

THE SOCIETAL SUBJECT

*Edited by Niels Engelsted, Mariane Hedegaard,
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AT A CROSSROADS – AN INTRODUCTION

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Every book has its own story, immersed in other stories. To provide context and background for this book, I want to sketch some of these stories. Primarily this is the story of what motivated the present collection, but, further, it is the story of how a particular psychological understanding intertwines with the development of Danish psychology; and in the last instance it is the story of psychology itself.

1.

The 14 articles presented are enlarged and revised versions of papers and commentaries delivered at the *2nd Danish Conference of Activity Theory* held at Roesnaes, Denmark, 1991.

Activity Theory, a theoretical position initiated in the late 1920's by Lev Vygotsky, and developed by his coworker Alexei N. Leontiev, was discovered in earnest by Western psychologists in the early 1970's, when the most important Russian works were translated into major languages. As the interest spread, international communication and cooperation on the subject of Activity Theory grew; and soon – in large part due to the tireless efforts of professor Michael Cole, San Diego, professor George Rückriem, Berlin, and professor Charles Tolman, Victoria – an international association had formed, complete with standing committee, journal, and international congresses.

The adoption of Activity Theory in Denmark very closely parallels this development. Vygotsky's seminal work *Thought and Language* was translated into Danish in 1971, and the general psychology of Leontiev was introduced soon after (Dreier, 1974). Leontiev's major works, *Problems in the Development of Mind* and *Activity, Consciousness, Personality*, appeared in Danish translations in 1977 and 1983 respectively. In 1986 Michael Cole, educational psychologist and American authority on Vygotsky, was invited to give the first *Alfred Lehman Lectures* at the Uni-

versity of Copenhagen, which served to broaden the scope and foster transatlantic cooperation.¹

This progression reflects the interest with which the Activity Theory approach was received in Denmark. The theory formed the basis of much subsequent work, and this again led to organizational initiatives of which the Danish conferences – held between the international congresses – are an example.

The establishment of Activity Theory as an international collaborative approach has been of great value. Yet, it would be a mistake to consider Activity Theory a unitary approach. The work left by Vygotsky at his premature death from tuberculosis in 1934 is for the most part an assembly of visionary outlines; while Leontiev's work can best be characterized as a conceptual framework for a general psychology. The Activity Theory handed down by the founding fathers is thus more a frame than a finished body of theory. Not denying the importance of ongoing research in studying and interpreting, and even recovering, the past work of Vygotsky and Leontiev – especially since their approach suffered considerable adversity in the form of repression and coercion from authorities – the major attraction of Activity Theory has been its open-ended quality and future prospects. It is precisely as a frame to be filled out and a set of insights to be utilized according to the agenda and priorities of the adopting parties that Activity Theory has been embraced internationally. The Activity Theory approach subsequently was inscribed onto the different psychological traditions of various countries, and today encompasses a wide variety of diverse issues and problems. Depending on whether it is looked upon through North American, Russian, Japanese, German or Finnish eyes, the theory shows itself in different perspectives.

Danish eyes are no exception to this rule. The contributions from the Danish conference, accordingly, reflect an adoption of Activity Theory that is distinctive for Denmark and should be understood in light of the history of the Danish psychological tradition.

Merely to introduce the present articles as a local conception of Activity Theory would be misleading, however. The conference had its own very special agenda. People knowledgeable in Activity Theory will notice right away that many of the contributions considerably overstep the recognized bounds of this theory. The present collection is consequently more like a fair of different theoretical visions than it is a unified theoretical approach. It was intended to be. This, however, does not mean that Activity Theory serves merely as a pretext. The aim of the conference and the project of Activity Theory as adopted in Denmark spring from the same venture. A venture that reflects fundamental and – so it seems – timeless problems in

¹ Thanks to Cole and the new electronic mail medium this cooperation today takes the form of daily worldwide communication between researchers in the field.

the science of psychology to the same extent as it reflects the particular history of Danish psychology.

