

Where is the primary contradiction? Reflections on the intricacies of research predicated on activity theory

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Abstract

This article reflects on the idea that there is an omnipresent primary contradiction lurking at the bottom of every activity in capitalism. In doing so, it articulates the relationship between Marxism and Activity Theory. Whilst Marx's ideas suggest that a trademark of capitalist social formations is the way surplus is pumped out from living labour, Activity Theory posits that the dual nature of commodities (i.e. their use and exchange-value) is the fundamental contradiction existent among all activities. The article argues that such distinction bears a direct impact on empirical research predicated on Activity Theory and goes on to consider the practical and theoretical implications of the Activity Theory's departure from Marx's ideas. The point is illustrated with an example of the challenges faced by the author while conducting an activity theoretical field research attempting to identify the primary contradiction in the activity system of a public organisation in the UK.

Keywords: *Activity Theory, Marx, Contradictions, Labour-power, Ascent method*

Introduction

One of the pillars upon which Activity Theory CHAT stands is the notion of contradiction as a driving force of transformation and development in activity systems (Engeström, 2001). Engeström draws upon (Ilyenkov, 1977; 1982) to describe the central role of contradictions, as follows:

The primary contradiction of activities within capitalism is that between the use and exchange value of commodities. This primary contradiction pervades all elements of our activity systems. (Engeström, 2001, p.137)

As a fundamentally Marxist-based theory, Activity Theory has incorporated Marx's categories such as 'contradictions', 'commodities', 'use-value' and 'exchange-value' into its foundation. Engeström specifically developed the notion of contradictions and categorised them into four levels: primary, secondary, tertiary and quaternary (Engeström, 1987). As it is beyond the scope of this article, a detailed examination of each level of contradiction is not provided herein. However, it can be vastly found in the literature (see e.g. Engeström, 1987 and Foot, 2014).

In this article, I focus on Engeström's interpretation of what constitutes a primary contradiction in capitalist socio-economic formations, namely the "inner conflict between exchange value and use value within each corner of the triangle of activity" (1987, p. 102). The reason for the emphasis on the primeval contradiction is that, while the others are contextual, the primary contradiction pervades all activity systems in capitalism. This is a notion not only present in Activity Theory, but also widespread in the work of Marx. However, while Activity Theory posits that the dual nature of commodities (i.e. their use and exchange-value) is the fundamental contradiction existent among all activities (Engeström, 2001), Marxism suggests that the primordial contradiction in capitalist social formations is the way surplus is pumped out from living labour (Marx, 1909). Besides the clear theoretical

relevance, the distinction also bears impact on empirical research, as the precise understanding of what constitutes a primary contradiction has the capacity to determine the development of an entire research project.

The goal of this article is to expand the understanding of primary contradictions and commodification adopted by Activity Theory in light of Marx's work. To investigate the conceptualisation of primary contradiction as manifested through the dual nature of commodity, I return to the work of Marx and explore his ideas on 'activity', 'labour-power' and 'the ascent from the abstract to the concrete' method. I pair an otherwise theory-laden article with reflections on my personal experience with fieldwork research predicated on Activity Theory. In doing so, I conclude by meditating on what could have been done in my empirical quest for the primary contradiction.

Articulating Marxism and Activity Theory

Activity was a central concept in Marx's seminal book *Capital* (Marx, 1976),¹ and the author strived to clarify that 'activity' was not to be confused with daily commodified tasks people are engaged. For Marx, activity (or work, or labour process for that matter) is the eternal natural condition of human existence and its elements remain the same in all social forms of development (Marx, 1909). These elements, according to the author, are "purposeful activity, that is work itself, the object on which that work is performed, and the instruments of that work" (Marx, 1976, p. 284).

It is possible to notice that Marx was not describing any particular form of historical activity like a job, for example (Newman & Holzman, 1993). The elements described above are independent of historical and social conditioning and they remain constant throughout all potential forms and stages in the development of the processes of production. They are

1 It is worth noticing that, throughout volume I of *Capital*, Marx used terms such as "labour", "productive life", "work", "process of labour" and "labour process" as synonyms of activity (Marx, 1976, p.86, p. 998).

typical of human labour (or human activity) as an evolvment beyond purely animal production process and are not constrained to capitalism (Marx, 1909). What is typical to the capitalist production process, however, is the fusion of the labour process and the valorisation process (Marx, 1976).

