

Theories, Conceptions, Paradigms

**Ideological Prolegomena
of the Soviet-Russian Activity Theory**

S.F. Sergeev

Saint Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg, Russia

DOI: 10.30727/0235-1188-2019-62-5-44-61

Original research paper

Abstract

The article examines the system-methodological and conceptual foundations of the psychological activity theory that arose in the Soviet Union under the influence of the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. The author demonstrates the process of incorporation of Marxism-Leninism dogmas into the canonical form of the activity theory as a scientific knowledge that does not need any scientific confirmation. The pseudoscientific discourse that arose at the same time served to strengthen the position of the ideologists of the bureaucratic system, who found “objective confirmations” of the truth of Marx’s teachings in the data of psychological science. The scientific community, subjected to ideological transformation, tried to defend itself from the destructive influence of ideology, giving rise to special forms of relations in the scientific and psychological environment, which led to the struggle and confrontation of scientific schools and groups. As a result of ideological expansion, psychological knowledge has become to some extent a tool for the bureaucratic system to overpower scientific dissent. That was clearly manifested in the discussion on the results of the Zagorsk experiment, in which an incorrect, partially falsified, attempt was made to prove the development of the human psyche of children born deaf and blind. The influence of ideology can also be traced in the confrontation of scientific schools in physics, genetics, biology and physiology. The article discusses prospects and new trends in the development of the activity theory after exclusion of the ideological concepts of Soviet socialism from its system-conceptual foundations. We observe the formation of new psychological concepts that reflect non-classical and post-non-classical forms of scientific rationality. Attempts are made to create and study the models of psyche

developed within the framework of the theory of organized complexity and the concepts of autopoietic self-organization and evolution.

Keywords: activity theory, ideology, system approach, self-organization, complex systems.

Sergey F. Sergeev – D.Sc. in Psychology, Professor at the Saint Petersburg State University.

s.f.sergeev@spbu.ru

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6677-8320>

For citation: Sergeev S.F. (2019) Ideological Prolegomena of the Soviet-Russian Activity Theory. *Russian Journal of Philosophical Sciences = Filosofskie nauki*. Vol. 62, no. 5, pp. 44–61. DOI: 10.30727/0235-1188-2019-62-5-44-61

Идеологические пролегомены теории деятельности

С.Ф. Сергеев

Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, Санкт-Петербург, Россия

DOI: 10.30727/0235-1188-2019-62-5-44-61

Оригинальная исследовательская статья

Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются и анализируются возникшие под влиянием господствовавшей в Советском Союзе идеологии марксизма-ленинизма особенности системно-методологического и понятийного базиса психологической теории деятельности. Показан процесс вращивания догматов марксизма-ленинизма в каноническую форму деятельностного подхода под видом не требующего научного подтверждения научного знания. Возникавший при этом псевдонаучный дискурс служил усилению позиций идеологов административно-хозяйственной системы, находивших «объективные подтверждения» истинности учения Маркса в данных психологической науки. Научная среда, подвергаемая идеологической трансформации, пыталась защититься от деструктивного влияния идеологии, порождая особые формы отношений в научно-психологической среде, что вело к борьбе и противостоянию научных школ и коллективов. В результате идеологической экспансии

психологическое знание превратилось в некоторой мере в инструмент борьбы административно-командной системы с научным инакомыслием. Это отчетливо проявилось в дискуссии по результатам Загорского эксперимента (эксперимента «загорской четверки»), в котором была сделана некорректная, с элементами фальсификации, попытка формирования человеческой психики у слепоглохих от рождения. Влияние идеологии прослеживалось и в противостоянии научных школ в физике, генетике, биологии и физиологии. Обсуждаются перспективы развития и новые направления деятельностного подхода в психологии, возникшие после исключения из его системно-понятийного базиса идеологием развитого социализма. Появляются психологические концепции, использующие системные представления, отражающие неклассические и постнеклассические формы научной рациональности. Делаются попытки создания и исследования моделей психики разработанных в рамках концепций организованной сложности, с использованием теоретических конструктов и представлений включающих понятия аутопоэтической самоорганизации и эволюции.