2.

Geographically Denmark is placed at a crossroads, bridging the Scandinavian countries to the North with Continental Europe to the South, and the British Isles to the West with Eastern Europe and the Baltic to the East. This placement shaped the Danish intellectual landscape, with traffic of ideas following the traffic of commerce, and parochialism being counterbalanced by the opportunism of a small trader. (A small country cannot afford provinciality, it is said). Over the years, the main trends of Western thought were quickly adopted in Denmark, which – befitting its geography – came under the sway of both Anglo-Saxon and Continental philosophy.

This being so, it is not remarkable that the innovation of experimental psychology – being an Anglo-Saxon notion bred on Continental ground – was quickly adopted in Denmark, where we pride ourselves of having the world's second oldest university-established psychological laboratory, dating from 1886.

The founder of the laboratory, Alfred Lehman, an engineer, was, as would be expected, a student of Wundt in Leipzig; the route taken, however, was decided by his successor, Edgar Rubin, philosopher and cousin of Niels Bohr. Rubin was a student of G.E. Müller in Göttingen, and this apprenticeship – plus Rubin's strongwilled temperament – was the crucial factor in the creation of what became known as *the Copenhagen School of Phenomenology*.²

G.E. Müller entertained the belief that psychological problems were those that could be investigated by experiment in a laboratory. The method was description of phenomenological experience. Theorizing was to be avoided as – at best – premature. Lectures and seminars, accordingly, were superfluous. If they must, students could attend the lectures of faculty-member Edmund Husserl. Entirely irrelevant was also, of course, the writing of a 'Grundriss' or 'Grundzüge', otherwise obligatory for German psychologists. The only thing that really mattered was methodological stringency.³

Müller's puristic conception came to dominate Danish university psychology during Rubin's directorship, thus ending the prior tradition for theoretical synthesis laid down by Rubin's old teacher, philosopher Harald Høffding.⁴ A body of beautiful experimental work was produced, unsur-

² For a review see Moustgaard & Petersen (1986) and Moustgaard (1987).

³ For an analysis of the impact of experimental psychology on the development of psychology in Scandinavia see Nilsson (1978).

⁴ See Høffding (1882).

passed in descriptive acuity – Rubin's own work on the perception of figure and ground being a prime example⁵; but it was a slim body. Having inherited very little of the go-getter quality of the Continental phenomenological tradition founded by Husserl, and further developed by thinkers like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, The Copenhagen School of Phenomenology was more related to the Anglo-Saxon neo-positivist tradition⁶, and with its narrow conceptual scope hardly able to address the rich array of issues confronting theoretical and applied psychology.

The reign of the Copenhagen School of Phenomenology came to an end in the late sixties and early seventies. Its demise coincided with a period of massive student unrest and rebellion sparked by substantial social transformations in the system of higher education and paralleled by similar student activism in France, Germany, and the United States. According to legend, the school was actually – in a very Kuhn-like manner – unseated in 1968 by rebellious students of psychology revolting against professorial authority. Looked upon in retrospect, it was not a clear break at all; but at the time it seemed to be.

In place of the repudiated tradition, other traditions were soon brought in, spurred by a great appetite for new understandings. From the United States, Germany, France, and England were imported behaviorism, ethology, cognitivism, psychoanalysis, humanistic psychology, Rogerian and other traditions in personality psychology, and various brands of social psychology. It was like a great natural experiment, where the vacuum created by the sudden extinction of the native species was rapidly filled up by migration of all major species of psychology.

In such an experiment, sharp inter-species competition will be the immediate outcome, gradually giving way to coadaptation. This happened to be the case in Danish psychology where years of strife – reminiscent of the war between psychological schools of the early part of the century – eventually subsided into a state of reasonably peaceful (and indifferent) coexistence among different psychological understandings.