The capitalist production process is “the unity of labour process and process of valorisation” (Marx, 1976, p. 304), but it does not mean that both processes are the same thing. They are antithetical activities aimed at the production of commodities, which are things useful to sustain life that also have a market price attached to them. Therefore, it would be wrong to attribute to tasks conditioned by capitalist production relations (e.g. the capitalist production process) the character of activity in its abstract form. To do so would be a "very convenient method by which to demonstrate the eternal validity of the capitalist mode of production and to regard *Capital* as an immutable natural element in human production as such" (Marx, 1976, p. 998).

Figure 1

The capitalist production process and its creation

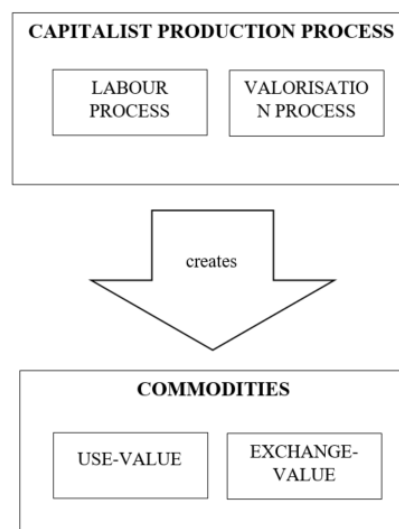


Figure 1: The capitalist production process and its creation

In light of the above, it appears as if Activity Theory was mistakenly created out of the determinations that Marx specifically tailored to activity in the sense of labour process. This inaccuracy can be observed, for example, in Leontiev's distinction between collective activity and individual action (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999), or in Davydov's generalisation of Marx's concept of activity in the sense of labour process to include all sorts of social activity

Thus one can regard activity as an initial category that determines the specific character of people's social being. The social laws can reveal themselves only in activity and through it" (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999, p. 41).

Activity Theory overlooks Marx's understanding that human activity is independent of every specific social development (Marx, 1976) and grounds the entire theory in characteristics of activity within a capitalist social formation. In other words, Activity Theory confuses the sub-species activity (i.e. a commodified task, a job) with the genre activity (i.e. the eternal natural condition of human existence that transcends the constraints of any social form). Thus, it is not activity that determines the specific character of individuals, as suggested by Davydov. In capitalist societies, it is the capitalist labour process (i.e. the unity of labour process and valorisation process) that determines the specific character of people's social being. This confusion is the reason why the elements of activity in Marx's sense (as described at the beginning of this section) cannot be used to model "activities" within capitalist social formations or any other formation for that matter, as attempted in Ilyenkov's characterisation of 'activity' in Activity Theory as "object-oriented, collective, and culturally mediated" (1982, p.96).

The same confusion is also found in the work of Engeström, who understands that the dual nature of commodities is what constitutes the primary contradiction of activities in capitalism (Engeström, 1990) when in fact the dual nature of commodities (their use-value and exchange-value) is not even an exclusivity of capitalism (Jones, 2009). In the capitalist

production process, two are the most emblematic features: (1) “the labourer himself acts in the role of a seller of commodities” so that “wage labour is the typical character of labour” (Marx, 1909, p. 1025); and (2) “the production of surplus-value as the direct aim and determining incentive of production” (Marx, 1909, p. 1026). In this sense, commodities are actually a prerequisite for capitalism, being “products of capital itself” (Ilyenkov, 1982).

By grounding its logic in activities within capitalism instead of the Marx’s concept of activity, Activity Theory errs as the bourgeois political economists did: it failures “to comprehend the labour process as an independent thing and at a same time as an aspect of capitalist production” (Marx, 1976, p. 1000). Furthermore, Activity Theory fails also when it considers the dual nature of commodities to be the principal contradiction within the capitalist production process (Engeström, 1987). This second error particularly has a direct impact on the successful deployment of activity theoretical studies, as researchers demonstrate a proclivity to struggle with the identification of the primary contradiction (the dual nature of commodities) that should be lurking at the bottom of each and every activity system. This is an idea further explored later on in this article.

Labour-power and Activity Theory

According to Engeström, as stated at the beginning of this article, the tension between the use and exchange value of commodities is the primary contradiction that pervades all elements of our activity systems in activities within capitalism (Engeström, 2001). Bypassing the potential inaccuracy of the statement, if we are to look for the primary contradiction of an activity, provides us with the *modus operandi*.