Ключевые слова: теория деятельности, идеология, системный подход, самоорганизация, сложные системы.

Сергеев Сергей Федорович – доктор психологических наук, профессор Санкт-Петербургского государственного университета.
s.f.sergeev@spbu.ru
<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6677-8320>

Для цитирования: Сергеев С.Ф. (2019) Идеологические пролегомены теории деятельности // Философские науки. 2019. Т. 62. № 5. С. 44–61. DOI: 10.30727/0235-1188-2019-62-5-44-61

Introduction

In the history of Russian psychology of the 20th century it is difficult to find a more famous, popular, outwardly understandable to everyone and everyone but at the same time deeply incomplete and contradictory theory than the activity theory, which once occupied the minds of leading representatives of Marxist philosophy and psychology. For a long time, it was considered the main achievement of Soviet philosophy and psychology, being both an ideological tool and one of the tenets of the social sciences of the Soviet period. Al-

though we came to understand this fact much later, with the collapse of the Soviet ideological apparatus and the consequent reduction in the pressure of the scientific bureaucracy on science. However, at present this topic is considered non-public, criticizing the ideology of the era of developed socialism is still a taboo, although the key people and executives of that time are no longer with us. This holds back the development of the scientific basis of Russian psychology and the activity theory itself as a scientific systemic concept explaining the forms and mechanisms of a person's mental activity in his relations with the world and society.

The influence of ideology on the psychological activity theory

G.V. Sukhodolskiy, a recognized authority in the field of activity psychology and a professor of Saint Petersburg State University, comes to an unexpected and possibly harsh conclusion in one of his last published articles on the dramatic history of appearance and development of the postulates of the activity theory, stating the following: "The psychological activity theory attributed to A.N. Leontiev turned out to be a fiction. He himself did not leave a clear account of at least the foundations of this theory" [Sukhodolsky 2006, 330]. The following are even more serious assessments: "After the death of A.N. Leontiev, his son A.A. Leontiev and two other respected psychologists independently tried to reconstruct the main provisions of the Leontiev activity theory. And three different versions appeared" [Sukhodolsky 2006, 330].

We would like to leave the fact that the assessments of G.V. Sukhodolsky are categorical and sometimes excessively emotional to his conscience. He had the full moral right, being the author of a generalized psychological activity theory [Sukhodolsky 1988] and an active participant in the battle of ideas of that time, which, unfortunately, often turned into confrontation between scientific schools. However, dissatisfaction with the conceptual framework and ideological versions of the activity theory of A.N. Leontiev and his comrades was expressed by many other representatives of psychological science and practice independently of each other and at different times [Jones

2009; Dubrovsky 1994; Orlov 2003; Lecture, Garai 2015; Platonov 1972; Smirnov 1993].

In the activity theory there is no single version accepted by all. The canonical version of the theory is attributed to A.N. Leontiev, but he himself has not assessed it as a complete scientific theory. Being a serious and responsible person, he understood its overly expressed ideological orientation and never publicly emphasized his authorship in the activity theory, presenting it as a result of collective work, and positioned himself only as one of the participants in the creation process [Ivannikov 1999]. Nevertheless, it is Leontiev's version that can be considered the main one, as it is present in almost all the works devoted to the activity approach in psychology. There is a number of adjustments to the theory proposed by the students and followers of A.N. Leontiev, which reflect their personal understanding of the topic under discussion. We can say that these are quite different forms of systemic representations, although they are united by the general concept of "activity." It should be noted that many authors of the Soviet period, touching on the topic of activity, tried to emphasize their connection with the Leontiev school. This gave them a certain social status and a special role in the psychological science of that time.