Comprising all major psychological understandings, Danish psychology became a small scale model of psychology *in toto*. The basic problems of psychology, not least of which was the problem of coherency, consequently were very acutely felt in Danish psychology, now unprotected by the shield of one ruling viewpoint.

3.

The lesson learned from the years of strife was that unification cannot be gained by conquest. As it reflects this lesson, the principle 'live and let live'

⁵ See Rubin (1921). See also Moustgaard (1990) for a recent example of the keen descriptive ability of the Copenhagen tradition.

⁶ See Erik Schultz this volume p. 109–130.

is hard-won and to be treasured. Yet one must wonder how such a principle of pluralism can apply to a science? Intuition tells us that the diversity of psychological theorizing does reflect the many-sided nature of mind, and that insights will be lost if perspectives are closed and diversity attenuated. At the same time, the very talk of perspectives and many-sidedness presupposes that something has these many sides which different perspectives can reveal. The recognition of diversity presupposes some unifying order.

The lack of agreement as to the nature, not to say existence, of such an order or subject matter has been a hallmark of psychology from its first inception. This, of course, threatens psychology's claim to be a science, since it is the existence of a particular domain of lawful order in the universe that sanctions a particular science and gives it the mandate to investigate and uncover this domain.

This lamentable state has – as was perhaps forecast in the ancient Graeco-Roman myth of *Psyche* and her sisters – made psychology *the Cinderella* in the sisterhood of science. It was the judgment of Sigmund Koch, the sage of psychological theory, that psychology could never become a coherent science; that it could be a science at all has been denied from Kant to Rorty. From every side another science has stood ready to eliminate – cannibalize in the word of Edward O. Wilson⁷ – psychology in a great reductive sweep.

Since psychology has not yet been felled by these harsh verdicts, but, on the contrary, has flourished as both a profession and a scientific institution, and continuously grows in practical application and theoretical scope, however diverse, one could perhaps dismiss such denunciations as mere bickering. As long as our science works in practice and can solve the particular problems it set out to solve, why should we make a fuss; let each man follow his own drummer.

Much can be said for such a pragmatic stance. Nevertheless, the critical judgments of the sisters should not be taken lightly. They reflect the fundamental conceptual problems that form the core of the psychology's scientific domain; if psychology is not to be reduced to a collection of ingenious visions and a bag of sagacious tricks, these problems must be addressed. Moreover, psychology cannot simply renounce its claim for scientific status; among the sciences a very special responsibility befalls psychology.

4.

Every science has its measure of theoretical differences and confusions, what sets psychology apart and threatens it with incoherence, is the special place it occupies in scientific geography.

⁷ Wilson (1975:6).

The scientific world has three great continents: the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. Set apart by subject matter, and consequently, methodology and philosophy, these continents are not easily bridged. Rather, they have come to constitute worlds of their own, and traditionally have eyed each other in ways that are very much reminiscent of the ways of enemy tribes.

To which of these worlds does psychology belong?

As Ebbinghaus observed, psychology has a short history, but a long past. Until Wundt – inspired by the psycho-physiological work of Fechner and Helmholtz – at the end of the last century launched psychology as a science adopting natural science's outlook and methodology, psychology had throughout millennia been an integrated part of philosophy, investigating the possibility, forms, and conditions of knowledge, experience, desire, and the will. Wundt's project was, therefore, a coupling of two markedly different worlds. As such, it immediately invoked vigorous protest. There is, asserted Wilhelm Dilthey, *Naturwissenschaft* (natural science), which explains; and there is *Geisteswissenschaft* (humanities), which understands. Psychology belongs to the latter, since humans are agents with consciousness and must be understood in terms of meaning. Wundt did not really disagree, as his subsequent work on the *Völkerpsychologie* proves. He only thought that, for some purposes psychology, should adopt a natural science position, for others a hermeneutical science position.

