

Ontological Issues and the Possible Development of Cultural Psychology

Gilberto Pérez-Campos¹ 

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Abstract Ontological issues have a bad reputation within mainstream psychology. This paper, however, is an attempt to argue that ontological reflection may play an important role in the development of cultural psychology. A cross-reading of two recent papers on the subject (Mammen & Mironenko, *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 49(4), 681–713, 2015; Simão *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 50, 568–585, 2016), aimed at characterizing their respective approaches to ontological issues, sets the stage for a presentation of Cornelius Castoriadis' ontological reflections. On this basis, a dialogue is initiated with E.E. Boesch's Symbolic Activity Theory that could contribute to a more refined understanding of human psychological functioning in its full complexity.

Keywords Ontological issues · Social imaginary significations · Symbolic activity theory · Cultural psychology

Ontological issues have a bad reputation within mainstream psychology. Logical positivism partially succeeded therein in characterizing metaphysical matters, ontological issues among them, as senseless (Carnap 1967/1932).¹ In fact, at first sight, it may be difficult to argue what could be gained in reflecting about Being/beings as such. That is why we should greet the explicit discussion of ontological issues in *Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science* (Mammen and Mironenko 2015; Simão 2016). I would like to join this discussion arguing that ontological issues are important for the

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In commemoration of E.E. Boesch's one hundred birthday

✉ Gilberto Pérez-Campos
gperez@servidor.unam.mx

¹ Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México Facultad de Estudios Superiores Iztacala, Tlalnepantla, Estado de México, Mexico

reflection about the relationship between culture and psychology, insofar as they force us to make explicit matters that usually are taken for granted.

The paper is organized as follows. Firstly, I analyze how the ontology of psychology is discussed by Mammen and Mironenko (2015) in their reworking of Activity Theory with the introduction of a phenomenological view. The second part presents the criticism of Mammen & Mironenko's proposal by Simão (2016) as well as her alternative and the sources that participate in its composition. The third part is a summary of Cornelius Castoriadis' ontological reflections aimed at understanding the nature of the socio-historical stratum of Being (and the individual subject within it). The fourth part combines some critical remarks on Simão's alternative with the possibilities of mutual fertilization between Castoriadis' ontological reflections and Boesch's and Simão's developments of Symbolic Action Theory.

Mammen & Mironenko's Reworking of Activity Theory

Mammen and Mironenko (2015) address the ontology of psychology basically from the angle of the dualism between rationalism and empiricism, which has led to separated and opposed concepts of objectivity and subjectivity. Their aim is to offer the beginning of an alternative to Psychology's lack of "coherence and unity, conceptual clarity, efficient analytical and conceptual tools able to accumulate and integrate empirical facts and to enrich and put critical perspectives on individual and collective phenomena" (p. 682). They do not set out explicitly the notion of ontology underlying their discussion, besides stating that activity allows us to surpass the duality between rationalism and empiricism "in a sort of dialectical synthesis" (p. 684). They consider that a first step in order to get rid of this dualism was taken by Russian Activity Theory, where activity

"...has a *form* created in the practical encounter between the subject and the object... The form has not to be derived by deduction from some obscure a priori as in rationalism or from some formless sensual raw material through blind inductive associations as in empiricism" (p. 685).

But the authors warn us of the temptation "to cast the whole burden of deriving psychology on it", and this is because activity also has its premises:

"...human activity has its premises in the biological equipment of the subject, explaining why we can't educate a chimpanzee to take part in our culture, and in our individual life-histories explaining why we may have different motives, etc. And human activity has its premises in the cultural world we encounter, with its history, artifacts, sign-systems, etc. These inner and outer conditions must be conceptualized as a frame or ground for activity as the figure." (p. 685).

However, they think still it is necessary "to *understand and describe the inner structure of the activity connecting subject and object* in a practical and epistemic relation, activity both serving vital functions and *connecting the subject with the world in relations beyond functionality*" (p. 686, emphases added). This requires introducing phenomenology in Activity Theory. In order to do this, certain *ontological* conditions

for activity need to be conceptualized: 1) the subject moves freely in the world, where objects are distributed in space and time, 2) some objects are searched for and others are encountered accidentally, 3) the subject focuses on different objects and on some of their qualities among a possible infinity, 4) objects have numerical and qualitative identity, sometimes are interchangeable, and they are connected, moving and interacting (Mammen and Mironenko 2015, p. 686).

These “ontological conditions” can be analyzed with the help of Schatzki’s (n.d.) characterization of *social ontology*, which has to do with “the nature, character, or basic features, structures, or elements-constituents of social life” (p. 1). Different theorists may choose one or another of these formulations, but together they “specify the basic ‘what there is’ of social life; these formulations articulate their understanding of what, ultimately, there is to the subject matters in which they are interested.” (p. 1). On this basis, we see that Mammen & Mironenko’s ontological conditions specify the *constituents* of activity (subject, objects), their *basic features* (subject move freely, objects are distributed in space and time, objects have infinity of qualities) and their *relations* (objects may be searched for or encountered accidentally by the subject, objects have – for the subject– numerical and qualitative identities, etc.).

This ontology, derived from a Danish tradition of Activity Theory influenced by existentialism is, according to Mammen & Mironenko, their way “to understand and describe the inner structure of the activity connecting subject and object”, which is summarized in the following quote:

“The activity is functional in relation to the subject’s vital needs and motives, but it is also spontaneous in the sense that the motives are formed by and changed by the encounter with unexpected objects, and that it even can be explorative and searching with no precise motive. Activity is object-directed, has an external focus, but the object is not necessary present or in any causal relation with the subject. It can be imaginative and, at least at the human level, not necessarily defined by its qualities or features, but by its identity as a particular with a specific history. Psyche, and especially the human psyche is accordingly not only viewed as functional in relation to basic and vital need and motives, but as defining its own relations to the world. Psyche as servant for vital needs becomes master and transcends functionalism, setting its own goals and affections in a meaningful phenomenological world.” (p. 696–697)

Mammen and Mironenko (2015) claim that this view allows us to escape from the two core principles constituting “mechanicism”: proximal causation (“all interaction, including that between individuals and their environment, could be resolved in a chain of interactions, infinitesimal in space and time”, p. 700) and universalism (“the particular objects interacting could be analyzed in a sum of universal qualities”, p. 700). Psychology has to break with these two principles not only “as a figure in the scientific landscape, but in the ontological ground Psychology shares with other sciences”, that is, its ontological basis (p. 701).

All this line of thinking, implying “a duality in our basic relation with the objective world” (p. 705), becomes synthesized in a pair of categories:

“The *choice categories* are what *connect* us with objects as *numerical* identical over time and as *concrete* objects with an *infinity* of qualities *beyond* our practical

capacity for sensory discriminations. The *sense categories* are on the other hand our sensory “snapshots”, i.e. our decisions based on the capacity of our *sense organs* and their extensions with measuring and amplifying equipment or devices.” (p. 705)

Choice categories bring us beyond mechanicism and functionalism because they “define relations of belonging, of solidarity, of love and affection which can’t be reduced to any optimization of sense categories or parameters” (p. 706). But, one could ask, how is it that the choice categories so developed “in our basic relation with the objective world” are not merely personal (and, so, not even partially shared with other people)? In Mammen & Mironenko’s paper there are two ideas that clear the risk for the choice categories to relapse in another form of subjectivism:

“All objects have a history, a trajectory, of their own, and especially for artifacts their meaning is not a snapshot of qualities but *bound to the intentions laid down in their production and in our acquisition of them*” (p. 706, emphasis added).

“The psyche [thanks to choice categories] defines a new orientation and *openness* towards the world, it becomes sensitive to demands, appeals and incitements we encounter, above all from other individuals, *demands which do not emerge from ourselves*” (p. 707, the last emphasis added).

So, the duality of categories product of the “inner structure of the activity connecting subject and object”, is embedded within the world where artifacts embody intentions and the individual encounters demands/appeals/incitements from other individuals; in short, the human world. This may seem an “obvious” issue, but it is not at all as we will see. It is worth emphasizing that, in their own terms, with their duality of categories Mammen & Mironenko offer a way to surpass a purely instrumental relationship of the subject with her world. This can be seen clearly in their critical analysis of the role of needs, according to Leontiev, as necessarily laying behind the formation of activity’s motives. Against Leontiev’s qualification of motives as “‘fallacious’ if they are not adequate embodiments of needs”, they suggest the possibility of “a new motive triggered by an encounter with something unexpected or not wanted... or responding to a demand, an appeal” (p. 708). This possibility is a direct consequence of their ontological conditions (see above).