The specific of the humanities of the Soviet period was their almost complete dependence on the ideology of the administrative command system based on vulgar interpretations of the provisions of materialist philosophy and the ideology of Marxism. Its influence permeated all spheres of social life and practice, leaving a special imprint on relations in society between representatives of different professional and social groups, imposing a ritual form over them. For example, there was a special template for texts of scientific papers and reports. The work was supposed to begin with quotations from the classics of Marxism-Leninism with the obligatory mention of the "historical decisions" of the congresses of the communist party. This was an unshakable rule. It was impossible to state opinions differing from those prescribed by officially recognized authorities representing well-known scientific schools. Many scientists were

forced to present their works as attempts to “develop and deepen” theories created in the process of collective scientific activity. The “social” dominated the “individual” in full accordance with the Marxist theory of social development. Inspired by the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, the forms of behavior and the presentation of scientific results were not only cultivated and respected in the scientific community but also replicated in the public mind by the media and propaganda, forming the image of the “Soviet scientist as the builder of communism.” Along with the obvious negative impact on science and the scientific environment as a whole, these rituals in relation to specific scientists often gave a positive result, protecting them from repression, persecution and purges from the administrative system. We must admit that most of the scientists of that time understood not only the conventionality and obvious absurdity of the imposed rules of the game, but also that as long as they were formally respected, the path to freedom of creativity was opened and reinforced by state funding,

Almost every major psychologist at a certain stage in the development of his scientific career puts forward his own “theory of everything.” This is quite logical and natural due to the synthetic, generalizing the individual experience of researchers, the nature of psychology. In order for a theory to become “truly scientific,” the author of the Soviet period had to show the natural science, Marxist “roots” of his creation and justify that it belongs to the “true,” officially recognized scientific and philosophical doctrines.

The absolute authority in Soviet academic psychology of the 1950s was A.N. Leontiev, who defeated S.L. Rubinstein and L.S. Vygotsky in the political and ideological argument, having received in 1949 a blessing from Y.A. Zhdanov, a head of the Department of Science of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks. This gave him the formal right for many years to represent the Moscow School of Psychology on behalf of the government [Leontiev 2003; Ovchinnikov et al. 1983]. Leontiev, being a member of the Communist Party, “never divided the work into political, scientific, pedagogical, etc. Adherence to the

party penetrated all forms of his activity, and his speeches at party meetings were distinguished by their efficiency, integrity and acuteness of raising questions...” [Ovchinnikov et al. 1983, 26]. In all fairness, we must admit that A.N. Leontiev was able to protect the members of the Moscow Scientific School of Psychology from the negative influence of official Soviet ideology using an ideologized, largely dogmatic form of activity theory, creating an internal environment for the growth and development of scientific knowledge. The achievements of this school in the field of theoretical psychology are undeniable and, of course, are a significant contribution to domestic and world science.

The development of psychology under ideological restrictions required the solution of not only scientific problems but also political and administrative issues. Much has been written about the difficult relations of the founders of the activity theory with the authorities and with each other [Orlov 2003; Brothering 2013; Zinchenko 1993; Leontiev & Leontiev 2003], although it should be noted that their fate was quite typical of the scientific and creative intelligentsia of the era of class struggle. The time was tough, it required the ability to survive and win in any conditions.

As a result, by the second half of the last century in the Soviet Union, with active scientific and administrative participation of the Leningrad and Moscow (with the Kharkov period [Zinchenko 2013]) scientific schools and their leaders, S.L. Rubinstein and A.N. Leontiev, a stable, largely ideological, concept of psychological study and explanation of human creative activity was created. It was called the “activity theory” and, in our opinion, was, to a certain extent, a compromise between scientific psychology, communist ideology and materialistic philosophy. The result of this, in our opinion, artificial combination was a certain scientific limitation and, to some extent, the dogmatism and incompleteness of the theory, which was most acutely felt in the scientific community of the 1970–1980s and is reflected in the content of scientific discussions of that time [Sukhodolsky 1988]. Apparently, a certain decline of interest in

the activity theory, which began in the 1990s with the beginning of perestroika, was also associated with this.

