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***BOOK REVIEW**

Andy Blunden (2010): *An Interdisciplinary Theory of Activity*, Leiden, Boston: Brill

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A few words of explanation are in order for the fact that I appear here as a reviewer of Andy Blunden's *An Interdisciplinary Theory of Activity*. It will immediately be clear to any reader that I play more than a casual role in the author's thinking; readers of *Mind, Culture, and Activity* will recognize Andy as a part of its current editorial leadership and those who weather the deluge of text on XMCA discussions associated with that journal will recognize him as a frequent contributor and supporter of that stream of discourse which explores ideas associated with L.S. Vygotsky and activity theory. Without boring the reader with details of our scholarly and collegial interactions in recent years, I need to acknowledge that I am not a neutral party to the kind of project Andy discusses in this volume.

However, it is also relevant that I did not read the book until it arrived in its glossy hard cover several months ago and that Andy and I have quite different intellectual backgrounds. He is a philosopher who, in his words, pursues a "broadly pragmatic interpretation of Hegel's philosophy of Spirit, which utilizes Lev Vygotsky's Cultural Historical Activity Theory to appropriate a non-metaphysical conception of Subjectivity consistent with Hegel's conception of spirit as both Subject and Substance." I was trained as an experimental psychologist in the American tradition of mathematical learning theory. My formal training in philosophy focused on operationalism and logical positivism. Consequently, I am poorly read in the staples of the intellectual tradition that Andy seeks to trace from Goethe to contemporary cultural-historical theories of human nature that take "activity" to be a central concept.

It is also relevant that when Andy's book appeared, Morten Nissen and I had been corresponding about the overlapping interests of *Outlines* and the journal I participated in starting, *Mind, Culture, and Activity*. We thought it might be interesting in the spirit of

international dialogue, if we used our different responses to Andy's work as a common object for discussion. We agreed not to read each other's reviews before writing and to focus on whatever seemed personally most important to raise for discussion in an international context.

That said.....

What I have always found interesting about interacting with Andy is that he combines **four** characteristics:

1. He knows a great deal about the philosophical tradition that leads from Goethe to contemporary scholars who seek to develop cultural-historical lines of thinking.
2. I share his belief that the development of activity theory needs to go beyond psychology to include a number of other disciplines and I see this requirement as very difficult to fulfill, so I am always on the lookout for suggestions of how to proceed.
3. I learned a lot from his immanent critique of the scholars working in this tradition. His discussion of the concept of a "unit of analysis" among these thinkers has left me with a great deal to think about.
4. He is an activist in promoting the production and free dissemination of a wide variety of written and digitally recorded materials to make available for discussion the general set of ideas associated with his project of creating an interdisciplinary theory of culturally mediated human activity.

Whether or not scholars agree with all they read in this book, they will find a lot to be interested in. The book is divided into four sections: Section 1 traces core ideas such as "gestalt" and "ur-phänomenon" (or "germ cell"), and "unit of analysis" from Goethe to Vygotsky. The second is devoted to an explication of Vygotsky's thinking in light of its historical antecedents. The third focuses on activity theory; it includes various criticisms of Vygotsky's ideas and Andy's own critical analysis of the ideas of Leontiev, Engeström, and myself. The fourth lays out Andy's vision of an interdisciplinary approach to activity theory, beginning with a discussion of ethics and proceeding through Marx to an "emancipatory science" based on "collaborative projects." There would be no way for me to summarize the entire argument owing to lack of knowledge even more than lack of space. Others better educated in the original writings of Andy's key historical figures must judge for themselves (and, perhaps inform us of their reactions). Nor do I have the intellectual reach to include Gadamer's ideas about the substance of science, contemporary ethicists, critical theorists and more.

What I hope to accomplish is to make pertinent observations on a number of ideas about which I have some reasonable level of knowledge.

Since Andy leads with Goethe and the idea of Romantic Science, it's too obvious a topic not to take up.