The primary contradiction can be found by focusing on any of the elements of the doctor’s work activity. For example, instruments of this work include a tremendous variety of medicaments and drugs. But they are not just useful for healing—they are above all commodities with prices, manufactured for a market, advertised and sold for profit. (Leontiev, 1981, p. 255)

Leontiev's acumen made the tension between use-value and exchange-value seem clear-cut, but this is not the case by any stretch of imagination. Contradictions play the central role of setting change in motion, but do not, in themselves, guarantee a better alternative (Engeström, 1987). It is the ethical critique of capitalism, not merely a technical critique of labour within capitalism that ensures evolvment (Bhaskar, 1993) and here is where Activity Theory departs from Marx's critical theory of labour. In its current form, Activity Theory does not seem to provide a sound ethical critique to capitalism inasmuch as it is grounded in characteristics of activity within a capitalist social formation. As explained in the previous section, Activity Theory confuses the sub-species activity (i.e. a commodified task, a job) with the genre activity (i.e. the eternal natural condition of human existence that transcends the constraints of any social form), which can be observed in Engeström's proclivity to lay his analysis/criticism on contextualised technical practices rather than on contradictions embedded in social class relations (Engeström, 1990; 2001).

In order for us to equate activity theoretical studies with Marx's critical theory of labour we need to bestow on the analysis of activity systems a quality of transcendence, which is necessary for them to become the representation of aspects pervading all capitalist social relations. The study of activity systems as the representation of production sites where concrete commodities such as, for example, machines or interagency services are being produced is an epistemological error to be avoided. Elements such as 'rules', 'community' and 'division of labour' cannot be construed as archetypes of concrete social relations binding actors to each other. As the activity in totality, its elements also need to convey a sense of transcendence in order for activity systems to be seen as sites where 'social substance' is constantly being transformed to mould the fabric of the social universe. It is only under such conditions that contradictions will be pervasive (Warmington, 2008).

Unpicking Leontiev's example quoted above, we see that the treatment provided by the doctor is his 'product/service', the objectification of his labour within capitalism; therefore, it has an exchange-value in the market. The treatment, however, is useful for healing and will be purchased as a use-value by patients with a momentary need of the healing. The money exchanged for the service will enable the doctor, in turn, to purchase the products/services of others' concrete labour. Put simply, the treatment commodity has been sold by the doctor as a means to enable him to acquire the objectified labour of other producers, for example, a car, clothes or food. Thus, commodities can have both use-value and exchange-value depending on the activity in which they are being analysed.

Even though the example serves well the purpose of demonstrating the differences between use-value and exchange value, it is limited in its ability to support an ethical critique of capitalism. The dual nature of commodities does not provide sufficient grounds in which the capitalist production process can be criticised for its strategies to intensify work and maximise value at the expense of workers. There is another aspect that seems to be relegated in Leont'ev's example as well as in Engeström interventions: labour-power.

[Labour power] is the merely abstract form, the mere possibility of value-positing activity, which exists only as a capacity, as a resource in the bodiliness of the worker. But when it is made into a real activity through contact with capital—it cannot do this by itself, since it is without object—then it becomes a really value-positing, productive activity. (Marx, 1976/1858).

From the above definition, it can be construed that labour-power is a potential until the moment in which workers direct their various capabilities to reify labour. In fact, Rikowski posits that, just as actual labour has use and exchange-value, so does labour-power (Rikowski, 1999; 2002a; 2002b). The use value being represented by one's aptitude to labour and the exchange-value being symbolised by socially average labour time (Marx, 1909). In this sense, even though it seems like employers are purchasing labour, they are in fact paying for the employee's aptitude to labour, i.e. labour-power (Warmington, 2008).

Rikowski (2002b) divides labour-power into three expressions. First, ‘concrete labour-power’, i.e. the skills and attributes embodied in an individual but not yet manifested. Second, the ‘subjective labour-power’, represented by the labourer’s will to materialise his/her potential at a particular moment to a particular end. Finally, ‘collective labour-power’, which is of special interest to Engeström and those adopting his version of Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987)

The collective aspect of labour-power reflects the fact that in capitalist society labour-powers are coordinated (through co-operation and division of labour) ... Such co-operation forms a significant collective force within the labour process, a force that capital and its representatives seek to control and channel into the value form of labour (Rikowski, 2002b, p.15).

