

# Meeting Vitaly Rubtsov amid the scenery of the '80s

Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont

University of Neuchâtel

Vitaly Rubtsov has made remarkable contributions to educational theory and practice. Standing on the shoulders of important predecessors, aware of the role of social interactions for cognitive development, among other things, he has drawn attention to the need to consider not only adult-child but also child-child interactions. This has led him to invite educators and researchers to investigate with care the organization of the relationships in which students get involved.

His exemplary commitment to keeping the insights of cultural-historical psychology in constant dialogue with educational practices has led him to organize a whole university, Moscow State University of Psychology and Education (MSUP), devoted to the theoretical and empirical study and the pragmatic implementation of educational action and social work, strongly anchored in the tradition of Cultural-Historical Psychology. The international influence of MSUP is notably observable in its publications, as well as in the scientific meetings and conferences that it has hosted, its contributions to the International Society for Cultural-historical Activity Research (ISCAR), and the variety of international students and researchers who are attracted by its summer school programs. Here, at the University of Neuchâtel (where Jean Piaget was a student and then held his first full professorship), we are proud of having had Vitaly Rubtsov as a guest and happy to continue to participate in so many of the activities nurtured by MSUP.

I had the pleasure of meeting V. Rubtsov face to face for the first time at the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development (ISSBD) meeting in Jyväskylä (Finland) in 1989. We had been in contact for a few years already preparing publications together. But we had such a hard time finding each other in Jyväskylä! There were no cell phones to help, although the lack of technology was not the main reason. What happened was that we both had such strong stereotypes about what a member of the Russian Academy of Science or a Swiss University professor should look like that we passed by each other several times without realizing it. It took Rubtsov's

delivering his talk on the last day of the conference to have a proper frame of reference to “recognize” each other!

So, on the occasion of this friend and colleague's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, let me venture to step back a few decades and try to sketch some elements of the scenery in which our paths first crossed in the '80s. To help understand the changes, I'll say a few words of my *Weltanschauung* in those days. Let this be a small contribution to delineate the importance of the work done by V. Rubtsov, together with others, to reach present day dialogues and stimulating scientific exchanges. I will then point to future possible implementations of Rubtsov's recent suggestions to our current research.

When I was a student at the University of Geneva in the late 60's, Lev Vygotsky was there but partly hidden by a sort of taboo. Why? Probably because of the general ideological fear of communism. Perhaps also because Vygotsky was supposedly a “rival” to Jean Piaget—though Vygotsky's death at an early age also inspired a form of respect for an impossible — but longed for — critical debate. Nevertheless, Vygotsky was an author often referred to by Piaget in his lectures. Of course, Piaget would present the thesis of his Russian colleague through his own lenses, and we didn't know how he had had access to his work. Unfortunately, Piaget never told us the story of how he had been in contact with Vygotsky, how his early book was translated into Russian, and who the people were who mediated their contacts. It is only when working on the edition of *Piaget and Neuchâtel* that I realized how young Piaget and Vygotsky were when they were in touch (in the present day university system, with its long rituals for the young, they would have been postdocs).

I remember Piaget recalling with respect and admiration the pleasure he had in being invited to Moscow in 1955. He told us how he felt when he discovered how much in common he had with his Russian colleagues. It was probably not what he had expected. But this was only mildly alluded to — perhaps because, as mentioned above — the ideological and political atmosphere of those Cold War days was not favorable for larger meetings of the mind.

**For citation:**

Perret-Clermont Anne-Nelly Meeting Vitaly Rubtsov amid the Scenery of the '80s. *Kul'turno-istoricheskaya psikhologiya = Cultural-historical psychology*, 2018. Vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 19–21. (In Russ., abstr. in Engl.). doi: 10.17759/chp.2018140402

**Для цитаты:**

Перре-Клермон А.Н. Ландшафт 1980-х: знакомство с Виталием Рубцовым в контексте эпохи // Культурно-историческая психология. 2018. Т. 14. № 4. С. 19–21. doi: 10.17759/chp.2018140402

