

LABOR AS THE LEADING ACTIVITY IN THE PSYCHIC DEVELOPMENT OF ADULT INDIVIDUAL¹

Camila Fernanda Moro Rios²

João Henrique Rossler

Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR), Curitiba-PR, Brazil.

ABSTRACT. This paper aims to analyze, through the theoretical revision of classic and contemporary authors of Historical-Cultural Psychology, labor as the leading activity of adult life, that is to say, as the activity which guides the main changes in human psyche and personality at this age. For this purpose, abstracts and generalizes elements from the studies about periodization of human psychic development. On the one hand, it identifies the psychological contents and processes that, being produced by labor, highlight this activity relevance for adult individual formation. On the other hand, it approaches the alienation processes inherent to capitalist society, which alienates labor as a leading activity. Thus, labor shows up, dialectically, as a humanizing and alienating activity. We understand that this study brings contributions for methodological theoretical advance of Cultural-Historical Psychology because it addresses the issue of labor as a leading activity, that is a still incipient and little systemized discussion. Moreover, it overcomes the focus of development studies that emphasize childhood and reiterates the rupture related to maturacionist perspective, according to which adult life is a period of development stagnation. By the analysis of labor under the concept of leading activity, we conclude that psychological development in adult life is mainly expressed by several acquisitions of abilities and capabilities, by the exercise of creativity, by a complex restructuring of the affective-motivational sphere of personality, by the promotion of self-awareness and by the dialectical movement of class consciousness, that stresses the contradiction between the humanizing pole and the alienated/alienating pole of labor in a society that limits and impoverishes this same development.

Keywords: Labour; adult development; historic cultural psychology.

O TRABALHO COMO ATIVIDADE PRINCIPAL NO DESENVOLVIMENTO PSÍQUICO DO INDIVÍDUO ADULTO

RESUMO. Este artigo visa analisar, por meio da revisão teórica de autores clássicos e contemporâneos da psicologia histórico-cultural, o trabalho como atividade principal na vida adulta, isto é, como a atividade que orienta as principais mudanças no psiquismo humano e na personalidade nessa idade. Para tanto, abstrai e generaliza elementos constantes nos estudos sobre periodização do desenvolvimento psíquico humano. Por um lado, identifica os conteúdos e processos psicológicos que, produzidos pelo trabalho, evidenciam sua relevância para o desenvolvimento do indivíduo adulto. Por outro, aborda os processos de alienação inerentes à sociedade capitalista, que alienam o trabalho como atividade principal. Assim, o trabalho se apresenta, dialeticamente, como atividade humanizadora e alienada. Entende-se que este estudo contribui para o avanço teórico-metodológico da psicologia histórico-cultural por abordar a questão do trabalho como atividade principal, uma discussão que se encontra ainda incipiente e pouco sistematizada. Além disso, supera o enfoque dos estudos sobre o desenvolvimento centrados na infância e reitera o rompimento com a perspectiva maturacionista de que a vida adulta é um período de estagnação do desenvolvimento. Pela análise do trabalho como atividade principal conclui-se que o desenvolvimento psicológico, produzido na vida adulta, se expressa, principalmente, por uma série de aquisições de habilidades e capacidades, pelo exercício da criatividade, por uma complexa reestruturação da esfera afetivo-motivacional da personalidade, pelo desenvolvimento da autoconsciência e pelo movimento dialético da consciência de classe, que tensiona a contradição entre o polo humanizador e o polo alienado/alienante do trabalho numa sociedade que limita e empobrece esse mesmo desenvolvimento.

Palavras-chave: Trabalho; desenvolvimento do adulto; psicologia histórico-cultural.

