

Vygotsky's scientific psychology: Terra incognita*

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This article presents a brief overview of the developments in Marxist psychology and its achievement over the past first Marx's century (1883–1983) and then preview how Marxist psychology looks like in the second Marx's century (1983–2083). Marxist psychology of the second Marx's century will shape the ontological, epistemological, theoretical, and methodological outlook of psychological studies. Marx research investigations guide the scope of our theoretical and empirical scientific activities and lead to the conclusion that human higher mental functions are rooted in Marx's four levels of the organization of production that regulate and organize all forms of human life including human higher mental functions. Marx's archives possessed a wealth of fragmented psychological ideas and concepts. This article concludes with the idea that, the second century Marx will be more productive and for the first time we are perhaps nearer to a Marxist psychology than ever. This view is essentially possible if it has an important market and an influence in the United States. Here I join Marx's conclusion that the real change for a better world will begin in the United States, this change will shape the world. In the last three decades, Vygotsky was re-discovered and promoted by North American psychologists, and his ideas spread around the world including Russia.

Key Words: Vygotsky, Scientific psychology, Dialectics, Concrete reality, Social relations, Praxis, Consciousness, Totality, Crisis of psychology, What is psychology?

«We do not need fortuitous utterances, but a method; not dialectical materialism, but historical materialism. *Das Kapital* must teach us many things from it- both because a genuine social psychology begins *after Das Kapital* and because psychology nowadays is a psychology *before Das Kapital*.» (Vygotsky, 1997. Vol. 3. P. 331).

«Marxist psychology which is developing before our eyes... does not yet have its own methodology and attempts to find it ready-made in the haphazard psychological statements of the founders of Marxism» (Vygotsky, 1997, Vol.3, p. 312).

«We might put it (Marxism) as follows: they are looking, firstly, in the wrong place; secondly, for the wrong thing; thirdly, in the wrong manner» (Vygotsky, 1997. Vol. 3. P. 313).

Introduction

From Karl Marx to Henri Wallon to Georges Politzer, to Lev Vygotsky and from Alexis Leontiev, to Alexander Luria, to Lucien Seve, to Klaus Holzkamp, scientific investigators improved our comprehension and understanding of the forms, the structures and the functions of human higher mental processes through individual or joint collective efforts connected in common inquiries across vast cultural, geographical and chronological spans. Human higher mental functions are socially formed, historically developed, and culturally shaped. They are grounded in concrete social life, and carved in socially organized practical activity. Thus psychology is the concrete study of concrete human reality. Marxist psychology is nothing more than a refinement of the German Hegelian philosophy and German materialist physiology, the British empirical philosophy, and the French Cartesian philosophy.

When, on 6 January 1924, Vygotsky presented his paper at the 2nd All-Russian Congress on Psychoneurology in Leningrad, he certainly was not aware that he was beginning the ten most creative years of his life in terms of theoretical production (precisely from 1924 to 1934). Today we know, moreover, that Vygotsky again read and reread Marx and Hegel as well as psychological, sociological, philosophical, and anthropological theories of the ninetieth and early twentieth century. Vygotsky discovered for the first time in his life the importance of the concept of consciousness, as the permanence (conservation of human mind), the process (movement of human mind), and the meaning of human nature. It is consciousness that relates human with his/her true nature. Consciousness becomes the focal point of psychology. Psychology is the study of human consciousness. Vygotsky's treatment of the conscious forces at work in society derived from Marx's concept of alienation. However, Vygotsky's

* An unexplored field of psychological sciences.

