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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Benny Karpatschof', written in a cursive style.

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Benny Karpatschof

HUMAN ACTIVITY

**Contributions to the Anthropological Sciences
from a Perspective of Activity Theory**

**A Dissertation submitted to
the Faculty of Humanities
University of Copenhagen**

Dansk psykologisk Forlag

Benny Karpatschof
HUMAN ACTIVITY
Contributions to the Anthropological Sciences
from a Perspective of Activity Theory

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Cover picture: The picture on the front page has two components, each illustrating the mediators of human activity, that is, tools, signs, cooperation and appropriation. The larger component is a painting from Pharaonic Egypt. For explanatory description see page xi-xii.

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Preface

This book has been under way for a long time.

I started a year before the fall of the notorious wall, of state bureaucratic Communism, and, according to public opinion, of even Marxist theory. Unwilling to let my own critique of Marxist theory be influenced by this massive ideological backlash, I continued my work as a somewhat lonely follower of the social historical school, in general, and Activity theory, in particular.

Now the book is finally published at the transition to a new millennium, in an Age when the dominant creed within humanities and social science is that knowledge is a social construction. This is, of course, a partial truth, and I willingly recognise that the theoretical movement to which this book is a contribution must be understood as such a construction. In fact, a main agenda of the book is to illuminate how a good foundation for the anthropological sciences can be constructed. As indicated by the picture on the front page, however, I consider theoretical work to be much more than a pure mental construction. The process of anthropological theory is theoretical construction, but its object is the field of Human Activity.

I hope to demonstrate in this book that a durable key to the understanding of Human Activity is a theory that has never been very popular in the Western World, and furthermore has been pushed into near oblivion for the last 10 years. This theory is Activity Theory, and its relevance for the anthropological sciences is the thesis of this book.

Acknowledgements

As mentioned in the preface, writing this book has been a primary part of my activity for more than a decade. It has also been a rather lonely form of activity, in sharp contrast with the human cooperative activity that is so essential according to Activity Theory. There is, however, a large group of people whose help has been most important and often indispensable. From the very start, I worked closely with two friends and colleagues at the former National Educational Institute (now a part of Denmark's Pedagogical University). These colleagues, Svend Thyssen and Vagn Rabøl Hansen, shared their scholarly knowledge on Activity Theory; regrettably, the latter died last year. Together with another psychologist, Mette Bendixen, we contacted Prof. Rückriem and Prof. Messmann at The Institute for General Education, College of Art, in Berlin in order to edit and translate a Danish version of the great Berlin project, the publication of selected works of Leontiev. Both the German and the Danish project failed because of the ill-considered death penalty imposed on any kind of Marxist theory, which was a consequence of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

During the last two decades, I have been a member of a study circle called the Activity Theory Group, which has been gathering monthly in an informal way to discuss subjects within general and applied psychology. This group, consisting of psychologists Erik Axel, Eva Ethelberg, Lone Karpatschhof (who happens to be my wife), Karin Rue, Dorthe Marie Søndergaard and the psychiatrist Anders Kelstrup, has invested at least a year of its program to discuss all the chapters of this book. To have critics that are informed and sympathetic is the dream of any writer.

I have discussed part of the book with several of my colleagues in the Psychology Department at the University of Copenhagen. Accordingly, I had many good discussions with Erik Schultz before delivering the treatise to the faculty that appointed him to be the chairman of the judging committee. From Arne Poulsen I got very useful feedback on chapter 5 (concerning *meaning*). From Niels Engelsted, whose work in general psychology is very close to my

own, I have had almost daily inspiration, from his book as well as from his sharp and witty verbal contributions. From Ole Elstrup Rasmussen I got the original inspiration to study Activity Theory, and I am also indebted to him for his comments about my writings on sociology.

Our Librarian, Lene Seedorff, has always been helpful, effective and creative in getting the sometimes rather esoteric literature I needed. I thank Mette Høyer, a psychologist, for her meticulous proofreading of the book. The extensive cooperation with my English editor, Deborah Licht, much to my relief and astonishment, has turned out to be a very pleasant experience. Besides correcting my numerous grammatical, idiomatic and orthographic blunders, she has even warned me about parts of the text beyond her (and sometimes even my own) comprehension.

Referring to the production of the book itself, I am indebted to my neighbour, the Egyptologist, Torben Holm Rasmussen for his scholarly documentation of the Pharaonic part of the picture on the front page (see below), to the psychiatrist (and part-time artist) Anders Kelstrup for drawing the IT-part of the picture, and to Lone Bjarkow (from the Danish Psychological Publishers) for elevating my amateur text files to a professional graphical standard, with the skill and dedication I have appreciated for many years while collaborating with her publishing the journal *Psyke & Logos*.