Irrespective of the validity of the distinction between explanation and understanding, a solution based on division hardly seems tenable, however. After psychology's appropriation of Darwinism, it became very clear that mind is a phenomenon belonging *simultaneously* to the world of natural science and to the world of hermeneutics. Only by spanning the great divide can psychology bring into focus the essence of mind, as attested by the achievements of William James and Freud.

No one has, however, to this day, shown how the divide can be spanned in a principled way. Here is the *Catch-22* of psychology: If it is true to its subject matter, it becomes unprincipled. If it tries to remedy this, it becomes untrue to its subject matter. Humanistic psychology and behaviorism can be seen as prototypical examples.

If, to this problem, further is added the necessity of tying psychological understanding into the historical understanding of the social sciences, we have the real reason why incoherence rules psychology.

It is not because psychologists are less intelligent than other scientists, even though they may be. It is not because psychology is a young science, and it can be debated whether it is. It is not because psychology is still an immature science; even though it is, this is a symptom and not the cause of the problem. It is not because psychological problems are complex; they are, but every science is confronted with complex problems. Unless, of

course, this complexity refers specifically to the problem of bridging simultaneously the understandings of hermeneutical science, social science, and natural science. Because this is the real problem: that psychology in order to capture the essence of mind, must span all three scientific continents, and therefore must suffer their mutual incompatibility as her own incoherence. Hence also the special responsibility of psychology; on her territory open up the fissures of science, so it is from here that the possibility of redemption is to be sought. Only psychology fits the shoe.

5.

In psychological history, periods where the coherency problem – also called the crisis of psychology – is in focus alternate with periods in which the problem is largely ignored. In America, for example, a period of strenuous search for theoretical rapprochement, brought about by the exodus of European scholars in the thirties, ended in the late forties, at which time there seemed to be "no question of tongues blending into a single narrative" (Koch, 1959:1). Then again, two decades later, the theoretical quest was vigorously resumed, this time spurred on by the new *Cognitive Science*; and not surprisingly so, since Cognitive Science in its very conception is an attempt at a synthesis across the continents of science and consequently faces formidable conceptual enigmas.

In other words, it is the meeting of incongruous understandings that makes the incoherence problem stand out and calls for theoretical work to provide a larger and more synthesizing view.

This was exactly the situation confronting Danish psychology in the seventies, and explains the upsurge of theoretical interest in this period. The adoption of Activity Theory was one attempt at meeting the challenge of incoherence, and a befitting one, since the Vygotsky–Leontiev approach was developed originally as an answer to the crisis of psychology. Further more it contained certain insights, which from the Danish point of view are considered *sine qua non*.

Vygotsky – young art critic and teacher – entered psychology as an ardent believer in objective psychology, but soon came to have second thoughts. Without wishing to renounce Pavlov or behaviorism, he nonetheless found psychology without psyche or mind rather senseless. His 1924 paper *Consciousness as a problem in the psychology of behavior*⁸, which calls for an effort at synthesis, propelled him unto the scene of Soviet psychology where, in 10 short years, he – as composer and conductor – produced such brilliant work that he has been considered the Mozart of psychology by Stephen Toulmin.⁹

⁸ See Vygotsky (1934,1979).

⁹ See Toulmin (1978).

In keeping with his time and place, Vygotsky saw the key to the necessary synthesis of objective and subjective psychology in Marxist philosophy. This choice could hardly have been more appropriate since the philosophy of Marx is essentially an attempt to synthesize the classical, continental, idealist understanding of the human as subject and producer with the classical, Anglo-Saxon, materialist understanding of the human as object and product.

The renaissance of Marxism in Europe in the 1970's greatly facilitated the discovery of Vygotsky and his school.¹⁰ There was, however, another important reason for the adoption of this understanding in Denmark.