At the same time, the activity theory turned out to be not as much of a harmless product of Soviet ideology as it might seem at first glance. Its active introduction into the practice of building socialism was accompanied by instances of active fight against dissent and opponents. A vivid example illustrating the struggle of representatives of the activity approach with their opponents was the Zagorsk experiment on the education of deafblind children from birth. According to the adherents of the classical activity approach, who participated in the scientific, ideological and practical substantiation and implementation of this project (V.V. Davydov, E.V. Ilyenkov, A.N. Leontiev), the human psyche is formed only through objective activity, and speech arises and successfully develops on the basis of this activity. This is exactly what was proven in the Zagorsk experiment. However, it was further shown that the data and procedure of the experiment were distorted and falsified in order to please the ideological dogmas that prevailed at that time [Dubrovsky 2018]. Paradoxical as it may seem, but 50 years after the end of the discussion about the Zagorsk experiment, we are witnessing a revival of old ideologues and dogmas of activity theory and attempts to give them a scientific status, despite facts indicating the opposite. Modern interpreters of the activity approach are trying to find the features of new knowledge in the constructions of the classics of the activity theory, trying to give them the status of a theoretical basis of psychological science. We suddenly find features of non-classical relativistic psychology in the cultural-historical constructions of Vygotsky [Asmolov 1997], although they are not there.

It was almost impossible to avoid the ideological influence on psychology carried out by the mechanisms of state power at the stage of the emergence and development of an activity approach due to the political and social realities of a totalitarian society. Note that ideology had a negative impact not only on the humanities but also on the development of physics, physiology and genetics.

Paradoxically, the sources of dogmatism in science are scientific schools and a blind faith in the existence of ultimate truth, cultivated in scientific groups. In this regard, the mechanisms of scientific faith are the same as the mechanisms of religious faith. They form adepts of emerging forms of attitudes toward knowledge, nourishing and radicalizing the struggle of scientific schools between each other. For example, A.S. Sonin [Sonin 1994] has touched on the use of ideological methods in the struggle between Soviet scientific schools in theoretical physics. Similar processes of persecution of ideologically alien scientists up to the destruction of entire scientific fields and schools took place in biology and genetics (Lysenkoism and Michurin biology) [Aleksandrov 1992], neurophysiology (dispute with the school of K.S. Koshtoyants). Cybernetics has been called a “reactionary pseudoscience.” The dogmatization of communist ideas in ideology subsequently led to a split in the communist movement, giving rise to conflicts between “fraternal” countries.

Over time, the activity theory began to lose the status of “the only true doctrine” and moved from the catechism of nomenclature socialism to the arsenal of the living psychological knowledge under discussion. The development of new “ideology-free” versions of the psychological concept of activity continued uninterruptedly during perestroika, before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in post-perestroika Russia (V.G. Aseev, V.P. Zinchenko, A.V. Karpov, E.N. Sergienko, G.V. Sukhodolsky and others). It was a difficult and contradictory process of liberating psychology from the old ideological bonds with the simultaneous formation of new ones that came to us from abroad along with the postulates of the ideology of the Western “free world.” The deideologization of psychology was uneven, with varying speeds and degrees of success, accompanied by increased attention from the psychological community to one or another imported scientific trend.

The collapse of the scientific fabric of Soviet psychological science during the period of perestroika destroyed along with its ideology the organizing vector of its development, which was embodied in the activity theory. Separate private points of view on activity and its

structure, local psychic phenomena, forms of behavior, etc., began to acquire the status of independent theoretical constructions, often of low quality. There was a well-known devaluation of theoretical knowledge in psychology [Zhuravlev & Ushakov 2011].

The ideological roots of the classical activity theory and the beginning of post-non-classical theory

The foundations of the ideas of activity lie in German classical philosophy and are associated primarily with the Hegelian explanation of the rational activity of a person who structures the world. According to Hegel, this is the result of the action of the spirit as an immaterial intelligent substance that rationalizes the world. Marxism, denying idealism, has removed the concept of spirit from this scheme (depriving psychology of the subject of study) and began to consider activity itself the organizing principle of human activity. In fact, we began to talk about the special properties of a system that includes a person as a demiurge, an active actor and creator. To a certain extent, one can talk about the theory of self-organization and self-organizing systems, but this branch of the system approach, unfortunately, at that time was not able to develop for ideological reasons, associated to a certain extent with a mechanistic Marxist understanding of the “system” category.