critics of his contemporary scholars -Soviet psychologists- were based on Marx's ideas, he criticized their ontological, epistemological, theoretical, and methodological outlook. These critics have the merit of shifting the ground of discussion away from abstract individual to concrete individual to historical individual in respect to other social, historical, economical and cultural institutions. Vygotsky makes his theoretical framework more materialistic and empirical which lead to the idea that human individuals engage actively in the re-appropriation of the externalized concrete social reality. The externalized concrete social reality is organized and regulated by labor activity. Marx research investigations led Vygotsky to the conclusion that human higher mental functions are rooted in the economic conditions of concrete life and social relations of productions that regulate and organize all forms of human life. Labor is the essence of human individuals as well as the essence of wealth and social progress. Society is an expression of social relations; human individuals are ensemble of social relations. Labor itself is not an object but it is an activity. Labor itself is not a value but a living source of value. Living labor is the rational nucleus of Vygotsky's psychology, it is conceived as creative source of human productive process of production (ideas, symbols, tools, etc.). Vygotsky always remained within the orbit of Marxism as exemplified in his use of the ontological dialectic of totality. Thus, human individual is a changing being in a changing world. Vygotsky's whole theoretical task is an attempt to create psychology's own capital. Crews argues «if we ask ourselves which doctrine, since the time of the French Revolution, has proved most consequential for the reshaping of human existence, only one answer is conceivable: It is Marxism» (1985, p. 449). In other words, Marxism is «the humus of every particular thought and the horizon of all culture» (Sartre, 1960, p. 17). The second century Marx will be more productive and for the first time we are perhaps nearer to a Marxist psychology than ever.

A reconstruction of Marx's theory of psychology

Renewed interest in Vygotsky's writings has spurred discussion of Marxist psychology (e.g., Jantzen, Lompscher, Ratner, Roth & Lee, Shames, and Tobach, among others). In many ways, these discussions have proceeded without sufficient and deep understanding of Marx's ideas. Vygotsky drew his inspiration, insight, and theoretical guidance from Marx's research paradigm.

The Vygotsky-Luria-Leontiev cultural historical activity paradigm is motivated by a conviction to make Karl Marx's theory, the theory of scientific psychology (Marxist psychology). The works of Vygotsky-Luria-Leontiev are examined in the light of this epistemological ontological philosophical background. In recent years, cultural historical activity paradigm (Cole, 1996) has gained wide usage in psychology and is becoming increasingly influential in the social sciences. Marxist ideas are being used to guide empirical research investigations of human higher mental functions. All empirical research

investigations are guided by certain assumptions. The most important of these assumptions are ontological assumptions concerning how the social cultural historical context influence individuals and being influenced by them. This means that cultural historical activity paradigm is explicit about the ontology of social concrete reality, its needs and overcoming its contradictions.

In early work, however, Vygotsky explicitly connected his own ideas on higher mental processes with his present-day zeitgeist academic research activities, incorporating psychological theories and Marxist philosophy as well as Hegelian philosophy. In so doing he stressed the central role of labor in the development of human higher mental functions, especially consciousness as the creative and changing processes.

For this reason, Vygotsky believed that labor had a historic significance first elaborated in his cultural historical activity theory, and that its existence was a condition of possibility for the elaboration of Marxist psychology. Traditionally, this thesis on the historical significance of labor has been read as deriving from the centrality of praxis. Marx argued «All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice» (Marx, *Eighth Thesis on Feuerbach*).

Marx's materialist conception of history theory contains at its core dialectic between inherited material concrete life, social relations and its incessant social transformation by human individuals. In this context Marx pointed out: «Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past» (1971, p. 10). Human individuals shape their nature and cognition through labor. Marx was clearly mistaken on several points, including his theory that labor is the source of value. His books will be worth reading as long as individualistic mode of productions endures.

A reconstruction of Marx's theory of psychology is fully in line with at least one of the many strands in Marx's thought. For Vygotsky, then, the project of reconstructing Marxist psychology follows the path of appropriating the epistemological achievement of the competing psychological schools, rather than an «epistemological break» (Althusser, 1970). In his work the emphasis is on getting the various propositions in Marxist theory clear in relation to one another, and on showing how these propositions can be used to offer valid explanations of historical development of Marxist psychology (Le Ny, 1963; Malrieu, 1983; Naville, 1948; Quiniou, 1983; Seve, 1966, 1975, 1978; Wallon, 1990; Zazzo, 1950, 1971, 1975, 1995). In short, Vygotsky prioritizes the empirical validity of Marx's theory over the issue of its logical scrutiny.

Reading Marx in this way, Vygotsky reproduces the founding moment of dialectical psychology within Marxist theory. It is Vygotsky who reinstated Marxist philosophy as the foundation of psychology, and relegated epistemology to a peripheral position. Psychology, he argued, must first struggle for clarity of its concepts, define its unit of analysis, and create its own capital. Psychology is the concrete study of con-

crete reality. Concrete reality is formed and shaped by labor -activity- and social relations of productions (relations to one another). Human higher mental functions were manifested in and conditioned by *an ensemble of social relations*. The form and content of higher mental functions are dialectically located within the single totality of conscious human labor -activity- and the social relations of production that activate it.