After the long reign of subjective idealism that governed The Copenhagen School of Phenomenology, objective psychology came to hold great attraction. Brains were dissected, and rats run in mazes. Yet, the lesson of the Freudian father-murder was not to be escaped. You are yourself the father. Less poetically, a psychology, it was realized, which does not accredit subject and subjectivity a decisive place is not tenable. Why? Because the mental phenomena undisputable tells us so, and – another legacy of the Copenhagen School of Phenomenology – the phenomena are not to be talked away, but are to be taken serious.

The Copenhagen School of Phenomenology did not see things wrongly, it only saw them too narrowly. The subjective as well as the objective are crucial for the psychological understanding. Psychology must encompass both worlds.

Both worlds were seemingly what Vygotsky offered. Believing himself to be dying, he writes in 1927 his major methodological work, *The Historical Sense of the Psychological Crisis*, in which the very cause of the incoherence of psychology is identified as the existence of two psychologies – "the natural science, materialist, and the spiritualist". "Everything else is differences in view points, schools, hypotheses...", often in a confusing and intractable manner¹¹. Only a general psychology that addresses the basic rift can sort out this confusion.

6.

The answer to Vygotsky's call was Activity Theory. Outlined originally by Vygotsky and developed by Leontiev in the following decades, it attempts to mediate the cleft between objective determination and subjective agency through the concept of the subject's activity. Immersed in a world of objective determinations, the organism or person is capable of actively

¹⁰ Scholarship can have a hard time crossing ideological boundaries, as is well known. Despite the long overdue arrival in the West the basic ideas of Vygotsky luckily have not diminished in actuality.

¹¹ See Vygotsky (1985:192).

confronting this objective world, and this process calls forth the phenomena of mind.

Rejecting Watson¹² the theory draws an important dividing line between animals and human beings. Animals are not by this division denied mind. On the contrary, it is of singular importance to show how at a certain stage of phylogenesis mind occurs as a natural development. Leontiev's dissertation is dedicated to this problem, and in his subsequent work the prehuman stages of mind are thoroughly dealt with.¹³ Nevertheless, the theory is naturally primarily devoted to the particularly human stages of mind, consciousness and personality.

The investigation of the ontogenetic development of human consciousness occupies the larger part of Vygotsky's work. His basic idea was that cultural signs – words and tools – constituted a particular class of stimuli, which the child could use to control itself. Vygotsky here found a common ground for objective determination and subjective agency. Further – in the words of Cole and Scribner¹⁴ – Vygotsky became the "first modern psychologist to suggest the mechanism by which culture becomes part of each person's nature." This work – not least the part of which was the conception of *the Zone of Proximal Development*¹⁵ – made Vygotsky famous as a developmental and educational psychologist.

In references to this work, and in the supplementary work done by Alexander Luria in Ushbekistan¹⁶, the term the *Cultural-Historical School* is often used, while the term *Activity Theory* is reserved for the subsequent work of Leontiev and his coworkers and students. Whether or not this distinction is theoretically important, it does reflect different focuses of interest in the adoption of the Vygotsky-Leontiev approach. One reflects the interests of general psychology, as mentioned; another reflects the interests of developmental and educational psychology. The Danish adoption followed both courses, as can be clearly seen from the present contributions.

7.

The issues motivating the two courses are not identical, but they can never-

¹² Watson (1914:1) "recognizes no dividing line between man and brute".

¹³ See Leontiev (1981).

¹⁴ See Cole and Scribner (1978:6).

¹⁵ See A. Mortensen: Notes on Activity Theory, Communication and Zone of Proximal Development, this volume p. 229-240, and K. Baltzer: Where does personality go, when the child goes to school?, this volume p. 250.

