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PROPOSALS AND PROBLEMS CONCERNING THE CONSTRUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY – The potential of contemporary art for the development of subjectivity[1]

In the first grade of an elementary school in Siegen, Tom (age 6) is noticed from the first day on because of his extremely violent behavior. Regardless of how insignificant a conflict may be, he always attempts to resolve it by means of direct force. He lives with his mother, who has to work during the day in order to provide for herself and her son. Their neighborhood abounds in circumstances connected with social problems: a home for the homeless, simplest housing facilities, and a high percentage of unemployed youth and adults. At school, Tom must now learn that violence and the use of violence are a serious offense. The teacher attempts to make this clear to the boy; the school management arranges several meetings with his mother. All of this is aimed at changing Tom's behavior.

We have the impression that Tom experiences school as something phony. It forces him to demonstrate behavior at school that would get him into real difficulties outside of school. His mother has brought Tom up according to the motto: "You have to defend yourself. Don't put up with being treated badly." Now, she is forced to transform that amount of pride she had in her son to being ashamed of his violent behavior.

In this double-bind situation, Tom has the following alternatives:

a. he can be insincere and hypocritical by demonstrating conformist behavior at school and continuing to behave violently on the street – and without discussing the matter with his mother or his teachers;

b. Tom can accept the "ideology" of nonviolent behavior and become a victim of his neighborhood

c. or he can become schizophrenic.

The example illustrates the fact that the way the education system must deal with the problem of violence is perverse at its core. For it is also a kind of violence to force a child to renounce the "language" of his own survival strategies. This type of violence exhibits approximately the same sort of logic as in teaching a child to be ashamed of being hungry.

Which other fundamental alternatives might the school have for dealing with this problem?

Our simple example has a very complex problematic structure. It demonstrates that violence is by no means a marginal problem, but, rather, a central problem of our society. But we cannot deal with this aspect here.

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Our example makes it quite clear that at present the school is less and less successful in literally "producing" the social coherence of our society by making knowledge, abilities, and attitudes general, by universalizing them.

Our example makes it quite clear that the school, with its traditional organization and structure of education no longer corresponds to the current dramatic economic and social changes, above all to the changes in the social function of knowledge.

Our example makes it quite clear that pedagogic action in the sense of influencing children and youth is no longer successful, that pedagogic action cannot simply replace one form of behavior with another by certain learning mechanisms.

The meaning and logic behind pedagogic action is not to be found in the **control of children and youths by adults** but, at the most, in the **control of the relationship between generations**, even better: in the development of a new structure for the relationship between generations.

With this stipulation, we return to the question posed above: how might the school deal with the problem of violence or, in this case, with Tom? It would have to enable him on a number of different levels to experience school as an intelligent place for teaching and learning where no violence is necessary and where knowledge, abilities, and attitudes can be learnt as relationships, not as "things", and that these relationships are subject to development and change.

In other words: how can school be understood and conceived of as a social place where teaching and learning are a dynamic system of relationships aimed at the construction of subjectivity? What does the construction of subjectivity entail?

In what follows we will present **theoretical and methodological aspects** of a case study. This study is designed to develop hypotheses for research on teaching as a social sphere, as a **developing system of teaching and learning**. The focus is on a Brazilian school in which we were astonished to be confronted with new forms of teaching and learning. The school is located in Juiz de Fora. It is a public school of the *rede municipial*.

The theoretical and methodological basis of the project is the category of activity, which we reinterpret with the use of G. Bateson's concept of levels of learning. This project is still in the planning phase.

At this school, various forms of aesthetic practice, especially avant-garde modern art, play a central role. From this case study we would like to extract hypotheses concerning the construction of subjectivity in new forms of learning. We do not reduce subjectivity to consciousness or to the "self" as the center of consciousness in the form of an immediate self-awareness.

The study should help us to formulate the following questions more precisely:

In what way is the subjectivity of children and youths today a social matter? How do a number of egos within individual children and youths cooperate and compete with one another? In which new forms of teaching and learning does a social subject express itself in children and youths – a subject that goes beyond the limits of the individual subject?

1. Leont'evs Activity Category Revisited on the Basis of Bateson's Levels of Learning

In the city of Juiz de Fora, state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, the Municipial Elementara (1st to 8th grade) School Olinda de Paula Magalhães has been implementing certain teaching techniques in accordance with an innovative proposal for the last seven years. This municipal school is situated in a low-income neighborhood, almost a slum, and it has around 1.oo students.