The Cover Picture

The picture on the front page has two components, each illustrating the mediators of human activity, that is, tools, signs, cooperation and appropriation. The larger component is a painting from Pharaonic Egypt. I got the following description from my neighbour, an Egyptologist, Torben Holm Rasmussen, M.A.:

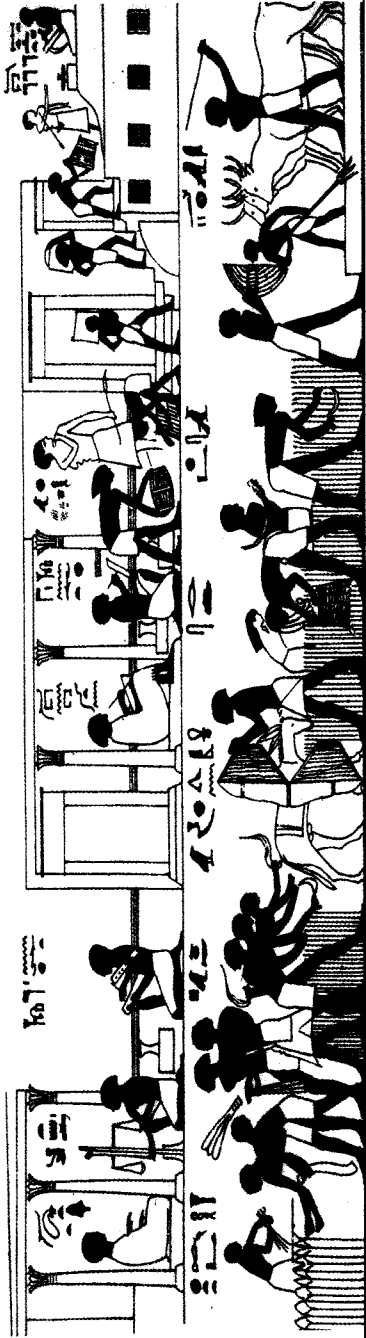
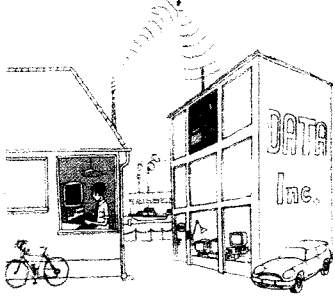
Khnumhotep II was nomarch (governor) over the Gazelle nome (region) during the reign of Pharaoh Amenemhet II (1929-1892 BC). The picture is a painting on stucco found in the tomb of Khnumhotep II, which is situated at Beni Hasan near the town El Minya on the east bank of the Nile about 270 km south of Cairo. In the lower part of the picture, the basic activity is shown, that

is, agriculture leading to the harvest of the crop. In the upper part, officials are rendering an account to one of Khnumhotep's leading official Baket, "principal of the keepers of the seals". A subordinate official is sitting at the scales, while the scribe, Netjernakht, is rendering an account. Baket is sitting on a raised platform wrapped in a cloak. The scene in the middle shows the steward (also sitting on a raised platform) counting the number of bushels of grain. The grain is carried to the granary in the scene to the right. It should be noted that the title "scribe" also referred to the people who functioned as what we would call *accountants*.

The magical power of art allows the cultural content of the picture, the depicted activities, to be maintained forever. The work on Khnumhotep's estate thus continues, and he therefore will get his supplies in his afterlife. There is, however, also an additional meaning. These pictures that include daily activities can be seen as a testimony that Khnumhotep has fulfilled his duty as a high ranking official; he has worked as a prominent official to maintain *Ma'at*. *Ma'at* is an important Egyptian concept denoting "the order of society, justice, the harmony of society". The scribe/accountant had an important and highly esteemed position in the Ancient Egyptian Society. Only a small proportion of the population had the knowledge of reading and writing at this time (the Middle Kingdom).

The smaller component of the picture on the front page depicts contemporary activity, with two employees working and possibly communicating by means of the prime mediator of our time, the PC, which is simultaneously a *tool*, a medium of producing and preserving *signs*, a mediator of *cooperation*, and even a means of *appropriation*.

BENNY KARPATSCHOF



Human Activity

Contributions to the
Anthropological Sciences from a
Perspective of Activity Theory

DANSK PSYKOLOGISK FORLAG

After an investigation of the philosophical foundation of Activity Theory, the book undertakes an assessment of the adequacy of this theory as a framework for the anthropological sciences. The thesis is that the perspective of Human Activity is "a key to solving basic problems found in epistemology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, semiotics, and even in the study of science itself.

Human Activity is defined as a *mediated form of activity*, and has *Tools, Signs, Cooperation and Appropriation* as its prime mediators. Each of the 6 chapters of the book provides a specific perspective on the general subject, Human Activity, and on the general theory, Activity Theory.

The first chapter introduces the historical background of Activity Theory, including the evolution of the theory from Hegel to Marx and the two Russian psychologists Vygotsky and Leontiev. Ch. 2 covers the basic problems of ontology and evolution; the ontology assumes an original cosmological object field, from which a biological field emerged, and from the latter an anthropological object field emerged. Ch. 3 analyses the relation between *pre-human activity*, belonging to the biological object field, and *human activity*, belonging to the anthropological field, the characteristics of which are discussed. In Ch. 4, epistemology is discussed from the perspective of human activity. Ch. 5 attempts to clarify the problem of *meaning*, and in this connection the leading theories in semiotics and language theory are discussed. Finally, Ch. 6 is dedicated to the *study of science*, that is, the discipline of Metascience. Themes treated in this chapter include: the relation between technological and scientific evolution, the status of the formal sciences, and the difference between the natural and the anthropological sciences, in particular psychology.

The book is recommended for scholars with an interest in Activity Theory, Philosophy of Science and Psychology.

The author is a member of the Psychology Department at the University of Copenhagen and the book is his doctoral dissertation.



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