Anyway, it would be wrong to consider that the sole duality of categories would be enough in order to solve the critical situation of Psychology. Mammen and Mironenko (2015) clearly state that other developments would be necessary:

“This is not to claim that the introduction of a duality of categories and going beyond mechanicism and functionalism exhaust the ontology needed as a ground for Psychology as a figure. It may also be necessary to include the Possible as a supplement to the Factual, to have an ontology of Time, and on the subjective side place for fantasy and imagination not to be understood as just “free flowing” but also as a reflection of levels in reality, etc.” (p. 708–709).

However, the duality of categories plays an essential role in Mammen & Mironenko's conceptual development because it underpins an epistemological assumption (with ontological implications) that can be identified in the following quote:

“But in relation to the traditional dualisms talking of two worlds accessible with different methods from natural science and hermeneutics, respectively, this is something else. We simply claim that there exist real distal relations in nature, and real non-universal relations between particulars, and that there is no fundamental difference in the interpretive task in natural science and e.g. psychology, only a *difference in the dimensions, scale, and universality of the necessary interpretative contexts.*” (p. 701).

Simão's Critique of Mammen & Mironenko's Proposal

Livia M. Simão (2016) challenges Mammen & Mironenko's pretension to have surpassed the dualism between rationalism and empiricism, and its implied internal-external dichotomy in psychology. She rejects their proposal just arguing that

“postulating ‘history, artefacts, sign-systems, etc.’ as a ground for the subject's activity may hold us back from overcoming the dualist ontology these authors criticize, once culture remains as an external conditioning to the subject. The subject and object still remain radically split.” (p. 571).

There are two intertwined issues involved here. First, as the rejection is focused on one initial summarizing statement of the authors, Simão doesn't go into details about what they consider the ontological conditions required for phenomenologically describing the inner structure of the activity *connecting* subject and object, neither their proposed duality of categories, which define the two possible subject-object links considered as fundamental. So, it is not clear to me Simão's statement that ‘subject and object remain radically split’, because, as showed before, ontologically speaking, one of Mammen & Mironenko's starting points is a differentiation between subject and object, that later (in the subject's ontogeny) become connected in sense or choice relationships. Secondly, in what is to me the most complicated issue involved in this debate, Simão rejects for culture (with its artifacts, sign-systems, etc.) to be conceived as a ground for the subject's activity, because “culture remains as an external conditioning to the subject”. But again, as shown, Mammen & Mironenko take the cultural world (as well as the biological equipment) for granted as the ground for human activity as a figure.

So, it is rather evident that even when Mammen & Mironenko and Simão claim to maintain a phenomenologically informed alternative to ontological dualism, their views clash. It seems necessary to examine this in more detail.

Simão, in contrast with Mammen & Mironenko, explicitly mentions the ontological perspective she builds upon. This is composed of three main parts from diverse sources: a) ontological issues as the borders of the relationship between philosophy and psychology (Klempe); b) ontological questions ask for the qualifying character of its

subject and not merely for the propositional descriptive character of it, and this involves the use of concepts as predicates (Taylor); c) hermeneutics of facticity (Heidegger) understands the ontological dimension “as revealing itself in the ontic dimension, i.e. in what is factually experienced in life” (Simão 2016, p. 581).

Such composition raises questions concerning the compatibility of their constituents. Klempe’s (2016) proposal of ontological concerns as demarcation criteria between philosophy and psychology –focus on entities *existence* versus their *appearance*, respectively–, is based on a meticulous analysis of Kant’s efforts in order to make a distinction between pure and applied reason. Even when Klempe asserts that the demarcation line does not imply separation because “we have also seen that the two fields are still strongly interwoven” (p. 83), this does not erase the fact that *noumenon* (thing in itself) and *phenomenon* (appearance) are still an insuperable dichotomy in Kant’s thinking. It is on the basis of this dichotomy that Klempe states that “Ontology is first of all about general valid statements of the world, whereas psychology is about the subjective, and individually [*sic*] experiences of the particular parts of the world” (p. 86). Leaving aside the question if ontology in fact elaborates “general valid statements of the world” (which would imply that only *one* ontology could/should exist), and considering Klempe’s assertion “that a fully understanding of psychology can only be achieved by having a clear distinction between the subjective and the objective, and by taking both of them into account” (2012, p. 174), the obvious question is whether posing ontological issues as a demarcation criterion allows us to evade the Kantian dichotomy.

Simão’s characterization of ontology seems to rest partly on Klempe’s demarcation between philosophy and psychology, even when she does not mention him in that part of her paper:

“Ontological questions ask about the nature of the being, while psychological questions ask about the modes of the existence of beings, entities. In such understanding, ontology regards universal aspects of the human being, while psychology regards the particularity of the living persons.” (Simão 2016, p. 569).

So, Simão’s effort to surpass the dichotomy between subject and object (internal and external) is based on a demarcation criterion between philosophy and psychology that, at its time, is based on a dichotomy between existence and appearance. This is so even though Simão says that she proposes ontological issues as a dialogical boundary, given “the bidirectional and tensional dynamicity of the borders...between philosophy and psychology” (p. 570). Consequently, it is not clear whether Klempe’s demarcation between philosophy and psychology is congruous with Heidegger’s hermeneutics of facticity where the ontological dimension ‘reveals itself in the ontic dimension’ (Simão 2016).

Concerning the other two sources of Simão’s elaboration (Taylor and Heidegger), she does not go into details about their respective ontological views. This makes difficult to see whether they are indeed compatible among themselves and with her proposed alternative (ontological predication). I can’t discuss this issue in detail, but I would like to give some indications. Simão says that “Following Taylor (1958),² I

² There is a little mistake here, because the publication year of this paper is 1959.

understand that each ontology establishes particular relationships of the being with its world, both qualifying and distinguishing it from others that are not beings, and so distinguishing itself from other ontologies.” (p. 571), and only quotes his idea that ontological questions “arise in connection with concepts in their use as predicates, and not simply in connection with substantive expressions” (1958, p.128, quote in p. 571). I find a bit difficult to deal with the utterance “each ontology establishes particular relationships of the *being with its world*, both qualifying and distinguishing it from *others that are not beings*”, because ontology tries to specify what “the world” (Being) is or what are the different beings that may be identified as part of Being, as well as their relationships. Are the “others that are not beings” *other* beings or are they, following Klempe, “appearances”? And, what are we talking about, ontologically, when we say “the being with its world”?

Concerning the “use of concepts as predicates”, I think it is necessary to locate this idea of Taylor within a wider picture. According to Meijer (2014), Taylor’s oeuvre is characterized by its wide range of concerns, which together with his style of writing (aimed to *articulate* problems instead of trying to solve them), has led to multiple interpretations. However, Meijer argues that there is a core concern all along Taylor’s work identified by the concept *strong evaluation*. This concept derives from his struggle against the “naturalism” prevailing in mechanistic/reductive/atomist approaches to human sciences, which model human life and action on natural science. Strong evaluation lies at the heart of his alternative to naturalism (called philosophical anthropology), which does not deny that humans are part of nature, but the canon “that we must avoid anthropocentric properties [...] and give an account of things in absolute terms” (quote from Taylor 1985, in Meijer 2014, p. 443). The specific anthropocentric property grasped by the concept of strong evaluation refers to the fact that human beings can’t exist without making “distinctions of worth”: the differential significance of things for human beings. This is important for the “use of concepts as predicates” as the main point that Simão draws from Taylor, because in that paper he argues that “some strata of our language are [...] in conflict with others, i.e. they presuppose a “world” in which the things and happenings we speak about in the other strata cannot find a place (1959, 136)” (quote in Meijer, p. 443). So, it seems to be not enough to say only that concepts are used as predicates without considering “that most people are reluctant to embrace the full implications of a naturalistic perspective and yet remain highly skeptical of all things that do not fit the naturalist model” (Meijer 2014, p. 443). These “things that do not fit the naturalist model” play a critical role in Taylor’s thinking and revolve around the concept of strong evaluation.

