

Morten Nissen

Editorial

In this issue, there are several ways we can see general themes of contemporary critical social studies, approached, as is typical of our journal, from a both theoretical and practice-oriented angle.

One such theme is the historical production of subjectivity. One would perhaps expect this theme to be firmly placed in a “post-” context (postmodern, poststructuralist, postconstructionist etc.), rather than in a publication where a discussion of Engeström’s widely applied activity theory is prominent in two papers – Warmington’s and Lange & Lund’s. Does not that theory exclusively and universally place subjectivity at the side of constructing agency?

But one should not treat such territorial markers too rigidly: No critical social study belongs unconditionally to any such domain or within any static doxa. Both articles (continuing a trend in our journal, see e.g. González Rey, 2007; Langemeier & Roth, 2006) take up basic categories in activity theory, such as “object”, or methodological concepts, such as that of “contradiction”, for discussion, and seek to expand the theory’s dialectical and historicizing ambitions and powers. Lange & Lund’s classroom study takes up Hyysalo’s suggestion (2002) of “intermediate concepts” to achieve access to a “slice of the object” as woven into social and historical context, juxtaposing situational with historical time; and up comes the fertile question of where those concepts belong, between the agents’ empirical concepts and the theoretical structures of the researchers.

Warmington returns to the general concept of labor – and thus, significantly, “activity” – as

intrinsically belonging to modern capitalism, rather than something trans-historical (only – it may just be both, if capitalism, following Marx, is seen to unfold and thwart universal potentials). Thus, what is produced in practices such as the *Learning in and for Interagency Working* project in the UK is not only the immediate products, nor even just abstract value, but also, and increasingly, something even more abstract: labor-power. “Labor-power” is close to the ontology of subjectivity, since it is at once individualized, generalized, and abstracted into a potential. It is as such that it embodies fundamental contradictions in each and every “activity system”, in ways which are considerably more difficult to domesticate, suggests Warmington, than Engeström’s notion of expansive learning seems to allow for.

From here, the step is surprisingly short to Mik-Meyer’s interactionist and governmentality-inspired discussion of the management of obesity at workplaces. The contemporary production of “somatic individuals” as objects of governance and as ethical substances is seen to put into question long-standing notions of the division between public and private domains as barriers to a totalized managerial power, as well as run counter to the espoused liberal value of diversity. As this organizational production of labor-power crosses into the domains of privacy and body, it carries the yardsticks of very specific health standards, but it regulates only through the extreme subjectivity of general, abstract, individual self-responsibility for life potentials. When, in health talks, the employee is divided into smart and irrational parts, s/he is juxtaposed to

normative standards (despite liberal intentions of health promoters), but s/he is also recruited and held accountable as primary producer of his/her own generalized will-power.

It is illuminating to trace the continuity from earlier (mostly structuralist) analyses of the political economy of education, health, and so on, that Warmington can be read as taking up, to our day's (mostly post-structuralist) descriptions of the production of subjectivity, which Mik-Meyer exemplifies. Could it be that some of the long-standing dimensions of critical debate around that axis apply here?

One could be the old question whether structural Marxism was ever really able to take into account the meaning and implications of state power and institutions, except perhaps as apparatus, as a tool for the (re-)production of labor (-power, subjectivity), in itself neutral and fought-over, or subservient in the hands of Capital. And whether post-structuralism did anything but problematize formally the notion of a unitary apparatus. In Beck's study of home education, we appear to witness an altogether different problematic in the heart of the discourse of those professionals who deliberately produce subjectivity: The old Durkheimian problem of social integration. Like Durkheim himself, this discourse seems to operate with a "society" as its given object, but globalization raises the question of the reflexive agents of that operation, the (nation) state which contains and seeks to regulate and maintain that society; the state which provides the taken-for-granted home and perspective for most social studies and theory. So, we begin to see that the production of subjects as labor-power and as somatic individuals has really all along been the production of citizens, too. When we ask: Can we trust the home to produce, not only competent and healthy individuals, but also democratic and responsible subjects with resources and understanding to reach across cultural differences? – do we then assume, with little support in evidence, the

nation state to be the unproblematic arena for the unfolding of such qualities? Or, when, on the other hand, we problematize this idealism, does that force us to think of the state as an instrument or venue (be it unitary or fragmented) for the blind workings of economy or discourse? Or indeed, should we develop approaches that reflect how the state, with its highly precarious recognition of citizenship, carries other undomesticated contradictions that go to the core of subjectivity and tear it apart?

Another classic discussion around both structural Marxism and post-structuralism revolves around the recognition, in social theory, of subjectivity as reflexive agency beyond or in relation to discourse, power and structure. Thus, in Salkvist & Pedersen's analysis of women's perspectives on sexual coercion, "agency is understood as intentional, situated and strategic". But it is more than that. This understanding is itself a recognition, in more than one sense: an identification, acknowledgement and appreciation – and thus, even a co-production – of participant reflexive subjectivity. As such, it is discursively mediated and ordered, while at the same time it reflexively deploys that discursive ordering strategically and under facilitating or adverse socio-political conditions, struggling for agency. In the gendered social practices that reconstruct everyday lives after events of sexual assault, the objectivity of rape is contentious, and with it, the subjectivities of victims, survivors, and otherwise categorized participants get to be precarious.

References

- González Rey, F. (2007). Social and Individual Subjectivity from an Historical Cultural Standpoint. *Critical Social Studies – Outlines*, 9, 3-14.

Hyysalo, S. (2002). Transforming the Object in Product Design. *Outlines – Critical Social Studies*, 4, 59-83.

Langemeier, I. & Roth, W.-M. (2006). Is Cultural-Historical Activity Theory Threatened to Fall Short of its Own Principles and Possibilities as a Dialectical Social Science? *Outlines – Critical Social Studies*, 8, 20-42.