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² *E-mail:* camila_fmr@hotmail.com

EL TRABAJO COMO ACTIVIDAD RECTORA EN EL DESARROLLO PSÍQUICO DEL INDIVIDUO ADULTO

RESUMEN. Este artículo pretende analizar, por medio de la revisión teórica de autores clásicos y contemporáneos de la Psicología Histórico-Cultural, el trabajo como actividad rectora en la edad adulta, es decir, como la actividad que guía los principales cambios en la psique humana y la personalidad en esta edad. A tal fin, abstrae y generaliza elementos constantes en los estudios sobre la periodización del desarrollo psíquico humano. Por un lado, identifica los contenidos y los procesos psicológicos que, producidos por el trabajo, demuestran la importancia de esto para la formación del individuo adulto. En el otro lado, discute los procesos de alienación inherente a la sociedad capitalista, que alienan el trabajo como actividad rectora. Así, el trabajo aparece, dialécticamente, como actividad de humanización y de alienación. Se entiende que este estudio contribuye al avance teórico y metodológico de la Psicología Histórico-Cultural, puesto que aborda el tema del trabajo como actividad rectora, una discusión que todavía es incipiente y poco sistematizada. Además, trasciende el enfoque de los estudios sobre el desarrollo que se concentran en la infancia y reitera la ruptura con la perspectiva maturacionista de que la edad adulta es un período de estancamiento del desarrollo. En el análisis del trabajo como actividad rectora se concluye que el desarrollo psicológico producido en la edad adulta se expresa a través, principalmente, de una serie de adquisiciones de habilidades y capacidades, del ejercicio de la creatividad, de una compleja reestructuración de la esfera afectivo-motivacional de la personalidad, del desarrollo de la autoconsciencia y del movimiento dialéctico de la conciencia de clase, que hace más estricta la contradicción entre el polo de humanización y el polo alienado/de alienación del trabajo en una sociedad que restringe y empobrece este mismo desarrollo.

Palabras-clave: Trabajo; desarrollo del adulto; psicología histórico cultural.

Work has its ontological role widely recognized by Historical-Cultural Psychology. Through this essentially social activity, the psychism itself was inaugurated, and development became governed mainly by socio-historical laws (Leontiev, 2004). From that moment, to develop as a human being, every individual born within a given society needs to appropriate the objects and knowledge produced by the labor of previous generations. In this way, labor presents itself as the foundation of the whole process of psychic development, permeating all stages of life.

However, within the context of the Historical-Cultural Psychology itself, there is a lack of a greater systematization of the psychological dimension of labor, that is, on how this activity contributes to the development of the psyche, to the formation of psychological processes and personality of the adult individual. Although it is common to assume labor as the leading activity in adult life, based on the concept of leading activity present in the studies of Vygotsky (1988, 1996), Leontiev (1988, 2004) and Elkonin (1960, 2000) on the periodization of human development, there are no studies in the literature of the area that develop the concept of labor as leading activity and that effectively answer the question: what does it really mean to consider labor as the leading activity of the adult?

The lack of theoretical accumulation about labor as a leading activity in the adult life is evidenced in recent researches, either implicitly, as Soler (2012) – by the disproportionality of contents and bibliographic sources presented on labor in comparison with the other leading activities that regulate human development –, or by explicit reference to the difficulty of finding a theoretical and systematized apprehension of the theme, as does Calve (2013). A difficulty that is confirmed in the present study, which, with the exception of Martins, Abrantes and Facci (2016), did not find in the literature of the area researches on the issue.

When using the classic and contemporary authors of Historical-Cultural Psychology who deal with the periodization of human development we find studies predominantly focused on child development. This is probably due to the originating context of this psychological theory. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, it urged the need to build a new society and a new human being, with which it resulted in the concern to consolidate formative processes directed to the full development of the new generations. Thus, although Elkonin (1960) announces that the entry into productive life is the moment that succeeds the period of youth education and Leontiev (2004) remembers that development does not end with the initiation in labor activity (since the new place occupied by the individual changes his relationships and points of view), the focus on childhood remains until the present day, with emphasis on studies on child development.

Starting from the conception that development is not passive, but derives from the social activity of individuals, and that at every stage of life it is possible to identify a leading activity, so called by regulating the major transformations occurring in the development of the human psyche, in consciousness and personality, the present article aims to analyze labor as the leading activity of the adult life, as stated by Martins and Eidt (2010), Reis (2011), Soler (2012), Calve (2013), Malaguty (2013), Martins et al. (2016). For this purpose, it is done a theoretical review of classic and contemporary authors of the Historical-Cultural Psychology that deal with the relationships between activity and periodization of human psychic development (Vygotsky, 1988, 1996; Leontiev, 1988, 2004; Elkonin, 1960, 2000; Veresov, 2006; Pasqualini, 2009; Soler, 2012; Martins et al., 2016). And, based on the systematization of these studies on the epochs of psychic development and the leading activities that regulate their periods (in early childhood, direct emotional communication activity and manipulation of objects; in childhood, play activity/role-playing and formal learning activity; in adolescence, intimate personal communication activity and career-oriented activity), it seeks to abstract and generalize elements that subsidize the reflection about labor as a leading activity in adult life.

