

Postscript to “The Unit of Analysis and Germ Cell”  
**A note on reification and units of analysis**

**Marx’s *Capital*.**

Marx says (1881) “What I start out from is the simplest social form in the which the labour product is presented in contemporary society, and this is ‘the commodity’,” and in the opening lines of *Capital* (1867) he says: “The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as ‘an immense accumulation of commodities.’” So he clearly says that he believes that values takes the form of *things* in bourgeois society and this is his starting point.

And yet we have good reason to believe that Marx wanted a ‘philosophy of praxis’. In *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), he says in a dozen different ways: “All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.” So why in *Capital* does he insist on the ultimate reality being *things* rather than practices? Why does he start from the commodity rather than the exchange of commodities?

I see three reasons.

Firstly, how can a writer observe and measure human activity en masse other than through observation of the products which are the objects and means of their activity? Observing a single individual is a different matter – we can observe the physical movement of hands and muscles, the heart rate, and so forth.

Secondly, it is a feature of bourgeois society that wealth is conceived of as ‘an immense accumulation of commodities’, and indeed this is essential to the practice of *accumulating* wealth. Even if you grant that a service can be a commodity and therefore a form of value, the buyer can only possess the product once the service has been enjoyed, not the service as such. When a builder builds a house for you, you look to owning the house, not the builder’s action of building the house, whether your object is that of a home-maker or a real estate speculator.

So the *reification* of value into material products at some point is essential to the practice of accumulating value. In the further development of capitalism wealth comes to be rendered in the form of writing in ledgers (even electronic ledgers), but the meaning of these symbolic forms of value lies in their standing for things, and failing that, the symbolic wealth evaporates, just as possession is not property unless legally legitimised.

The third reason is that Marx put forward his theory in opposition to the idea of exchange of commodities being cast as an exchange of *services*. Such a conception of commerce renders the activity of the wage worker as a service to the employer, while the provision of means of production is cast as a service on the part of the employer, conflating the exploitation of wage labour with purchase of personal services for immediate consumption. Such a conception mystifies the source of surplus value which, according to Marx, lies in the appropriation of unpaid labour arising from the difference between the socially necessary cost of production of labour power and the value of the product of labour. In Marx’s conception, the capitalist *directs and uses* the ‘labour power’ of the worker to add value to products and thereby acquires a product worth more than the sum of the value of its components. Marx saw services, on the other hand, as objects of personal consumption. However he does allow that “a schoolmaster who is engaged as a wage labourer in... a knowledge-mongering institution, is a productive worker” (1867, ch.2) and does produce surplus value.

Thus Marx's insistence that a service provision cannot be productive of surplus value is not held consistently. It is just that he takes the production of tangible commodities as the archetypal form, the *germ cell*, of wage labour.

In the 150 years since *Capital* was published, it has become clear that services can be bought and sold on the market for the purpose of accumulation of surplus value in any branch of industry. Indeed, industries that are exclusively reliant on the production of stuff are in general less successful in appropriating surplus value than service industries. It remains the case that wealth cannot be accumulated but only consumed in the form of services. Generally speaking wealth is accumulated in symbolic commodities, not piles of stuff, so there is little point in insisting on the priority of production of stuff as opposed to services.

On closer examination, Marx's units of analysis of bourgeois society are the practices of (1) selling labour in order to buy the means of life (C—M—C') and (2) buying in order to sell at a profit (M—C—M') – both *forms of practice*. However, the actions in question are *artefact-mediated* actions, that is, essentially, the practices in question necessarily entail actions *with* artefacts. In the case of services, the artefacts in question are human bodies and human energy.

So, my thesis is this. The reification of actions in the form of commodities which can be accumulated as wealth is a feature of any society based on the accumulation of wealth, and the use and production of things is an essential moment in the perception of labour activity. However, even though Marx does not say so, the units of analysis he uses in *Capital* are forms of practice, (C—M—C') and (M—C—M').

See my *Goethe, Hegel and Marx* (2016) for more on this.

## Vygotsky's *Thinking and Speech*

It is generally agreed that Vygotsky used artefact-mediated actions as a unit of analysis across a range of studies. This claim is reiterated in significant works by A. N. Leontyev and Y. Engeström, and is taken to be the foundation of Activity Theory. In the first chapter of *Thinking and Speech*, Vygotsky elaborated the idea of 'unit of analysis', but only in connection with 'word meaning', and explicitly had speech and not writing in mind. In *The Instrumental Method in Psychology* (1930) he distinguished between 'technical tools' (used for acting on Nature) and 'psychological tools' (used for acting on the Mind).

So Vygotsky identified three different kinds of artefact-mediated action:

- the spoken word (by 'word' is meant a sign for a concept),
- the psychological tool (sign, written word, map, diagram,...) and
- the technical tool (the hand is the archetypal technical tool).

