

GRAPPLING WITH THE STRUCTURAL FROM A SITUATED PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract.

The aims of this article are threefold. Firstly, the article is an attempt to contribute to discussions about what a Marxist psychology might look like, from an impression of Marx and Marxism generally having much too little to say about people's everyday lives and the situated and practical aspects of people's mental life. Secondly, the article links this discussion to the relationship between method and critical thinking and the importance of a critical position that does not voice critique from some potentially totalizing platform, nor from some detached position of "nowhere". The former is a risk in much Marxist theorizing. The latter is a risk in much post-structuralist critique, as discussed in relation to the work of Michel Foucault. Finally, taking a point of departure in an empirical example and ideas from German-Danish critical psychology, the text's overall ambition is to outline and discuss how a subject-scientific psychology can include and develop its attention to the organizational, structural and political dimensions of people's everyday lives.

Keywords: *Marxism, Foucault, critical psychology, critique, subject-scientific standpoint, situated practice-research, power*

INTRODUCTION.

As a teacher at a Danish university, I regularly present myself as a critical psychologist, who works from a so-called subject-scientific perspective, first developed by the German psychologist Klaus Holzkamp (1927-1995) and further developed by, amongst many others, a number of Danish psychologists (Axel, 2002; Dreier, 2008; Schraube, 2009; Højholt, 2011; Nissen, 2012). Presenting this German-Danish version of critical psychology, a thing that never fails to puzzle people is how a psychology that claims to be critical can take as its point of departure people's own perspectives on their own situated practices, and then, on top of that, claim to relate this theoretically to the writings of Marx? Does the world we live in today not confront so many huge social, cultural and environmental problems that it seems we rather need a psychology that takes as its point of departure an understanding of the overall political, structural and societal workings of our societies? And is this not exactly what an interest in Marx is all about: realizing that the subject matter of psychology is historical and societal through and through? If not for other reasons, then at least because psychology compared to, for example, sociology seems to show a distinct lack of self-reflective awareness of the

discipline's relationship to wider cultural and socio-political trends and developments.

These are certainly valid and relevant objections and concerns, and perhaps for the same reason, objections and concerns that were raised numerous times during the conference on Marxism and psychology in which I presented the paper this article is based on (<http://marxpsyconference.teocripsi.com>). The concept of "critique" carries connotations of analytical distance and detachment. This is so for good reason, since not only Marx, but also more recent theories of critique and power, for example the important work of Michel Foucault, stress the indispensable need to reflexively and critically examine the conditions of our own agency and becoming. Despite obvious differences, both Marx and Foucault relate the preservation of oppressive power relations to our day-to-day participation in specific practices that afford compliance with certain ideas, norms and modes of action. Thus it may seem rather naive to insist on a psychology that takes as its point of departure people's own first-person perspectives on their everyday-life activities, and furthermore claims that this constitutes a possible starting point for critical, let alone *Marxist*, psychology. Nevertheless, it is this endeavour that I will try to argue for and discuss here. Firstly, by pursuing a train of thought in Marx's work that I think is neglected in much Marxist theorizing, even though it presents an important counterweight to the tiresome tendency for totalization and determinism in Marxist theory and practice. Secondly, by discussing the work of Foucault and the challenges his work poses to understanding societal power relations from a situated subject-scientific standpoint.

My aim is threefold. Firstly, I hope to initiate discussion about what a Marxist psychology might look like, from an impression of Marx and Marxism generally having relatively little to say about people's everyday lives and the situated and practical aspects of human mental life – including here the *lived* dialectics between human individuality, subjectivity and agency and the institutional and structural configurations of our societies. Secondly, I wish to examine whether it is possible to develop a way of carrying out critical research that does not voice critique from some potentially totalizing platform (which I think can be identified in much Marxist theorizing), but neither from some detached position of "nowhere" (which I correspondingly find to be a risk in much post-structuralist theorizing, discussed here in relation to the work of Michel Foucault). And last but not least, I hope to use the text as an opportunity to address some challenges that I think German-Danish critical psychology far too often fails to address.

Back in the 1980s, many psychologists in Denmark were concerned with the difficulties of "translating" the interesting, but often rather abstract, new post-structuralist theories and insights into concrete psychological concepts and methods (for example, the work of Derrida and Foucault). Somehow German-Danish critical psychology (henceforth referred to as just critical psychology) seems to suffer from the opposite problem. From a critical psychological perspective, social practice certainly relates to wider societal structures. These structures are, however, not seen as invariable preconditions of action, but rather as variable outcomes of action. Any meaningful hypothesis about the constraints imposed by socio-structural conditions must therefore be based on analyses of how these constraints and conditions appear and are modulated by the experience of specific subjects in specific situations. Critical psychology is all about demonstrating how the general must be understood through the particular and vice versa. The perspective therefore has a strong focus on concrete human action in specific situations and contexts. This has, however, some potentially unfortunate

effects. First of all, the position results in very detail-saturated analysis and everyday-language concepts that many outsiders have a hard time relating to broader theoretical and political discussions and developments. Secondly, much critical psychological research displays a distinct absence of traditional theoretical discussions. And even though this is in fact *theoretically* reasoned, it easily translates into a reluctance to participate in more traditional theoretical discussions, which not only poses a risk of theoretical complicity and isolation; it can also contribute further to making it unduly complicated for students and “outsiders” to get an overview of the theoretical traditions and ambitions that critical psychology stems from, relates to and comments on. Ironically, this problem, which by its very nature should be of great concern to a perspective that insists on participation and cooperation across contexts and disciplines, is often neglected. It is therefore an additional hope that this article may contribute to countering this tendency.

DIALECTIC THEORY, ONTOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY.