The proposal was put forth by the Portuguese language teacher Neida Braga, who was taking her master's degree at UFRJ in 1990. As a way of enhancing her practical work, she introduced her students to concrete poetry, which happened to be the theme of her thesis. Her proposal included the writing of poems on the part of her students as a form of feedback to check their learning of the contents of the syllabus. The response was immediate. Surprised at the results, she asked the art teacher to engage in a kind of joint project with the language and literature class. The idea was to illustrate what would arise from the literary creative process in the form of images, using the most advanced contemporary art techniques.

Alternative to writing poetry, the students could also write lyrics to songs. The students requested permission to present their work to the entire school in a kind of show. They wished to perform and sing the songs they had composed. This show was actually a provocation because there was a sort of war going on between two very violent rival gangs whose members attended the school. The show was a great success and the opposing gang that did not participate in the original show also requested the right to present a show. That was the beginning of active participation of all students who were in some way involved in the gang war.

With the support of the school headmaster, these teachers were able to attract the interest of other teachers and include them in an interdisciplinary endeavour which culminated in a poetry week. The students used the contents learned in biology, math, Portuguese, art, social studies and physical education plus the techniques acquired in the art classes, such as photography, engraving, painting, ceramics, sculpture in wood and acting, to create a series of works on a wide range of topics.

As a result of this work carried out by the teachers, there a was a sharp upsurge in the quality of the students' learning process. The teacher-student relationship became a relationship between individuals, partners in the teaching-learning process, since both were striding along a path with no predetermined model. The proposal was innovative for them, as well as for the school as an institution. The students' creativity demonstrated unknown potentials of their learning process to the teachers. No obstructions or lack of interest were generated as a reaction to this methodology. The violence inside the school gradually disappeared, as did drug use and thefts. The drop-out and failure rate decreased.

It is obvious that several problems needed to be overcome during these seven years, but the results of this process are striking, especially when one considers that students who finished the 8th grade and left for other schools keep coming back to visit their old school, practically every day, to meet teachers and peers. Today, the vacancies at the Olinda de Paula Magalhaes School are a matter of fierce competition and are quickly filled. Students who are admitted there acquire a new appreciation of their own identity and subjectivity.

From our participation in teaching lessons at the school, we have the following impression: Here, teaching is a sequence of patterns of a highly complex interaction and communication.

With these patterns, students and teachers continuously realize several mutually interconnected levels **simultaneously**:

- the level at which the **topic** is worked out and the **socio-communicative** level involved in the process

- the level of the **individuality** of the pupils and the level of the class as a "**community of learning**"

- the level of interaction among the pupils and the level of interaction with the teacher.

Apparently, pupils and teachers have highly developed abilities to **differentiate** among these levels. They are able to classify the often blurred delineations between these levels, but also between the literal and the metaphorical, between playfulness and seriousness, between reality and fantasy, in their own actions. This greatly aroused our curiosity.

How can Leont'ev's category of activity and Bateson's conception of levels of learning be used to comprehend and to describe the particular interactive and communicative quality of these processes?

In what follows, we would like to briefly discuss these two conceptions in the light of the following two questions: To what extent can we comprehend the relationships between learning and learning as a social formation, as a developing system of activities (Leont'ev 1979)? To what extent can that ability of pupils and teachers to differentiate between events or processes and their patterns be comprehended and described in terms of Bateson's conception of context (1972)?

Activity is not what an individual does. Rather, the individual consists in his activity. Activity is the mode of existence by which individuals establish themselves as subjects of their life processes. Equally, in this perspective the object of activity is nothing the individual relates to, it should rather be considered as something the individual constitutes by his activity. Only objects relating to his activities are actually objects for an individual.

Only within and by means of the process of activity does that which we refer to as subject and object of this process originate. What we call the "subject" and "object" of this process only comes into being as a result of two different perspectives on a developing system, the **system of subject–activity–object**.

In Leont'ev's view, activity has a systemic quality; it is a self-developing system and has a feedback quality. Effects can influence their own causes. This system is characterized by **nonlinear, circular causality**.