¹⁶ Alexander Luria, later to be known as a brilliant neuropsychologist, was a coworker of Vygotsky. In the thirties he was commissioned by Vygotsky to investigate the effect of radical social change on the modes of thinking among peasants in Ushbekistan. The study, however, was afflicted by not easily overcome cultural bias. See Luria (1976).

theless be traced back to the same social changes, namely the modernization of Danish society incited by the economic boom of the 1960's. Not only was higher education for the few changed into higher education for the many, resulting in problems of adjustment and student unrest, but women were also brought into the labor market *en masse*, creating no fewer adjustment problems. The need for day care institutions grew rapidly, for instance, when temporary relief had to be found for working mothers. This, in turn, created a great demand for qualified personnel, which only a special education and educational facilities, schools and teachers, could meet. *Teaching* the art of taking care of and instructing children, however, requires some kind of conceptual understanding of children's development. Hence a great need arose for theoretical contributions from educational and developmental psychology. Vygotsky and his school obliged, and Activity Theory subsequently formed the basis of much empirical and theoretical work in this field, which came to constitute the decisive forum for the dissemination of Activity Theory in Denmark. The scope and originality of this work are well represented in the paper of Sven Mørch and Søren Frost (p. 273).

8.

There are many ways in which a theoretical framework can support inquiry. It can provide guidelines for empirical research, which leads to the organic growth of a body of empirical results with supplementary theoretical observations. The article of Hedegaard and Chaiklin (p. 259) provides a good example of the artful combination of practice and theory.

It can also be the starting point for conceptual rethinking, leading to extensions of the framework, perhaps even transgressions of its boundaries. The open state of Activity Theory makes such work particularly relevant. After all, Activity Theory has not provided a definite solution to the crisis of psychology. A. A. Leontiev (1992:44), son of A. N. Leontiev, even goes so far as to say: "Vygotsky and Leontiev each intended to develop a new conceptual system, and each failed to do it. That is, it would appear, the next problem that will motivate the development of psychology in the decades to come." Actually, the concern of Danish general psychology has been to search for the missing elements in Activity Theory, while still remaining within its framework.¹⁷ In this collection, Jens Mammen's forceful article on the elements of psychology (p. 29) and Henrik Poulsen's astute discussion of conations (p. 17) are good examples of this approach.

A theoretical framework can also serve as the springboard to a different framework. The work of A. N. Leontiev serves this function in the *Berlin School* of Klaus Holzkamp, also called *Critical Psychology*, which can be

¹⁷ See for example Engelsted (1989) and (1992); Mammen (1989); and Poulsen (1989) and (1991).

considered a cousin of Activity Theory. Born of, and keeping alive, the social critique of the student rebellion years, Critical Psychology is a general psychology which places special emphasis on human emancipation.¹⁸ The critical acumen of Critical Psychology – here with Leontiev himself as the target – is exemplified in the contribution of Erik Axel and Morten Nissen (p. 67).

Yet, a theoretical framework should do more than this. It should also, like a good parent, provide confidence, make you trust your own judgment, and furnish you with a secure base from which you can move out and boldly explore the world. This is not, admittedly, the way theoretical frameworks usually function. More likely, they will hold you captive behind the self-erected borders of your own understanding, viewing different understandings with great suspicion and disdain. Evidently, such all too common bent and bias, when added to the truly great conceptual problems, makes the incoherence problem of psychology absolutely insoluble.

9.

An explicit objective of The Second Danish Conference of Activity Theory was, for this reason, to address the necessity and problem of going beyond the single understanding. This choice was hardly accidental. The biases of theories are merely special cases of the biases of ordinary life, and, like them, socially constituted. When social change upsets the latter, the former follow like Hegel's owl.

The breaking-up and opening of borders, which in more ways than one characterizes the social changes of recent years, does not leave psychology untouched. On the contrary, it not only forces the examination of new questions, it also urges the reexamination of old issues. A.A. Leontiev's reappraisal of Activity Theory quoted above, is a case in point.

Temporarily adopting Feyerabend's principles of theoretical proliferation and methodological pluralism¹⁹, the Danish conference set out to investigate this new window of opportunity. In addition to papers securely within Activity Theory, contributions from outside the tradition were invited, and authors were asked, if possible, to search for possibilities for alignment between views.

