We do not begin here with what humans say, imagine, represent, not even of the humans that appear in discourse, thoughts, images, representations to get from there to the corporeal human being; we begin with the really working human beings and from the real life process to articulate the development of their ideological reflexes and echoes of their life process. (Marx/Engels 1958: 26)

To understand the real nature of human beings, Marx/Engels suggest beginning with the real life process, with the real relations human beings have with each other in and through their work. Proceeding otherwise – i.e., beginning with what humans say (about themselves), their imaginations, representations, and ideas – leads us to idealism and metaphysics. It does not allow us to understand real life and its continuous movement, and, with it, the production of ideas, representations, consciousness, thought, and so on. This is so because life leads to and determines consciousness rather than the other way around. This methodological specification became the ground upon which the cultural-historical activity theoretic psychologists – including Vygotsky, Luria, Leont’ev, and Holzkamp – built their theoretical and methodical approaches. All, in a very decided manner, not only attribute their theoretical and methodological commitments to Marx but, in a very deep way, develop an approach to psychological research that bears fundamental resemblance to the historical approach to political economics that Marx/Engels (1962) outlined in Das Kapital (Capital).

We, too, are committed to theories and methods that begin with the analysis of real human relations and the forms of consciousness that are required in their actions and that they make available to each other as a matter of course in order to bring about, in and through their often invisible work, the very societal structures that other researchers merely note or accept as if fallen from the sky.¹ Throughout

¹ Ethnomethodology constitutes the one approach that differs from all others in this respect. It takes as its task to elucidate how human beings, in their relations with others, produce the very objective societal structures that other researchers accept as given (see, e.g., Garfinkel 1996). Because this approach de-
this book, we emphasize that the cultural-historical activity theoretic framing of the situation focuses on the societal relation as which the higher psychological function – the ‘abstraction’ of the multiplicative pattern for saving from the preceding additive pattern, itself an ‘abstraction’ of the action of adding chips to the goblet – first appears. We then observe this function, which existed only in and as relation, in the form of independent action. But any goal-directed action, because it is grounded in the reasoning of a person – who, using shared language, could never reason except in cultural-historically enabled ways – already is a societal rather than a singular phenomenon. Working independently, therefore, does not take Mario out of societal relations: he is completing the worksheet not just for himself but inherently for the (anonymous) other. Even if he were to write it down for himself, this would still denote, according to Vygotsky, an external, other-mediated relation to himself.

**Subject in/as Societal Relation**

In this book, we present the exemplary and exemplifying analysis of but one short episode in the life of Mario and Jeanne, and we see even less of Thérèse and Aurélie, who do not feature centrally on the videotape that recorded them all. If we push Vygotsky’s approach, which itself is a concretization of the program outlined by Marx/Engels, then who Mario is and what he thinks is the accumulation of societal relations. That is, in a strong sense, we never observe Mario in and for himself but always only in societal relations (even ‘solitude’ and ‘time-out’ are forms of individual-collective relations). We only ever observe societal relations and then inscribe or attribute some of what we see, some of the actions, to students such as Mario – even though the cultural-historical activity theoretic perspective asks us to take into account the activity as a whole so that we can identify the subject only as a constitutive moment of an irreducible whole. If we pull the activity, if we pull the relation, the subject no longer exists, for the cultural-historical activity theoretic subject only exists in and as relation, in real, concrete activity. To think otherwise by focusing on, for example, activity in the abstract is handing oneself over to the psychological idealism that Vygotsky (1927/1997) adamantly critiques and in contrast to which he offers up his own ‘concrete human psychology’ (Vygotsky 1989).

But we may focus on the identifiable body and the identifications it makes possible. We can then think of subjectification as ‘the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of societal reality from the perspective of the participants, it goes well with a Marxist sociological and social psychological analysis (Smith 1987).

2 Random movements, because they are not goal-oriented, may be singular. This is how, according to Vygotsky, pointing first emerges. An other person attributes a sense (intention) to a random movement, and this sense (intention), which first appears as relation, subsequently comes to be realized by the developing subject.