Accordingly, Vygotsky's use of Marxist philosophy to reconstruct scientific psychology casts his theory as a set of explanatory conceptions operating within. In Vygotsky's work the emphasis is on establishing a set of conceptions that will constitute the ground floor of cultural historical activity theory and its dialectical method.

Vygotsky and dialectical method

Vygotsky's thought (Elhammoumi, 2001a, 2001b, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2006, 2007, Sawchuk, Duarte & Elhammoumi, 2006) is fundamentally dialectical and in many ways can be characterized as Hegelian and in some extent Marxist. The dialectical thinking emerges in Heraclitus through direct immediate contact with society, nature and external world. Dialectic is the activity within which meanings compete for mastery and control (dialogues of Plato and Aristotle's Posterior Analytics). The genesis and development of the concept of dialectic runs from Plato's dialogues through Aristotle's fundamental dialectical epistemology and ultimately through the thought of several modern European thinkers, scientists, and philosophers, as well as North American, South American, Asian and African scholars and philosophers. I do not propose to provide a detailed exposition of the different forms and theories of dialectics in this paper. The great advantage of dialectics, as philosophical framework is its strength and ability to explain why the world, nature, society, and human higher mental functions are in state of flux. The dialectic is a philosophical system consisting of an ontology, an epistemology, and a method, it attempt to grasp the totality of the system -natural, social or mental- and that the changes occur as a result of contradictions intern to that system. Dialectic is an ontology (a theory about the fundamental nature of the world, society and human higher mental functions) as well as an epistemology (a theory about the nature of human knowledge) and a method (the ability to explain why nature, society, and human higher mental functions are in state of flux).

There are several types of dialectics: Fichte's reflection-analytic dialectics, Hegel's synthetic dialectics, Marx's opposition dialectics, Engels's subjective and objective dialectics, dialectical materialism, the dialectic of critical social theory, Bloch's not yet dialectics, the creative dialectics of the Yugoslav Praxis School, existential dialectics, negative dialectics, dialectic of defeats, dialectic of enlightenment, dialectical logic, structuralist dialectics, Mao's rotation dialectics, Fanon's dialectic of experience, Hartmann's real dialectics, dialogical dialectics, Gonseth's open dialectics, hermeneutical dialectics, abstract dialectics, concrete dialectics, formal dialectics, dialectic of emancipation, systematic dialectics, Piagetian dialectics, Bhaskar's dialectic of critical realism, dialectical method,

dialectical thought, and dialectical reason. Yet, no single text has yet compiled or worked out on the relevance of dialectic for psychology. Marx's dialectical method conceives the world, nature, society and human individuals as an inner-connected whole dynamic of constant flux. The dialectical method enables psychologist to see the mechanism associated with the deep structures of human higher mental functions. It helps to comprehend the larger scale (such as forms of social control and power, distribution of wealth, divisions of labor and social class) to which higher mental functions belong, providing both a beginning for research and analysis, explanation and interpretation, and perspective in which to carry it out. The dialectical method provides the needed flexibility for analytically synthesizing historically, socially, culturally and economically the structures of human higher mental functions. Dialectical method helps us to see more clearly, investigate more accurately, to reveal and grasp more precisely, to understand more fully and more dynamically the nature, the development, formation and the functions of human higher mental processes. It is through dialectics that psychology becomes human science. In this regard, Henri Wallon argued that «It is dialectics that has given psychology its stability and its meaning» (1951, p. 34). Dialectical materialism is «the most rational explanation for psychology» (Wallon, 1954, p. 127). Dialectical materialism «is relevant to the entire realm of knowledge, as well as to the realm of action... psychology... must, more than any other science, find in dialectical materialism its normal base and guiding principles» (Wallon, 1951, p. 34). Wallon's perspective helps uncover Marx's joint use of dialectical and scientific reason, and advance our understanding of human higher mental functions in greater detail than that have been provided by the ontological, epistemological, theoretical, and methodological assumptions of traditional and mainstream psychology.