As pointed out by Saurette (2003), it is a much-contested issue whether Taylor may be located among the strong or weak ontologists. While the former “believe that there are clear ontological truths about the world –and that these need to be reflected in our political and moral thought and structures”, the latter “acknowledge that we all have deep convictions...[but] they believe that these convictions only *prefigure* and inspire us towards certain questions and solutions –these convictions don’t determine certain perspectives as incontestably necessary” (p. 4). Anyhow, the most important point here, concerning Simão’s proposal, is that

“...Taylor strongly believes that a crucial part of his project is excavating and articulating the ontological ‘background’ in which he thinks we all exist. From Taylor’s perspective, the key point is that we cannot formulate our political and

ethical principles without taking into account –and following the dictates– of our *fundamental nature* as beings with identity, *beings that need to make imperative, universal moral judgements, beings that use language and beings that cannot but exist in communities.*” (Saurette 2003, p. 5, emphasis added).

The last part of this quote has to do directly with ‘concepts in their use as predicates’ because, for Taylor, in using language the individual is

“enmeshed in two kinds of larger order, which he can never fully oversee, and *can only punctually and marginally refashion.* For he is only a speaking agent at all as part of a language community...and the meanings and illocutionary forces activated in any speech act are only what they are *against the background of a whole language and way of life.*” (Saurette 2003, p. 5, emphases added).

This, in my view, cannot easily be conciliated with Simão’s emphasis on the subjective nature of the individual action. I will come back to this issue below.

Something alike happens with Simão’s resort to Heidegger’s hermeneutics of facticity, which is presented only briefly in the concluding remarks of her paper. Given the almost legendary difficulty of Heidegger’s thinking/language, it is necessary to draw on some of the available interpretations in order to get an idea of the larger frame where the hermeneutics of facticity finds its place. The following summary of some of his concepts draws mainly on a combination of Vattimo (1986) and Escudero (2009).

Already in his early works (his doctorate and habilitation theses), Heidegger argues against neokantism and addresses the problem of realizing the historicity of the living mind that makes impossible to consider the knowledge subject as the pure subject assumed by any transcendental position. The difficulty/impossibility of traditional metaphysics in dealing with historicity and life derives from the fact that the meaning of the concept of being is identified with the notion of presence: that what subsists, can be found and “gives itself”, and is present. In so far as it is the historical being of the mind what forces the reexamination of the notion of being, its reformulation takes place in relationship with time, starting with the analysis of the being that “presents” the problem in the sense of asking itself about the meaning of being.

Saying the human being exists cannot mean that it is something “given” or simply present. In *Ontology. Hermeneutics of facticity* (Heidegger 1999/1923, OHF hereafter) Heidegger tries to capture the phenomenon of life in its *factual* modes of existence –i.e. related to the historical and finite character of human life. The expression “hermeneutics of facticity” is the antecedent of what will be later called (in *Being and Time*) “existential analytics”; it defines Heidegger’s program consisting in reaching a genuine, primary, non-theoretical, pre-reflexive understanding of the being of human life.³ In OHF *existence* appears as the distinctive being of the Dasein, the formal indication of its most proper possibility. “*Facticity* is the name we give to the character of the being of ‘our’ ‘own’ Dasein” (OHF, p. 25), but with the proviso that ‘our’ ‘own’ does not imply

³ It is worth mentioning that in an early paper Taylor criticizes the phenomenological reduction as supposed access to the content of ‘original’ experience and the possibility of ‘pure’ description because “to ‘suspend’ one concept for re-examination requires that others are taken for granted in order to carry out this examination” (Taylor & Kullman, 1958, quote in Meijer 2014, p. 444).

“isolating it in what seen externally would be an individual” but is rather “a how of being” (p. 26). So, as stated by Zaborowski, “Hermeneutics of facticity, then, is a (phenomenological) disclosing, or unconcealing, discourse of how Dasein *is* and thus how it is there (*da*) for itself” (2011, p. 23). This seems to call for a closer exam of Heidegger’s characterization of Dasein, which is lacking in Simão’s paper, as well as the need of considering the issue in *Being and Time*, above all because “[u]nlike his earlier hermeneutics of facticity, the hermeneutics of Dasein of *Being and Time* is integrated... into a more pronounced fundamental... ontological framework” (Zaborowski 2011, p. 28).

Heidegger uses *Dasein* exclusively in order to express the ontological constitution of human life, characterized by its openness to being and its capacity to question itself about its sense. Dasein’s existence is not characterized by what it is in fact but by what it may come to be; it is always an “able-to-be” (*Seinkönnen*)⁴ that projects itself into the future. So, Heidegger makes a distinction between the fundamental ontological determinations constituting all the existential (*existenzial*) modes of being of the Dasein and the ontic and existentiell (*existenziell*) level of the individual life of everyone.

Human existence cannot be understood as an encapsulated self but is open to the world in a dynamic relationship with things, people, and situations that come to its encounter. “The being of man consists in being referred to possibilities, but this referring takes place... not in an abstract dialogue with itself, but as concretely existing in a world of things and other people.” (Vattimo 1986, p. 27).

Some features of Heidegger’s conception pose some difficulties for Simão’s use of OHF in her paper. *Being and Time* begins with a preparatory analysis of man’s being,⁵ studied in its more general and comprehensive meaning in order to avoid the risk of surreptitiously presenting anyone aspect of it as essential. This requirement leads Heidegger to pose the problem of man’s being from its “daily nature” and “averageness”, indicating the whole set of actual modes of man’s being. “Daily nature” (*Alltäglichkeit*) was used for the first time in an ontological sense in OHF, in order to describe the way the Dasein finds itself immediately and regularly in the world. In this mode of existence, Dasein is submitted to the ways of behavior and interpretation established by “the one” (*das Man*) that are we all and nobody in particular, which leads Dasein to conduct its existence in the frame of the “averageness” (*Durschnittlichkeit*). Heidegger’s hermeneutics, therefore, may be thought of as “the practice of self-awakening which requires a certain independence from others in order freely to think –to interpret oneself– for oneself” (Zaborowski 2011, p. 24). Is this “independence from others” an immanent feature of human beings’ existence? Later I will take up this question. Now, something must be said about Dasein’s world.

Things are not mere presences with an ‘objective’ existence, but for us they are tools. Their “readiness-to-hand” (*Zuhandenheit*) –their meaning for our life– is their initial mode of existence in our experience. But a tool is never isolated; it only is defined within

⁴ Given that Heidegger’s terminology has no full standard translation, I decided to include the German words for some terms in order to reduce the possibility of confusion.

⁵ I use here “man” instead of “human being” just to avoid the expression “human being’s being”. I am aware that in OHF Heidegger himself argued against the expressions “human being” and “man” in order to give name to the region of being he was investigating, because they already put the investigation within a determinate categorial conception (Heidegger 1999/1923, p. 46).

a totality of tools.⁶ Consequently, the world is not a sum of things but the condition for individual things to appear.⁷ But the totality of tools is given in so far as there is somebody that can use them, Dasein (as *Durchschnittlichkeit* and *Alltäglichkeit*).

Dasein is not a pure subject because it never is a disinterested bystander. “Affectivity”/“mood”/“disposedness” (*Befindlichkeit*) reveals that the constitutive project of Dasein is always a “thrown project” that expresses its finiteness; we always find ourselves being, without the possibility of accounting for it. If affectivity is the very way that things are given to us (but not as purely private feelings projected into the world) and if affectivity is something that we find ourselves into without the chance of accounting for it, this faces us with “the fact that our original mode of grasping and understanding the world is something whose grounds we miss, without being, on the other hand, the transcendental characteristic of a ‘pure’ reason, because affectivity is what every one of us has as the most typical, the most individual, and the most changeable” (Vattimo 1986, p. 39).

This characteristic combination of not being able to account for its where and from where and at the same time being radically open as such is what is called “state of thrown” (*Geworfenheit*). The Dasein is finite because even if it opens up the world, it is at the same time thrown to that openness, which is not at its disposal. This thrown structure indicates the facticity (*Faktizität*) of Dasein.

One of the fundamental ontological structures of Dasein is “care” (*Sorge*). Care embodies the way Dasein relates with the world. Heidegger distinguished two fundamental ways of care: the dealing with (*Besorgen*) the entities that come before us in the surrounding world and the solicitude (*Fürsorge*) as the proper way of treating the others. In *Being & Time*, care becomes the fundamental ontological structure that binds together the moments of existentiality (*Existenzialität*), facticity (*Faktizität*), and falling (*Verfallen*).⁸

So, two related questions arise concerning Simão’s appeal to Heidegger. Can one draw on the hermeneutics of facticity without a detailed analysis of Dasein? What is the relation between Dasein and the singular subject so much emphasized in her paper?