In the last 20 years or so, a particular form of individualism has been growing steadily and becoming increasingly unchallenged. Hence, today, much scientific work, explanation and examination take as point of departure ideas about the free individual or some subjective phenomena or qualities in order to explain how our society works, how it is or should be organized and why. Yet, as Marx pointed out, the idea of the isolated individual is actually a poor starting point for scientific study and explanation, since human agency is historical and societal. In fact, the popular idea of “the free and rational individual, pursuing his or her own interests in a free market” needs a gigantic social development to emerge. The dominating neo-liberal conception of the autonomous subject therefore constitutes a highly elaborate form *not* of isolated agency and/or willpower, but of social cooperation, connectedness and development. This argument has, of course, a number of important ontological, methodological and theoretical implications. Firstly, it involves the idea that scientific concepts and identifications do not become strong by abstraction. For some reason this is still a very challenging idea in our society – partly due to the strong historical dominance of natural science ideals, but maybe also because of a hugely shared tendency to relate the concept of a meaningful life to some kind of “metaphysical need” to place ourselves in a general world picture or grand narrative. In other words, we seem to think that certain kinds of abstractions – even though they might be purely fictitious – are an important and necessary part of the human condition and making sense of our lives. Marx, however, presents the contrary idea: namely, that we can get a strong sense of our place in the world simply by being socially embedded in and participating in social practices. Hence, whether things make sense to us or not is *not* a question of theory, but of practice: of participating in social life and in social practices and activities. Of course, this is not an objection to generalizing. I would not even know how to make such an objection without generalizing. What it *does* mean, however, is that the meaning of abstractions and generalized concepts and theories springs from our participation and practical engagements in concrete social activities. Not the other way around. It is therefore social practice, not representations, that we need to study to understand our social being and reality. As Marx puts it, “Music alone awakens in man the sense of music” (Marx, 1997/1844: 136). The forming of our senses must therefore be studied as the subjective side of objective human activity and production. Which is why, as Marx puts it in his second thesis on Feuerbach, “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth – that is, the reality and power, the this-

sidedness of his thinking in practice” (Marx, 1997/1845: 104). To my mind, one of Marx’s most important insights is this: abstract and general notions of social phenomena are by nature weak notions and on top of that often rather unhelpful and banal – like stating that the need for humans to eat is universal and therefore helps us understand how people actually live their lives. Science, to Marx, was all about turning abstract notions into concrete ones, walking the route of historical contextualization, specification and differentiation. So when Marx stated, for example, that “all societies must reproduce the conditions of their own existence”, he did in fact *not* claim to make a strong scientific point. Instead his aim was to turn this rather *weak* point into a strong one by examining the *specific* historical and societal ways in which his own current society reproduced its own conditions of existence. *This* was the scientific work that needed to be done – again and again – in order to develop strong scientific notions of social reality. Since our social reality is dynamic, complex and conflictual, we need to examine social phenomena as comprised of many determinations and relations, or – to use Marx’s own terms – as a “differentiated unity”. The latter concept is also a critique of “normal” types of logical abstraction that generally lead to and move towards weak scientific notions, since they operate by abstracting away everything of historical and practical specificity, until we are left with only an essential core of trans-historical essence, without differentiation or specification. But in fact there is no “production-in-general”, “food-consumption-in-general”, “subjectivity-in-general” or “human-activity-in-general”. There are only distinct forms of social being, specific to time, space and conditions. Our concepts thus point to specific conditions and relations, not only to the “thingness” phenomena might appear to have on an immediate empirical or conceptual level. For example, “human production” appears to have an immediate identity that is distinct from, for example, human consumption. As soon as we investigate further, however, we see that there are elements of consumption in production and elements of production in consumption. Production entails consumption of energy and materials, as well as consumption of the products, just as consumption produces new sensations, pleasures, needs, experiences, life conditions and forms of subjectivity and living. Thus our units of analysis turn out to be *differentiated* units, that is, complex, dynamic and hard to cut out of the social in clearly delineated ways.

The second implication of Marx’s thoughts is therefore methodological. Just as the notion of “the free individual” easily turns structural contradictions into personal issues and problems, all abstract definitions and descriptions involve a risk of distracting our attention from relationships and connections that might be important to us. That is why methods are not neutral, but inscribed with politics and particular social agendas. That is why Marx’s work invites us to develop new methods and “logics” to examine social reality; methods and logics, not of abstraction, but of societal and practical specification and differentiation. The question is how?

THE TROUBLESOME POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE AND PSYCHOLOGY.

Marx’s thinking led him to talk about a true science – a science that showed that the capitalist mode of production depends on social connections and dependencies, that curiously takes on an “ideological” form of individual independence, disconnection and fragmentation. True science should challenge these ideological representations by unmasking the “essential” relations behind their mystifying inversions. Now, even though this certainly sounds important, and even though Marx’s critique of abstract atomistic notions of the human subject is certainly as valid today as in his own time, his

clear-cut distinctions between “essential relations” and ideological representations are very hard to work with. Not just because of today’s strong opposing claims to what “true science” is and should be. Nor because of politically motivated suppression of such “subversive” and “obsolete” perspectives. But more importantly because the whole discourse of “essential relations”, “representations”, “unmasking” and “alienation” has turned out to be quite problematic and unproductive. People simply tend to stop listening if you claim to know their reality or reasons for acting better than themselves. Doing so therefore rarely invites constructive dialogue, and often generates exactly the social distance and mistrust that we usually need to overcome if we want to participate in and contribute to democratic social change and development. Finally, there seems to be something quite contradictory in many of the otherwise impressive Marxist analyses, since many hard-core Marxists relate the analytical power of their analysis to a proportional ability to generalize: generalize what a capitalist society is; generalize how capitalist societies work, how they develop and to what social effects, conflicts and problems. Hence to many Marxists the attraction of a critical Marxist analysis is its ambition to create an overall conception of our social reality and how we can understand it. As mentioned earlier, this might seem both important and necessary. However, what *also* happens is that a powerful vision of some increasingly totalizing system or logic is developed. And the more powerful this vision becomes, the more powerless the “reader” comes to feel. So, insofar as the critical theorist wins by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine, at the same time he/she loses, since his/her analysis tends to paralyse the impulse to resist and believe in possible social transformations and alternatives. In other words, the tendency to depict an omnipotent capitalist dynamic can be somewhat self-disarming. So what to do instead?