I first encountered the idea of a romantic science when editing Alexander Luria's autobiography (Luria, 1979). It was through Luria that I came to be involved in cultural-historical activity theory, but I had never heard him speak of romantic science, until he used the term in the two case studies which he brings together in his concluding chapter.

Here, Luria's introduced me to *Faust* in a way that helped me to understand many threads of his own career: the struggle to reconcile idiographic and nomothetic sciences of human beings, to unite theory and practice as well as the descriptive and explanatory, all as necessary achievements to overcome the crisis in psychology.

Naturally, I was curious about Goethe. While I then read *about* him, except for *Faust* itself, I did not read him. I learned about his theory of color and thought which I assimilated to the history of American psychology (naturally!). I figure that he must be a very interesting guy to do both natural science and poetry. I did not understand Goethe to be a precursor of Vygotsky in any close theoretical sense because I did not properly understand Vygotsky's use of Gestalt theory; my introduction to the idea of a "germ cell" came later from reading Davydov.

This kind of truncated understanding is, I believe, characteristic of American psychologists who encounter Vygotsky and contemporary cultural-historical activity theory. Mea culpa of course. But I console myself with the thought that it was Goethe who pointed out that "People hear only what they understand"—misery loves company. Andy's exposition helps a great deal in linking up important foundational concepts that are, for many, free floating bits of potentially interesting ideas.

Andy writes that the idea of a romantic science is outdated and, drawing support from Jürgen Habermas, suggests "emancipatory science" as a continuation of the romantic science tradition. I'll return to this suggestion at the end of this essay, as Andy returns to it at the end of his book.

Another important theme that runs through the book is the assertion of a need for an *interdisciplinary concept* of activity as a condition of achieving a powerful theory of activity. Such an interdisciplinary concept is achieved, he writes, "when specialists in different disciplines or currents of science communicate with one another [by using] a shared language and conceptual framework." Andy comments that such a condition of interdisciplinarity is difficult to achieve because the medium of discourse between disciplines is everyday language and common sense while scientific concepts are generally limited to their meaning in specific theories which are in turn linked to specific disciplinary traditions and their subject matter. The result is often incoherence.

The need for, and difficulty of achieving, interdisciplinarity in Andy's sense of the term, has impressed me all of my professional career. Entering the cultural historical tradition against the background of a decade of cross-cultural work, my initial focus was on trying to reconcile the competing claims of anthropologists and psychologists about cultural variations in psychological processes, particularly claims about differing levels of intellectual development. It did not take long to learn that all sorts of words used in common by anthropologists and psychologists (mentality, culture, development, activity) do not share the same meanings when they cross disciplines. This caused all sorts of misunderstandings in my conversations with anthropologists and in my reading of the anthropological literature. In a sense, my work for some 15-20 years was devoted to trying to sort out the various misunderstandings involved in such interdisciplinary work. [For anyone so inclined, I strongly suggest actually engaging in a joint project (Andy's unit of analysis for an emancipatory science with anthropologists (and sociologists and linguists and). Be ready for a long term project along with its attendant satisfactions and frustrations.]

One especially relevant misunderstanding of the sort that interdisciplinary work can lead to involves the key term in this book, activity. As I am sure every reader of *Outlines* is aware, when the term, activity, appears in a lot of psychological discourse about human learning and development it is very often used in a common sense way, not as a foundational theoretical category. I interpret Vygotsky to be using the word in a common sense matter in most, if not all, of his uses of the word in, for example, *Myishlenie i rech* (variously translated into English as *Thought and Language* or *Thinking and Speech*).

I, like most everyone else I know, entered the field using the term in precisely this common sense way. However, I entered it in dialogue with anthropologists, not German philosophers or Russian psychologists (the term, “activity” did not come into vogue in Moscow until after my formative years of working on Vygotsky and Luria’s ideas). Consequently, I thought of activities when I sought to understand Liberian children’s difficulties in mastering elementary mathematics by seeking answers to questions like “Where and when do Kpelle children and adults use arithmetic in everyday life?” Such questions led us to look at “everyday activities” such as rice farming, building houses, measuring cloth, or selling fish at the market.