Not disregarding the possible variations resulting from a set of socio-historical factors, the age range between the ages of 18 years (according to legal age and public policies for youth) and 60 years (a milestone in policies for older people), is taken as a reference for the time of adult life. Obviously that, under certain social conditions, individuals can either enter the labor market before the age of 18 years – and labor may, in these cases, acquire (or not) the character of leading activity –, such as being able to devote themselves exclusively to higher education, postponing this entry; or continue working after sixty years old. However, this study focuses on adult life, considering it the time when labor can take its most developed form and thus potentiate the process of psychic development that occurs under its determination as leading activity.

It should also be pointed out that, through a methodological choice and considering the humanization-alienation dialectic, the relationship between work and psychic development is presented, initially, in general manner, to only later be articulated to the historical-social particularities in which this relationship actually occurs. Thus, in a movement specific to the historical-dialectical materialism, the labor of its concrete and historical relations is abstracted, to analyze it, firstly, as the leading activity, organizer of the human psychic development and, therefore, humanizing activity. Then, labor is repositioned in the class social relationships, but already at a higher level of understanding and systematization about it, to be then analyzed as the leading activity alienated. This movement is, however, apprehended in its essentially contradictory character, which has in the development of class consciousness the moment of greatest tension.

The relevance of this study takes place under three main aspects: it is an need inherent to the very advancement of the theoretical-methodological field of Historical-Cultural Psychology, since the problem of labor as leading activity needs deepening and conceptual systematization; the systematization of the relationship between labor and psychic development in adult life subsidizes theoretical and practical reflections in several areas of Psychology from the perspective of Historical-Cultural Psychology, such as Education, Health and Work; it is necessary to understand the consequences of the alienation of labor as the leading activity for the psychic development of the adult, especially in societies based on social relations of exploitation and domination, as is the case of the current capitalist society.

Periodization of development: leading activity as the basis of human formation

Understanding activity as the substance of the psyche means interposing a mediating element between the bonds of the individual with the world: the practical existence of the human being (Leontiev, 1978). Hence, it is criticized both approaches that stipulate a psychic nature inherent to the subject and only adaptable to the pressures of the environment, as well as those that, emphasizing the multiplicity of the constituent social discourses of the subject, fall into a cultural relativization.

For Leontiev (1988) and El'konin (2000), throughout development hierarchical relationships between diverse activities that mediate the relationships of the individual with the reality are established. And, according to this hierarchy, it can be delineated different periods (or stages) of development, each marked by a leading activity, a fundamental way for the individual to relate to reality. This is not necessarily the

most frequent activity, but the one: in whose form other types of activity arise and differentiate, in which particular psychic processes are shaped or reorganized and on which the major changes in personality depend (Leontiev, 1988).

The content of the leading activity of each period is determined by the social place of the individual, suffering direct influences of the concrete conditions of life (Leontiev, 1988, 2004). It is through the peculiar relationship established between the individual and the reality around him, called by Vygotsky (1996) of social situation of development, that social acquisitions are actively transformed into individual attributes. Thus, although the social place does not guarantee with it psychic development, it provides the substrate for what actually promotes it: the activity (Leontiev, 1988, 2004).

According to Veresov (2006), development can be understood as a complex process of restructuring a system of activities whose core is the leading activity, which regulates other activities and enables the emergence of new psychological formations at each stage. When this activity gives place to another, it does not cease to exist, it only gradually changes its role in the system of relationships of the individual with reality. In the same way, the psychological acquisitions resulting from the transition to a new leading activity do not occur in isolated psychic processes. As Pasqualini (2009) points out, the structure of the psyche is modified as a whole, each age being characterized by a global (inter-functional) formation that integrates a multiplicity of processes (attention, perception, memory, language etc.). In this formation, main lines of development are identified, which become accessory lines in the following period and vice versa (Vygotsky, 1996). What changes, therefore, are not the psychological functions themselves, but the complex links established between them, that is, the psychological system (Vygotsky, 1999).

