SUMMARY

Activity theory has been formulated and developed around 1930s by A. N. Leontiev και S. L. Rubinshtein, as an attempt to override the contradictions and limitations of the major currents in psychology during the first decades of the 20th century (behaviorism, introspective psychology, psychoanalysis) on the basis of marxist philosophy and Lev Vygotsky’s cultural-historical psychology. Leontiev and Rubinshtein have been the founders of the two major versions of the theoretical approaches that placed the category of activity at the core of psychological analysis. Those two versions share some common basic theoretical positions, however they are characterized by important differentiations as well. In the following paper we will refer to the basic methodological characteristics of A. N. Leontiev’s Activity Theory, focusing especially on its limitations and internal contradictions. Our goal is to trace the possibility of dialectical overriding of activity theory in the context of a more developed theoretical and methodological framework, based on the achievements of V. A. Vazioulin’s “Logic of History” approach.

THE APPEARANCE OF LEONTIEV’ S ACTIVITY THEORY

A. N. Leontiev developed his theoretical approach on the basis of L. S.
Vygotsky’s cultural-historical psychology, but, at the same time, he was differentiated from (his teacher and colleague) Vygotsky on one of the most basic principles of the latter’s approach, i.e. on the process of internalization. More concretely, Vygotsky, in his theoretical approach, underlined the significance of social influences on the ontogenetic development of human psychism, elaborating the concept of internalization as the specific mechanism that relates the social environment with the psychological activity of the developing subject. According to the “genetic law of cultural development”, formulated by Vygotsky, any function in the child’s cultural development appears on two levels: first it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. This transition from the social to the psychological plane constitutes the process of internalization (Haenen, 1993, p. 61).

According to Vygotsky’s approach, it is speech (especially “word meaning” and concepts) that functions as the most important means for the transmission of social, cultural experience from adults to child. Therefore, Vygotsky chose the category of word meaning as a unit for the analysis of consciousness (Haenen, 1993, p. 65). Consequently, he tended to adopt French sociological school’s conception of internalization (expressed in psychology by J. Piaget), as the process of transmission of ideal-cultural elements to a, primarily non-social, biological consciousness. In this conception, the transformation of interpsychological to intrapsychological resulted directly from the sphere of human communication (Kouvelas, 2007, p. 159; Dafermos, 2002, p. 252). This position had been criticised by Vygotsky’s partners (like Leontiev and Galperin) as well as other soviet psychologists, like Rubinshtein. Leontiev criticised Vygotsky’s view that the development of word meaning is the result of social interaction, as, in this case, human is conceived not as a social, but as a communicative being. In the context of this, substantially idealistic, approach, consciousness is treated as a result of absolutely internal, ideal processes, while the role of external, practical activity on its formation is completely underestimated (Dafermos, 2002, p. 252).

We could argue that activity theory has been elaborated on the basis of the main theoretical and methodological positions of Vygotsky’s cultural-historical psychology, but, at the same time, it was founded on Leontiev’s criticism on Vygotsky’s conception of the process of
internalization. In the context of activity theory, Leontiev elaborated a more developed and concrete, but also differentiated, understanding of internalization. Kharkov school members (i.e. Leontiev, Galperin, Zaporozhets, Zinchenko and others) considered activity (as Galperin put it) as a means of bringing psychology “out of the close world of consciousness” (Haenen, 1993, p. 77). A new conception of internalization process had been developed: it is no more the social that transforms to psychic, but it is external, practical activity, developing under social influences, that is internalized and transforms into psychic activity.

Activity theory modified the way psychological phenomena were approached: they were no more considered as autonomous and self-existent, and their scientific explanation presupposed the analysis of the relation between the subject and the surrounding social environment, i.e. primarily the analysis of the subject’s practical, material activity. According to Leontiev, through the category of activity, we can override the dichotomy between external world and internal, psychic phenomena, while a new problem is posed, that of the study of the relation, the connection and the mutual transition between external practical and internal activity (Leontiev, u.c., p. 111-112). According to Rubinshtein, the conception of human consciousness’s determination by external, practical activity can lead to the overcoming of the opposition between social and individual, internal and external, while it is the foundation for the scientific study of human psychism (Rubinshtein, 1987, p. 117-119).

