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Benny Karpatschof
Table of Contents, front matter, cover

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Contributions to the Anthropological Sciences
from a Perspective of Activity Theory

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København den 7. december 1999

John Kuhlmann Madsen
h.a. dec.

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# Table of Contents

Preface ................................................................. ix

Acknowledgements ....................................................... x

The Cover Picture ........................................................ xi

Prologue ........................................................................ 1

1. Introduction to Human activity – The Intentions, Content
   and Background of the Book ........................................ 3
  1.1 The Intentions of the Book .......................................... 3
     1.1.1 The Subject Matter of the Treatise ......................... 3
     1.1.2 The Thesis of the Treatise ...................................... 5
     1.1.3 The Discursive Method of the Treatise – Dialectics .... 6
  1.2 The Content of the Book ............................................. 9
     1.2.0 The Plan of the Book ........................................... 9
     1.2.1 The Remainder of this Chapter ............................... 10
     1.2.2 Ch. 2. Being and Becoming – Ontology and the Conception
          of Evolution in Activity Theory ................................... 10
     1.2.3 Ch. 3. Human Activity – the Anthropology of Activity Theory .... 11
     1.2.4 Ch. 4. Reflection, Transformation and Production of Objects
          – the Epistemology of Activity Theory ........................ 11
     1.2.5 Ch. 5. The Meaning of Activity – the Semiotics of
          Activity Theory ..................................................... 12
     1.2.6 Ch. 6. Theory and Practice – Meta-Science from the Perspective
          of Activity Theory .................................................. 12
  1.3 The Background of Activity Theory .............................. 13
     1.3.1 Fichte and Schelling ............................................. 13
        1.3.1.1 Fichte .................................................... 13
        1.3.1.2 Schelling .................................................. 17
     1.3.2 Hegel ............................................................... 18
        1.3.2.1 Hegel’s Ontology .......................................... 19
        1.3.2.2 Hegel’s Genealogy (Teaching of Evolution) ........... 20
        1.3.2.3 Hegel’s Epistemology .................................... 21
        1.3.2.4 Hegel’s Dialectics ....................................... 22
        1.3.2.4.1 Antidialectics ........................................... 23
        1.3.2.4.2 Dialectics of Knowledge ............................ 23
        1.3.2.4.3 Dialectics of Activity ............................... 23
Part I  Foundation of Activity Theory ........................................ 79

2. Being and Becoming – Ontology and the Conception of Evolution
   in Activity Theory .......................................................... 81

2.1 Ontology ........................................................................... 81
   2.1.1 To be or not to be ...................................................... 82
   2.1.2 Practical Necessity as a Criterion for the Acknowledgement
         of Existence ........................................................................ 84
   2.1.3 Categories of Existence ............................................. 88
         2.1.3.1 Object .................................................................... 89
         2.1.3.2 Phenomenon .......................................................... 90
         2.1.3.3 Essence ................................................................. 95
         2.1.3.4 Forms of Existence and Modes of Appearance ........ 99
         2.1.3.5 The Dialectics of the Forms of Existence in the
                 History of Science .................................................. 101

2.2 Conception of Evolution (Genealogy) ................................. 105

2.3 Cosmogony, Cosmogenesis and the Cosmological Object Field .................................................. 108
   2.3.1 The Principle of Causality ......................................... 111
         2.3.1.1 The Metaphysics of Determinism ......................... 111
         2.3.1.2 The Metaphysics of Thermodynamic Disintegration 115

2.4 Biogony, Biogenesis and the Biological Object Field ........... 117
   2.4.1 The Principle of Functionalism ................................... 118
   2.4.2 Biogony and the Theory of Evolution ......................... 119
   2.4.3 Biogenesis and the Biological Object Field ................. 121
   2.4.4 The Principles of Functionalism and the Controversy
          about Finalism ............................................................. 124
         2.4.4.1 Signals, information and self-regulation ............... 128
         2.4.4.2 Animal communication ....................................... 140

2.4.5 Biogenesis and Evolutionism ......................................... 144

2.4.6 Psychogonic Theories .................................................. 150
   2.4.6.1 Anthropyschism ...................................................... 150
   2.4.6.2 Panpsychism .......................................................... 151
   2.4.6.3 Biopsychism .......................................................... 152
   2.4.6.4 Neuropsychism ....................................................... 153
   2.4.6.5 Kinopsychism ......................................................... 155