Dasein “discovers” itself existing (being) in a human world where it has been thrown into. This world is not a sum of multifarious isolated things but it is a totality of tools, signs, people, and activities. Dasein cannot be thought of as severed from its world; its existence is always “being-in” and “being-with”,

⁶ An instrument, constituted as a function of another, has the character of reference. It refers not only to its specific use but also to the people that use it, to the material it is composed of, etc. But the tool in itself is not made to express such references. There is, however, a worldly being defined precisely by such character of reference: signs. For signs, their utility coincides with its “capacity of reference” and in this way, it manifests what is characteristic of all worldly beings: its connection with other things. If the world is the totality of tools, signs are the “instructions manual” for using them. So, being in the world is no only finding ourselves among a totality of tools, but to be familiar with a totality of meanings. (cf. Vattimo 1986).

⁷ This ontological issue raises interesting questions, not pursued here, for Mammen & Mironenko’s choice and sense categories, and has important consequences for the symbolism of action.

⁸ *Verfallen* is the propensity or tendency to remain prey of the public world, to get lost in the *Besorgen* and the *Fürsorge*.

not in a pre-established way but as opened to possibilities, as “able-to-be”. As seen in the previous summary of Heidegger’s conception (as well as Taylor’s), Dasein is *constituted* in that human world and is permeated by its language, tools, traditions, procedures and rules. That is why it is addressed in its “daily nature” and its “averageness”, submitted to the ways of behavior/interpretation of “the one” (*das Man*).

If, as Simão states, ontological issues ask about the universal aspects of the human being, while psychological issues ask about the particularity of living persons (p. 569), and given that she understands “the ontological dimension as revealing itself in the ontic dimension, i.e., in what is factually experienced in life” (p. 581), then one would expect to see how the “existential analytics” of the Dasein intertwines in “mutually constitutive and transformative relationships” with psychological issues (p. 568). But Simão says only a few things that are not enough in order to clarify these matters: a) “ontological issues necessarily include the perspective of the experiential particularity of being here and now” (p. 582); b) “facticity regards the universal character of subjectivity constituting and being constituted in time, that is temporality” (p. 582); c) “Being in the world is being with others in culture, in which the interpellation of tradition plays a primary role in the Dasein’s project of coming to be” (p. 5823); d) “the perspective encompassed by the hermeneutics of facticity prevents any understanding of the being as an objectified entity that exists prior to its world, in a subject-object dichotomy” (p. 582).

Of these four points, a) clashes with the remarks in the preceding paragraphs, if by “experiential particularity” Simão means only “the particular, idiosyncratic and unique character” of individual action (p. 575). Point b) asserts the temporality of subjectivity, but leaves unstated the specific character of that temporality and so it seems that it refers only to the temporality of individual action: “the being in the world...in its contextual present, which is already and always involved in the project of its own future” (p. 582). The problem with point c) is that the statement takes for granted Dasein may distance itself from tradition, something that according to the above summary does not happen in the first place. Dasein, says Heidegger, can only escape from that mode of existence characterized by “the one”, “averageness”, and “falling” listening to the call of its consciousness (*Gewissensruf*) which invites to choose itself in its property/authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*). But Simão does not address this issue. Point d) remarks the rejection of any kind of subject-object dichotomy by denying “any understanding of the being as an objectified entity that exists prior to its world” (p. 582).

Simão goes, without enough argumentation, from a partial presentation of the hermeneutics of facticity to what seems a unilateral emphasis on the individual’s singularity, idiosyncrasy, and uniqueness, which plays, according to her, a key role in the “emergence” and transformation of culture. Moreover, from her critique of Mammen & Mironenko’s activity theory, she strongly rejects to consider anything as a ground for the subject’s activity because that allegedly would hinder us from overcoming a dualist ontology, even when one of the ontological structures of the Dasein is its “state of thrown”. In *Being & Time*, Heidegger says that to mention “the others” does not mean all the rest of people except me but, on the contrary, those from whom one does not distinguish oneself, those among whom one also is (Heidegger 1993/1927, p. 134). Moreover, even if, as noted by Dreyfus (1991), it is not clear

enough in chapter IV, First Section, of *Being & Time*,⁹ for Heidegger everything that Dasein uncovers in the world as an X has been previously used as an X by others, therefore it is from them that we learn what an X is and how to use it. In his own words (Dreyfus 1991, p. 145, emphasis added):

“On Heidegger’s account, then, a plurality of Daseins each with its own background skills and for-the-sake-of-whichs *must* uncover a single shared world because *background familiarity and ways of being Dasein are not a matter of private experiences but are acquired from society*. Heidegger does not usually speak of Dasein genetically, but at one illuminating point in his lectures he remarks...”

The lectures referred to by Dreyfus makeup Heidegger’s book *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena* (1985/1925). There we find a precise starting point of one of the issues Simão struggles with but without accomplishing a clear enunciation:

“What is first is precisely the world in which one is with one another. *It is out of this world that one can first more or less genuinely grow into his own world*. This common world, *which is there primarily and into which every maturing Dasein first grows*, as the public world governs every interpretation of the world and of Dasein.” (p. 246, emphases added).

This quote would seem to assert the same that Simao’s point c) above, but it rather may be understood as a way of saying that *culture has priority over and shapes the private (own) world*. This is something that Simão rejects repeatedly in her paper and, to me, part of a core ontological issue that still needs to be posed in a way that allows us to elaborate a generative answer. It will be taken up in the next section with the idea of *culture as instituted*, not “given” neither existing as a “thing”/“object”.

A final point about Heidegger’s existential analytics of Dasein, complementing and extending the previous one, starts with the resounding statement that “The Anyone is an undeniable, demonstrable phenomenon of Dasein itself as being-with in the world.” (Heidegger 1985/1925, p. 247) and then continues:

“*This Anyone [das Man] must be comprehended as in a way the ‘realist subject that there is for Dasein*. Its phenomenal structure shows that the authentic entity of Dasein, the who, is not a thing and nothing worldly, but is itself only a way to be. (...) This element of the Anyone prohibits us phenomenally from seeking an entity which could be Dasein. Even the return to an ‘ego,’ to an ‘ego-pole’

⁹ Dreyfus says that this chapter is one of the most basic in the book but also the most confused, because Heidegger did not clearly distinguish and integrate the influences of Dilthey and Kierkegaard: “while Dilthey emphasized the positive function of social phenomena, which he called the ‘objectifications of life,’ Kierkegaard focused on the negative effects of the conformism and banality of what he called ‘the public’. Heidegger takes up and extends the Diltheyan insight that intelligibility and truth arise only in the context of public, historical practices, but he is also deeply influenced by the Kierkegaardian view that ‘the truth is never in the crowd’” (Dreyfus 1991, p. 143).

freed of all thingness, is still a concession to a dogmatic and (in the bad sense) naive interpretation of Dasein, which attributes a subject-thing to the Dasein and then must still keep it as an ‘ego-thing’ and ‘person-thing.’ On the other hand, however, the ‘ego’ and the ‘self’ are also not epiphenomena, not, say, the fallout resulting from a specific constellation of the being of Dasein. The ‘ego; the ‘self; is nothing other than the who of this being, the very being which as the Anyone has the possibility of being of the ‘ego’ itself. That the Dasein can be so, that it first and foremost is not itself but is absorbed in the Anyone, is a phenomenal finding which at the same time indicates that the being of Dasein is to be sought in its possible ways to be itself.” (1985/1925, p. 247–248, emphasis added).

This touches again on Simão’s point c) above, but while Heidegger’s emphasis lies on the constitution of Dasein, as *das Man*, in culture, Simão stresses individual’s symbolic action as “the inherent form of relation between the active subject and the world *it realizes as not being it*”, having noted that symbolic action “allows *the inseparability, but not fusion*, between subject and object” (Simão 2016, p. 575, emphases added). It is not clear how these diverging emphases could be assembled in the “bidirectional and tensional dynamicity of the borders... between philosophy and psychology” (Simão 2016, p. 570) and it does not help just to say that “ontology regards universal aspects of the human being, while psychology regards the particularity of the living persons” (p. 569). One example of the difficulties in bridging the ontological issues set out by Heidegger (and Taylor) on the one hand, and Simão’s emphasis on the ontological predication in SAT on the other, comes first from Heidegger himself in Dreyfus’ reading (Pérez et al. 1999, p. 297, emphasis added):

“Our involvement in everyday practices is characterized by *no explicit or implicit experience of dissociation between mind and the world of bodies and things*; it is an absorbed coping. *Absorbed coping is the dominant mode of involvement in everyday life*, but if things turn difficult, we must pay attention and *turn to the modality of deliberate subject–object intentionality*: the Being-in-the-world appears as a thinking subject and the things at hand as an array of isolated, determinate, present substances. But even in this latter case, when one is considering what happens and is planning the next step, one should not forget the absorbed coping which backgrounds the whole process.”