The concept of activity, according to the apt assertion of a classic of the Soviet system approach Y.G. Yudin, was an attempt to create a “universal characteristic of the human world” [Yudin 1975, 272]. Using the category “activity,” the founders of the activity approach tried to solve the problem of the origin of the psyche and explain the possibilities of the human mind in all its forms and manifestations. The basic works in this direction were the works of K. Marx *Theses on Feuerbach* [Marx 1955] and *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* [Marx 1974]. It followed from them that only through active interaction with reality man transforms nature and himself, giving meaning to the world that he encounters in his perceptions. Hence the revolutionary appeal of Marx: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is

to change it.” [Marx 1955]. Only by appropriating the forms of human activity, a person becomes a rational being that goes beyond the framework of the animal world.

The ideas of philosophical materialism have found their supporters and followers in Soviet psychology, becoming its official worldview. The origins of the psychological activity theory lie in the works of E.V. Ilyenkov [Ilyenkov 2009] and A.N. Leontiev [Leontiev 1975], who formed the conceptual framework of the classical version of the theory. Now the theory is supplemented with many extensions, indicating the existence of various options for creative human activity and the problems of the activity theory. According to V.P. Zinchenko and E.B. Morgunova, “in the Soviet Union there were two paradigms of psychology: cultural-historical and psychological activity theory, created by the same people. For the first of them, laid down in the works of L. S. Vygotsky, the central problem was and remains the problem of the mediation of the psyche and consciousness, while for the second, which interprets the works of Marx, the problem of objectivity of both external and internal mental activity” [Zinchenko & Morgunov 1994, 103]. V.P. Zinchenko considered activity theory to be a product of a totalitarian system [Zinchenko 1993]. This point of view was supported later in the work of A.B. Orlov, who believes that after the break in the early 1930s of Vygotsky and Leontiev, the latter created an activity theory that “lost contact with the individual life, individual being of a person, with experiences as a universal context that preserves human integrity. And because of this, it became a blind lead. Moreover, it led all Soviet psychology into a dead end” [Orlov 2003]. According to Orlov, the cultural-historical theory of Vygotsky turned out to be more vital, but then “it only hid for a while” [Orlov 2003]. Peter Jones believes that the activity theory is based on “an erroneous interpretation of the Marxian concept of activity (or labor), as well as his research method” [Jones 2009]. The opinion of D.I. Dubrovsky agrees his views, stating that the “‘activity approach’ expressed the position of orthodox Marxology, nourished its ultra-sociological attitudes. Hence the denial of the role of natural, including genetic, factors in personality formation, which

have become widespread and appeared as an unshakable Marxist truth thanks to the efforts of many philosophers and psychologists, especially A.N. Leontiev” [Dubrovsky 1994, 7–8].

Attempts to develop the activity theory were made by many other researchers of the Soviet period, but most of their work was unsystematic, often ideological, and was aimed at using the canonical postulates of the theory to justify solutions to particular versions of specific practical problems.

In theoretical terms, in canonical versions of the psychological activity theory, one can single out the theoretical schemes of S.L. Rubinstein, A.N. Leontiev, A.G. Asmolov, V.V. Davydov, G.V. Sukhodolsky. Each of them, in due time, claimed the completeness of the used system-conceptual basis, sufficient, in the authors’ opinion, to create explanatory models in psychology, but for some reason was not in demand and was never completed.

The key to the activity theory is the question of the possibilities and limits of applicability of the systemic methodology in the humanities-historical knowledge. There is currently no answer to it. According to V.P. Zinchenko, it is impossible to create a unified activity theory, since this is an infinity, which cannot be dressed in theoretical clothes. The excessive determinism of a theory incapable of explaining the creative and spontaneous principle in a person, and the expressed technocratic attitude in which a person is regarded as an automaton deprived of freedom of choice are criticized [Zinchenko 1993]. The problems of the psychological activity theory have become especially acute with the advent of new tasks of practical psychology in explaining the effects of organized complexity that arise in the modern technogenic world [Sergeev 2014]. He shows failure and even helplessness of the activity theory in questions of forecasting and analysis of future results in network structures of global communications. The concepts of feedback, regulation, and adaptation used in the theory proved to be insufficient [Sergeev 2012]. Rational approaches have also recently raised doubts among researchers. There is a crisis of theoretical psychology, inevitably leading to a change in its basis and the search for alternatives.