In short, from a given social situation of development, conditions are created for the emergence of a leading activity, through which new appropriations are made and new psychological formations are formed. The degree of development achieved leads the individual to move towards a new social situation, from which new facets of reality are revealed, new interpersonal relationships are established, new possibilities for the appropriation of social experience and of objectification are conditioned, and a new type of activity is demanded of it (Elkonin, 1960). This process does not happen in a linear way, but it is permeated by critical moments of intense rupture and transformation of the personality, in which everything formed in the previous stage disintegrates until something new is established (Vygotsky, 1996). According to the intensity of the crisis, El'konin (2000) proposes the categorization of development in epochs and stages (or periods), which are dynamic and do not necessarily correspond to pre-established ages. The epochs, marked by more evident crises, are: early childhood, childhood, adolescence and – in addition to the proposal of the author – adult life. In each of them two periods are interspersed: one in which the development of activities promoting the affective/motivational sphere predominates, that is, whose tendency points to the predominance of objectives and norms of relationships with people; and another in which the activities of intellectual/technical-operational formation predominate, that is, whose trend points to the predominance of socially elaborated procedures of action with the objects.

The affective/motivational and intellectual/technical-operational spheres constitute a unit in the development process, based on human activity as an affective-cognitive unit (Martins & Carvalho, 2016). This unit is not static, but dynamic; consists of interconnected opposite poles, within which certain elements assume, at a given moment, a predominant position in the set of determinations constituting the unit/totality of the phenomenon, pointing the direction, the line of its development. Based on Lukács, Lessa (1992, 2015) affirms that Marx advances in relation to the Hegelian dialectic when consider the action of the predominant moment in the internal processuality of being. For Hegel determinations would move by pure contradiction; which, in the Lukács' view, based on Marx, it could lead only to a static equilibrium between the contradictory poles, and is not sufficient to produce any developmental process. Thus, when analyzing the dynamics between the processes that constitute the affective-cognitive unit as well as the psychic development as a whole, it is necessary to consider the predominant character that certain elements (determinations) assume in their constitution as a dialectical unit in motion.

Based on the studies carried out here, adult life is considered to be a time regulated by a single leading activity, labor, within which the predominant character of the affective-motivational and intellectual/technical-operational spheres alternates, that is, of both development trends.

Adult life: labor as the leading activity

It can be said that the formative process of the individuals is a preparation for them to become active members of society, contributing, with their labor, to the production of humankind. In this sense, labor is the fundamental ontological activity. On the other hand, as a leading activity, it promotes in individuals both the acquisition of new types of activities, knowledge and skills regarding reorganization of motivations, feelings and human relations. Therefore, it is considered that, in adult life, this activity shapes and reorganizes the psychic development of the working individuals, establishing its direction and determining the major changes in the personality. This process is contradictorily impoverished in class societies, based on social relationships of exploitation and domination that impose limits on the psychic development produced by labor, as is the case in capitalist society.

The analysis of labor as the leading activity in adult life therefore demands to consider it dialectically as the leading humanizing activity and leading alienated and alienating activity.

Labor as the leading humanizing activity

As a humanizing activity, labor facilitates the appropriation of knowledge and the formation of cognitive-affective, sensory-perceptive and psychomotor abilities, skills, and competences that instrumentalize and enrich human activity in general (Soler, 2012).

By its intentional character – that is, by orienting itself towards the creation of a necessary or useful product to society, responding to an objective given by the broader social activity – labor demands design and control for its execution, as well as a certain discipline to fulfilling the duties involved. It requires tension, effort, and overcoming external and internal obstacles (Rubinstein, 1978). In this sense, it demands the development of certain psychic abilities, such as action planning, voluntary regulation of activity and voluntary attention, which enables the individual to concentrate on stages of work that are not directly attractive to him (Martins, 2001).

By involving both physical and intellectual processes, labor actions and operations require the sophistication of knowledge and the creation of habits. The habits determine and automate the actions, facilitating and making agile the activity, while the knowledge allows them to deal with the changing conditions of the work process, underpinning the initiative to solve new tasks that appear in its course (Rubinstein, 1978). Thus, the intellectual activity required by the labor is linked to the exercise of a creative attitude, expressed in the confrontation of new needs and situations and in the generation of new objectifications from pre-existing elements (Vázquez, 1977).