When I first encountered Leontiev’s classic article on “The problem of activity” (1974) I was very excited to read:

Human psychology is concerned with the activity of concrete individuals, which takes place either in a collective - i.e., jointly with other people - or in a situation in which the subject deals directly with the surrounding world of objects - e.g., at the potter's wheel or the writer's desk....

That sounded just right to me, an apparently clear link between Leontiev’s notion of how to ground psychological analysis in everyday activities – and the notion of activity as conceived of by anthropological colleagues and my common sense. But in fact, this linkage was an odd kind of misunderstanding. Leontiev, himself, did not study such activities. And when his students did (e.g. Vladimir Zinchenko) they did so only in the narrow confines of highly controlled motor control tasks where the constraints of their experimental situations closely matched those of the criterion socially productive activities (oops, that word again!)—in this case military tasks, such as flying a fighter plane, and shooting down the other guy before he shoots you down.

My way of interpreting “activity” had to be appalling to my Soviet colleagues. Not only had I failed to ground my understanding of activity in Marx, but my way of treating experiments as models of what people actually do a lot in their everyday lives led me to question the idea that non-literate people are incapable of theoretical thinking. To complicate matters, my colleagues and I created experimental situations that had no obvious Euro-American counterparts, making comparison for purposes of developmental ranking murky in a whole new way. The obvious conclusion for anyone who actually understood and closely followed Marx and Leontiev was that I was a soft-hearted, soft-headed liberal who refused to face the facts of cultural progress (this opinion can be encountered in the relevant Russian academic literature today). The alternative interpretation, that I was not interested in being a Russian or American cultural imperialist, did not seem to occur to anyone.

It remains an open question for me how to provide the “right definition” of activity. Theories have a way of masquerading as definitions. Drawing as I do on other traditions that can also be linked back at least to Hegel, such as American pragmatism, I am often

confronted with notions such as “situation” or “cultural practice” which clearly bear a resemblance to activity, but the nature of that clear resemblance is not itself clear. Think of the problems such misunderstandings might pose when I try to think about a concept such as the “social situation of development.” Is this Dewey’s “situation,” or is it the situation of any Ivan Ivanovich on the street.

Similar issues arise when we turn to another relevant concept often encountered in the discourse of cultural historical activity theories, context. Context enters into the discussion in at least two ways. Firstly, the choice to accept as one’s unit of analysis the term “activity” or “mediated action in context” is a major fraction line separating those who share an interest in Vygotsky but prefer the flag of “socio-cultural theory” to the flag of “cultural-historical activity theory.” Secondly, at the end of his discussion of my cross-cultural work, Andy sides with those among my critics in cross-cultural psychology who complain that our approach to cross-cultural comparisons focuses on the need to locate experiments with respect to local activities (context). As Andy puts it, “The context is an open-ended totality, so to include it in a unit of analysis is to abandon the whole idea of a unit of analysis” (p. 251).

Perhaps. Partly the matter depends upon how one conceives of “context.” If, as Yrjö Engeström has declared, “The activity is the context,” things do not seem so open. Or, if we think of context as “that which weaves together, which gives meaning to the whole” we might just be arriving at the idea of a gestalt! Partly, of course, the productivity of invoking context depends upon the uses to which one puts the term. Nowhere, to my knowledge, have I equated context with “the unit of analysis.” In the early work most often cited in these discussions, the invocation of context was part of a critique of experimental psychology’s inability to deal with such questions as: How do you know that the system of interactions you are studying (in an experiment) has any equivalents outside of itself? (The problem of ecological validity). Such discussions always involve recognition that it is the relation of “the task” to “its context” that is involved, not context as a reified rigidified “impinging environment.”