2.4.7 The Major Biogenic Leaps ............................................. 155
   2.4.7.1 The Pro-biontic Leap ............................................. 156
   2.4.7.2 The Bionic Leap ...................................................... 156
   2.4.7.3 The Teleologic Leap
          (Psychogonic according to Engelsted) ......................... 156
   2.4.7.4 The Sensibility Leap (Psychogonic according to Leontiev) 157

2.4.8 The Psychogenesis of Leontiev ..................................... 157
   2.4.8.0 The Stage of Irritability ........................................ 158
   2.4.8.1 The Stage of Sensibility ........................................ 158
2.4.8.2 The Stage of Perception .............................................. 158  
2.4.8.3 The Stage of the Intellect ......................................... 160  
2.4.8.4 The Stage of Consciousness ....................................... 162  
2.5 Anthropogony. Anthropogenesis and the Anthropological Object Field ......................................................... 163  
Notes .................................................................................. 168

3. Human Activity – The Anthropology of Activity Theory ................................................................................... 173  
3.1 Anthropogony – the Content of the Anthropological Sublation ................................................................. 175  
3.2 Methodological Problems in Developing an Anthropology ........................................................................... 177  
3.2.1 The Problem of Anthropogenic Theories ........................................................... 177  
3.2.2 The Status of Culture – Absolute or Relative ..................................................................................... 179  
3.2.3 Anthropogenesis and Cultural Evolution ......................................................................................... 180  
3.2.4 The Human Species, the Human Individuals and the Human Societies ................................................. 183  
3.3 The General Form of Human Activity ......................................................................................................... 184  
3.4 Tools (Material Production) ..................................................................................................................... 187  
3.4.1 The Externalisation of Human Activity .............................................................................................. 190  
3.5 Meaning (Ideal Production) ..................................................................................................................... 192  
3.5.1 Tools and Meaning as Related Mediators ....................................................................................... 200  
3.5.2 Consciousness as the Psychological Counterpart of Meaning ............................................................. 202  
3.6 The Organisation and Division of Human Activity ..................................................................................... 205  
3.6.1 Communication in Human Activity .................................................................................................. 209  
3.7 Transmission of Culture (Education and Appropriation) ............................................................................. 211  
3.8 The Relation between the Biological and Sociological Object Fields .......................................................... 215  
3.8.1 The Relation between Phylogenesis and Sociogenesis in the Evolution of Humankind .......................... 215  
3.8.1.1 The Pre-anthropoid Stage of Pure Phylogenesis ....................................................................... 216  
3.8.1.2 The Anthropoid Transition stage – the Dialectics of Natural and Cultural Evolution ...................... 217  
3.8.1.3 The Anthropic Stage of Pure Sociogenesis .............................................................................. 217  
3.8.2 Biologism and Anthropism .................................................................................................................... 218  
3.9 The Relation between the Human Individual and the Human Society ......................................................... 220  
3.9.1 Psychologism and Sociologism .......................................................................................................... 225  
3.10 The Meta-scientific Relations of the Anthropological Disciplines ............................................................. 227  
Notes ...................................................................................... 229

Part II Theory of Knowledge ................................................................. 233

4. Reflection, Transformation and Production of Objects  
– The Epistemology of Activity Theory ........................................... 235  
4.1 The Kernel of Truth and the Insufficiency in the Theory of Reflection ....................................................... 242  
4.2 The Area of Non-validity in the Theory of Reflection ............................................................................... 245  
4.2.1 The Semi-dualism of Picturality ......................................................................................................... 246
Table of Contents

4.3 The Reactivity of Picturality .................................................. 247

4.4 An Alternative Conception of Knowledge According to Activity Theory . 247
   4.4.1 The Object-reflecting Meaning Production ............................. 249
   4.4.2 The Symmetric Interplay of Object and Meaning Production ...... 250
   4.4.3 The Concept-Based Object Production .................................. 251
   4.4.4 The Dialectics of Anticipation and Reflection in Knowledge ...... 253