In general, labor implies, therefore: the development of skills and abilities; the automation of actions; the appropriation and sophistication of knowledge and experience; creativity. It also gives a qualitatively superior level to the inter-functional dynamics of the psyche, enhancing awareness of reality and of himself. Mobilizing personal senses and social meanings, labor engenders re-articulations between the psychological functions of the complex inter-functional system of the human psyche (sensation, perception, memory, language, thought, imagination, emotion and feeling), and thereby transforms consciousness as a whole.

It must be considered that different types of activity have different specificities, presenting a more or less specific psychological aspect as well. Each type of activity (industrial, pedagogical, scientific, artistic etc.) has its own special intellectual tasks, habits, techniques, and creations (Rubinstein, 1978). Thus, what determines what knowledge and actions, what skills and abilities are developed by the labor is its specificity. The psychological functions are activated to different degrees and improved according to the type of work performed. For a lawyer, for example, primordial is the development of logic, language, orality. For an engineer, it is important to develop logical-mathematical reasoning, have problem-solving skills, and the ability to create solutions for concrete situations. Each type of activity leads, predominantly, to a certain inter-functional dynamics of the psyche, to certain inter-psychic integration. On the other hand, this does not negate the need for an integral formation, in which human faculties are fully developed, as Marx and Engels (2011) and Vygotsky (2004) advocate. Material labor and intellectual labor constitute a unit, and the production process must be apprehended globally, from the elementary

skills to operate the tools of productive branches to the general and common theoretical-scientific principles to every productive process.

In addition to the aforementioned technical-operational potentialities developed by the labor, there are still those related to interpersonal relationships, affections, interests and motivations, in other words, to the motivational sphere of the personality. Through labor, the self-conscious personality is consolidated, affirmed and distinguished in adult life. Martins and Eidt (2010) point out that activities at this time of life involve conscious and hierarchical reasons, awareness of the articulation between motives and goals, and the interlinking of actions. In Rubinstein's view (1978) labor is the most important means for the formation of the personality, because in it, attitudes, values, are developed; the character is formed; principles and ideals are forged; and the posture that one has about practical action and human relationships is transformed. As the individual relates not only to the process or the product of the labor, but also directly with the people with whom he works, and indirectly with those to whom the product of his labor is destined, the author considers that a subjective attitude is developed to the labor, linked to the motives that this activity assumes.

The motives of the labor are many and derive from the objective social conditions in which it takes place. But since labor is the basic law of humankind, in which, it is based on it that humankind is produced and reproduced, what is expected is that the individual motives and interests that guide it are to some extent tied to social interests. Labor represents the satisfaction of the most peremptory need of the human being: the manifestation of himself by activity, the transformation of intention into action. Through labor, the individual creates, objectifies himself in material products, enriches and extends his own existence, leaves a mark on the real, recognizes himself in the objectification that produces and recognizes himself as a creator being, finding in this, satisfaction (Rubinstein, 1978).

To the extent that the individual works to produce a particular result because this supplies a social need, which, in turn, has repercussions on individual existence; that is to say, to the extent that the objective meaning of the labor is in unity with the personal sense, a humanizing activity is evidenced. Martins (2005) defines as humanizing the activity by which the individual not only develops in himself certain abilities, competences and properties, but also externalizes them into products that return for the benefit of himself and his generic being. By this activity, human beings objectify themselves in a social and conscious way, with a view to universality and freedom.

By becoming a worker, the individual assumes an active position in the construction of social life, a position before other individuals and society as a whole. In this process, it is common for emotions and feelings to contribute to the mediation of the situations experienced. Rules of conduct and values are also forged, as are the conditions for the formation of a self-image (projected in what is done) and the expansion of self-consciousness (indicative of autonomy in the transformations of personal and generic life) (Martins, 2005). The results of the work and the social relationships that are built on it contribute to the individual to expand his activities, reconfigure motives and create new ones, related to personal growth, cooperation and humanization. It can be said, therefore, that labor affects all spheres of life, constituting itself as the organizing center of the hierarchy of activities of the individual, from which a meaning for existence is constructed. It is "because of this activity that man guides his routine, establishes his plans, goals and aspirations, builds affective bonds, exerts his creativity, guarantees his independence and survival" (Reis, 2011, p. 84).