The last 30 years have presented us with a range of new ways of doing critical psychological work. The critical perspectives of, for example, post-structuralism, social constructionism, discourse analysis and deconstruction depart from Marx in a number of ways, the most obvious one being a change in focus from materiality, production and the economy to a focus on more cultural issues: language, discourse, cognition, gender, ethnicity and so forth. To my mind, one of the most interesting differences in this context relates to the work of the French historian of ideas, Michel Foucault. Foucault’s influence on recent social science and humanities is hard to overestimate. However, his work is philosophically complex, and any summary is thus bound to simplify. Even so, it is worth picking out some key points. First of all Foucault eschews the notion of a pre-existing subject that acts, feels, thinks and experiences. For Foucault, subjectivity refers to discursive practices of power, in and through which human subjectivity is formed. Secondly, Foucault relates the concept of power to societal techniques and strategies, rather than specific institutions, groups, elites or classes. Hence Foucault expands our interest in social struggles to include more than just forms of exploitation (which in different ways separate individuals from what they produce), or forms of domination (ethnic, social, religious). He also includes forms of subjectivity and subjugation, here understood as a form of power that “applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him” (Foucault, 1982: 212). An example is Foucault’s analyses of the discourse of sexuality and how it implies “to find a truth”; a truth that is relevant for all people and thus contributes to a complex “policing of what can be said”. We need only translate this argument to the discourse of “finding

out the truth about the economy” to see how Foucault’s argument implicitly raises the question of whether Marxism (and critical theory) essentially breaks with the forms of discourse it denounces. Foucault critiques “the hypothesis of repression” in the sense that he demonstrates how this hypothesis, even though it points to forms of repression and domination, at the same time imply an inherently repressing discourse of “the Truth”. Foucault problematizes all such claims to exhaustiveness, as well as all claims that it is possible to reduce what is at stake in social conflicts to one sole question. Instead a more complex understanding of social conflicts, and of historical forces, is developed; an understanding, that breaks fundamentally with left-wing utopianism. According to Foucault, there is no *basic* historical conflict (for example the exploitation of the workforce in capitalist society), to which other conflicts can be subsumed. Just as there is no discourse, hence no social formation, without relations of power, conflicts and domination. History therefore does not reserve any privileged positions from which the meaning of social life can be witnessed. Instead it presents us with a series of permanently relevant questions to any discourse, social representation or institution that contribute to police “what can be said”.

Foucault’s work engages important questions and blind spots in Marxism and critical theory. Foucault has refined our gaze on social reality. And he has demonstrated how institutions – such as schools, prisons and hospitals – and the knowledge produced in and about such institutions are “directed towards the society as a whole” and hence linked to a more general project (Foucault, 2007: 117). To acknowledge this is also to acknowledge that we should try not to lose ourselves in the truisms of our immediate activities, practices and institutions. To see how the order of, for example, psychology also contributes to the coordination of techniques in childcare, welfare, politics, law, bio-medicine, management and so on, we must learn to de-centre our understandings of the problems, functions and objects we engage in, in our institutions and everyday practices.

To my mind, Foucault’s work invites critical inquiry that pays more attention to contextual aspects and, with a little ingenuity, to people’s situated practices and everyday-life. Nevertheless, I will try to present an alternative approach to these aspects in this article, returning, in a way, to Marx. This is motivated by an impression that Foucault’s work brings us forward, but also too far away from some of Marx’s important insights. My reservation concerns the completeness of Foucault’s methods and way of theorizing in relation to psychology; its weak interest in divisions of labour and the circumstances surrounding production, and more specifically the lack of a concept of “agency” in his work.

The German philosopher Rudolf zur Lippe (Lippe, 1974), who studied the same historical period as Foucault, notes that when soldiers today have tried to perform the prescription for military exercises that Foucault reconstructed from the 17th century work on the military body, they turned out to be both practically and physically impossible to perform. In fact, the exercises Foucault described were so impossible to perform for the soldiers who tried them out that even the soldiers at the time must have addressed these prescriptions from an understanding of their *actual* limits and possibilities. Otherwise, Lippe writes, “The blood would have stopped in their veins” (Lippe, 1974: 146). Now, to my mind, this is far from being an unimportant detail. It points precisely to the fact that Foucault’s method entails a risk of mystification. Now, my point is not that we need to start with “the body”, as the basis of what I call a

subject-scientific standpoint. What I *do* want to get at is that the example demonstrates how social practice is full of tacit improvisations, situated knowledge and social relations that constitute important gaps between what a practice might look like from the outside, or in a process manual, and what it looks like in reality. It is precisely within these gaps that we find a range of important and valuable data for critical analyses of social reality. Foucault examines power-relations from their epochal transformations rather than from their situated transformations. Hence he shows little attention to such gaps or to concrete dilemmas and conflicts in people's everyday-lives. Not least since power is not just conceptualized as epochal but also as epistemic rather than practical, which furthermore makes it impossible to question the relevance of this form of critique from a point of view of practice or the specific conflict and/or situation.

However, according to Marx, human experience is not primarily about the production and acquisition of knowledge. It is about the dialectic relationship between the subject and the world: our *participation* in the world. Our experience of social reality is therefore not reducible to cognition or the explicable; that is, reducible to what we can describe or are able to think. Human experience is much richer than that. It is emotional, practical and sensuous *as well* as cognitive. And it is anchored in our participation in the world and our orientations towards enhancing this participation and the possibilities to do so. To overlook this entails a risk that we mystify part of social reality by reducing it to, for example, the discursive. This seems to be exemplified here in Foucault's work. And it is a mystification that precisely stems from a problem that Marx warned us about and unequivocally committed his thinking to overcome (even though curiously enough it applies to a lot of Marxist theory as well). As formulated in his first thesis on Feuerbach, "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively" (Marx 1997/1845: 104).

Both Marx and Foucault consider the concept of the free individual to be a terrible starting point for scientific study and explanation. However, Foucault takes the argument much further than Marx did. Not only does he leave behind the notion of the worker as the subject of history. He leaves behind any notion of the subject and authentic agency as such. In contrast, even though Marx certainly criticized liberal individualism, he never said that we could not study and examine our reality from the standpoint of the active social subject. In fact, he proclaimed that this is *exactly* what we need to do, if we are to overcome the classical problems and dilemmas of materialism and if we are to avoid weak and abstract notions of our reality. To me, this is a central point if not *the* central point of Marx's work and legacy. To conceive social reality, we need to conceive it *as sensuous human activity, practice, subjectively*. That is, we need to understand and examine social reality through people's own subjective and sensuous activities and *situated* perspectives on these activities. Otherwise we risk entangling ourselves in mystifications in one form or another. And here Foucault's work constitutes an example. But more importantly, there is another problem attached to the issue: namely that a weak interest in people's own perspectives on their practices also results in a weak interest in people's *reasons* for acting. And without this interest, not only does it become difficult to understand the actual everyday-life workings of power, we also run the risk that the very people we might like to cooperate with, or enter into dialogue with, perceive our analysis as insensitive, uninformed and exterior.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUDING THE FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE.

