proposes a Spinozist-Marxian approach wherein there is no place for the concept of mediation in a revised approach to mathematical knowing and learning. In contrast to the original theory of knowledge objectification, which takes knowledge to be objectified in things (objects, signs, artifacts, linguistic devices), Roth's article— following the Spinozist-Marxian take of the late Vygotsky, Ilyenkov, and Mikhailov— suggests that anything particular to mathematics exists as a relation between people. In this account, "the ideal

(supersensible) form first will have been a real (sensible) relation with another person,” that is, the Spinozist-Marxian account emphasizes the societal relation as the concrete locus and embodiment of the ideal (universal) of mathematics, a relation that manifests itself in the relation among mathematical objects. The article presents two contrasting interpretations of a concrete classroom example from Radford’s own studies to illustrate and develop his arguments. We expect the author’s attempt to close dualist gaps in the theory of knowledge objectification to be welcome by readers familiar with Activity Theory as an important contribution, including his call to drop triangular representations “to represent a sign X that takes an intermediary position between the stimulus A (or S) and the response B (or R),” such as used by Vygotsky. Nonetheless, the provocative claim to altogether jettison the notion of cultural mediation will likely stir debate and controversy.

This volume closes with an extensive and innovative discussion of a methodology of rearticulation to approach the Self. This is the focus of Nissen and Friis’s article titled "Recognizing Motives: The dissensual self". Building on the Vygotskian tradition of socio-cultural-historical activity theory (SCHAT), which views the self as mediated by cultural artifacts in activity, they explore the resources such tradition offers to the project of rearticulation by focusing on the transformative social process that reconfigures sense and meaning as people rearticulate activities in which they display their motives. Drawing on cases of clients in a drug counseling facility who, in their words, are “currently marginalized by the contemporary motivation ideology”, they focus on paradoxical motives to disclose some limitations of socio-cultural-historical activity theory. Their overall aim is to theoretically rearticulate practices of the self “in dialogue with efforts to transform practices, since these make visible the presuppositions and implications of those practices and the selves they make.” Weaving together a vast array of critical perspectives, the authors problematize the functionalist overtones of the concept of motivation, including in SCHAT.

While provocatively deconstructing the notion of cure, the authors nonetheless reaffirm their commitment as practitioners to human growth and to an ethics of expanding agency as communal production and control of our forms and conditions of life. To that effect, paradoxical motives, such as “invocation of self-destruction can be articulated as aesthetic invitations to reconstitution by and of emergent collectives.” As a theoretically informed practice study, their article offers a powerful critique of mainstream approaches to psychotherapy for drug addiction and a compelling practice of resistance as ‘rearticulation’ of the self via aesthetic expression.

There is no doubt that the massive change we have undergone during the course of this pandemic, and the heightened sense of uncertainty and insecurity, will leave deep marks in the ways we live our lives and our social and political imagination though. As Anna Stetsenko has been telling us for a while, adapting to the status quo is not an option. It’s high time we moved past traditional theoretical and scientific legacies that still privilege stable and static renderings of reality to instead embrace human agency and social change as ontologically and epistemologically primary. Poetically, though not metaphorically, the primacy of change reminds of the indigenous legacy we were heir to in Brazil. According to the perspectival Amerindian *buen vivir* cosmology, shared by indigenous people from the Amazon and Andean regions in Latin America, the universe is always transforming itself, always ending and thus always beginning, depending on the particular position one occupies in it and the particular stance one decides to take in the conflicts that shape the universe. The devastating loss and massive disruption we are facing now, originary peoples in the geographical and epistemological Global South have endured for centuries. As a prelude to our next issue, wherein we hope to publish articles by scholars from the Global South, we invite our readers to open up the imagination for what we can learn from them as we seek to subvert the neoliberal world order that has brought us disaster on a global scale.