Activity Theory’s interest in the collective expression of labour-power derives from the fact that, as opposed to general commodities, labour-power is inherently expansive, given its unlimited potential to create value (Allman et al., 2000; Neary & Rikowski, 2000; Rikowski, 2002a/b). This characteristic is what Engeström calls “expansive transformation” (1987; 2001; 2007); even though in practice such potential is affected by conflicts (contradictions) between antithetical drives. In Engeström’s model of analysis of activity systems, the tension between labour-power and capital is addressed within the element ‘division of labour’ (the division of labour occurs horizontally according to task, role or professional expertise and vertically between the representative of capital and staff. It is in the latter that the contradiction between labour-power and capital occurs). However, there seems to be a reticence in Engeström’s interventions to address wider social antagonism and instead there is a focus on contextualised technical practices (Engeström, 1990; 2001). This is where Activity Theory falls short of the appropriate incorporation of Marx’s critical theory of labour and this is where there is scope for an improvement of the theory’s methodological framework. Currently, workplace activities are as much about social production as they are about the production of commodities (Warmington, 2005). Thus, it is crucial that empirical

research takes into account broader notions of social antagonism and break away from the limited analysis of contextualised technical practices. To that end, an adequate use of Marx's 'ascent from the abstract to the concrete' method could be opportune.

Activity Theory and the 'Ascent Method'

Up to this point in this article, I have addressed Activity Theory's misinterpretation of Marx's concept of 'activity' and the consequences of such inaccuracy. The notion that the primary contradiction pervading all elements of our systems in activities within capitalism derives from the dual nature of commodities is misleading. The peculiar trait of capitalist mode of production is rather "the production of surplus-value as the direct aim and determining incentive of production" (Marx, 1909, p. 1026). In this section, we will address Activity Theory's need for incorporation of Marx's 'ascent from the abstract to the concrete' method (henceforth, referred as the 'ascent method') in order for empirical research to focus more on broader notions of social antagonism instead of getting lost in the intricacies of contextualised technical practices.

The ramifications of Marx's work are incommensurable. Although he is mostly recognised as a political economist, it is as methodologist that he is a figure of relevance to Activity Theory. In his introduction to *Grundrisse*, under the heading 'the method of political economy', Marx introduced a methodological principle that has become known as the 'ascent method'. The method was an approach developed to make sense of historically specific social formations like, for example, the capitalist mode of production. In Marx's view, the analysis of a social formation could not be predicated on general concepts and notions indistinctively enforced across dissimilar formations throughout history. Instead the analysis should begin from the unique economic phenomenon that differentiated a particular capitalist social formation from others. From that initial unity of analysis (the germ-cell), the theoretician would be able to systematically uncover the logic of development of the entire economic

structure of capitalist society (Marx, 1976/1858). The terminology adopted by Marx was that so the totality of the economic structure of society in all its details was the ‘concrete’, whereas the simple economic fact isolated from any extraneous features was the ‘abstract’ (Jones, 2009).

Engeström (1990) referred to the ‘ascent method’ as the reason why Marx was able to, in his analysis of capitalist production, identify commodity as germ-cell from which the analysis progressively ascended to the concrete, i.e. entire economic structure of capitalist society. In fact, Engeström drew similarities between the ‘ascent method’ and the dialectical method of thinking adopted by Activity Theory, calling for the identification of a germ-cell (i.e. an activity system as unity of analysis) also in activity theoretical studies, which he exemplified with the application of the ‘ascent method’ to make sense of educational practice through the analysis of a case study on adult education taking a course in instructional theory (Engeström, 1990).

The utilisation of Marx’s political-economic methods in the analysis of human beings has been on Activity Theory’s agenda from the outset, as Vygotsky himself once stated that the field of psychology needed its own Capital – referring to the seminal work by Marx (Sève, 2018). Over the years, the initial concern Activity Theory had with the dialectical process of human development transmuted into an interest in the dialectics of activity at a collective level (Engeström, 1987; 1999), which can be observed in Engeström’s introduction of elements such as ‘community’, ‘rules’ and ‘division of labour’ in the analysis of activity systems. Nevertheless, dialectical logic has always been a key idea behind Activity Theory, and it seems only natural that activity theorists would adopt the ‘ascent method’ outside the political-economic arena (see e.g. Engeström, 1990 and Miettinen, 2000).