The ability of movies and literature to communicate an understanding of and solidarity with even the worst villain is an interesting feature, certainly worth reflecting on. I grant that this capacity is often an effect of an enhanced or even overexposed organization of a stand-alone narrator-perspective and/or dramaturgical tricks to manipulate a unilateral attention. Hence it is certainly not innocuous. Even so, a closer look at this quality reflects that an interest in people's everyday life experiences and perspectives, and the possibility of following people in their own specific complex everyday-life contexts and reality, enables understanding of something we can otherwise find quite incomprehensible and strange. The interest in situating people's actions in their specific everyday contexts thus contains a basic democratic and ethical element and experience; a kind of methodical immune system against the demonization of people. Namely that to get close to other people and their actual lives also brings us closer to an understanding of the reasons for their actions. In other words, methods are important and not only permeated by questions of ideology and power; they are similarly imbued with ethical issues, questions of social solidarity and our relationship to "otherness". I think we need to take this very seriously. And I think we need to do this for a number of notable reasons.

Firstly, we must take this seriously because the failure to do so in much psychology is reflected in the absurd but undeniable reality that it seems that most of us have learned much more from movies and literature than we have from psychology about, say, what it means to be a single parent, unemployed, living with chronic back pain, AIDS or Alzheimer's; what it is like to be an unemployed heroin user who is trying to raise a kid in a modern welfare state; or what it is like living as a street child in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and so on. In general, it is not psychology, or social science for that matter, that most frequently challenges us to put ourselves in someone else's place, or to feel with, sympathize and empathize with other people. Psychology simply has very little to say about what it is like to be a human being living a concrete life with specific dilemmas, challenges and pleasures.

Secondly, we must recognize the depth of this illogicality and the importance of correcting it. A dialectical (and relational) understanding of humans' "social being" and subjectivity entails that we, to use an almost Hegelian formulation by Foucault, "must attack everything that separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life", and thereby forces "the individual back on himself and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way" (Foucault, 1982: 211-212). Critical thought is about pointing out and pointing to the fundamental social fabric of human existence. And to my mind, there is no better way to confront this in an undeniable fashion than to look at people's everyday lives and concrete situated practices. To meet and study people and their social life in its real situated settings and contexts is therefore not an optional but a crucial part of critical work and thought.

And finally, we need to take this very seriously, if not for other reasons than because in the end it is not only up to the researcher to define what is critical or fruitful. It is not determined by specific intentions or methodologies, but also by whether or not the people who read it see that it is relevant, helpful and meaningful. Does it hit the nail on the head or does it miss? The recipients of research also have a say on its qualities, since critical research for better or for worse only gains its relevance if it contributes to a development of the phenomena, practices and contexts it deals with. However, since

critique typically concerns a more or less conflictual organization of connections between people, our research should encourage reflections on these connections and arrangements, as well as social cooperation on their mutually beneficial development. Descriptions that some of the recipients of our research find insensitive, unrecognizable, external and disassociated are therefore often barren in relation to democratic developments. What follows from this is that we should organize psychological research from a real interest in and sensitivity to people's own perspectives and reasons for acting, since the ethical encounter with "otherness" is also about the potential recognition and basic ethical question: could not I, too, under the same conditions and in the same situations, act the same way, think the same way, feel the same way?

Of course, a proper attitude towards otherness is not a residue-free solidarity with this otherness. There is a need for understanding, but also a need for distance – a distance from which the analytical work may occur, from which an independent attitude can develop and be preserved, and from which science may be justified and identified as a distinct practice. Thus the researcher cannot and must not lose him/herself and his/her own voice in the process. The question is, therefore, how the analytical distance may occur safely and how the researcher, by extension, can understand his/her own authority to talk about others' experiences and lives. The purely observational recital that never shares any of its informants' concerns and driving emotions often ends up with descriptions that can be understood as unpleasant, hostile and misunderstood. Conversely, the total identification with the observed most likely results in naive and/or partial descriptions that others probably experience as disaffected and biased. A position must therefore be found that, so to speak, puts its feet between these extremes: a position that "seeks to understand" but at the same time leaves space for differences and disagreements. The question is, how? *How do we show solidarity from a critical position?*

To me, Marx himself provided important elements to an answer to this question, the first element being Marx's first thesis on Feuerbach, in which Marx states that in order to understand social reality, we need to take as our point of departure people's actual practices and their subjective perspectives on these practices. However, we need to unfold what this actually implies; what a first-person perspective actually implies. The second element concerns Marx's take on knowledge and social practice, which further means that we need to study people's first-person perspectives as a form of practice, that is: as a relation of participation, hence we need to study people's first-person perspectives in *plural* and understand this study-in-plural to be in fact a simultaneous study of the structural dimensions of our reality. Let us now turn towards an empirical example.

THE FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE IN EVERYDAY LIFE.

I met Thomas during a two-year-long qualitative study of everyday life and work in a large and very successful advertising company in Denmark. Thomas worked as a graphic designer, and during my two years of field study I had several conversations with him and regularly spent time with him and his colleagues. While I was there, the company underwent radical organizational and cultural changes – partly in order to accommodate their largest client's "Just-in-Time" production set-up, partly to develop the organizational, numerical, functional and economic flexibility that might secure the ever more short-term and fragile cooperation agreements, and partly due to the

implementation of a Total Quality Management system that related to yet another agenda and challenge. The changes that were taking place were characterized by ongoing processes of standardization, increased job insecurity and division of the participants into indispensable core staff and expendable foot soldiers. During one of my conversations with Thomas I asked him what he thought of these changes. Thomas then explained to me how his work had “become very monotonous, there is no overall idea, and no personal development”. However, even though Thomas was certainly sorry about this, he did not question the meaningfulness of it. Instead he elaborated on his experiences, explaining to me how: “the systems we are using now are really smart. And there is no doubt that that’s the future. Everyone, our clients included, can see everything now and distribute this information to their subcontractors, just as we can see much better which commercials work and which don’t. It’s brilliant”. Thomas’s overall conclusion was therefore that any employee who did not accept or embrace this development should simply find another job.