CRITICISM, LIMITATIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS OF LEONTIEV’ S ACTIVITY THEORY

The approach of consciousness in the context of Leontiev’s activity theory has substantiated the determinant role of an organism’s practical, external activity on the type of reflection of reality that characterises it. In the case of human, this theoretical conception has been expressed through the principle of the unity of activity and consciousness. This principle was an attempt to override the limitations of both introspective psychology, that studied consciousness as something primary and immediately given and excluded activity from the psychological study, and behaviourism, that focused only in external behaviour and ignored internal psychic processes as a subject matter for psychology (Rubinshtein, 1987, p. 112-113). In the context of
activity, there has been an attempt to create a whole system of psychological concepts and categories, a system sufficient to approach not only discrete psychological functions (such as perception, memory, speech, thought) but also human psychism as a whole. This led to the analysis of the internal structure of activity and human psychism, as well as to the systematic study of their phylogenesis and ontogenesis.

As, activity theory based, investigations, were developed, limitations of experimental approaches have arisen, while, at the same time, the theoretical and methodological core of activity theory had been criticised. In general, activity theory can be criticised from a marxist point of view, as well as from the aspect of other philosophical currents (phenomenology, positivism, postmodern) (Lektorskii, 2004, p. 21-27).

In the following paragraphs we will refer systematically to the criticism to Leontiev’s theory that was articulated by philosophers and psychologists that can be categorised in the marxist tradition. The presentation of the limitations and contradictions of Leontiev’s activity theory that follows is based on an analytical model, where the different characteristics are mentioned side-by-side, as relatively independent, while the internal relations between each other are partly ignored. This method of presentation, despite the fact that it absolutises the limitations of the whole theoretical system, is the most suitable for systematically locating its weak points and contradictions, as a precondition for any attempt to override them.

The relation between internal and external activity

Leontiev’s activity theory received criticism by many psychologists because of the way the relation between external, practical and internal, psychic activity is conceived. According to Leontiev the process of internalization can be described as the transformation of external activity to internal, psychic activity. On this point there was a clear difference with Rubinstein’s approach. According to the latter, in the context of Leontiev’s theoretical system the dependence of internal activity on external activity is overstressed, while the inner structure and content of psychic activity itself is not revealed (Dafermos, 2002, p. 200). As far as the relation between internal and external activity is concerned, while in Leontiev’s approach external causes determine the psychic development of the children directly, Rubinshtein puts emphasis on the fact that external causes act only through internal conditions, “the external acts only through the internal” (Brushlinskii,
At the same period, other Soviet psychologists, like Menchinskaia, criticised Leontiev’s supporters and colleagues for reduction of internal, mental activity to external, practical activity, as their notion of internal activity is solely concerned with the content and structure of external activity (Haenen, 1993, p. 76). According to Zinchenko, in the psychological theory of activity consciousness turned out to be no more than a “copy” of activity, and this fact reveals our ignorance about consciousness itself (Zinchenko, 2004, p. 40). Although Leontiev introduced the category of activity in his psychological system in order to tackle the opposition between external and internal that characterises all psychological approaches based on Cartesian philosophical tradition, according to Leontiev’s colleague, Galperin, this goal was not achieved as “the external remained external and the internal remained internal” (Zinchenko, 2004, p. 33). Conclusively we could argue that, in Leontiev’s approach, it is partly ignored that human activity is characterised by continuous, successive internalizations and externalizations, by mutual transitions from the external to the internal and vice-versa, while the emphasis is put on the process of internalization only.

The underestimation of the active role of the subject of activity

A basic feature of Leontiev’s activity theory is the underestimation of the active role of the subject of activity. This feature was revealed especially in the experimental researches of Leontiev and his partners (such as Galperin), concerning matters of pedagogical psychology and more generally matters of ontogenetic development of human psychism. As Rubinshtein mentioned, in Leontiev’s perception of education, learning process is reduced to the assimilation of fixed knowledge, of predetermined products and results of the process of cognition. Kalmykova, while referring to Galperin’s approach about learning, criticised his perception of the learner as a passive recipient of the curriculum content, which turned the learning process to an “one-way transmission” (Haenen, 1993, p. 138). This underestimation of the active, creative role of the subject of activity, not only in the learning process, but more generally in the whole system of activity theory, has been mentioned by other researchers as well (Blunden, 2009). According to Zinchenko, in the context of activity theory, the participants in an activity are considered as faceless subjects or functionaries who do not have their own I but are organs of the activity.
From here it is but one step to subjectless activity (Zinchenko, 2004, p. 63).