Expanding the ‘ascent method’ beyond the political-economic field is a riveting idea, but it is crucial to observe the structure of the method and ensure that it is not disfigured after

adaptations. In recent instances of adaptation of the ‘ascent method’, it seems as though activity theorists have handpicked the most convenient features of the method at the expense of others. In other words, it is difficult to see how the study of the psychological development of a deaf-blind child (Miettinen 2000), the development of particular approaches to schools subjects (Davydov, 1990) or the analysis of adult education taking a course in instructional theory (Engeström, 1990) would lead us to the final goal of attaining an understanding the entire economic structure of capitalist society, which they did not.

As it is today, Activity Theory’s analysis starts with the identification of a ‘unit of analysis’ (i.e. an activity system); the activity systems is broken down into elements (subject, tools, object, artefacts, rules, division of labour); contradictions are identified both within each element, between elements and between activity systems; finally, contradictions are dialectically worked out and an opportunity for transformation occurs. Such an approach, as suggested by Engeström in diverse occasions (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; Engeström, 2001), is devised to attend social current needs for a method flexible enough to analyse complex interactions. However, given the extent to which activity theorists have been relativizing the ‘ascent method’, it has become unclear whether there is still a connection with Marx’s original ideas, as we can see in the comparison provided by table 1 below.

Table 1

A comparison between the starting and ending points in each tradition

	Activity Theory	Marxism
Concrete	A map of the whole social system enabled by a network of interacting activity systems	The totality of the economic structure of society
Abstract	Activity systems	Commodity

Note. The two traditions compared

The point to be made here is that Activity Theory has been bypassing commodity as the germ-cell and has been focusing on concrete developmental contradictions of local activities in society as unity of analysis, i.e. it bestows the status of 'the abstract' on each activity system separately. The question then becomes why can we not take each activity system as a germ-cell and then try to figure out how all activity systems work together? Why did Marx not simply start the 'ascent method' with an inventory of different types of work as 'the abstract' instead of only the commodity?

It is worth noticing that Marx's method did not reduce all activities into one germ-cell, but found the common ground among all activities run in capitalist societies: the commodity. Thus, it is the analyst's responsibility to find out how extraction of surplus value is occurring in the analysed living labour activity. For example, while political activity does not produce surplus value, we can all appreciate how governments act in response to financial crises. The point is that the production of surplus values occurs in both governments, schools and factories equally. A teacher produces as much surplus value as a car worker or a coal-miner (Marx, 1909). If an analyst is not able to notice the common thread running through all types of work (i.e. that they all are producers of surplus value), then it is either a shortcoming of the analyst or he/she needs to identify a better placement for the analysed worker in a capitalist social formation grounded in productive work.

The theoretician has not merely a right but even an obligation to consider the commodity form in abstraction within the capitalist system, he has no logical right to consider just as abstractly any other form of economic connection in the same capitalist organism. (Ilyenkov, 1982, p. 104).

In this sense, Activity Theory does not seem to be ascending from the abstract to the concrete, but remaining in the sphere of the abstract and, therefore, far from a scientific concept (Ilyenkov, 1982). To solve that, Engeström has argued that

Activity systems are characterized by inner contradictions. The primary inner contradictions reflect the basic contradiction characteristic to the socio-economic formation as a whole. In capitalism, the basic contradiction is the dual nature of commodities, the tension between the use value and the exchange value. In different activity systems, this fundamental tension appears in different forms, as the primary contradiction of that particular activity. This primary contradiction resides in each component of the activity system. (1990, p. 84)

Engeström's solution is unsatisfactory on many levels. First, the characterisation of the dual nature of commodities as the primary contradiction in capitalism seems like an inappropriate generalisation. While capitalism is predicated on commodity making, the production of commodities is not exclusive to capitalist societies. In other words, the dual nature of commodities can also be observed in other social formations besides capitalism. What is typical of capitalist production is the existence of wage labour, which transforms the labourers also into sellers of commodities inasmuch as they sell their service. So, "the relationship between wage labour and capital determines the entire character of the mode of production" (Marx, 1909, p. 1025). Another peculiar trait of capitalism is the "production of surplus-value as the direct aim and determining incentive of production" (Marx, 1909, p. 1026). The conclusion is that the dual nature of commodity is not the primary contradiction of capitalist societies (as it can be observed in other social formations), instead it is the tension between wage labour (i.e. the agents who produce surplus value) and capital (i.e. those who exploit surplus value of the agents) that characterises capitalism (Jones, 2011).