In addition to the development of consciousness about himself and self-consciousness, there is the possibility of the development of class consciousness as the fundamental humanizing moment of the process of psychological development produced by work as his leading activity. A consciousness that can stand in the way of the processes of alienation established in class societies – which alienate the very labor activity that promotes it – and which Vázquez (1977) associates with the historical task of the workers to know capitalist society to, collectively and radically, transform it.

The issue of class consciousness will be resumed after moving the labor from the field of abstract reflection developed so far, to the concrete historical-social circumstances in which this activity takes place, that is, the capitalist class society, which, although it does not deny humanization in/by labor, brings a number of obstacles to it.

Labor as the leading alienating activity

The psychic development produced by labor as the leading activity occurs at the limit of the real possibilities of the alienated place that the individual occupies in social relationships. Abilities, skills, creativity, interests, needs, motivations, inclinations and aspirations are permeated by the cut of classes. Thus, the leading activity of adult life is presented in the form of alienated and alienating labor. The consequence is the impoverishment of the development of psyche and personality (Calve, 2013).

In the capitalist mode of production there prevails the division between a class which holds the means of production and another which, having only its own workforce, is obliged to sell it for a wage which is far below the value it generates, which is expropriated by the capitalist in the form of surplus value. Thus, the production process becomes active alienation, since the objectifications resulting from the labor do not belong to the worker or serve his needs. The labor turns to the production of exchange-value to the detriment of its use-value; it becomes a mere execution, in an indirect way of satisfying – from the salary – needs that are external and foreign to its content (Martins, 2001).

In the current configuration of capitalism, the exploitation and alienation of the worker in favor of increased productivity and surplus value are intensified. The labor, serving more to the reproduction of capital than to the development of the individual and his generic being (Martins, 2005), requires creativity, abilities and skills only to the extent that they adapt immediately to the position or to the place occupied in social production, that is, according to strictly pragmatic requirements. A partitioned and highly specialized activity is executed, without being aware of the overall process of which this activity is part (Vázquez, 1977). The current discourse on the polyvalence of the worker takes place in practice as multifunctionality: the quantity and variety of actions under the responsibility of the individual are amplified, which in most cases have no relationship with each other and over which the worker has no control, since the chaining and the rhythm thereof is determined by market demand (Malaguty, 2013). There is no real integration and enrichment of the tasks, as is commonly claimed, but rather an accumulation and an overload of work (Palangana, 1998).

In this context, the reduction of the creative potential and the only unilateral development of the worker's psyche is more likely to occur. The making and the knowledge assume a utilitarian character, limiting itself to the application of techniques, to the learning and reproduction of mechanized modes of action. It is established, according to Vázquez (1977), a repetitive praxis. With the fractionation of labor activity, workers' know-how and thinking are equally fragmented (Palangana, 1998). If on the one hand this can translate into extremely simplified, monotonous and low-skilled work, on the other hand, it can restrict the training and qualification of the worker to generic skills and technical interventions, with the content and form of knowledge prescribed by the immediate demands of the production. In both cases, ignorance of the totality of the productive process hinders the individual perception of labor as an accomplishment of something and expression of creative potentialities, which directly interferes in the motivational sphere of the worker.

The personal sense and social meaning of labor become incongruous. Regardless of the nature of the activity and its results, the reason to act is given priority, if not exclusively, by the salary, so that the activities are differentiated less by their products and by their social value than by the conditions of survival offered by them (Leontiev, 2004). Lacking a sense of its own that enriches its content, labor is experienced as a burden and obligation (Malaguty, 2013); as toil, suffocating and oppressive activity, which consumes time, exhaust energies, and limits the prospects for full development (Martins, 2005). This causes the individual to maintain a relationship of exteriority to his own activity, which comes to be seen as determined by random occurrences, by apparently unavoidable objective conditions.

A spontaneous (not conscious) relationship with the world and with himself is thus established, and becomes generalized (Martins, 2005). Once the capacity for criticism and conscious reflection is limited, the psyche becomes vulnerable to the manipulation of behavior, feelings and thought (Rossler, 2004). The self-constitution of individuality by social and conscious activity, the capacity for self-management of life, gives way to a personality determined from the outside, manifested in ritualized and stereotyped behaviors, devoid of personal sense (Martins, 2005, 2009). Thus, ideological conceptions that locate in the individual the causes of his success or failure in life, which contributes to the experience of states of resignation, conformism or even suffering, gain strength (Martins, 2001).