Three types of artefact-mediated action, corresponding to these three types of artefact, have developed in the biological and cultural evolution of the human species:

- speech evolved in close connection with labour (i.e., tool-use) in the early evolution of the species, and probably evolved out of manual sign-use,
- (technical) tools developed in the course of evolution of the species and continued to develop culturally, but Vygotsky believed that tool-use *led* speech development in human evolution,
- signs (i.e., psychological tools) developed as an outgrowth of the development of technical tools, although expanding the communicative function formerly belonging to spoken words and gestures. (See Blunden 2019)

*Formally* speaking, speech is a sub-category of the use of psychological tools, the word a type of sign, but the two are markedly distinct *genetically*, in the evolution of the human species and in the development of the human individual. All children spontaneously master the form of speech which they find in their environment, but children have to be deliberately instructed in reading and writing, and historically many communities have been illiterate, although all human communities use tools of one kind or another. Writing is an invention of bureaucratic, class societies, although less developed forms of sign-use (marking of land, cave painting, ...) are ancient.

Tool-use and sign-use are closely interlinked in the development of human culture. In Vygotsky's aphorism: "in the beginning was the *tool*, but ... in the *beginning* was the tool." This developmental, genetic distinction between tool, word and sign is of primary significance for Vygotsky, rather than their all being categorised as artefact-mediated activity.

Words and tools play distinct, albeit interconnected, roles in human development. Vygotsky resisted the subsumption of words as a subset of artefacts, implicitly subordinate to tools, resisting the theoretical subordination of communicative action to the labour process. In this he was taking a stand against the Soviet orthodoxy in Marxist theory (See *The Problem of the Environment. A Defence of Vygotsky*, Blunden 2014). In the analysis of social history, technical tool development (the development of the means of production) leads the development of communicative action (the superstructure, cultural activity), but this is not the case at the *individual* level, in Psychology. Tool use certainly leads the development of practical intelligence but not the intellect properly so called. Access to technical tools may widen the field of a person's activity, and thereby promote learning, but it is only thanks to the use of signs, mainly words, that that wider field of experience may be productive of cognitive development. You may need a car to get to school, but you will not learn if don't listen to what is said at school.

My point is this: word meaning, psychological tool-use and technical tool-use are three *distinct* lines of artefact-mediated action.

As a unit of analysis, "word meaning" is not itself an artefact, such as an entry in the dictionary, far less an entry in some neural look-up table; it is an *action* in which the artefact being use is a spoken word. The spoken word is the artefact. "Meaning" is the gerund of the transitive verb "to mean," as in doing what you meant to do with a word. By "word" is meant the sign for a concept, be it a phrase or a single word. No other interpretation of the term is possible.

In Chapter 5 of *Thinking and Speech*, when Vygotsky discusses the experiments in which children constructed groups of blocks by referring to the signs written on the underside of the blocks, they were engaged in performing a concept, reified in the group of blocks gathered together by the sign-mediated actions of the child. Each action is a sign-mediated action, of generically the same kind of action as using a spoken word. All the actions taken together are an activity, a concept characterised by the criteria implicit in the mode of grouping blocks, and *reified* in the blocks so grouped.

Now, "meaning" *also* means that reified artefact, the relevant entry in a dictionary. But not only dictionaries – the entire mass of cultural artefacts in a language community constitute a reification of the meaning of the users of words (and signs) and constitutes a kind of 'living dictionary'. Words 'carry' a meaning given to the word by the entire cultural history of the community. It is well-known that misunderstandings can arise when someone hears a word and ascribes a meaning to the speech-act which can *differ* from the meaning of the speaker. So it is not the actual meaning (intent) of the action which *has effect* but the meaning implicit in the

word (as spoken in its context, with the given accent, emphasis, etc.). Ultimately, it is the culturally determined meaning of the word, its use-value, so to speak, which is materially active in the action, whatever the speaker's intention.

Vygotsky points out that word meaning is the unity of sound and meaning, of speech and thinking, of affective and intellectual processes, of generalization and social interaction, of thinking and communication, of generalization and social interaction. We must add also a unity of the speaker's intention and the hearer's reception. A unit of analysis is a *concrete concept*, and as such, a concentration of diverse determinations, the contradictions between which unfold in the manifold phenomena under consideration.

## Product or Process?

This the same quandary we faced in reading Marx's *Capital*: Marx was analyzing forms of artefact-mediated actions, viz., exchange of commodities, but he referred to these actions in terms of their products – commodities. And rightly so, because it is only thanks to the reification of these activities in the form of things that accumulation of wealth is possible. And accumulation of capital is, after all, what is driving the whole process.

Further, it is only possible to perceive the *object* of the various activities (practices) in which people in a social formation are engaged by looking at the products of that activity and to perceive the *means* utilised in the various activities by looking at the material means of production available to the society. In broad overview, what other way is there of grasping the various activities going on other than by their object and their means?

Equally, if we wish to analyse the cultural life and communicative activity of a community, then we will have to look at the reified products of that cultural activity – the books and movies, clothing and symbols, the various records and regulations, the reified products of all kinds of sign-use: above all the *language*.

Material conditions (C) determine (limit, afford) activities (A). Activities reproduce or change material conditions. So if we aim to understand the reproduction of a social formation we begin with the existing material conditions inherited from the past, and see how activity is determined by these conditions and are thereby reproduced:  $C \rightarrow A \rightarrow C'$ . Alternatively, if the object is to change how we live,  $A \rightarrow C' \rightarrow A'$  represents how the production of new material conditions enables transformed activity. It is the latter process that most concerns me at the moment.

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