Of course Leontiev does not in any case deny the role of the subject in the determination of the whole system of activity. It is not accidental that his system of analysis about the structure of activity includes concepts such as the motive or the personal sense which have a clearly subjective meaning, namely they demonstrate the one-sided, subjective refraction of the surrounding world by the subject. However the main goal of Leontiev’s analysis, is the eduction of the whole system of psychic processes from the practical activity of human subjects (Dafermos, 2002, p. 262). This implies that Leontiev’s approach emphasizes on the determination of the internal, mental activity by the external, practical activity, without referring systematically to the reverse influence of mental to practical activity, that is to the way the developing psychic life of the subject, determines the type and the content of practical, external activity this subject will be involved in. As a result, in many cases the process of determination of external activity by the internal rests outside Leontiev’s investigation field, while it is considered as something given. As Leontiev himself admitted “The subjective selection of the goal (i.e., the conscious perception of the most immediate result to be attained if the subject is to perform the activity that will satisfy the motive) is a special process that is almost completely uninvestigated. Under laboratory conditions or in pedagogical experiments, we always give the subject a "prepared" goal; therefore, the process of goal formation usually escapes the investigator's attention” (Leontiev, 1979, p. 62). However this underestimation of the active role of the subject should not be attributed only to the limitations of the experimental process, but results lawfully from the basic conceptual framework of activity theory, especially from the way the relation between internal and external activity is considered. According to Brushlinskii if psychism is considered to be organised on the basis of external activity, i.e. if the formula “from (only) the external to the internal” is adopted, then the sources of the individual’s activeness are wholly outside of him from the beginning. In this approach we have only one-sided, unidirectional movement from society to the individual. Hence the latter’s passivity: he is merely an object of social influences and a product of the development of society, and not a subject at all (Lazarev, 2004, p. 44).

This conception of the individual as a passive object of social influences and not as an active subject, is related with the social reality
in USSR and the goals that were posed and pursued by psychology as a social science after October revolution. One of the basic aims, that influenced the theoretical and experimental research of many soviet psychologists, during the first decades after the revolution, was the elaboration of the scientific foundations of psychology, in order to render possible, through the appropriate educational and other social interventions, the creation of the new man of socialist society, as well as the optimum organisation and rationalisation of the production of the socialist state and the creation of better labour conditions (Petrovsky, 1990, p. 219-220). In the context of these ambitious goals it was inevitable to consider human subjects not from the point of view of their activeness, independence and of their self-inclusive tensions of personal development, but as objects developing only under the external influence of society according to specific goals (Rozin, 2004, p. 79). As a result there were many cases where the interaction between individuals (for example during the education process or inside the division of labour for the organisation of production) was conceived as an activity for the creation of objects according to an initial aim (Lektorskii, 2004, p. 22). Of great significance for the development of such a conception, was the fact that the great majority of the population, especially of the peasants, in USSR was characterized by an extremely low level of psychological development (illiteracy, very low living standard). As a consequence the psychological and cultural development of these people presupposed the decisive role of external, conscious interventions, while the possibilities for spontaneous development were minimized.

**The non-developing, non-historical approach of activity**

Some researchers criticized the fact that activity is not defined by Leontiev as a developing phenomenon. According to Lazarev, no distinction is drawn between its simplest forms and the forms that correspond to higher levels of development (Lazarev, 2004, p. 40). Although in the analysis of ontogenesis the transition from one main activity to another is described (according to the general model play-education-labour), what is absent is the distinction between the simplest and the most developed forms of activity inside each separate category. This fact is shown in clarity in the case of labour, as, according to Leontiev’s model, there is no distinction between more and less developed forms of labour, and consequently there can be no
differentiations between the psychic development of different subjects. As a result every adult who works, regardless of the type of his labour activity, is considered to be on the same level of psychic development. According to Leontiev the main dimension of human personality is the concrete hierarchy of the motives of the subject’s activities. Consequently a personality should be considered developed if its main motive-goal, does not isolate the subject, but on the contrary associates substantially his life, with the lives of other people, even with the prospects of human society as a whole. From this point of view a subject is a developed personality when he becomes, according to Gorky’s phrase, “the man of mankind” (Leontiev, u.c., p. 228). However in this analysis it seems that the hierarchy between the subject’s different motives is not related (or is only externally related) with the content of his labour activity, with the characteristics of the labour process. In other words, subject’s motive hierarchy is considered as independent not only concerning the object of labour activity, but also other labour’s internal characteristics such as its creative, developing or, on the contrary, monotonous, indifferent or even destroying character for the subject. In this theoretical framework, the question of the type of labour activity that is related with the appearance of developed personalities is not even posed (and of course it is not answered).