When, in the 1980’s, my understanding had developed sufficiently to entertain the notion of a unit of analysis, my work took me in two directions. First, I suggested that a unit called “the social sphere” (taken from British anthropology) could serve as a unit of analysis for joining together the psychological with the anthropological/societal levels of analysis. That idea retains its appeal for me. But it is difficult to apply beyond the small, face-to-face societies where it arose.

Secondly, I suggested “joint mediated activity” as a potential unit of analysis that highlights the points of productive overlap between the ideas of Vygotsky and Leontiev. This suggestion arose based upon research on the development of reading that was specifically designed using the ideas Vygotsky and Leontiev. If challenged to specify “the context” in this work, I would be tempted to respond, à la Engeström, that the relevant context for the participants is the activity (a concretely organized and implemented form of reading instruction). But immediately I would relent. My research has shown that what applies for “actions in context” applies for “activities in context”- these two analytic entities are mutually constituted.

When we began to study the entire system of activities that our initial reading curriculum was a part of, we found that the qualities of the activity that emerged from our pedagogical design work depended upon its “institutional context.” The actual embodiments of an

afterschool club, for example depended critically on the institutional setting in which it transpired. That institutional setting, in turn, provided variable resources to “the activity” depending upon the economic conditions in the town where the institution was based at a specific historical time. And when the historical times changed in a relevant way, the activity could disappear altogether, or multiply into many new settings.

Which brings me to Andy’s proposal of joint collaborative projects as a unit of analysis for a romantic/emancipatory science of human beings. As I wrote earlier, I like this idea. I have in fact used this unit of analysis without having a name for it in the 30 year long “5th Dimension project” which was conceived of as a form of joint collaboration in a common project among institutionally and disciplinarily distinct participants. (Andy briefly discusses this work right before he launches into a discussion of “what is a context?”)

In the spirit of this discussion I will raise two questions about Andy’s proposal, one theoretical, the other practical. Firstly, while I understand the reasons for adding collaborative to the notion of joint activity, I do not want to give the impression that in general collaboration is a “good thing.” One person’s collaboration can be another person’s treason. Moreover, we do not want to lose sight of the fact that conflict is constitutive of all activity. The qualities of the “jointness in “joint activity” certainly matter, but there can be joint activity with only co-operation; even a fist fight requires some degree of co-operation(s). Why restrict matters in this way? It puts us at risk of not taking a critical stance toward our own ideas, in theory and in practice.

On the practical side, there are enormous difficulties facing anyone who wishes to engage in a joint collaborative project. First of all, the fact that projects often span long periods of time, means that the participants have both to want to, and be permitted to, engage with each other and the other participants of the project. Obtaining financial support for such an undertaking occurs only in rare circumstances. Secondly, at least in my experience, the burdens of mounting a methodologically adequate research project such as we have done with after-school activities and others have done in a variety of activity settings, are very difficult to combine with the simultaneous documentation and analysis of the development of the project. Without detailed documentation and critical analysis, what is the point of the project in so far as it is a project that seeks to develop theory along with practice? And without both documentation and time to analyze and write about the results for academic consumption, the researchers will lose their jobs.

These issues really deserve further, sustained, attention by CHAT scholars who choose joint collaborative projects as their units of analysis for understanding human life. Perhaps such collaborations can arise from this exchange of views.

Those are my reflections, New Year’s Eve, 2011. It is a great thrill to me, even now, when I think back upon the first time I read about pulling in the schoolmen to help you understand matters, and the consequences of their efforts:

And so philosophers step in
To weave a proof that things begin,
Past question, with an origin.
With first and second well rehearsed,
Our third and fourth can be deduced.
And if no second were or first,
No third or fourth could be produced.
As weavers though, they don't amount to much.

To docket living things past any doubt
You cancel first the living spirit out;
The parts lie in the hollow of your hand,
You only lack the living link you banned.
(Goethe, 1988, p.95)

Thanks to Andy for writing the book. It provides a context for us weavers! And thanks to Morten for inviting this commentary.

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