Marxist psychology was born in a theoretical vacuum, and it grew despite this vacuum, filling in as best it could the existing Marx fragmented psychological ideas, nourishing itself from Marxist philosophy and the contradictions of bourgeois psychology for which Vygotsky had the most profound respect. It [Marxist psychology] was able to rally itself some famous psychologists -- and they came primarily for practical and theoretical reasons; as well as a method of analysis and action.

There were no really great psychological *maitres* in Marxist psychology amongst us to guide our steps. Politzer, Wallon, Vygotsky among others who might have become the greatest Marxist theoretical psychologists if they had not sacrificed their philosophical-psychological achievements to urgent tasks of the consequences of the first and the second world wars: mental disorders, education, literacy, disabilities, orphanages, etc.

Vygotsky is making a comeback

Vygotsky's work is the most serious attempt to date to give the Marxist theory of psychology a new lease to life after years of neglect. Though Vygotsky's version carries and draws central elements from Marx, it is radically different and original theory in the field of psychological sci-

ences. Vygotsky's contribution to theoretical conceptualizations of Marxist psychology belongs to the first century after Marx's death 1883–1983. This first century began under Engels's guidance and continued under the hegemony of the Second International, e.g. Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin among others. The second century of Marx has begun from 1983–2083 with Perestroika, Glasnost and Solidarnosc, the collapse of Soviet Union and Eastern Europe brands of socialism. Marx of the second century will be much more different of Marx of the first century. In many ways, first century Marx's legacy has been obscured by the failure of Soviet and Eastern European socialism, which wasn't Marx's ideas primary interest. Marx may have understood our social relations of production and higher mental functions better than some of our leading psychologists. The decline of high culture, alienation, false consciousness, division of labor, literacy, education, morality, mental illness, and behavioral disorders, issues that psychologists are now confronting anew, sometimes, without realizing that they are walking in Marx's footsteps. We are perhaps nearer to Marx and Marxist psychology than ever.

The return to Vygotsky, Vygotsky is the next thinker of Marxist psychology, Vygotsky is making a comeback, he is the Mozart of psychology. In my view, Vygotsky was a student of Marx and Marxist traditions, and that is how he should be judged. With the massive publication of hitherto unknown manuscripts, Vygotsky will be seen very different in the second century Marx. Thus, Vygotsky was, in the periphery, yesterday, more pertinent today than in Stalinist Russia, and behavioristic, individualistic North American psychology.

Vygotsky was interpreted for five decades from the standpoint of positivistic versions of Marxism, itself deformation of Marx and Marxist tradition (that it is not necessary even to discuss it in this paper). In any case, initially one depended on the materials published by Vygotsky. When, in 1962, the *Thought and Language* was published, on which Jean Piaget, as well as Jerome Bruner so astutely commented, a rediscovery of Vygotsky was begun. The *Mind in Society*, published in 1978, did have the same effect. Wertsch's edited book *Culture, Communication and Cognition: Vygotskian Perspectives* (1985) was the first important discussion of Vygotsky's works. The reception of Vygotsky as well as the perception was in some extent modified (Newman & Holzman, 1993; Ratner, 1996; Tobach, 1999; Lompscher, 2001; Elhammoumi, 2001, 2002, 2006; Seve, 2002; Roth & Lee, 2007), but not fundamentally in North America.

Vygotsky began his studies of literary critics (Psychology of Art, 1925), which continued with (Crisis of Psychology, 1927) and ended by (Thought and language, 1934). This means that Vygotsky begins with perception (Psychology of Art, 1925), turns to logic (Crisis of Psychology, 1927), and ends with language (Thought and language, 1934). Thus one might say that Vygotsky begins with perception, turns to logic, and ends with language. These titles are of the greatest interest. Each one suggests a form and content, a subject matter and a method.

This part of his life has been sufficiently studied by contemporary psychology, especially by Mecacci (1983),

Blanck (1984), Riviere (1985), Schneuwly & Bronckart (1985), Van der Veer & Valsiner (1991), Newman & Holzman (1993), Elhammoumi, (1997), Moro Schneuwly & Brossard (1997), Asmolov (1998), Veresov (1999), Clot (1999), Vygotskaya (2000), Vergnaud (2000), Daniels (2002), and Wink & Putney (2002). Thus far, I think, there has been no extended essay written on the psychology of Vygotsky as a whole. To date no one seems to have been interested or able to provide a synthetic idea of Vygotsky's scientific psychology (Marxist psychology). This absence is striking and significant.