The logical and historical presuppositions for the transition to human activity

The logical reconstruction of the categories of activity theory, as well as the historical approach of its subject matter (whether it is activity, or psychism or personality) have as their starting point of analysis the category of human activity. From the point of both the logical and historical analysis of the subject matter, we should mention that before reaching the category (logically) or the appearance (historically) of human activity, it is necessary to examine which are its necessary and sufficient preconditions. As Ivanov mentions, human activity, that appears as something given in the psychological analysis, already comprises an entire complex of fundamental problems of philosophical analysis, and consequently the psychological investigation of activity falls into contradiction when the question of its sources is posed (Lazarev, 2004, p. 38). Other researchers as well posed the question of the presuppositions, the motives, the necessity and the sources of human activity (Hakkarainen, 2004, p. 5; Haenen, 1993, p. 78;
The question of the origin and the presuppositions of human activity is sharply posed if we bear in mind that a necessary condition of any human activity is the existence of a subject that is capable of performing it, i.e. of a subject with a more or less developed psychic life. As a result, in the context of this theoretical analysis a vicious circle arises: in order to derive human psychism from activity it is necessary to assume that its subject already has some psychic properties, for, otherwise, there is no activity. In order to resolve this contradiction one is compelled to presuppose (as Rubinshtein did) the existence of preactivity forms of human psychism, and then activity ceases to be the sole basis of human subjectivity (Lazarev, 2004, p. 38). As a result human activity is no longer the starting point of the psychological analysis.

This problem arises not only from the logical reconstruction of the system of psychological categories, but also from the experimental data of human psychism’s ontogenesis, as well from the historical study of human society evolution. As far as human ontogenesis is concerned, contemporary research in Developmental Psychology (Kugiumtzakis, 2008), substantiates the theoretical conception that human psychism appears and begins to develop before the birth of the subject, as a result of the interaction between genetic predispositions and external stimuli, while on the same time the psychic development of the child presupposes and is accompanied by a corresponding biological analysis. This means that human activity does not precede but follows subject’s psychic development, at least as far as the primary stages of ontogenesis (intrauterine and fetal period) are concerned. This fact questions the applicability of activity theory model, at least on these stages of psychological development, as the principle of internalization cannot be applied in the case of intrauterine psychic development, where there is no external activity to be internalized. If the significance of biological maturation, and the role of specific biological features (such as idiosyncrasy, dispositions and type of the nervous system) is also taken into account, we can conclude that the general direction of psychic development in ontogenesis is not from (only) the external to the internal, but always one of constant interaction between the external and the internal (Brushlinskii, 2004, p. 73-74). Similar conclusions are drawn by the study of the structure and the historical evolution of human society: in this case, interaction between individuals as biological organisms, and interaction with the environment in the form of
consumption, as satisfaction of basic human needs, is considered to be the starting point of logical and historical analysis of society as an organic whole, while human labour activity develops for the satisfaction of these needs, when the latter is not possible through the simple crop of ready products of nature (Vazioulin, 2004, p. 108, 138). Consequently, in the case of human society phylogenesis as well, the appearance of human activity does not comprise the primary phenomenon, but activity arises on the basis of specific necessary conditions.

