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Editorial

Critical social studies come in various forms and modes. The present collection testifies to this effect with the themes that cross through them.

First, of course, they are *critical*. One form of critique is engagement with issues of social and political relevance either to find alternative problematizations or directly to counter prevalent views on problems already defined in the discourse. Singla's article runs against the tide of problematizing and stigmatizing family patterns in minority cultures, and, more generally, against the underlying conception that dichotomizes (Western) autonomy from (Eastern) interdependence. Zittoun's study of orthodox jews' transition into secularity provides an account of what is generally known and feared as "religious fundamentalism" that restores human agency and cultural creativity in the place of some vague notions of pre-modern or emotionally immature abjects, thereby developing an approach to recognizing the subjects of her study without identifying with their ideological form – in itself, a kind of co-constructive critique.

Another form of critique is the traditional academic art of taking up debate with colleagues. In Langemeier & Roth's discussion of Engeström as in Miettinen's of Dewey, one main concern is to suggest shortcomings in the theories of those colleagues, as those theories are presented. But this does not mean that critique simply points to limitations. Rather, what we witness is a critique that enters into the perspective of the authors and, from there, points to internal contradictions. Shortcomings are set against intentions or possibilities

that are also present in texts written by the same authors. And eventually, through toiling with these contradictions, the critique turns into a struggle to honor the values of a work thus worth developing. This, to us, shows the vicinity of dialectics with the kind of dialogicality that is at the core of any truly academic enterprise.

In those two contributions, dialectical theory and method, the epistemology of practice that informed from the beginning and still informs cultural-historical activity theory, is directly addressed and some of its classical philosophical expressions reviewed. This unwaning relevance of theoretical and philosophical inquiry characterizes critical social studies, perhaps since the job of reworking prevailing forms of thought and practice is never completed. We will never find a place safe from those; not even within this journal! Dare we ask the reader if it would not be possible even here to ascertain specimens of the pitfalls identified: the reduction of dialectics into empiristic functionalism that Langemeier and Roth warns us against as a tendency in Engeström, or the misrecognition of culture's objectification in artefacts which Miettinen ascribes to Dewey's account of social practice?

Second, to follow up on this point, these critical studies are *social*. Here, we contend, the "social" is hardly to be identified simply with immaterial patterns, communication or the like, even if the reader may be tempted to answer in the affirmative to this last question, and even if concerns with such things as routines, habits, social institutions, regulations, discourses, framings etc. abound. Certainly, it

would be hard to overlook the pervasive endeavour on these pages to grasp the social as produced in cultural objects, or the array of concepts provided as tools for the purpose. Yet this does not settle the issue in a simple way. It is only with a praxiological concept of “object” that dualism can be overcome. The materiality of the range of objects relevant to subjective experience and activity cannot be maintained as anything but an abstract claim unless in the interplay of meaning with collective practices. This leads to including in the concept of “object” many entities which in a dualist perception would be regarded as immaterial; and it leads to highlighting how such cultural objects are, essentially, mutable and depend on local contingencies for their meaning.

The approach to the question of mediation of subjective experience and activity with social structure that takes us through local practices, institutions, frames, or situations that are both productive of, and constituted with, cultural objects, is broadly common to research in this tradition of critical social studies. But with which theoretical concepts

exactly? Daniels suggests the introduction of Basil Bernstein’s sociology to activity theory. This would provide, he claims, concepts to appreciate the ways institutions “do their psychological work” through shaping discursive practices. In a way, Daniels’ vision of how activity theory should develop is not far from the general opening toward pragmatism discernible in Miettinen’s interest in Dewey, or from Zittoun’s focus on semiotic units as cultural elements. To us, this appears a rich and possibly necessary front-line of debate and development, even if (or perhaps precisely because) it forces us to rethink the theoretical meaning of the material objectivity of cultural artefacts.

Finally, what we present here are *studies*. This term captures, perhaps better than our title *Outlines*, our dynamic and developmental intentions – the idea that any scientific activity (at best) produces “work in progress”. “Studies” connote creative activity objectified and hints at the workshop in which it takes place. It signals a both modest and reflexive awareness that the truths produced and presented remain of their time, themselves “cultural elements”.