Nonetheless, human activity is not simply a matter of individual production. It is simultaneously and inseparably also social exchange and social distribution, as Engeström (1987) has demonstrated in his further development of Leont'ev's approach. Human activity always take place within a society that is dominated by the division of labour and other regulations. Accordingly, in activity, we always put a **social relationship** to reality and to ourselves into practice.

In my opinion, Leont'ev himself does not sufficiently expound upon the feedback quality of activity. For one necessary result of this quality is the hierarchic structure of activity. Precisely this aspect was developed by G. Bateson in his conception of context and of levels of learning.

a. The question of the context.

In daily association with other human beings, in contact with socially formed objects, in games, at home, and on the street: in all of these situations our children learn **something** as, e.g., actions and, at the same time, "**contexts**". Whenever we learn something, we also **simultaneously** form a context.

What we as observers attribute to children and youths, but also to ourselves, as character is nothing other than a context we have learned, e.g., dependence, boldness, timidity, precision, passivity, optimism. Bateson even goes one step further and assumes that entire cultures have such types of character. It seems that living beings have no alternative but to develop such sorts of character, such habits.

Habits do have their advantages. They organize the world; they make our own actions and those of others predictable. **But, above all, habits have disadvantages.** They confirm themselves and are thus not very susceptible to change. This is a circular process. If I am afraid of giving a lecture in English, then I will certainly accomplish the task in such a way that I will have every reason to be afraid of giving the next lecture. Contexts, "habits", are taken for granted; they are not questioned. Usually, they are not even perceptible to oneself because they seem so "natural" and so much a matter of course.

The significance of the concept of context leads Bateson to differentiate among individual logical levels of learning.

b. The question of levels of learning

The starting point for Bateson's hierarchy of levels of learning is a logical typology developed by Whitehead and Russell in *Principia Mathematica* and having to do with elements, sets, and sets of sets.

Two examples might serve to illustrate this point: **Playing** is not a particular activity, but, rather, a particular organization of activities. Playing is a context (a set) in which the same activities (elements) attain a certain relevance and meaning which they do not have in other contexts. The **exploratory behavior** exhibited by animals cannot be forced to be discontinued by negative reinforcement, for it is not on the same logical level as an individual exploratory act. Exploring surroundings is aimed at collecting information about whether something is dangerous or not. If an object is found to be dangerous, then this is a negative reinforcement for the individual action, but a positive one for the context of exploratory behavior.

If we learn meaningless syllables, then we do not only learn such meaningless syllables, but also how to learn meaningless syllables. Bateson calls the learning of meaningless syllables **learning I**. Learning how to learn meaningless syllables is what he calls **learning II** – learning a habit, learning character.

Learning II is actually an inseparable accompaniment to learning I. It means learning to learn, the acquisition of the context or structure of some type of learning I. Thus, common descriptions of a person's "character" are actually characterizations of the results of learning

II. "It follows that learning II acquired in infancy is likely to persist through life". (Bateson 1972, 301).

Thus, what is learned at the level of learning II is of a contextual nature. This kind of learning is practically indelible; it tends to be maintained during the organism's entire life. Contexts are neither true nor false, neither good nor bad: "It is like seeing an image in an inkblot. This is neither correct nor incorrect. It is simply a way of seeing the inkblot." (1972, 388) This way of seeing cannot be checked against reality either since, on the practical side, this behavior tends to confirm itself. It is also useless, in any educational, didactic, or behavioral therapeutic sense, to attempt to make someone conscious of his character or of some characteristic with the intention of effecting some change. Applied to our example, this means: Tom's undesirable behavior cannot simply be replaced by some other, desirable behavior.

What, then, is learning III? Learning how to form habits, learning how to learn to learn. To return to our example about syllables: learning syllables; learning to learn syllables; learning how to learn to learn syllables. Thus, it is essential to realize that this is not replacing one habit with another, but, rather, **going beyond the level of habits**.

Learning III is a rare event, produced by **the contradictions** of learning II. On level III, the individual learns to control, limit and direct his learning II. He becomes conscious of his habits and their formation. "Certainly it must lead to a grater flexibility in the premises acquired by the process of learning II – a freedom of their bondage" (Bateson 1972, 304). But what kind of inner contradictions generate learning III ?