**Activity theory’s sociologism**

The lack of systematic investigation of human activity presuppositions in the logical and historical (phylogenetic and ontogenetic) analysis of human psychism, leads to the sociologism that characterizes activity theory. The analysis has as its starting point human activity, which is conceived as primarily social, with characteristics like the mediation by (material and ideal) products of human culture and its collective-intersubjective character. Thus, the emphasis is put on the role of internalization of this activity in the ontogenetic development of the subject. The assimilation of socially developed activity by the child is considered to be the main (or even the sole) factor of human ontogenesis, while the role of biological determinants in this process, is systematically underestimated. As far as the problem of the relation between the social and the biological in human ontogenesis is concerned, Leontiev’s approach to the problem of the relation between human needs and activity is of great importance. In fact, Leontiev’s references on this matter are quite contradictory. While in some of his texts Leontiev considers human needs as a necessary condition for the appearance of human activity (Leontiev, 2009, p. 214), which means that the primary, the starting point of analysis has to be the category of need, in other papers he adopts the scheme activity-need-activity (instead of the scheme need-activity-need), rendering needs products of human activity (Leontiev, u.c., p. 201). According to activity-need-activity model, the starting point of analysis is not human need but human social activity. In this way Leontiev results in a conception of needs as socially created, stressing on the difference between human and animal, just biological, needs. However in this context what is not taken into account is the fact that human needs have, primarily, also a directly biological character before being transformed and developed by
At this point we consider necessary to refer to the scientific conclusions that can be drawn by the study of ontogenesis of deaf-blind children, that took place during their education, in Zagorsk in USSR. What should be emphasized is that the impressive results achieved in this constitution, demonstrate not only the effectiveness of some strictly practical principles of special education, but also the validity and scientific power of the whole theoretical framework that directed this educational process, i.e. the validity of activity theory. Many psychologists and philosophers in USSR (among them Luria, Leontiev, Davydov, Zaporozhets, Galperin and Ilyenkov) considered Zagorsk school’s achievements to be an “experimentum cruxis” that substantiated the scientific validity of activity theory (Bakhurst, Padden, 1991, p. 210). However, while it is undoubted that Zagorsk school’s results demonstrated the superiority of cultural-historical psychology, and especially of activity theory, in relation to other scientific approaches on the problem of human psychism ontogenesis, at the same time these results have shown activity theory’s limitations. On the matter of the relation between needs and activity, and more generally between the biological and the social in ontogenesis, one of the basic conclusions drawn from the education of deaf-blind children, was that the first activity that emerges is that directed towards the satisfaction of its primary physical needs (like feeding, self-defense and excretion). As far as these needs are satisfied through the use of socially developed objects and tools, the child assimilates human experience and the modes of action linked with these objects and tools. As a result biological needs direct the child towards humanized objects and, necessitating human methods for achieving their satisfaction, they develop into human needs, while on the same time, in this process new, secondary, socio-historical needs arise (Mescheryakov, 2009, p. 99-100). This means that the existence of human biological needs is a necessary precondition for the development of human activity.

CONCLUSION-TOWARDS THE SUBLATION OF ACTIVITY THEORY

Previously, we emphasized that the analytic presentation of activity theory’s limitations should not lead to the false conclusion that the specific features of the theoretical framework of activity approach we referred to, are not closely interrelated with each other. For example the reduction of internal to external activity is related with the
underestimation of the active role of the subject, the sociologism and the use of the category of activity as the starting point of analysis. All these methodological features result from the basic theoretical and methodological positions on which activity theory is based. This point is of great importance for every attempt to supersede the limitations and contradictions of activity theory, since it implies that this supersession presupposes, not only the fragmentary overriding of separate weak points of activity approach, but the elaboration of a whole alternative theoretical framework in psychology, that will develop a more broad treatment of these issues, through a different, more developed, system of psychological concepts and categories. Such a theoretical framework should at the same time preserve the major achievements of activity theory, subsuming them in a broader context.

Such a theoretical and methodological project presupposes the development of the theoretical core of activity approach, which, in our opinion, concerns the role of the category of activity in the whole system of categories of activity approach. More concretely, basic methodological feature of activity theory is the confusion between the categories of the unit of analysis and the essence of the object under investigation (Dafermos, 2002, p. 260). As described before, the category of activity is conceived at the same time as the unit (i.e. the starting point) of analysis, and the essence of human personality. On the basis of this methodological conception arise the significant achievements, but also the limitations and contradictions of activity theory.

Consequently, any attempt to develop the theoretical and experimental achievements of activity approach, presupposes the distinction between the unit of analysis and the essence of personality, and the methodological investigation of the logical and historical preconditions for the appearance of human activity. We believe that those preconditions should be sought in the characteristics of the individual as a biological organism, especially in the category of human biological needs. In this direction, the analysis of the structure and the historical development of human society as an organic whole, achieved in the context of V. A. Vazioulin’s “Logic of History” (Vazioulin, 2004) approach, opens up great possibilities for the development of psychological theory.

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