As stated by Martins (2001), based on Montero (1991), some psychological manifestations that can arise from the psychic impoverishment rooted in the alienation of labor are: feeling of lack of power or impotence – when the individual, denied or inhibited by the environment, feels unable to manage his own destiny; sense of absurd – when the impossibility of predicting actions reduces expectations and leads to the detachment from the environment, to the non-realization of projects and to the refuge in fantasy; isolation – when there is a distancing from society, driven by hopelessness and the devaluation of social objectives; self-estrangement – when the activity depends on external rewards; absence of rules; anomy – when, in the face of unbearable oppression, the bond with the system to which he belongs, is broken.

Malaguty (2013) points out that, in the present context of labor, these manifestations affect all spheres of the worker's life, since the personal life is not only incorporated, in different forms, into the productive process but, outside the working environment, it serves to the mere reproduction of the workforce. Thus, the feeling of isolation, for instance, may arise from the lack of balance between the exacerbated rhythm of work and the family, cultural and social rhythm of life: the individual, being connected all the time with the company (via information technologies), may be required by it at any time (according to the demand), and carrying constant worries about the job (unfulfilled goals, difficulties of relationships, increase of tasks, fear of unemployment), has his life, in its various instances, shaken. In the workplace, the feeling of isolation and impotence is also reinforced: the teamwork – which would presumably increase personal relationships and cooperation – feeds individualism and competitiveness, through competition between teams for greater productivity and constant control exercised by their members so that the proposed goals are achieved; the individual who does not reach them feels guilty for not handling with his work and tends to isolate himself and be isolated by others. The impossibility of predicting actions, which characterizes the sense of absurd, is also present, since the turnover in the work is great and the knowledge required, in addition to being limited, seems to be in constant renewal. Faced with the frequent modification and unpredictability of tasks and techniques, frustration at work increases and the feeling of being always out of date, obsolete.

All these forms of exploitation of the worker and intensification of his suffering are today very subtle, especially in the new models of management, through the individualization of these experiences. The worker feels important to the company, responsible for the quality of the production and participant of the management. Therefore, he demands of himself an increasing commitment with the established goals; he intensifies his work hours (he takes work home, he does overtime) and he blames himself when his efforts are insufficient or he eventually fails (Palangana, 1998).

Therefore, if on the one hand labor is the leading activity in adult life, which organizes and acts on the process of psychic development of the individuals, on the other, the alienated form that this activity takes on in today's society reverberates in the adult psyche, impoverishing the process of development of higher psychological functions, consciousness and personality, as well as negatively affecting the relationships that workers establish with society and with other human beings (Martins, 2005). In turn, the untying of labor from social interests and its restriction to individualistic reasons affect the development of self-consciousness and class consciousness as potentially transforming consciousness, for labor as an alienated activity produces an alienated consciousness.

However, such a process does not occur without contradictions, and the dialectical movement of class consciousness – within the dynamics between humanizing and alienated aspects of labor – is a direct expression of this contradiction, as well as a condition for its negation and possible overcoming.

Class consciousness as a point of tension between the processes of humanization and alienation through labor as the leading activity

According to Almeida (2008), alienated consciousness naturalizes existing social relationships, taking them as immutable, and reproduces the values sustained by capitalist material relations: commodity fetishism, individualism, competitiveness, property. But the insertion of the individual into new material contexts and the establishment of new relationships – entry into work, contact with unions, participation in strikes and social movements – opens space for the internalization of other values, which may contradict the dominant. At some moments, ideological meanings are incongruent with the reality

experienced, with the material situation of the working class, which can both generate an individual revolt and a tendency to blame themselves, and open space for a new form of consciousness.

