

Activity as Project: The Case of Asbestos

Talk for ISCAR Congress, Sydney October 2014, by Andy Blunden

This paper picks up on Vasily Davydov's comments for the ISCAR Congress in 1998 that "the problem of activity and the concept of activity are *interdisciplinary* by nature," and "the issue of activity is not necessarily connected with psychology as a profession... Things just turned out this way."

My interest is in social theory. After all, the cultural and historical environment into which you are raised will be the major determinant of your psychology, so a social theory which is linked to a sound theory of psychology has as much merit as a psychology which links up to a sound, critical social theory.

In the short time allowed I just want to point to some grave defects in Leontyev's version of Activity Theory which prevent it from ever being taken seriously as a *social* theory. I will make no comment on Engeström's version of Activity Theory. I will use as an example, the asbestos industry, which was finally eliminated in Australia in 2003.

Let's begin with Activity Theory's dualism of subjective or personal sense, and objective, societal motives.

How does Activity Theory view the asbestos worker? It is said that the worker *understands* the need for asbestos, which is objective, but the *personal sense* of asbestos, which provides the *motive* for his actions, is the wage he earns.

This is so far from the reality of the case.

Far from there being any need which is met by asbestos and provides an objective motive for its production, it is now universally acknowledged that asbestos kills people. It will continue to be a leading cause of death for decades even though it was banned over a decade ago. So there was nothing objective about the motive for asbestos production. It was a fiction created by the asbestos companies.

What sense did asbestos have for the workers? Up until quite recent times, all the workers involved in its production really believed in the benefits of the miracle fibre and dismissed as scaremongering suggestions that it was damaging their health. It is not even the case that they took this work because it was the only alternative to unemployment. Only a minority of asbestos workers would ever have had difficulty finding another job. And the same is true of the people who lived in the company towns where asbestos was produced, who used asbestos dust to make sandpits for their children to play in. Asbestos workers and their communities *believed in* asbestos.

The owners on the other hand, took defensive action against possible claims for compensation as long ago as the 1930s, because the scientific evidence showed that asbestos kills people.

So, the personal sense of asbestos for the workers was *not* their wage, but rather the concept of a miracle fibre, a fiction promulgated by their bosses.

But there *was* an *alternative concept* of asbestos, as a deadly carcinogen, a concept known since Roman times, but established as an incontrovertible scientific fact 50 years ago by medical science. How is it then that medical science was mobilised by the asbestos companies to *cover up* the dangers of asbestos and mislead campaigns to make workplaces safe?

The bosses' real project – the accumulation of capital – made it possible for them to buy off enough medical scientists and all the governmental regulating authorities to obscure the truth and keep the concept of asbestos as a poison out of the public domain. Even though asbestos production was never particularly profitable and companies like James Hardy continue to amass billions without producing any asbestos.

Now it is said that the personal sense of science for scientific workers is the pay and prestige they get from producing papers which meet with the approval of the academy. That theory worked fairly well for the asbestos companies up to a point. But how do we explain that in the end, asbestos was exposed? If all the scientists and all the regulators and all the union reps. and all the journalists were motivated only by monetary and prestige rewards, and if the workers believed in the safety of the product they made, if all this activity was subsumed under the accumulation of capital in the collaborative project of asbestos production, how was it possible that this was all changed?

And that's the bit which is really *interesting*, isn't it?

An activity was launched – the campaign to ban asbestos. This project was formed by an alliance between initially a few individuals within several existing projects which had hitherto been co-opted by the asbestos companies – a few individual scientists, Dr. Selikoff in New York in particular, a few unionists, particularly a group in the AMWU, a couple of lawyers engaged in litigating for compensation and some of their clients, and a journalist. The scientists could gather the basic science which could help the lawyers win compensation cases, and these cases provided concrete evidence which journalists could put into the public domain and union officials could take directly to the people who really needed to know, those who were risking their lives working with asbestos. These were individuals whose character and circumstances allowed them to begin to realise a different concept of asbestos, who were prepared to go against social norms and *realise* that concept by bringing their projects together in an *alliance*.

After a long, hard struggle the anti-asbestos project defeated the capitalist project.

A new concept of asbestos, an air-borne carcinogen for which there was no industrial need, displaced the former concept of asbestos, the miracle fibre which was needed for brake pads, insulation and so on. As a result of grasping this new concept, asbestos workers changed their perception of their work, their union and their bosses. As a consequence, Parliament was forced to ban production and importation of asbestos.

By returning to some of *Vygotsky's* ideas, Activity Theory can understand this process by using project as the unit of analysis, and seeing activities as projects whose object is a concept.

Projects are activities, but projects are not functional components of a stable political-economic formation. The whole idea of a project is teleology! an intentional effort to *change* the world, even though, if they last long enough, they get institutionalised. To see the world as made up of projects, each at one or another stage in its life-cycle, is to see the world as *a work in progress*, as compared to seeing the world as made up of various activities each with an objective motive meeting a given societal need.

The object of a project is objective in the sense that each of the participants is motivated to realise the aim of the project in some way or another, in *the material world*, not in their imagination. But what is realised by a project is never the same as what was conceived by any of the participants at the outset. But eventually, there it is: the outcome of all your work, before our eyes. Although this is different from what you

expected, we are not dealing with the relation between subjective motive and objective outcomes. And nor is it a question of individual versus social motives. It is the process of *realisation*, or formation, *of a concept*.

The more difficult question is this: what is the relation between each individual action motivated by the object of a project and the object-concept of the project itself, that is, the relation between any action, any meaningful word, and the concept which motivates it. Each is an action realising, or signifying, the concept in specific conditions. The concept exists *only* in and through all the individual actions realised in a project *unified by some symbolic* and possibly useful *representation* or body. The relation between the individual action and the object-concept is in fact *the project itself*, the activity. It is not a dualism but a three-sided relation: universal object, individual actions, particular project.

If someone's motive for participating in an activity is not the realisation of the object of *that* activity, that is not because they have an undisclosed *personal* sense of the activity, but because their actions are also furthering some *other* project, such as the raising of a family, the accumulation of capital. People's actions are *always* realising one, or several allied projects, and it is wrong to take these other projects as 'personal' and somehow less real than or secondary to what *you* take to be the object.

What this means is that we can mobilise all of Vygotsky's work on concepts and word meaning, and all of Hegel's Logic, to solve problems like understanding how it was that asbestos was a miracle fibre one day and a dangerous carcinogen the next. Why workers did not believe the newspapers or their union reps who were telling them about the danger of asbestos one day, and helping them get it banned the next, and how an industry can be subsumed under capital, whether or not it is socially useful. It helps us understand how executives who knew the dangers of asbestos exposed to mesothelioma not only the public but their own families. It also allows us to understand how sometimes one person can, not just re-arrange the deck chairs, but change the world. It means that we can take a critical attitude to social formations and put that criticism at the heart of our work as researchers, educators and activists.

But it means above all that we must *desist* from taking the object of an activity to be some unproblematic, objective societal need, and understand that the object of any activity is a *concept*, a part of *some system* of concepts, and which is grasped in the same way it is realised and manifested, through participation in activities. There is not a world of "objective, nonpsychological meanings" out there, only meanings attached to artefacts by people engaged in projects.

Vygotsky has given us an outline, in "Thinking and Speech," for how concepts develop, and these same ideas inform us about how adults grasp and form true concepts, and consequently can change society. A version of Activity Theory based on Vygotsky, and using project as a unit of analysis of social life, can help us do that.

This approach is demonstrated in more than a dozen different case studies, including the case of asbestos, in the book "Collaborative Projects. An Interdisciplinary Study."