Research in the neurosciences has shown that using a tool modifies the body schema and transforms the neural functioning as if the tool became an extension of the arm (Clark 2011; Noë 2009). So, we have here evidence that action not only produces the differentiation between subject and object, but also some kind of fusion that accords with the notion of absorbed coping. Then, it seems necessary a more precise elaboration of the possibilities of subject-object differentiation in order for not getting a purely formal (and empty) distinction. But this takes us back to the conception of culture, with the difficulties that were already mentioned.

I am not trying to deny the individual’s singularity, idiosyncrasy, and uniqueness, but just to point out that, in my view, Simão’s analysis does not allow to fully bridge the ontological issues involved in the hermeneutics of Dasein and the psychological issues involved in accounting for the particularity of living persons. Anyhow, I completely agree with her that: “From different philosophical interpellations to psychology, different

ontological issues can emerge as their bordered field; and, from them, different psychological issues regarding the subject-world relationships, and the respective proposals to deal with them, can emerge.” (2016, p. 571). I would like therefore to introduce another philosophical interpellation characterized for its deeper reflection on ontological issues, which will underpin my further comments on Simão’s alternative to dualism based on Ernst Boesch’s Symbolic Action Theory in the last section.

But before turning to that matter, it may be necessary to say that Mammen and Mironenko’s lack of explicit ontological reflection on culture could be a deliberate move to avoid what they see as a characteristic of mainstream psychology: “Culture is regarded here as a kind of superstructure on the foundation of biology, and the unity of nature and culture in humans is considered as somewhat indivisible and forever given and specified” (p. 690–691). Consequently, they emphasize the construction of sense and choice categories bottom up, so to speak, because otherwise

“Psychology is back in mechanistic embracement and all postulates of qualitative new phenomena in psychology, meaning, signs, culture, whatever, will just be projections of *ghost into the machine*. The bridge between nature and psyche, nature and culture will have no foundation, no base in nature.” (p. 701).

The idea that we need to bridge between nature and psyche/culture and that this bridging needs to have a “base in nature” involves heavy ontological assumptions as we will see in the following section.

Cornelius Castoriadis’ Ontological Reflection

For Castoriadis (1997d), ontological issues involve a specific kind of reflection: “There is a reflection/elucidation, which is concerned with Being/being [*être/étant*] and which asks itself what appertains to it toward itself and what appertains to it in as much as it is for us – that is, from the fact that we are reflecting upon it.” (p. 362). This reflection opens up not only out of mathematics, physics or biology, but also when one reflects upon society, history, or the psyche:

“What is the mode of being of these beings (society, history, the psyche), ‘alongside’ the mode of being of these other beings that are physical nature, and the living being?; it also confronts us with the question of the being and mode of being of this being *for which* there is a world, nature or life.” (1997d, p. 363).¹⁰

¹⁰ Castoriadis’ wide and deep reflection on these issues may be found, without intending to be exhaustive, in the following volumes: 1987; 1992; 1988b; 1998. Particularly, his reflection on psyche as creation would deserve a separate paper, but in a nutshell it can be said that it involves a breakup from animal psyche, due to a monstrous development of imagination that turns human psyche *a-functional*. Human beings are animals radically inept for life outside society, which provides them, through the SIS, with meaning and allows them to become a particular kind of individuals. There is no opposition between society and individual, because the latter is a social creation (each time in its particular social-historical way). The true polarity is society/psyche; always irreducible to each other and always inseparable. (Castoriadis 1998).

This means that ontological reflection involves, at the same time, epistemological reflection in an endless process. The ontological reflection on society, history, and the psyche (besides that on physics and biology) leads, says Castoriadis, to “weighty conclusions concerning total Being/being as such” (Castoriadis 1997d, p. 363). These conclusions could be summarized as follows:

“What is is not ensemble or system of ensembles. What is is not fully determined. What is is Chaos, or Abyss, or Groundlessness. What is is Chaos with nonregular stratification. (...) The nondetermination of what is is not mere ‘indetermination’ in the privative and ultimately trivial sense. It is creation, namely, emergence of *other* determinations, new laws, new domains of lawfulness. ‘Indetermination’ (if it does not simply signify ‘our state of ignorance’ or a ‘statistical situation’) has a precise meaning: No state of being is such that it renders impossible the emergence of *other* determinations than those already existing.” (1997b, p. 307–308, underline added).

So, Castoriadis advocates a non-unitary ontology. Being is not merely order (*cosmos*) but chaos as well. Being is *creation* with non-regular stratification, which “means that it involves partial ‘organizations’, each time specific of the diverse strata that we discover (discover/construct, discover/create) in being” (Castoriadis 1988a, p. 64). The human world as such *included the individual*, is a specific stratum of such creation; it cannot be deduced or reduced to the physical or biological strata.

Specifically, the mode of being of the social-historical involves the creation of “a magma¹¹ of *social imaginary significations* [citizen, spirits, gods, God, nation, taboo, money, sin, man/woman/child, etc.]..., *irreducible to functionality or ‘rationality’, embodied in and through its institutions*, and constitutive, each time, of its own, or ‘proper’ world (both ‘natural’ and ‘social’)” (Castoriadis 1997d, p. 363, emphasis added). For the psyche, therefore, the “external world” is always the social world.

By institutions, Castoriadis refers both to constituent parts of *any* society as *language, family* (in its diverse historical arrangements) and a *type of individual*, as well as to the instituted parts of specific societies (Greek *polis*, capitalist enterprise, etc.). Given that there have been a huge variety of social imaginary significations (SIS) of different societies and of the institutions that bear or convey them, one has to ask: what do this imply for our conception of Being *tout court*? “The response is: The world lends itself to (is compatible with) all these S.I.S. and privileges none. That means: The world *tout court* is senseless, devoid of signification...” (Castoriadis 1997d, p. 363).

The world couldn’t be effectively organized were it not organizable, and this is a feature of the world, not something produced only by the subject (as Kant and heirs would like). The world entails a dimension that lends itself to an ensemblist-identitary (*ensidic*) organization shared among all past, present and possible societies (accounting for the ‘unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics’), but it cannot be wholly *ensidic* because it includes the human imaginary (as collective instituting imaginary and as radical imagination of the psyche), which is not *ensidic*.

¹¹ “A magma is that from which one can extract (or in which one can construct) and indefinite number of ensemblist organizations but which can never be reconstituted (ideally) by a (finite or infinite) ensemblist composition of these organizations.” (Castoriadis 1987, p. 343).

So, the social-historical is self-creation, the emergence of new ontological *eidos*, and each particular society is a specific creation. It is historical because it is always undergoing a process of self-alteration:

“In so far as they are neither causally producible nor rationally deducible, the institutions and social imaginary significations of each society are free *creations of the anonymous collective concerned* [emphasis added]. They are creations *ex nihilo* – but not *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*. This means, in particular, that they are creations *under constraints*.” (1997d, p. 333).

This is an especially important point that will be elaborated later. Here I would only mention that *anonymous collective* is not the same as ‘collective subject’. The essential reason for this is that SIS as creations involve

“a *putting forward* –a *positing* in advance– a before that is not ‘before’ or ‘in front of’ something else, that is not placing-something-in-front-of-someone but rather is that by which and in which every placing and every place exists, originary positing starting from which every position –as ‘act’ of a subject or ‘determination’ of an object– has being and meaning” (Castoriadis 1993, p. 12).

On these bases, a generative conception of culture ensues:

“We shall call *culture* all that, in the public domain of a society, goes beyond that which is simply functional and instrumental in the operation of that society and all that introduces an invisible –or, better, an unperceivable– dimension invested or ‘cathected’ in a positive way by the individuals of that society. In other words, culture concerns all that, in this society, pertains to the imaginary *stricto sensu*, to the poietic imaginary, in as much as this imaginary dimension is embodied in works and in patterns of behavior that go beyond the functional.” (Castoriadis 1997c, p. 339–40).