Everyone is waiting for the emergence of a new theory of the psyche, and we need to state that, in our opinion, the outlines of a new conceptual basis have already been set, which can be called the “post-non-classical activity theory.” So far, this is just a symbiosis of ideas from classical psychology and the theory of self-organizing systems and environments that considers the functioning of social and biological autopoietic systems, their interaction, development and evolution. However, the methodological foundations of the post-non-classical activity theory are already clearly visible and reflected in the works of V.A. Lektorsky and V.S. Stepin, developing ideas of non-classical and post-non-classical rationality within the framework of the concept of epistemological constructivism [Knyazeva 2006]. It consistently combines the synergetic paradigm (S.P. Kurdyumov, G.G. Malinetsky), activism (F. Varela, E.N. Knyazeva, M. Merleau-Ponty, E. Roche, E. Thompson), radical and social constructivism (E. von Glasersfeld, N. Luhmann), social constructionism (K.J. Gergen), the theory of autopoiesis (H. Maturana, F. Varela) and complexity paradigms in self-developing network and reflective environments (V.I. Arshinov, K. Mainzer, V.G. Budanov, K.K. Delokarov, V.E. Lepskiy).

Despite the rapid development of this discourse, it is too early to talk about its deep psychological content, leading to the creation of a non-classical and post-non-classical psychological activity theory. However, the problems of self-organization of the psyche already have independent significance in studies related to the evolution of the network world and the technogenic environment [Dubrovsky 2013], are taken into account when analyzing the work of social and complex ergatic and educational systems.

Not all the works published up to date using the term “post-non-classical psychology” are actually related to it. Most often, these are updated versions of old classic activity schemes. But at the same time, researchers are interested in the processes of self-organization of wildlife, cognitive models of evolving complexes, network and quantum representations that underlie the work of the human brain and consciousness [Arshinov & Budanov 2018; Knyazeva 2015; Petrenko 2018].

Speaking about the activity theory as a whole, one cannot fail to note its positive impact on the revival and development of Russian psychology, especially its general psychological basis [Lektorsky & Garai 2015]. It transferred psychology from the field of ideas of common sense and practice to the field of scientific knowledge, made it possible for many areas of scientific and practical activity to appear and develop within the framework of a single methodological basis, and led to the emergence of effective scientific schools and promising areas of scientific research in psychology.

We can hope that new areas of theoretical research in psychology, based on modern editions and the methodology of the activity approach, will be able to avoid the influence of the ideologists of the modern world, and will open a new stage in the development of Russian and world psychology. Otherwise, we will once again imperceptibly find ourselves in the arms of a new ideology, and everything will repeat itself in a closed cycle of social self-organization.

Findings

1. In the works of the representatives of the Moscow and Leningrad psychological schools A.N. Leontiev, L.S. Vygotsky, S.L. Rubinstein, the canonized versions of the activity theory are psychological and psychologized interpretations of the provisions of the philosophy of dialectical materialism.

2. The activity theory made a huge impact on the theory and practice of state building in the USSR, becoming the scientific, psychological and ideological justification of the socialist administrative bureaucratic system and directive management methods.

3. The ideological roots of the psychological activity theory are associated with the dominance in the basis of Soviet science of a vulgar, simplified form of materialism in the form of a philosophy of Marxism-Leninism, postulating the primacy of the social over the individual, justifying the dictatorship of the proletariat and authoritarianism.

4. The activity theory in its canonical versions is to some extent a compromise between scientific psychology, communist ideology and materialistic philosophy, which leads to some of its scientific limitations, dogmatism and incompleteness.

5. The demands of practice and the change in the status of psychology in the modern world require new approaches to the development of a psychological activity theory based on the achievements of science with a new theoretical basis, cleared of ideological layers of the past.

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