Chapter 3

The Philosophical Roots

God does not work, though he creates, but man both creates and works (Saying from the Renaissance)

The notion of praxis was elaborated by Marx and Engels during the early years of their life-long co-operation. Praxis in the way put forward by Marx has, quite naturally, been further elaborated in many ways, and a number of works have been written on this topic. I will mainly make use of the account of praxis given by Bernstein in his seminal book “Praxis and Action” (Bernstein, 1999). Another source of inspiration have been the ideas of the Soviet philosopher Ilyenkov as explicated by Bakhurst in the equally outstanding book “Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy: From the Bolsheviks to Evald Ilyenkov” (Bakhurst, 1991).

The heritage of Marx has hardly left any footprints in the annals of product development, and it might seem farfetched to use the ideas of a controversial thinker like Marx as a point of departure for an investigation into the nature of coordination. After all, the ideas of Marx and his forerunner Hegel have been relentlessly criticized and scorned by, for example, Popper (1945). It is but all too easy to dismiss the ideas of Marx in the light of his historicism and the way these ideas materialized in the socialist states. However, if we are able to see behind the political veil of Marxism we may be amply rewarded. It is my conviction that the ideas of the young Marx are highly relevant for coming to grips with the problems organizations face today.

In any case, we should not dismiss the potential that might be hidden in this heritage simply because its political connotations. So, let’s put our blinders aside and embark on the route towards ADT!

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PRAXIS

In the Marxian tradition praxis is the nexus of human activity:

Praxis [...] is the essence of human existence in terms of producing, forming, and transforming the world. At the same time, praxis as collective productive and transforming activity, makes it possible to comprehend the social world as produced and being transformed, in contrast to viewing it as given. (Israel, 1979, p. 119)

The idea of praxis has a long philosophical history. The word praxis originates from the Greek verb πρασσω [prasso]. Marx’s ideas about praxis, which is the central concept in his philosophy, were originally formulated in 1845 in eleven “theses on Feuerbach” when Marx was only twenty-seven. As Bernstein points out, this document “is one of the most remarkable and fascinating documents of modern thought” (Bernstein, 1999, p. 13). The last one of these theses is the well-known statement: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (Marx, 1852b, p. 15).

At the core of the discourse is the nature of the relation between a producer and his object of work, the product. In contemporary analytical philosophy it is customary to think of someone working on something as two different ontological categories. The producer and product are separate, distinct kinds of beings. This position is precisely what is challenged by Marx. The product and its producer are dialectically related to each other, which means that they cannot change independently. The reason for this is that the product is seen as the producer’s activity in congealed or objectified form. “Everything that is of fundamental importance in Marx’s outlook depends on grasping this manner of viewing the relation of the objects man produces and his activity: it is essential for understanding what praxis means” (Bernstein, 1999, p. 44). A quotation from Marx illustrates this further:

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee in the construction of her cells puts to shame many an architect. But what distinguishes the worst architects from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but also realizes a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. (Marx, 1867)

Marx claims that the activity of human beings working together for some purpose not only brings about artifacts but also creates the social existence of man himself. To clarify this idea, let’s consider an orchestra giving a concert. In what sense can we say that the natures of the musicians in the orchestra are “created” by this very activity? Obviously they cannot be created in a biological sense. But consider for a moment what is needed to perform. First, the musicians must have common understanding of the purpose or goal of what they are expected to achieve. Next, they must learn to use their instruments, how to read a score, etc. They must be able to follow the intentions of the conductor. Maybe there is a need for new ways of playing and invent new musical symbols to express this. Above all, the musicians must coordinate their actions in order to reach the goal. They must all interpret “the language of music” in a consorted way. Some musicians cannot play fortissimo when the score says pianissimo. All these
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