This conception leads us away from debates about ‘material culture’ versus ‘symbolic culture’ and makes clear that culture is not something ‘imposed’ from ‘outside’ on individuals who only ‘internalize’ it. That culture “pertains to the imaginary *stricto sensu*” means that as a dimension of institutions (which are the fundamental *eidos* of the social-historical world) it is permeated by the SIS and fueled by radical imagination. Institutions are never something “given” or merely “present” but need to be acted or played out continuously and this involves an entwinement of individual and collective processes. This is, in principle, completely congruous with Simão’s assertion that “Culture is, then, a dynamic symbolic field formed in action, which can transform and be transformed by the subject’s action” (Simão 2016, p. 578), on the condition that one is not talking merely about individual action. But this seems to be what Simão advocates because a little later she says: “This means that the whole dynamics of the individual-culture-individual relationship is...constrained by the subjective and *collective experience* over time and with time (temporality), bringing individual and *collective transformation*” (p. 578, emphasis added). However, “collective

experience” and “collective transformation” are just mentioned but not really addressed in the paper.¹²

Finally, Castoriadis’ ontological reflection has another aspect that must be considered. Almost all known societies have instituted themselves “in and through the closure of meaning”, that is to say, “they cannot put into question their own institution and they produce conformal and heteronomous individuals for whom the putting into question of the existing law is not just forbidden but mentally inconceivable and psychically unbearable. These individuals are ‘conscious’, but not self-reflective subjectivities.” (Castoriadis 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997d/1994b, p. 336).¹³ Such closure of meaning was broken first in Athens and many centuries later in Western Europe. “The main carriers of this new historical creation were politics as collective emancipatory movement and philosophy as self-reflecting, uninhibited critical thought. Thus emerged what I call the project of collective and individual autonomy” (Castoriadis 1997d, p. 337). The philosophically important point concerning this project is that

“even if it finally failed, as in Athens, or if it is in danger of waning, as in the present Western world, its effect has been the creation of a totally new, unheard of, ontological *eidōs*: a type of being which, consciously and explicitly, alters the laws of its own existence as it is, however partially, *materialized in a self-legislating society and in a new type of human being: reflective and deliberating subjectivity. And this is what allows us to take some distance from our own society, to talk about society and history in general, and to accept rational criticism of what we say in this or any other respect.*” (Castoriadis 1997d, p. 337, emphasis added).

In the last section, I explore what “different psychological issues regarding the subject-world relationship” emerge from Castoriadis’ ontological reflection. This reflection leads us to conceive Being, with the socio-historical and the individual in it, as creation. This seems to converge, in the first place, with Boesch’s statement that: “Trying to understand man as a cultural being forced me to see the diversity of cultures as a proof of human *creativity*.” (Boesch, p. 361). Let us see.

¹² It is curious that Simão draws on Davydov (1999) in order to define what should be understood by *transformation* in this context (as the first of eight unsolved problems of activity theories): “changing an object internally, making evident its essence and altering it” (Davydov 1999, p. 42), but the example with which the author illustrates his definition emphasizes only instrumental relations: “When we find and select wheat grains of full value, sow them, create conditions for their normal growth, and at last get a good crop, this process is an example of a real transformation of some part of nature by humans, or purposeful human activity.” (Davydov 1999, p. 42–43). This example contrasts with the analysis of harvest dances by Boesch (2007b) pointing out that “while harvesting itself induces a progressive extension of mastery over the learner’s environment, the transformation of instrumental movements into dance steps raises the level of consciousness, transforms the valence or emotional appeal...of gestures, increases social approval, and through all this enhances the self-relevance of the praxis.” (p. 205). In the latter case, where the emphasis lies on the symbolism of action, it is difficult if not impossible to assert that the transformation ‘makes evident an essence of activity’ – as “a law of development of the system itself” (Davydov 1999, p. 42). Simão, moreover, says nothing about the “second mostly unsolved problem of activity theory [which] concerns the relation between collective and individual activity” (Davydov 1999, p. 44), which he sets out in terms of the distinction and relations between individual and collective *subjects*.

¹³ In a heteronomous society, institutions state of themselves that they are not the work of human beings. That is why religions are a ubiquitous, but not necessary, institution of societies.

A Dialogue with E. Boesch's Symbolic Action Theory (SAT) through Livia Simão

Simão's interpretation of SAT is, as seen, presented under the heading of ontological predication. This means that

“ontological issues ask for the nature of the subject-other-world relationships that allow the subject's constitution and transformation; they call for the predication of the being, which unfolds in meaningful aspects that distinguish a psychological subject from all other instances that are not it in different psychologies” (Simão 2016, p. 572).

The ontological issue that interpellated Boesch in the development of SAT, Simão says, was of a phenomenological-existential order: living in Thailand, which brought about “disquietedness in him” (p. 574) and a wish for the ‘otherness to become his’. She *never specifies* the ontological issues that ‘interpellated’ him under that conditions but asserts, notwithstanding, that consequently he changed “his horizons of functionalist predication of the subject-object relationship to new theoretical ways that fitted to his personal sensitiveness in approaching the I-Other-World relationships.” (p. 574)

What I try to argue is the difficult task that Simão is involved with, given that SAT “does not fit a unitary and exhaustive description” (Comejo 2007, p. 250) and is “a heterogeneous composition of sources coming from diverse origins” (Rodríguez and Blanco 2012, p. 83). If this is so on the theoretical plane then it may be harder on the philosophical one. Boesch rejects traditional experimental research studies and, so, may be located within the interpretive tradition (De la Mata and Cubero 2003), but his philosophical filiation, particularly on ontological issues, may be complicated to ascertain.

Locating Boesch's SAT within a phenomenological-existential philosophical line is far from being unproblematic. Comejo (2007), an author Simão cites approvingly, notes that “Phenomenological accounts risk subjective transcendentalism, ignoring the objectivity of social structures” (p. 254), a statement whose last words would seem to converge partially with Mammen & Mironenko's assertion that the cultural world is one of the grounds for human activity.

What is more important now, however, is Simão's intended aim in elaborating the concept of ontological predication. It seems to me that her main concern is to propose a way to account for the *differentiation* between subject and object through symbolic activity, which Mammen & Mironenko take for granted. I totally agree with this aim, as a basic requirement for a developmentally-oriented cultural psychology. But when that aim is elaborated within the perspective of a phenomenologically oriented ontology, the problem of subjective transcendentalism is latent.

So, symbolic action is the inherent relationship “between the active subject and the world it realizes as not being it” and culture “emerges precisely from this relationship” making “subject's action and culture indissociable, in an intimate linkage that happens thanks to the subjective-experiential nature of action” (Simão 2016, p. 575). This seems only to assert the mutually constitutive relation between subject and culture, but then she adds: “*Subjective* is here understood as the particular, idiosyncratic and unique character of each person's symbolic action, nourished by his or her thinking and feeling

the world” (p. 575). With Castoriadis, one could ask whether an experience is *exclusively* personal: “Our ‘personal’ experience is our own home, but it would not be a home, but only a lonely cave, separate from a city or village; we cannot live without one but neither hermetically locked up in ‘ours’.” (Castoriadis 1998, p. 279).

It seems that in her effort to avoid the postulation of anything serving “as a ground for the subject’s activity”, Simão’s assertion that culture *emerges from subjective action* leads to lack of clarity with others of her or Boesch’s claims. For example, if culture as a field of action “offers possibilities of and stipulates conditions for action”, and if growing up in a culture “consists precisely in *discovering*... [the] unknown action possibilities” it offers but the individual may not be aware of (Boesch 1991, quoted in Simão 2016, p. 578), then these possibilities and conditions should have been created as such possibilities and conditions before any individual action is performed, and cannot “emerge” from the active contact between (individual) subject-world. Moreover, if culture as a field of action “in the collective...cultural sense embraces the totality of action opportunities and conditions” offered to its population “irrespective of whether particular individuals are aware of them or not” (Boesch 1991, quoted in Simão 2016, p. 578), then how is it that these conditions and opportunities of the action field in the collective/cultural sense gear with an individual action that is ‘particular, idiosyncratic and unique’? Nobody commits a *sin* unless this SIS is already instituted in her world. But, of course, even if it is already instituted, it is insufficient in order to understand that somebody thinks/feels of certain action as committing a sin, which demands to trace the construction process. It is here that some of Boesch’s conceptual proposals (praxic organization of action and its stabilization through social interaction; Janus-face aim pursued by action: reaching for specific goals and structuring representationally the field where the action took place; etc.) display its potential. But this requires starting from an instituted world.