4.5 The Dialectics of Theory and Practice in Human Knowledge .......... 255
   4.5.1 The Evolution of Cosmological Knowledge ............................ 262
   4.5.2 The Evolution of Biological Knowledge ................................ 263
   4.5.3 The Evolution of Anthropological Knowledge ....................... 263
   4.5.4 The Transitions between the Practical and the Theoretical fields . 265
   4.5.5 The Hidden Involvement of Practice in Question of Theoretical Truth .................................................. 265
      4.5.5.1 Decidability of Theoretical Truth .................................. 268
   4.5.6 The Relation between Knowledge and the Object field ............. 269
      4.5.6.1 Reflection and Reflexivity ........................................ 269
      4.5.6.2 The Relation between Object. Activity and Knowledge in the Areas of Nature
                    - Strict Reflection and no Reflexivity .......................... 271
      4.5.6.3 The Relation between Object. Activity and Knowledge in the Areas of Humanity
                    - Reflexivity and no Strict Reflection .......................... 274

4.6 The Subject of Epistemology – Personal and Public Knowledge ...... 276
   4.6.1 Epistemic Individualism – the Decontextualised Person as Epistemic Subject .............................................. 276
   4.6.2 Epistemic Collectivism – the Depersonalised Collective as Subject .................................................. 278
   4.6.3 Epistemic Transcendentalism – the Thought-in-itself as Epistemic Subject .............................................. 280
   4.6.4 Epistemic Activity – the Contextualised Person as Subject ....... 283
   4.6.5 The Relation between Personal and Public Knowledge ............. 283

Notes ..................................................................................... 286

5. The Meaning of Activity – the Semiotics of Activity Theory ........ 289
   5.1 The Ontological Status of Meaning .......................................... 295
      5.1.1 Absolute Idealism, the Hypostacy of Meaning in itself ........ 296
      5.1.2 Extensionalism, the Hypostacy of the Object ...................... 298
         5.1.2.1 Montague’s Referential Extensionalism ......................... 300
         5.1.2.2 Davidson’s Verificationistic Extensionalism .................. 300
         5.1.2.3 The Problems of Extensionalism ................................. 302
      5.1.3 Formalism, the Hypostacy of the Sign ............................... 305
         5.1.3.1 Logical Formalism ................................................ 305
            5.1.3.1.1 The Model Theory of Formal Logic ......................... 308
            5.1.3.1.2 The Inverse Semantics of Montague ..................... 308
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1.3.1.3 The Search for Reality in Situation Semantics</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.3.2 Linguistic Formalism</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.4 Subjectivism, the Hypostacy of the Subject</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.4.1 Psychological Subjectivism, the Hypostacy of Consciousness</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.4.2 Sociological Subjectivism, the Hypostacy of the Meaning System</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.5 Putnam's Realism as an Integrated Theory of Meaning</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.6 The Theory of Meaning in the Cultural Historical School</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.6.1 My own Definition of Meaning</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Whole and Part in Semiotics – the Hermeneutical Circle</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1 The Componential Semantics of Frege</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2 The Holistic Hermeneutics of Gadamer</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.3 My own Reflections on Part and Whole in Semantics</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Meaning and Operation – The Relation between Communicative and Operational Activity</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1 The Communication Analysis of Pragmatics</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1.2 The Relevance Theory of Sperber and Wilson</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2 The Contradiction between Interactionism and Instrumentalism in Activity Theory</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2.1 The Meaning (Communication/cognition) Eliminating Operationalism</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2.2 Leontiev's Concept of Communication as an Integrated Category within Activity</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2.3 Elkonin's Theory of the Duality of Interpersonal and Object-oriented Activity</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2.4 Lomow's Interactionistic Version of Activity Theory</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3 A Proposal for Integrating Communication and Semiotics into the Theory of Activity</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3.1 The Hierarchical Relation between Operational and Meaning-based (Significative) Level of Activity</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3.2 The Collateral Relation between the Interpersonal and the Instrumental Aspects of Activity</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Individuals and Universals – The meaning of Concepts</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1 The Classical Dispute about Universals</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1.1 Radical Nominalism</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1.2 Moderate Nominalism</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1.3 Moderate Realism</td>
<td>353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1.4 Radical Realism</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2 The Status of Concepts in Contemporary Science</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2.1 The Ontological Status of Concepts</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2.2 The Semantic Status of Concepts</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2.3 The Cognitive Status of Concepts</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.4.3 The Status of Concepts in Dialectical Philosophy .................. 360
5.4.3.1 Hegel's concepts of concepts ............................... 360
5.4.3.2 Marx's Ideas of the Relation between Historical and Conceptual Evolution ........................................ 362
5.4.3.3 Dawydow's Theory of Concepts .................................. 364
5.4.3.4 Concepts According to my own Theory of Meaning .............. 365
5.5 The Semiotic Universe – Logical Classes of Signs .................. 367
5.5.1 A Nature Void of Meaning – The Asemiotic World of the Natural Sciences .................................................... 369
5.5.2 The Significational Anthropological Field – the Identity of Signs and the Area of Human Activity ...................... 372
5.5.3 Specific and Non-specific Signs: the Professionals and the Amateurs of Semiotics .............................................. 373
5.5.3.1 The Unspecific Signs – Unintended Reference .................. 373
5.5.3.2 The Signs of Natural Science – the Categorical Difference between Sign and Referent in this Domain ................ 376
5.5.3.3 The Activity Signs .................................................. 377
5.5.3.3.1 The Problem of Fictitious and Misleading Signs – the Power of Human Imagination and the Abyss of Mistaken Reference .......... 378
5.5.3.4 The Signs of Reflexivity – Meta-signs ........................... 384
5.6 Semiotics and Dialectics .................................................. 387
5.6.1 Interactivity and Dialectics .............................................. 388
5.6.2 Reflexivity and Dialectics .............................................. 390
Notes .................................................................................. 392