The few statements above illuminate empirically the complexity of a first-person perspective, and, of course, also illuminate the important issues of power attached to its terms. One might, for example, see a confirmation in Thomas’s statements of the need to regard his perspective as inauthentic, since it seems absorbed by a management discourse of market realism and hence absorbed by precisely the kind of self-problematizing reflections that Foucault has taught us to look for and penetrate. However, if we leave it at that, we miss out on two important additional issues. Firstly, we would not get to know more about Thomas’s actual reasons for his perspective: the actual everyday-life dilemmas, challenges, relationships, social links and considerations that he has to deal with and that inform his perspective. Hence we would not, either, challenge ourselves or any reader to ask the tough questions of whether we could in fact ourselves think, feel and act the same way, if we were in his shoes. And without asking this question, how can we possibly imagine being able to come up with viable relevant comments and alternatives to his perspective? Secondly, if we simply reduce Thomas’s statements to some neo-liberal management discourse or some specific correlation between a specific field of knowledge, type of normativity and form of subjectivity, we overlook precisely the possibility of seeing and thus approaching the structural – and its lived reality and situated meanings – from a situated first-person perspective, thus it becomes impossible to see how there is also always subjectivity in the structural. In other words, we miss out on the opportunity to develop a theoretical account that is *equally* sensitive to the constitution and operations of human individuality, subjectivity and agency and the constitution and operations of society and the wider structural dimensions of our sociality.

From a distance, Thomas’s perspective might seem estranged. However, after spending a great deal of time with Thomas, and many others in the advertising company, what I heard was a dialogue of familiar voices and a handling of concrete social connections, relationships, obligations and considerations. Hence what I heard was intelligent reflections on a concrete and practical complexity, an attempt to participate in a conflictual cooperation (Axel, 2002), and an attempt to deal with different and even conflicting perspectives on a specific shared practice. Linguistically, Thomas would often move most of this concreteness of his perspective into the background of our conversations, thus at the same time turning the voices of, for example, his manager, his clients and co-participants into more abstract notions of “globalization” and “the market forces”. Like a soldier talking about King and Country,

even though it is in fact the people in his unit, his job, close relationships at home, that he thinks about, fights for and refers to with such expressions, Thomas would make himself intelligible by references to abstract notions. Even so, these notions never ceased to relate and refer, in some form or other, to specific places, people and relationships. It is this assertion that leaves us with two fundamental questions to address. According to Marx, concrete social life is a differentiated unity of practices tied in differences and conflictual cooperation. Our concepts and use of concepts relate to this experience, since in practice we need to be able to reproduce, in thought, the richness of the determinations and relations that go into our activities, social relations, cooperation and dependencies. And here reflective conceptual thought can help us accomplish clarifications of our conflicts and challenges by decomposing both our simple empirical experiences and abstract categories into the real, contradictory relations that compose them. Now this conceptual work, this reproduction in thought, of course, takes place in our heads, and requires the process of mental representations and operations. But, to quote Hall, "it does not, for that reason, 'generate itself'. It is a 'product of thinking and comprehending', that is, a product, rather, of the working-up of observation and conception into concepts" (Hall, 2003: 130).

Building on this practice approach, and at the same time conceptualizing practice as situated, Thomas's perspective leaves us with two difficult questions. First: how do we unwrap the concrete, specific and differentiated relations from their weak abstract conceptualizations? And secondly: if we never leave the situated, the concrete and the "local", where is the structural, the general and the global? How is it produced and why and how is it sometimes added to our perception of our everyday life practices as something abstract and external?

SITUATING THE SUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVE.

Any knowledge may be said to arise from some form of involvement in the world, a commitment to something – and some experience from this commitment. As previously described, "to know" does not necessarily have anything to do with being able to define something, but rather with the ability to *do* something – to exercise certain routines or specific actions in a practice; to make possible certain future relations, actions or possibilities. Knowledge and understanding arise from what we as humans *do* – and do in a context, with a range of other people and social entanglements. We can therefore look at our specific personal experiences, stories and knowledge as related to our specific angle on a context, linked to the meanings our participation here has for us, related to our access to and conditions for understanding. To take Thomas's work as an example, the advertising business is a complex practice structure, put together by a variety of practices where different people take part on the basis of different types of positions (consumers, customers, employees, officers, shareholders, casual workers, consultants, etc.), different types of responsibilities, different duties and contributions. For example, a manager, graphic designer, copywriter and key-account manager might engage in the same job task but experience it very differently. Just as a teacher, a mother and a psychologist can perceive the same child very differently. They are all involved and engaged in the same "thing", but in different situations and with different things at stake. To examine whose perspective and knowledge is correct or misunderstood is therefore absurd. In a sense, all the perspectives are correct, and all of them at the same time incomplete. That is exactly why they all contribute to our knowledge on the subject matter, a knowledge that moves across the different places, positions and contributions. Seen from what we might here call the common-case

perspective – for example, the perspective of “the good advertising job” or the perspective of the previously mentioned schoolchild – the disagreeing parties are thus not “randomly disagreeing”. In fact, it is the “disagreeing”, their *differences*, their shared conflictual relations that connect them. And this is reflected – in some form or other – in the dynamic self-problematization in Thomas’s subjective perspective.

When we act together, we at the same time structure each other’s ability to do something. You could say that we *are part of* each other’s conditions. And to the extent that this is clear to us, we include reflections on this in our perspectives on our practices and way of participating in them. Hence, to include people’s first-person perspectives is a two-sided strategy. It includes taking people’s experiences seriously, as well as their ability to reflect on their lives. But it also includes an interest in their standpoint, that is the specific point in time and space from which they access and participate in the practices they engage in.