Simão’s formulations are part and parcel of the diverse attempts to get rid of a simplistic social or cultural determinism. Boesch is one of the leading figures in this respect and his emphasis on symbolism (valence, connotation, etc.) has played a key role to that effect. Of particular importance is his concern with understanding how, “*in real life*” actions and things “are intricately interwoven in *constellations*” that do not come about automatically but are the result of “accommodations and assimilations, acting and reacting, choosing and rejecting, imitating and transforming”:

“Such a constructivist view, enlarged to include conceptual constructions no less that emotional and symbolic ones, was, I felt, the only way to integrate the individual in his or her culture without making him or her a merely passive product of conditionings or introjections, or of enforced drive repressions. The symbolism of action, resulting from the progressive integration of individual experiences, thus became of central importance for a cultural psychology.” (Boesch 1997, p. 426–427)

I completely agree with efforts like this and think that Boesch SAT has much to offer in understanding the process of “progressive integration of individual experiences” and how this could be related to the continuous transformation of culture. However, I think that a sort of confusion derives from Simão’s use of SAT in order to counter the intended surpassing of the internal-external dualism by a version of activity theory reworked with phenomenological considerations (Mammen and Mironenko 2015). She

argues convincingly that symbolic action (as inherently interpretive, affect-laden, future-oriented, etc.) produces the differentiation between the subject and the object. But confusion arises when this analysis is reworded in terms of “ontological predication” and the hermeneutics of facticity because, as shown above, it is not clear what the ontological issues at stake are.

In my view, SAT does not address the ontological status of society and culture. And this is an important issue that must be tackled explicitly as part of the development of a cultural psychology that may have relevance in our current historical situation. It is precisely the ontological issues underlying the individual-collective relationship that, as far as I can see, are missing in Simão’s paper as well as in Boesch work. This leads to some formulations that may be read as advocating another version of methodological individualism or creating bigger problems than they solve. For example, “the subject” in Simão’s paper is singular, and the others appear, so to speak, out of the blue subsumed under the symbolic dynamics:

“In such a subjective environment encompassing other persons, people hold symbolic processes in their relationships with the world. The individual symbolic dynamics, in the others’ dynamics, may transform the whole field that is culture, at some moment. Culture is, then, a dynamic symbolic field formed in action, which can transform and be transformed by the subject’s action.” (Simão 2016, p. 578).

The “other persons” just appear included in somebody’s “subjective environment”, with their similar symbolic processes. An unspecified relation among these symbolic dynamics (mixing, interweaving, adding?) somehow “may transform the whole field that is culture, at some moment”. But, what does it mean for the field of culture to be transformed “as a whole” and what is it required for such “moment” to come about?

A quote from Boesch (1980, p. 23–4, in Simão 2016, p. 580), which is taken by Simão as critical for understanding Boesch’s “ontological predication of the subject”, may help to explain the lack of reflection on the ontological status of culture in SAT:

“...keeping the constructionist and the biologic aspects close, I propose to consider them together and under the term of *action*. The cultural aspect, on its side, will be treated under the term of *object*, what will allow to limit the vast problem of ecological relations to a more restricted domain. Henceforth, the two domains, action and object, action and object cannot be separated but artificially: every action has an object (which is but an imaginary one) and every object is defined by its actional value. But nonetheless, both terms are distinguished in what is subjectively lived: we believe to clearly know what is internal (ourselves) or external (objects).”

From Castoriadis’ conception of culture argued before, I would say that it is of no help to treat “the cultural aspect...under the term of *object*” because this confuses culture as the imaginary dimension of all institutions, with the *particulars* that are identified/distinguished within it (subjects, objects, ideas, whatever). Therefore, the subject-object couple seems to induce confusion in thinking about ontological issues.

Boesch himself had noted that culture “is not an individual phenomenon, but one of interaction among individuals in groups” and although he rejected the charge of

neglecting the social aspects of culture, he recognized that he “did not attempt to *systematize* them” (Boesch 1997, p. 427). Here I return to the idea that the SIS which give a society its specificity are the creation of an *anonymous collective*. This is an important question because it helps to dispel the idea that culture can be changed by an individual’s action or the sum of many individual actions. This idea can be understood drawing on Thomas Kuhn’s (1982) arguments against the belief that a scientific discovery can be located as if it were a precise happening of an individual subject. The discovery of a new kind of phenomenon is a complex process that involves realizing that *something* has been discovered and *what* is it. As this requires the assimilation of the fact to a theory, it takes time and a lot of people are involved. Not only it is required the capacity of somebody to perceive an anomaly and certain degree of development of instruments and concepts; for a more or less long period, the individual who identified the anomaly, and usually a lot of other members of a group, try to reduce the anomaly to a law, which demands more observations or experiments and a lot of reflection. Along the process, scientists review many times their expectations, the norms of their instruments and occasionally their fundamental theories.

If we accept Kuhn’s arguments for the highly organized and reflexive field of science, it is rather clear that an individual cannot deduce, induce or in any other way devise a *new* imaginary signification from the current institution of her society. But of course, once created the SIS of autonomy, she can question and reflect about the established institutions and look for alternatives to their problems and contradictions, and this shall have its role in the development of conditions under which new SIS will be created and embodied in certain institutions. Even if an individual “great mind” could conceive a new imaginary signification, it would not become an *institution* in the socio-historical world by the sheer fact of being conceived. And it will be absurd to think that it would accomplish that condition by means of agreement or persuasion.

But the most important issue involved in the creation of new SIS is that its mere creation does not determine the institutions (words, artifacts, practices, etc.) that will embody them. As long as SIS cannot be reduced to functionality or rationality, the process of their effective and specific institution cannot dispense from the individual activity as has been conceptualized in SAT.¹⁴ The creation of the SIS of sin does not *determine* the range of actions, thoughts, and feelings that would count as such neither the conditions under which some activities would cease to be considered that way (as was the case, for example, with usury, v. Le Goff 1987).

In consequence, from the standpoint of the individual subject, institutions are never “given” in the sense of fixed or totally specified. They can only be maintained as parts of the institution of a society through the individual engagement with those that are part of his/her everyday life. In this process, the “subjective-experiential nature of action” as “the particular, idiosyncratic and unique character of each person’s symbolic action” needs to be thought of as always anchored on certain SIS that allow it to be personally meaningful (*therefore* potentially shareable with others) and not mere autistic delusion or insignificant/inconsequential symbolism. Moreover, as the creation of new SIS does not mean that the whole society be transformed *ipso facto*, so to speak, up to the last

¹⁴ To the idea that certain types of dramatic social relations are the source of the development of higher mental functions (Veresov 2016), we could add the suggestion that social relations themselves are the most basic ways for the SIS to *become institutions* in the human world.

corner and at the same tempo, this clearly makes room for conceptualizations as Boesch's and Simão's that emphasize symbolism and, therefore, may help to understand the individual's contribution to a process that is always, and at the same time, collective (and needs to be explicitly addressed).¹⁵

It is around these issues that I think we find interesting contributions of Boesch's SAT and Simão's paper; I will only mention two without further elaboration: a) The tension always present between what is aimed at and what is accomplished by action, as a source of a sense of one's life as something that not merely is, but is becoming in a direction: "These tensional differences are essential for the transformative processes, which touch, in the last resort, to the self in its everlasting character of being simultaneously processual and structuring of itself" (Simão 2016, p. 581). b) The need of distinguishing what is shared with others in activity and what is kept as private to the subject: "for joining forces in a team we need agreement as to procedures, tools, timing, while each member may retain the private meanings he or she connects with the common action" (Boesch 2007b, p. 209); without forgetting that insofar as such "private meanings" embody certain SIS they may be, in Valsiner's terms, externalized even if the subject does not realize it and, therefore, have consequences for the shared activity.