Engeström's misinterpretation of Marx's view on what constitutes the primary contradiction in capitalist societies sets researchers, such as me, for failure, as from the outset we go to the field equipped with a misconception of what our 'abstract' and our 'concrete' are. The result tends to be studies that mechanically apply Activity Theory's triangular representation of activity systems due to scholars who have not yet grasped the epistemology behind the model (Sannino, 2011).

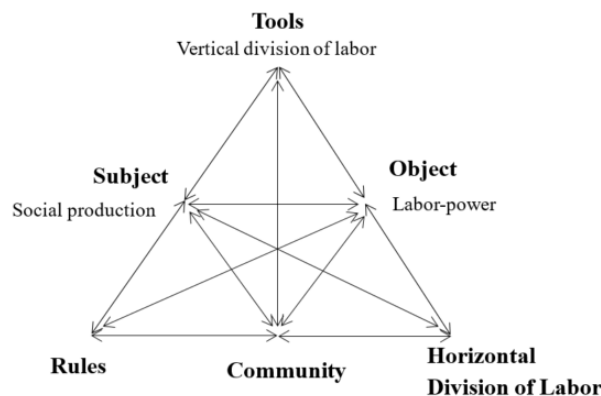
Where is the Primary Contradiction? Example from the Field

The discussion foregoing this section is not mere academic hair-splitting exercise. The proper understanding of Marx's 'ascent method' has practical consequences, as field researchers will be better equipped in their quest for the primary contradiction that pervades all activities within capitalism and, therefore, will be able to better draw the total – the economic structure of a society – from its parts – the commodity isolated from any extraneous features.

To carry out an activity theoretical Marxist analysis of an activity, first a reconceptualization of the object of the activity is necessary. There is a need to break away from contextualised technical objects to the consideration of the meta-object of social production of labour-power (Warmington, 2008). In this scenario, the element 'division of labour' acquires an explicit dual nature. Vertical division of labour (division between capital and staff) is construed as a tool and extracted from the element 'division of labour', which now comprises only the horizontal instance of division (that according to task, role or professional expertise).

Figure 2

The remodelling of Engeström's model



Note. The remodelling of Engeström's model with an explicit split of the element 'Division of Labour' and the focus on a meta-object, i.e. the social production of labour-power

Figure 2 above is aligned with Warmington's suggestion that

Institutions and organisations in which research interventions are conducted must not simply be analysed as settings in which tools are developed; they must be understood as (institutional) tools in themselves, created and developed to work on objects. Because organisations are configurations of labour-power, they must be examined as tools, as cultural artefacts, in ways that call attention not only to contradictions within and between the nodes of momentary object-orientated activity but also to the contradictions generated by labour-power within capitalism. (Warmington, 2008, p. 14)

Incidentally, such reconfiguration also means that some areas of public services (e.g. the rehabilitation of offenders co-organised by agencies in both criminal justice and welfare systems) do not characterise as a typical representation of the workings of capitalist production, despite their inevitable dependence on supply of commodities and wage-labour. This was the challenge I faced in my fieldwork research of a UK-based public organisation called Criminal Justice Liaison and Diversion (L&D) between 2017 and 2020.

In exploring L&D worker activity through the lens of Activity Theory, critical areas of tension were uncovered. Tensions (contradictions) are important as they might act as triggers for future service development and learning. The structure and activity theory methodology of the study are described in details in Rocha and Hean (2020 in press) and Rocha and Holmen (2020 in press). The research focused on the perspective of front-line workers on what are the main contradictions they face in their daily work of supporting individuals entering the criminal justice system. Accounts were collected from professionals located at both L&D and other organisations at the interface between criminal justice and welfare systems. The findings were that professionals tend to struggle with policies that do not meet the needs existent at the street-level and that information sharing within and between agencies is impaired by fragmented communication tools. The study also produced

evidence that professionals have been relying on interpersonal collaboration as a means to circumvent systemic limitations.

The research project was widely predicated on Activity Theory and adopted Engeström's taxonomy of contradictions to label the tensions observed within and between activity systems (Engeström, 1987). While secondary, tertiary and quaternary contradictions could be inferred from the data collected, the issue of identifying the primary contradiction in the unity of analysis still persisted. To tackle that, a fundamental tension within the element 'Subject' of the L&D activity system was tentatively construed by me as primary, based on Engeström's understanding of what constitutes the primary contradiction.