A Marxist psychology understands psychological realities as part of the social world. However, dialectic work and thinking points out that the concept of “the social world” is actually rather complex. In itself, *the* social world in singular form is an abstraction, since in order to participate in social life, we must always create boundaries and divisions, just as we at the same time *find* our social world divided and unified in specific ways (Axel, 2009). Hence, we never talk of the social as “a whole”. Even when we claim to do so, we always talk of a fragmented and incomplete part of the social. This is one of the real difficulties of dialectical thinking and writing. And it is also here we find a strong but risky temptation to lean on specific methods or procedures in order to reduce complexity (cf. Hayes, 2004). For Thomas to take part in the company’s monthly production of millions of catalogues, he must in fact act together with thousands of people: fibre cable technicians, programmers, lawyers, accountants, transport workers, printing workers, government officials, loggers, etc. The practices that Thomas is connected to in his everyday work activities involve numerous tasks and people, and depending on how we divide “practice”, we can say that these are part of the same practice or part of different practices. It depends largely on what we in the situation find relevant and necessary to take into account to coordinate our practice (cf. Axel, 2009). Our world interweaves in incalculable ways and we need to make some divisions to be able to act in it. With regard to the concept of the social and of practice, the question of singular or plural, part or whole, can therefore not be answered once and for all, or in any objective manner. In my previously mentioned conversations with Thomas, or with any of the other participants for that matter, we were all the time engaging in all sorts of divisions and assemblings of the social. We would, for example, talk about our kids, and thus divide ourselves for a brief moment into parents and non-parents, mothers and fathers, at the same time unifying some practices in our lives and disconnecting others. Someone would then express his or her delight about today’s lunch menu, thereby introducing a range of other ways to divide and unify the social. The divisions of our composite social reality are made on the basis of the given conditions and the relevancies we introduce in the situation. Hence we have to look at the distinction between part and whole from what is being done and as *something* that is being done.

Thomas’s perspective is a relation of participation and thus demonstrates the complexity of social practice, and the reflexive complexity that a first-person perspective entails and obliges a subject-scientific psychology to examine. However,

including first-person perspectives in one's research does not mean including all the connections, relationships and associations that a first-person perspective is informed by or can produce. To conceptualize a first-person perspective as a relation of participation is also to relate a perspective to a particular practice and hence to particular questions and concerns. In my case, I wanted to understand why the work was organized the way it was, and what this meant to the different participants. And in order to examine this, it made sense to focus on the people and contexts that were actively involved in and affected by the shaping of the work practices. What people, contexts and practices were involved in the organization of Thomas's work? On what and on whose relevancies was the social landscape divided and assembled into the specific practice that made up the company as a workplace? Who was invited in and who was not taken into account, and how was this put in play and negotiated? How did the participants coordinate themselves in relation to each other and how did this coordination take place and to what social effect? This was the interest that informed my study and at the same time what Thomas offered his reflections on.

When Thomas reflects on his work, he is also situating it within specific contexts, thus relating his own work and his perspective to other specific people, practical relationships, coordinations and work practices. It is these compounds that we can also learn much more about from examining people's standpoints and positions: the specific point in time and space from which they participate. Now even though a stand(ing)point is in some way a spatial figure, from a practice-orientated perspective, space itself must be understood as practice. Space is not reducible to a mathematical point in a static physical coordinate system. Space is materialized human action and coordination. Hence, examining people's standpoints and positions involves an examination of the "taskscape", rather than the landscape people are situated in: the practical connections, dependencies, coordinations and cooperation that thread the practices as well as the subjective standpoints of the participants in relation to their different perspectives. It is not about places, walls, doors and windows, but about access to information and participation. It is about a complex arrangement of barriers and openings of sensory perception that arranges what part of social reality we have access to and/or are prevented from sensing and participating in.

A first-person perspective is a relation of participation. And since the object of participation is both the specific actions and the acting subject him/herself, both the specific work and the wider practices and relations they are part of, Thomas's perspective is not simply a private or personal perspective. Thomas's perspective balances various considerations that are constituted reciprocally, and there is therefore always a potential moment of self-transcendence and self-problematization present. Namely, when "I" join in, when "we" problematize "me", but also when "I" take part in a "we" that problematizes "us" (Nissen, 2012). It is undoubtedly relevant to relate the question of power to the concrete social and practical conditions of these reflexive processes. But neither the subjective perspective nor the practical collective world can be understood in isolation from each other (the subjective in simple individualistic terms; the collective as just the sum of different individual perspectives). Both are constituted in reflections on the concrete and the subjective as *connected*, that is, as a differentiated, complex and conflictual unity. It is this fact that raises two important observations.

1. The first observation is that a first-person perspective is constituted in self-problematization. That is, it belongs to a subject of becoming. Structural issues and power relations concern the conditions of this becoming, the conditions of our self-problematization and self-transcendence. However, the becoming subject is a situated subject, since our subjective perspectives are informed by the dilemmas, conflicts and crosscurrent perspectives that confront us in our everyday life practices. Thus, to examine structural issues and power relations, we need to examine the concrete, situated and cross-contextual ways in which people relate to each other and, with their own actions, condition each other's ability to participate in social practice. And at the same time we need to examine how people make sense of these conditions, connections and dilemmas. That is why following the inherent dialogues of the first-person perspective, from a simultaneous interest in the standpoint and position of these dialogues, also points us along the concrete many-sided routes of the work-practice in question into the many practices and larger cross-contextual arrangements, it is part of. To return to my recurring example, my attempt to examine the taskscape Thomas was part of led me to examine the relevancies and different perspectives that were discussed and negotiated in relation to the formation of the social world of Thomas's work, that is, the divisions and assembling of people, activities and practices that arranged the taskscape of his job into a specific social landscape, a specific "social reality". Moving along the concrete connections of practices and participation in this taskscape led me to move not only along the internal lines of the formal divisions of labour in the company, but also along more informal lines of cooperation inside the company as well as more informal communities of practice between the management, the largest client of the company, the Danish Foreign Ministry, influential families in Bangladesh and invited Indian TQM consultants, that furthermore invited particular perspectives on management, quality assessment, organizational culture and "best practice" – originally developed in collaboration between specific American universities, parts of the American military industry and Indian software developers – into the everyday practices and taskscape of Thomas's work and company. Of course, I cannot convincingly describe these complex relationships here. I want only to indicate that it is possible to grapple with the structural dimension from a situated approach, in a way that at the same time turns abstract terms such as "globalization" and "market forces" into notions of concrete cross-contextual connections between specific people, places and practices.