6. Theory and Practice – Meta-Science from an Activity Theoretical Perspective ......................................................... 397
6.1 The General Relation between Theory and Practice ................. 397
6.1.1 The Evolution of Knowledge ........................................... 399
6.2 The Reflective and Heterologic Nature of the Natural Sciences .... 404
6.3 The Nature of Technology ................................................... 406
6.3.1 The General Relation between Technology and Science ......... 406
6.3.2 The Tendency to Progressive Externalisation in Tools and Knowledge ............................................................... 411
6.3.2.1 The Stone Age Culture ............................................. 411
6.3.2.2 The Bronze Age Culture ........................................... 412
6.3.2.3 The Culture of Industry ............................................. 413
6.3.2.4 The Culture of Information Technology ....................... 416
6.4 The Case of the Formal Sciences ......................................... 418
6.4.1 Model Making and Model Use ......................................... 419
6.4.2 Formal Systems ........................................................... 426
6.4.2.1 Formalism is the Professional “Weltanschaung” of Formal Science ......................................................... 428
# Table of Contents

6.4.3 A priori and Posteriori in Mathematics .......................... 430  
6.4.3.1 The Falsity of Kant’s Theory of Mathematics and Logic 430  
6.4.4 The Relation between a Formal System and an Empirical  
Discipline ......................................................... 431  
6.5 The Autology and Reflexivity of the Anthropological Sciences ......... 438  
6.5.1 The Autology of Anthropology ..................................... 438  
6.5.1.1 Anthropological Autology as a Methodological Problem 442  
6.5.1.2 The Concept of Truth in the Anthropological Sciences ... 444  
6.5.2 The Reflexivity of Sociological Science .......................... 450  
6.6 The Human Society and the Human Individual – the Relation between  
the Anthropological Sister Sciences: Sociology and Psychology ........ 452  
6.6.1 The Scope of Anthropology .................................... 456  
6.7 The Sociology of Activity Theory .................................... 458  
6.7.1 The Object Field of Sociology(G) ............................... 458  
6.7.1.1 The Sociological Objects .................................... 460  
6.7.1.1.1 Sociological Collectivities ............................ 460  
6.7.1.1.2 Material Products (Tools) ............................. 464  
6.7.1.1.3 Meaning (Signs) ................................... 465  
6.7.1.2 Sociological Phenomena ..................................... 466  
6.7.1.3 Sociological Essence ...................................... 467  
6.8 Person and Personality – the Psychology of Activity Theory .......... 467  
6.8.1 The Object Field of Psychology ................................. 467  
6.8.1.1 The Psychological Objects ................................. 468  
6.8.1.2 The Psychological Phenomenon .......................... 469  
6.8.1.2.1 The Boundary between Psychological and  
Sociological Phenomena .................................. 470  
6.8.1.2.2 The Boundary between Psychological and  
Biological Phenomena ................................... 471  
6.8.1.3 The Psychological Essence ................................. 473  
6.8.2 The Practice Field of Psychology ............................... 474  

Notes ........................................................................... 479

References ..................................................................... 483

Name Index .................................................................. 497

Subject Index ............................................................. 501
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 Leontiew. 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 Karpatschof (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 goods 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 feed back 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 Højyer, 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.
Human Activity

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