The following quote from Castoriadis (n.d./1999, p. 166, emphasis added) ties together several of the matters that have been discussed so far:

"The institution therefore furnishes... 'meaning' to socialized individuals. But it also furnishes them with the means to make this meaning exist for themselves, and it does so by restoring at the social level an instrumental or functional logic that no doubt existed, in another manner, on the animal level but that has been fractured in man by the unfettered development of the imagination. *Once instrumented in and through this logic, the radical imagination of a singular human being can henceforth become a source of creation on the collective and 'real' level. A phantasm remains a phantasm for a singular psyche, but an artist, a poet, a musician, a painter does not produce phantasms; he or she creates works. What his or her imagination engenders acquires a 'real'—that is to say, social-historical—existence by utilizing an innumerable quantity of means and elements—and, to begin with, language—that the artist could never have created 'all by himself.'*"¹⁶

¹⁵ An example of a cognate effort, from the ranks of critical psychology, and convergent with some of Boesch's ideas, *but* with a strong focus on the individual's organization of her everyday life as not merely individual accomplishment, is the following: "Living one's life includes what we could call the subject's specific *integrative sensibility and way of sense-making* without which the conduct of life would not be possible. (...) [The conduct of life] is related (and we may not always be aware of it) to a broader imagination of how we see the world and what we want with our life, and out of this broader imagination of our life and the anticipation of action possibilities, the concrete ordinary and extra-ordinary everyday activities and arrangements become meaningful and accomplishable. (...) The concept of conduct of life is applied and developed in analysing how subjects conduct their lives in collaboration with other subjects and in relation to different matters in their lives. Such conceptualizations seek to capture the inherently social dimension of our lives as human beings and, in this way, set the subject in the plural. This focus points, to social *coordination and conflicts* as the central problems of the personal conduct of life." (Højholt and Schraube 2016, p. 6).

¹⁶ An issue that deserves a closer exam is the relationship between SIS, institutions and psyche from Castoriadis' conception and Boesch's concepts of myth and phantasm.

An additional feature of Castoriadis' ontological reflection is its elaboration on the role of symbolism in the human world, about which I will only mention a very rough summary (v. Castoriadis 1987, chapter 3). Institutions only exist in the symbolic and as symbolic systems, but they cannot be reduced to rationality/functionality, even if this is an always present dimension of them. Symbolism, therefore, is neither "neutral" nor totally "adequate". It is not "free" because it is built on the ruins of former symbolic edifices, but due to "its virtually unlimited natural and historical connections, the signifier always goes beyond a strict attachment to a precise signified and can lead to completely unexpected realms" (p. 115). This gives room for collective and individual innovation.¹⁷ Insofar as symbolism rests on the SIS of that society, it is not possible to "establish once and for all neither the general degree of symbolization, which varies with the culture, nor the factors that decide the intensity with which a particular aspect of the life of a given society will be invested with symbolism" (p. 124), but one can understand, in principle, the possibility of autonomization of institutions with respect to society (i.e. alienation).

I hope to have shown that Castoriadis' ontological reflections not only provide a productive conception of being as creation (with diverse strata) but also, as Mammen & Mironenko suggested, includes the possible as supplement to the factual, offers an ontology of time, and has place for fantasy and imagination, not understood "as a reflection of levels in reality" (Mammen and Mironenko 2015, p. 709) but as the core source in the creation of the human world.

To finish I would like to comment on two points. One has to do with Boesch's idea that the individual, as well as culture, needs a balance between constancy and change. For him,

"[The individual's] orientation system requires a consistent and therefore constant world; yet, by the same token, the individual tendency at optimizing the action potential calls for variation, change, innovation, and therefore the individual will also have to establish his or her personal balances between the two tendencies" (Boesch 2007b, p. 210).

Human world's consistency and constancy, following Castoriadis, are of a different kind of what can be said about these characteristics in any other strata of being.¹⁸ Then Boesch adds: "Since cultures...need this balance too, we might now assume that an

¹⁷ "A functionalist may consider it self-evident that, when a society provides itself with an institution, it gives itself at the same time, as something it can grasp, all the symbolical and rational relations that this institution carries or produces –or at any rate, that there can be no contradiction, no incoherence between the functional 'ends' of the institution and the effects of its actual functioning, that whenever a rule is set down, the coherence of each of its innumerable consequences with the set of all the other previously existing rules and with the ends that are consciously or 'objectively' sought is guaranteed. It is enough clearly to state this postulate to see how absurd it is..." (1987, p. 122–123). "Not freely chosen, not imposed upon a given society, neither a neutral instrument nor a transparent medium, neither an impenetrable opacity nor an irreducible adversity, neither the master of society nor the flexible slave of functionality, not a direct and complete means of partaking of a rational order –symbolism determines the aspects of social life (and not merely those it was supposed to determine) while simultaneously being full of interstices and of degrees of freedom." (1987, p. 125).

¹⁸ That is why I cannot agree with Mammen & Mironenko's assertion that "there is no fundamental difference in the interpretive task in natural science and e.g. psychology" (Mammen and Mironenko 2015, p. 701).

individual striving for change would meet a different reception in moments of cultural openness for change than in more conservative times.” (Boesch 2007b, p. 211). In my view, drawing on Castoriadis, speaking of an “individual tendency at optimizing the action potential” which “calls for variation, change, innovation”, seems to *naturalize* something that is not inherent, for the reasons already mentioned, to individual action. What Boesch calls “moments of cultural openness”, would be the historical periods when social movements and individuals struggle against certain institutions.

The second point, intimately related with the precedent, refers to the contrast between heteronomous and autonomous societies. As previously mentioned, the former are societies that “cannot put into question their own institution” (Castoriadis 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997d/1994b, p. 336) while the latter are, at least as a project, the democratic societies: “a democratic society recognizes in its rules, its norms, its values, and its significations its own creations, whether deliberate or not.” (Castoriadis 1997d, p. 340). This point is related with what Straub & Weidemann (2007, p. liii) consider the center of Boesch’s concept of the human:

“...humans strive for so-called *interior-exterior balance*, for *equilibrium of the psyche* ...[which] assumes that humans want to experience themselves as an integral part of a larger whole, that they intuitively assume the existence of such a whole, and continuously integrate their actions into such an intuitively constructed world.”

They perceptively note that Boesch’s psychological anthropology entails a paradox: “The equilibrium one desires and pursues is not a ‘given’, ongoing state. Yet at the same time, human beings cannot choose *not* long for and pursue this equilibrium.” (p. lv). This last quote captures in a precise way what I would call the dependence of individual symbolization on the social imaginary significations (on whose bases are conceived in thought and feeling the nature and characteristics of a specific “larger whole”) and the active effort that involves living a life that embodies those significations. But to this, we would add the need to consider whether those significations are part and parcel of an autonomous or a heteronomous society.

So, a jihadist wants to be a *true Muslim* through his efforts to eliminate the “unfaithful”, and the perfect interior-exterior balance for him is the maximization of the number of people that can be killed by his own sacrifice. He cannot even imagine putting into question the fundamentalist interpretation of the Koran and he only can “understand” the “unfaithful” in an instrumental way that at the same time makes him an instrument of the Jihad (not an individuated human being or a self-reflective subjectivity). Boesch addresses this question focusing it in terms of how faith is constructed as an amalgamation of private and public meanings. I accept that faith “implies a vision of a future”, “reposes on beliefs and images of a culture” –legends, myths, tales of salvation– “as well as values and meanings applied to our community, our selves and actions”, and, above all, that “faith proves its strength in resistance, and only active opposition against wrong beliefs will truly provide the promised salvation” (Boesch 2007c, p. 266). But, in my view, this is not enough in order to understand how a self-reflective subjectivity is formed or how is it impeded/destroyed.

The recent terrorist attacks in Europe show us, in its most extreme form, that we should not conceptualize culture apart from the socio-historical world within which it takes its particular form. That's why it is not sufficient, even if it is necessary, to say that:

“Human action is, therefore, predicative. It structures things, events and other people in the world according to personal meanings, as well as the acting subject itself. Most important, the subject is not predicated by the efficiency of its actions for attaining its objectives, but by its objective-rational and subjective-functional relationship with its world, which may lead to that attainment. In this kind of relationship, feelings and values are active in the world structuration, besides the rationality of the cognitive processes.” (Simão 2016, p. 581).

Cultural psychology, as well as science generally, can only be the child of a democratic society but, in contrast with other sciences, it can and should contribute to understanding how is it that somebody becomes a self-reflective subjectivity instead of a jihadist and what is happening in our current socio-historical world that accounts for the increasing number of the latter.

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Gilberto Pérez-Campos is associated professor in the Facultad de Estudios Superiores Iztacala-UNAM. He is a member of a research group that studies the everyday life of people, mainly in the family and school contexts, from a sociocultural perspective. His research interests have to do with the development and integration of identities through the conduct of everyday life, as well as the reflection on basic concepts of sociocultural psychology.

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