2. The second observation is that a subject-scientific study of first-person perspectives for the same reason does not invite a potentially dangerous unilateral attention to a singular perspective. A subject-scientific position does not dissolve the difference between art and science. It is still a distinct scientific form of study. However, this study does not refer to a distinct method or procedure, but rather to a specific way of looking at and participating in social life. A first-person perspective – the researcher's perspective included – is a relation of participation, thus we must conceptualize it as a cross-contextual category that we need to study in *plural*, since any attempt to understand one perspective and standpoint automatically calls for an understanding of others' perspectives and standpoints. Furthermore, since the actions of the participants are grounded in everyday-life situations, which are by no means free of conflicts and contradictions, the described analytical movements automatically provoke and call forth the previously mentioned analytical position of both detachment and involvement, simply because the researcher, as well as the co-researchers, finds him/herself sympathizing with different, sometimes even conflicting, perspectives and

understandings. Thus the described analytical and methodological movements bring forth precisely a position that shows solidarity from a detached position, and detachment from a position of solidarity. Of course, this is a difficult “location”, built on both closeness and distance, participation and independence. But at the same time, it seems to me a productive and ethically informed critical position in which analytical solidarity and distance are mutually constitutive. Hence, a situated Marxist psychology might build on these movements a critical position which does not necessarily turn to macro-sociological theory to capture the structural, but try instead to grapple with the structural while moving into and along the composite cross-contextual connections and relations that constitute social reality as a concrete “differentiated unity”. On this route we can still find an informed scientific authority. However, this authority and the critical distance is neither held or given in advance, nor is it based on ideas of methodological or intellectual superiority. There is only an authority that is produced in social collaboration with others.

TO GRAPPLE WITH STRUCTURES OF POWER FROM A SITUATED PERSPECTIVE.

Earlier I posed the questions of how we can unwrap the concrete, specific and differentiated relations from their sometimes rather weak abstract notions? Above I have tried to delineate a route from which we can try to work with this question. However, we are still left with an unanswered question: if we never leave the situated and the concrete, where is the structural and the general? If we never leave the “local”, where is the global? How is the structural, the general and the global produced and how is it that these “dimensions” are often added to our perception of our everyday-life practices as external abstract “objects”? In relation to Thomas’s perspective and standpoint, the answers to these questions seem to vary according to the context and situation. Place does not allow for a thorough elaboration of these variations, but perhaps it is possible to put forward some clarifying hints as to their general “nature” and how we might conceptualize them.

The advertising company’s major customer, a global player within the computer industry, operated with particular growth targets. These growth targets were originally pure wishful thinking in the sense that they originated from a five-year development plan in which the owners of the computer company formulated their desire for annual growth rates of 20 percent. However, since much of the computer company’s production was outsourced to various subcontractors, who regularly had to compete and bid for contracts on the basis of these growth targets – Thomas’s company included – the growth rates were realized through a measurement, on scales of both detail and overall prospects, of the various subcontractors’ performativity on these “imagined” but technologically materialized targets.

All activities in the advertising company were compared with those growth targets, since any activity was performed using a specific technological system that functioned both as an internal and external tool of communication and collaboration, tool of documentation and forecasting system (Star & Bowker, 2000); making it possible to measure, from a distance, the effect of any product; advertisement, catalogue, TV spot or web banner, and compare its effect to the number of consumer calls it was expected to generate if the growth targets were to be reached. As Thomas’s boss, the owner of the advertising agency, explained to me in an interview: “All the catalogues we make and all our ads and banners contain a unique phone number. You can simply see that

this ad resulted in so many calls. Quarterly, we therefore go through the different activities and their results. Blue numbers from the previous quarter do not compensate for red numbers in the current". The described mechanism required a translation of everyday activities to mathematical algorithms, as well as a specific division and assembly of the multifaceted social activities and relationships that made such translations (comparison and measurement) possible. The figures related each individual activity to the overall deadlines, budgets, and growth targets. In this way, the technological tools reified a particular perspective on the shared and the common. It materialized a kind of "common good", which mainly took the form of blue and red numbers in constant motion and transformation.

In such circumstances, it is not surprising that the attitude of the employees to everyday challenges and their ability to pull themselves up by their bootstraps is regarded as resources in their own right. Just as it is not surprising that this particular social arrangement calls for a wide range of specific methods and techniques that can raise the awareness of, cultivate and measure such properties as a form of "conduct of conduct"; the conduct of the loyal and flexible self-improving subject. We might say that the ability to add abstract notions of the concrete everyday-life experiences of the participants in this case related to a recurring possibility of measurement, which not only installed a practical capacity in, for example, Thomas's everyday practice to relate his actions and value as, say, a worker (his "becoming" as a resourceful participant), to mathematical scales of infinite proportions. It also related to Thomas's "capacity to imagine them", to use a formulation by Marilyn Strathern (Strathern, 1995: 179).

Many years ago, the sociologist Michel Crozier wrote that the power of social systems is often linked to control over what Crozier called the "sources of uncertainty": those whose actions have the greatest impact on the conditions for the actions of others' rules (Crozier, 1964). This seems to be a relevant comment here. However, there is another way of proceeding as well. Namely to relate the described dynamics to how the participants have access and opportunity to let their different perspectives and standpoints illuminate each other: how are the participants' perspectives, standpoints and positions visible to each other? For whom and for how many are they visible? The key is not technology or mathematics. Even though it is worth noting how they enable a generalization, anonymization and reification of specific perspectives and standpoints. The main point is the ways in which the social collaboration is organized and the ways in which the diversity of the perspectives and positions are managed and organized; the ways in which a specific position, a specific expectation and perspective on the common is *being* generalized and elevated to "social reality" and realism. Hence, what we see is *not* that the particular and situated are held up to a more global and general perspective, but rather how particular perspectives are *being* generalized and are in the *process* of becoming general, structural and global.