The 1980s and 1990s, however, appeared more interesting, Vygotsky's archives were opened to researchers, and more manuscripts were discovered.

The hitherto unknown manuscripts of Vygotsky have been published in Russian since the 1980s. Most of these manuscripts have been published in English translation as part of the six-volumes collection *«Collected Works of Lev Vygotsky»* by Plenum Publishers in the 1990s. For the first time, we had thus closed the circle and could now consider the *«Vygotsky making a comeback»* of cultural historical activity paradigm. Vygotsky took up Marx's essential ideas on several fundamental points such as consciousness, labor, dialectics, materialist conception of history, cultural tools, language, etc.

We had, for the first time, a complete vision of Vygotsky's manuscripts. I believe that this Vygotsky will be not the *«Vygotsky of Stalin, Perestroika, Glasnost, and Solidarnosc,»* but the Vygotsky of the entire second century (1983–2083) who critically deconstructs the positivized versions of psychology and reconstructs it socially, culturally, historically, and economically in the light of Marx's ideas.

Today we know, moreover, that Vygotsky again reread Marx's Logic in the mid-1920s and that he even started to write the unfinished manuscripts *«Crisis of psychology»* to show the importance of Marx's logic. It is a psychological research paradigm with Marx's ideas as its rational nucleus. From this perspective, Vygotsky began to develop *«to create psychology's own Das Kapital»*.

Marx's dialectical method never paused he went on, constructing, constituting, one by one, his concepts and categories. It is in the dialectical construction of the concept of activity and consciousness that Vygotsky discovered for the first time in his life the importance of the concept of social relations of production, as a unit of analysis. Value is the foundation and the essence of capital, social relations of production is the essence of human higher mental functions. Thus, Vygotsky pointed out that, *«The individual and personal are not in opposition, but a higher form of sociality. To paraphrase Marx: the psychological nature of man is the totality of social relations shifted to the inner sphere and having become functions of the personality and forms of its structures.»* (1989, p. 59). This means that human higher mental functions, consciousness and personality is an aggregation of social relations, *«I am a social relation of me to myself.»* (1989, p. 67). In other words, *«Genetically social relations, real relations between people, underlie all higher functions and their relationships.»* (1989, p. 58).

It is from this perspective that Vygotsky, quickly, directed his attention to the concept of social relations of production. For the first time, the question of the psychological unit of analysis is approached scientifically and analytically.

Conclusion

Vygotsky explicitly sees himself as completing Marx's project in the realm of Psychology, and argued for the primacy of human consciousness as the object of study of a Marxist psychology. Thus, Vygotsky wants to extend a particular view of Marx's psychological ideas, that it «is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness» (Marx, 1978, p. 4). It is not possible to separate human higher mental functions from the concrete life of the thinking person. Our higher mental functions are shaped and carved by our concrete social reality. These higher mental functions and its conceptions in turn affect every aspect of human lives from the way human individuals organize their everyday activities, to raising children, to worshiping and laboring. In conclusion, Vygotsky actually rejected the philosophical premise that human individual is self-creating being arising out of the dialectic between his labor-activity- and the natural as well as social world it transforms. Vygotsky turned Marx fragmented psychological ideas into a constructive system, and provides a detailed argument for why it is urgent to develop a scientific psychology, a Marxist psychology. Thus, we are perhaps nearer to a Marxist psychology than ever. I conclude this paper with Georges Canguilhem remarks in his famous article titled «What is psychology?» he said,

«It is therefore, with a degree of vulgarity that philosophy confronts psychology with the crucial question: tell me what you are up to [tendez] so that I know what you are? But once in a while, the philosopher must be allowed to approach the psychologist as a counselor and say: when one leaves Sorbonne University by the exit Rue Saint-Jacques, you can either ascend the hill or go downhill: if you go up, you will get to the Pantheon which is the resting place for several great men, but if you go downhill then you're surely end up at the Prefecture de Police» (1958, p. 25).



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