The call was heeded, as the contributions show. In his paper on the psychodynamics of activities and life projects, Preben Berthelsen hands us a possible synthesis of Activity Theory and Freudian psychodynamics (p. 83). Benny Karpatschhof, in his analysis of social anomia based on Activity Theory, returns to the discarded and forgotten social psychology of Le Bon, and proves that old issues can provide insight into contemporary under-

¹⁸ For an English introduction and appraisal see Tolman & Maiers (1991).

¹⁹ See Feyerabend (1988:34 note).

standings (p. 201). Arne Poulsen, in his thoroughly worked out analysis of the disembedding of human capacities in modernity, relates this phenomenon rather relevantly to Activity Theory (p. 141). Kinship is also evident in Erik Schultz', at the same time phenomenologically – and realistically – based, exposition of methods, content, and theory in humanistic research (p. 109), as it is in Ole Elstrup Rasmussen's deeply thought-provoking merging of issues from organizational psychology with general principles of social intercourse (p. 165).

Heterogeneity abounds, of course. But even with a scope spanning from Mogens Hansen's paper on the development of the conscious body, (p. 67), to Mads Hermansen's platform for modern didactics in postmodern society, (p. 131), the common ground is never out of sight.

Norms of orderly presentation made us choose a tripartite division of the contributions into those dealing with general psychological foundations, those dealing with the deep interrelationship between human social living and mind, and those dealing with more specific issues from educational psychology. This convenient partition should not, however, obscure the profound parity of the contributions. Across the different perspectives there is a common manifestation of the genuine intent of general psychology, namely the pursuit of proper units of analysis to be used in unraveling the intricacies of mind. Across the diverse comprehensions, there is a deep commitment that renders the human individual a true subject. Across the various views, there is a mutual assertion that it is imperative to recognize the societal nature of human life and, hence of human psychology.

The close affinity with the quest of Vygotsky and Activity Theory is obvious. Choosing *The Societal Subject* as title for the book is a recognition of this.

10.

Looking for the other person's insights rather than his mistakes turned the exercise into a constructive one. Suspension of criticism and unprincipled compromise, however, is not hereby advocated as a solution to the crisis of psychology; neither is eclecticism, pluralism, not to mention relativism, which Jerry Fodor (1984) rightfully teaches us to hate. Quite on the contrary, to approach the problem of incoherence, one must be committed to psychology's claim for scientific status. That is, one must be convinced that some underlying order of mind really exists, that a genuine prince lurks out there in the mist for Cinderella to find.

Or, if not a prince, then at least the elephant encountered by the wise, but blind, men of the old Indian fable. Being blind, each of them got very different images of the elephant, as they touched it from different angles. Being wise, they understood, however, that their incoherence problem could be overcome if, and only if, the existence of a real, if still undefined, beast was maintained. Further, they understood that the image of the next

person, however lopsided, rather than threatening their image, provided potential clues for its refinement, bringing it closer to the reality of the beast. That disparity of vision, once the equations are solved, is the source of vision in depth. Kirsten Baltzer's paper (p. 241), critically taking on one perspective after another in an attempt to capture the vicissitudes of the child in school, could be seen as an exemplary manifestation of this approach. If the coherency problem is to be tackled, the wisdom of this approach should not be ignored.

Adopting this approach, the Danish conference – paying tribute to the spirit if not the letter of Activity Theory – adopted general psychology's quest for synthesis. This was not without precedent. In 1882 Harald Høffding observed – quoted in part in Vygotsky's treatise on the crisis of psychology²⁰ – that, considering psychology's many sources from across all the sciences, it could be pursued in many ways and by many avenues. Consequently there would be not one, but many psychologies. However, with a psychology of subjectivity as pivot, a drawing together should naturally be pursued.²¹

And so – with history taking a full turn – the chickens have come home to roost.

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²⁰ See Vygotsky (1985:65).

²¹ See Høffding (1882:32).

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