What is important here is not the use of mathematics or modern technology, but how the social arrangements allow for particular commercial agendas to gain access to and be generalized and reified in a workplace, and how this relates to the formation of a specific taskscape and arrangement of barriers and openings of sensory perception and practical collaboration that arranges what part of social reality the participants have access to. Furthermore, the described processes not only contribute to standardizing certain elements of the work, they also contribute to *setting* certain standards *for* the work (Timmermann & Epstein, 2010; Nissen, 2012); that is, to constitute certain *ideals*

that transcend reality and invite the participants to identify with particular expectations and a specific social imagination that relate to a particular future reality.

All the participants in Thomas's workplace seek influence over their lives and thus on their own action conditions. However their action possibilities and the social distribution of these possibilities are largely shaped by the conditions of social collaboration and communication. The arrangements of these conditions certainly relate to economic dynamics, but not solely. Rather, it seems the economy of production and consumption is related to a broader economy of action possibilities (Busch-Jensen, 2011). The term "economy" remains relevant here, since it points to:

1. A social arrangement of values (action possibilities).
2. The procedural nature of these values.
3. The possibility of acquiring "privileges" through an expansion of one's access to and opportunities for action and participation, sometimes at the expense of other people's access to and opportunities for action and participation.
4. A continued but relative possibility to question the current distributions of these action possibilities.
5. The existence of a "marketplace" (social practice, collaboration and coordination) where the social values of actions and action possibilities are "put to use" in order to increase their value and one's access to them, and where the outcome of the transactions are translated into specific arrangements and dynamic stratifications of social relations, conditions and action-possibilities.

In the study I have referred to in this article, I found it helpful to relate the questions of social inequality and power relations in the advertising company to an "economy-of-action-possibilities". The conceptual framework encapsulates the concepts of work and labour in the broader category of *practice*, which by extension is viewed to involve human activity as such: production, consumption, communication and organization (the manufacturing of tools, products, identities, communities, norms, institutions and contexts). In line with this form of reasoning, the social axes of conflict are thought to have many and varied names, since the notion of "value" relate to the much broader concepts of "action possibilities" and "participation". The terminology suggests both kinship with and differences from Marx. Also it expresses an attempt to combine insights from both Marx and Foucault, since social power is thought to presuppose a human's capacity for action, which is another way to formulate Foucault's point that the exercise of power does not oppose human freedom, but requires it. Thus power is understood as an inevitable – both enabling and restrictive – aspect of social practice; as something that relates to the ways in which we, by our actions, relate to and modify the actions and conditions of others. The possible field of action is never fully determined. However, neither is it random, since it still relates, as pointed out by Marx, to social divisions of labour and to specific circumstances of social production. There are structural aspects weaved into our situated practices, precisely because these aspects are not constituted "above" society or "apart from" the particular actions of people, but brought to life by them: in the arrangements and arranging of social cooperation, work-tasks, access and action possibilities; in the negotiations of the type of relevancies on which we divide and assemble our activities into specific differentiated practices; in the use of specific means, which make social distribution and generalization of certain types of relevancies, perspectives, and standpoints more or less easy and/or possible; and in social reifications and institutionalizations that include

both standardizations and a *setting* of standards that act upon actions and are brought to bear upon the possible actions and social imagination of the participants. Thus arranging social practices, which sometimes afford human beings to give up long-term goals to achieve short-term advantages.

CONCLUSION.

The basic thesis of Marx's thinking is that an immediate opaque relationship exists between, on the one hand, the economy's appearance as a relentless competitive struggle between isolated individuals, and on the other, the economy's basic character of elaborate coordination of community-related work in mutually binding chains of social dependency. Scientific knowledge is about conceptually reconstructing this relationship in ways that make it accessible to deliberately intrusive reflection and change. The task appears to require that we "look beyond" society's immediate manifestations. Hence, Marxist thought seems to require theory-supported analysis of empirical data and a strong focus on theory. The analytical perspective, this article reveals, does not oppose the need for theory. It does, however, want to discuss what it means to "look beyond" and how we might or might not need theory to do so. The ambition of the article has been to explore an alternative movement from the particular to the general; from the situated to the structural and from weak abstract notions of social reality (that arrange our social material in a simple and straightforward way that detaches it from its concrete contemporary content) to stronger and more concrete notions of social reality (that include the contradictory multiplicity of events and the conflicting psychological, practical and factual cross-purposes, that reveals social reality as a complex differentiated unity). This alternative route certainly recognizes that it is important to look beyond our immediate experiences in order to see how we are all the time participating in far more social relations and practices than our immediate experiences reveal to us. However, it does not turn to theory in order to "look beyond" society's immediate manifestations and simple motives. Instead it takes us further into and along the concrete practical (productive, communicative and organizational) and conflictual cross-contextual connections and relationships that make up social practice.

To make informative descriptions of our social reality, we need to elaborate our statements into statements about real people doing particular things to and together with other people. The sign in the public bus that reads "Non-payment of fare will be punished" means that someone from the bus company or a policeman may arrest you and fine you, if you fail to buy a ticket (Geuss, 2008: 23). Red numbers in a work assessment system mean that specific people must assess the efficiency of their work on the basis of specific other people's hopes for future growth and profit. Hence, we shouldn't just ask on *what* relevancies but also on *whose* relevancies people's activities and practices are divided and assembled into a particular social practice. However, to avoid our statements from demonizing people or personalizing structural problems, it is important that our descriptions include an interest in the conditions of and reasons for people's actions. Otherwise we are not confronting critically the elements of abstraction, but merely shifting the level on which we introduce these elements into our analysis. In relation to this, it is an important but curious observation that we must look around the individual to really see it. And similarly that we must start with and talk to the individual participants to see the workings of the broader organized conditions and structures they take part in. A situated approach to the structural aspects of social practice – based on these curious observations – might constitute the building blocks of a critical position that does not voice critique from some potentially totalizing platform,

nor from some detached position of “nowhere”. Instead it presents a critique of both closeness and distance, participation and independence. A critical stance that shows solidarity from a detached position, and detachment from a position of solidarity. Examining social reality this way, as a differentiated unity, and doing critical research from this perspective includes an understanding of social conflicts as an inevitable aspect of social life - an aspect we cannot do away with but should instead take into account in the way we arrange ourselves and arrange our social institutions, as well as the ways we do psychology. By extension, the point of this article is *not* to insist on a single “correct way” to do psychology or Marxist psychology, but merely to expand our ideas about what a critical and/or Marxist psychology might look like.

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