Leontiev (2004) addresses this process from the perspective of the exteriority between sense and meaning, implicitly manifested in the dilemmas of consciousness. These are understood as propitious moments for taking awareness, from the incarnation of the senses (engendered by human activity) in social meanings. The elimination of the inadequacy of consciousness, according to the author, can only occur with the transformation of the objective conditions on which it is based. In maintaining these conditions, the possible ways are either the repudiation of real life by consciousness or the active struggle against them. In the first case, there is an impotent movement, perishable and restricted to the sphere of feelings. In the second case, the possibility of struggle of the working class against the conditions that oppress it. A struggle for the full development of life, by overcoming the dominant meanings that refracted it partially and in favor of meanings more adequate to the concrete reality; as well as the collective search for the direction of the work to meet the needs of the working class, so that the result and the reason of this activity cease to be strange among themselves.

At first, the process of awareness can be situated at the level of a claiming consciousness, characterized by the identification of individual revolt with that of others and by the organized action to claim improvements in immediate reality, without considering the transformation of social relationships that produce exploitation. At the time, however, in which individuals not only perceive themselves as class, but set themselves in movement for overcoming capitalist relationships and abolishing classes, they enter the level of a revolutionary consciousness (Almeida, 2008). In this process, Bulhões and Abrantes (2016) highlight the central role of the appropriation of systematized knowledge, which enables the apprehension of phenomena in their multiple determinations. From the immediate experience, it is possible to detect relations of injustice and to demand better conditions of life and work; however, in order for the radical overcoming of the contradiction between capital and labor to become the north of the praxis of resistance, it is necessary the mediation of scientific, artistic, and philosophical productions.

Thus, the dynamic character of reality is reiterated: although the capitalist mode of production imposes numerous restrictions on the development of the psyche and personality, it does not totally negate the humanizing potential of labor as leading activity. In this case, a leading activity dialectically humanizing and alienated.

Therefore, the very contradictions of the capitalist society generate the necessity and the possibility of its overcoming. Class consciousness, having its genesis from labor as leading activity, tensions the humanizing and alienated/alienating poles of this activity. Although the psychic development produced by labor as leading activity can generate several points of tension, it is the development of class consciousness that can assume the maximum point of tension in this process, as predominant determination, pointing the direction for the possible negation and overcoming of the contradictory character of labor. It should be emphasized that, in order to effectively overcome the objective and subjective conditions of alienation imposed on the working class, it is necessary to radically transform the material conditions that produce them, that is, the abolition of capitalist social relations. A transformation that depends, dialectically, on the transition from class consciousness to revolutionary consciousness.

Final considerations

The psychological contents that are here highlighted, which support the affirmation of labor as a leading activity in adult life, make it possible to recognize it doubly as a synthesis: within the scope of the periodization of the psychic development, as a synthesis between the motivational and technical-operational trends of development; within the scope of the contemporary capitalist scenario, as a synthesis of humanization and alienation. It can be said that labor is the leading activity that marks the adult age – from youth to maturity – and that extends to old age, although assuming peculiar contours to each period. Affirming it, however, does not mean closing the problem of identifying a regulating activity of adult development, but announcing possible ramifications for the issue, since the determinations of this process are manifold. The complexity of the social relationships that transcend the experiences of the adult individual, make especially valid the warning of Bulhões and Abrantes (2016) as to the codetermination of other social activities in the development of the psyche and in the process of

personalization. In the initial period of adult life, youth, for example, the relationship with labor is marked by the contradictory unity between the professionalizing study activity and the productive activity. In essence, we have the same activity, the professional training activity; but what determines that this formation occurs predominantly in educational institutions or in the work environment itself are the concrete situations of life and the place that each individual occupies socially: while the autonomy of the young from the popular classes is linked to the urgency of entering labor market – including to ensure the studies –, that of the young people from other social segments is linked to study projects and academic education. Thus, in the dynamics of capitalist production, the adult world assumes opposing contours according to the division of classes. On the one side, we have the labor that is carried out in practice, promoting humanization by developing certain abilities and skills, but intensifying the alienation of the individual with the exacerbated pace of exploitation, reduction of wages and breakup of the intelligentsia of the production process. On the other side, we have the labor accessed by higher professional training, which humanizes through the appropriation of abstract knowledge, but also alienates by separating the individual from the world of work and collective social needs.

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Camila Fernanda Moro Rios: Graduated in Psychology and Master in Psychology from the Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR). <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5101-8708>

João Henrique Rossler: Graduated in Psychology and Doctorate in School Education from São Paulo State University (UNESP). Professor in the Department of Psychology at Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR). <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1639-6292>