A general description of these inner contradictions is worked out in Bateson's theory of the double bind. In double-bind situations, an individual who is intensely involved in some relationship receives two messages or commands which contradict each other – and the individual is unable to comment on the messages, i.e., he cannot make a meta-communicative statement: "If you say this stick is real, I will strike you with it. If you say this stick is not real, I will strike you with it. If you don't say anything, I will strike you with it" (Bateson 1972, 208).

But what if the individual is able to comment in a meta-communicative way upon the contradictory messages or commands he receives? According to Bateson, the individual "might reach up and take the stick away from the master." In other words, he may rise above the constraints of the contexts and break them. Learning III is motivated by the resolution of the contradictions of level II.

c. The question of a new subject.

In learning II, the object is seen as a problem possessing its own objective dynamics outside the subject, as Engeström points out (1987, 140 pp). Here, the individual is presented with a problem and he tries to solve the problem. In learning III the problem or the task itself must be created; it must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are troubling, puzzling, and uncertain. Here the object system is seen as containing the subject within itself. Furthermore, the quality of the subject changes radically. As Bateson points out, "But every freedom from the bondage of habits must be characterized by a profound redefinition of one's self. If I remain at the level of learning II, then 'I' am the entirety of all of the characteristics that I designate as my character. 'I' am my habits of acting and perceiving in context (...) Selfhood is a product or aggregate of learning II. To the degree that a man achieves learning III, and learns to perceive and act in terms of the contexts of contexts, his

"self" will take on a sort of irrelevance. The concept of self will no longer function as a nodal argument in the punctuation of experience."

"The resolution of contraries reveals a world in which a personal identity merges into all the processes of relationship in some vast ecology or aesthetics of cosmic interactions. (...) Every detail of the universe is seen as proposing a view of the whole." (1972, 306).

An individual able to break the stick is reaching a new level, constructing a new type of subjectivity. What is the particular quality of this new subjectivity? What are its dimensions and its perspectives? In which forms does this quality express itself, and, finally, what sort of social quality does it have?

Bateson notes that to demand this level of performance of some humans and other mammals is sometimes pathogenic: "Even the attempt at Level III can be dangerous, and some fall by the wayside. These are often labeled by psychiatry as psychotic, and many of them find themselves inhibited from using the first person pronoun" (Bateson 1972, 305 –306).

We are not simply concerned with abandoning a previous context and establishing a new one in its place. Rather, it is much more a case of remodeling a previous context so that a **meta-context** can be attained. This requires a reorganization of the entire communication and interaction system. **To master a context of contexts**: doesn't this demand much too much of a single individual, or, to put the question in another way, doesn't this require a new subject that exists and works in a **collective form** such as in a "community of learning"?

In our opinion, these theoretical and methodological aspects result in the following fundamental perspective for research: in the form of a school portrait and utilizing elements of activity theory, we present teaching and learning as a developing system of relationships. In doing so, we are not concerned with describing how students and teachers attend to patterns or contexts with reference to their origin or realization, in the sense of patterns of teacher and pupil behavior and their interactions. In the case study we are much more concerned with "portraying" the new quality mentioned above.

Thus, we are not concerned with how individuals develop and realize contexts. Instead, we inquire: **What enables teachers and students to produce which relations in a particular situation?** Which factors encourage or impede or prevent the development of this meta-level? The focus of our case study is on various forms of aesthetic praxis and modern art. We suspect that these contain the decisive potential enabling teachers and students to master a context of contexts, in other words, to reorganize the entire communication and interaction system of teaching and learning.

As we see it, the form of the case study results from the fact that we are breaking new ground here. We are not testing hypotheses of a basic problem, but, rather, we wish to formulate an outline of a problem in the first place. To portray a school and its practices according to a particular line of inquiry, it is necessary to make use of all available knowledge, of various heuristic methods such as narrative interviews, teacher and student portraits, biographical charts, etc., in order to reconstruct the novel elements of the praxis as far as possible.

Nevertheless, a case study is never simply restricted to registering unique and singular aspects. It is always concerned with the interaction between singular and general aspects. It is especially well suited to expressing the actual complexity of the object under study and thus to avoiding rash generalizations. But this does not mean that a case study is sharply opposed to

generalizations. The particular is always incomparable, but every communication presupposes generalization. On the other hand, there can be no generalization without the particular. A separation of the general from the particular is illusory. Just as understanding the particular always presupposes general concepts, understanding can only follow from understanding the particular.

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