The treatment provided by L&D front-line professionals is their product, the objectification of their labour within capitalism; therefore, it has an exchange-value in the market. The treatment, which demonstrates its proximal usefulness in the rehabilitation of those entering the criminal justice system, also presents an ancillary value to the state because it helps decreasing reoffending rates, relieving a stretched prison system and alleviating the public purse. For that reason, it is purchased as use-value by the public government (through salary payment, i.e. wage labour). The money exchanged for the service enables L&D professionals, in turn, to purchase products/services of others' concrete labour. Thus, L&D professionals' service seen as a commodity comprise both use and exchange-value and the tension between the two manifestations of value was construed by me as a primary contradiction.

In light of Marx's work, the identification the dual nature of commodity (L&D professionals' service) as a primary contradiction seems erroneous, although aligned with Engeström's standpoint. The dual nature of the commodity in itself does not provide sufficient grounds in which an ethical critique of the capitalist production process can stand.

My focus was narrowed down into the intricacies of the L&D activity system and my analysis did not account for wider notions of social antagonism.

In retrospect, my conclusion is that criminal justice and welfare services, by and large, do not provide cases of capitalist production to the extent that they are manifestations of consumption of goods and services rather than of production of surplus value. Furthermore, the cooperative atmosphere I observed among professionals (despite vertical and horizontal divisions of labour) did not characterise, at least *stricto sensu*, the primary contradiction of capitalism. For that reason, it was difficult to characterise L&D as either an allegory of capitalist economic processes or an example of activity in general (given its social specificity). Nevertheless, it is certain that criminal justice and welfare systems operate within the constraints of overall capitalist economic and political relations and, therefore, can only be fully understood if we consider their place in these relations. Their position in the system turns them into target for appropriation by private Capital (see e.g. Monbiot 2001; Deering & Feilzer, 2015) and forces us to analyse them in light of deep and powerful motive forces of capitalist production. In sum, a primary contradiction can potentially be identified within any of the elements of the L&D activity system, as the service is also a manifestation of the capitalist production process.

Final Thoughts

The goal of this article is to meditate on the intricacy of fieldwork research predicated on Activity Theory. More precisely, it is a reflection on the challenge of empirical identification of the primary contradiction that pervades all activities within capitalism, namely the dual nature of commodities (Engeström, 2001). The conclusion hereby reached, however, is that part of the difficulty derives from a misconception of what an activity theorist is looking for while in the field. To that end, the suggestion presented here is a return

to the origins of Activity Theory (i.e. Marx's work) in order to develop a deeper understanding of what activity means and how it manifests within capitalism.

In hindsight, I am able now to appreciate the reason why my attempt to identify the primary contradiction within the L&D activity system did not play out as planned: I was wrongfully focusing on the dual nature of commodities when in fact I should be concerned with broader notions of social antagonism derived from the capitalist mode of production. Had I done so, perhaps the outcome would have been different (naively assuming that I possess the necessary acumen to advance such a riveting mental exercise).

As mentioned earlier, the emphasis on the dual nature of commodities (i.e. their use and exchange-value) as the primordial contradiction existent among all activities is erroneous. The bipartite nature of commodities is not even a feature exclusively observed in capitalist social formations, let alone being its main contradiction. Jones suggested that, when looking for the "evil" that contaminates all activities in capitalism, one must concentrate on the "pumping out of surplus value from living labour" (2009, p. 54), and I must agree with him.

In his work, Marx strived to make a distinction between labour process and capitalist labour process, being the latter a subspecies of the former (Marx 1909; 1976). This distinction is crucial, as it frees creative and dynamic potential from capitalist strategies. In this vein, Marx wanted to demonstrate how human potential (see above the idea of potential manifested through labour-power) could also be perceived within capitalism but tends not to be because of its subordination to oppressive capitalist production processes.

In the end, as opposed to what has been suggested elsewhere (see Engeström & Mettinen, 1999), I ratify the understanding that Marx was "interested in problems of economy only insofar as they revealed the complex hierarchy of the structure that he wants to

see positively transcended” (Mészáros, 1970, pp. 126-7). Therefore, Activity Theory has still things to learn from its inspirational source.

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