A minority of students of my generation (the '68 generation) were preoccupied (among other things) the idea that, in his theory, Piaget would not seriously take into account either the characteristics of the "object" or the "social" as a distinctive level of analysis. This concern was discussed underground because "physical object" meant "material" and the senior researchers around us considered "material" a Marxist term. This fear of communism was not our concern (in those days, we were critical of everything, including Marxism). Our concern was that after two World Wars, Europe was presenting a sort of "hemineglect", or blindness to half of the continent (both ways), in many respects, including psychology and education. Half of the common European cultural heritage in this area was being developed by the successors of Vygotsky and other colleagues, but we could access only very small bits of their texts, and we knew even less of the lines of research in other Eastern countries; independently, the other half of the heritage was developed in Western Europe and in North America but in a piecemeal of languages and philosophical traditions. We were looking for possibilities to rediscover the "whole" of European heritage in psychology and education and the roots of the on-going debates. This also meant building bridges – and in the late 70's and during the 80's, this was the case via East/West research meetings and summer school programs.

Because I was involved in youth work and education, my personal experience made me unhappy with Piaget's theory regarding such issues as comparative studies and the role of education and culture. During my Master studies in London (1971–72), I attended very stimulating seminars with Basil Bernstein, discussing extensively the sociology of socialization. Primary schools in London were very innovative for the teaching of mathematics and science but also in the integration of the many children of this post-colonial period of migrations. While working on my PhD in Geneva under the supervision of Willem Doise, we were reading L. Vygotsky, G.H. Mead and social psychologists, in particular Henri Tajfel and Serge Moscovici. I was eager to transfer some of their ideas (in those days present only in social psychology) within developmental psychology.

I also remember vivid discussions around Bruner's work and the research conducted in Africa by Michael Cole and by Sylvia Scribner. Their concern for the role of culture in cognitive growth was transforming the understanding of cognition; the way in which they took care of the activity context framed quite differently the work of the "epistemological subject" left somehow homeless in Piaget's model. I found it really important and fascinating for many reasons, but in particular because it contributed to bridging very different lines of research born from a common European heritage.

I was also lucky to host Susan Ervin Tripp for some weeks and to discover the "micro" study of dialogical interactions between adults and children and how the understanding of socio-cognitive-linguistic acts (e.g., requests) was socially situated. This linguistic perspec-

tive was, for me, quite a different introduction to the famous language-thought debate and it motivated me to keep in touch with interdisciplinary research on the edges of psychology, pragmatics and linguistics as well as another reason not to consider teaching a top-down process.

All this contributed to the future of my research interests: thinking as a collective activity situated in interactions and in socio-historically situated contexts with cultural and technological mediations. I was concentrating on "micro" interactions, "micro" contexts and precise reasoning from the perspective of the specific goals of each interactant, but I kept in touch with Bruno Latour, who was taking "care" of the "larger" contexts and socio-material arrangements and inviting a complete revision of the philosophical premises. Doise's distinction and articulation of different "levels of analysis" were helping to manage the constant tension that exists between sociocultural explanations and the urge to recognize the person as a person. But what could be said of the "intermediary" frames of all these encounters (settings, institutions, cultural scripts, etc.) and were they offering spaces for thinking?

It is in this context that the meeting with Vitaly Rubtsov, which happened in the 80's, was so important. His key concept, *Joint action*, called for further investigation into activity theory and developmental psychology. Both of us had read Vygotsky, Piaget and G.H. Mead. But Rubtsov was considering *activity* much more seriously than our local psychological traditions, which had left this concern to ergonomics. ISCRAT (International Society for Cultural Research and Activity Theory), then ISCAR, conferences were gatherings where this could be discussed with psychologists and educationalists but also with linguists and anthropologists. Rubtsov's theoretical and empirical work was devoted to a better understanding of the complexity of joint action, with the perspective of contributing to pedagogical applications. He was producing advancements in understanding of its possible (but not "automatic") impact on learning and development with a concern for higher psychological processes (far from mere behavioral acquisitions). One of Rubtsov's interests was the pedagogical organization of group work in the classroom: teachers were invited to stimulate second-order reflection not only on the cognitive side of the activity but also on its social organization. This meant that students' understanding of their roles in handling the task, of the social situation and of its socio-cognitive requirements, was central. It also meant that understanding the goal of the activity was an important issue. This perspective was new to us: our local didactics were essentially concerned with the subject matter "isolated" from the communication process (or limited to an understanding of teaching as a "scaffolding" process). This shining light on the role of social interactions in development and learning inspires much more careful research into how students understand what they are asked to do in the classroom and how they manage not only the task but also their relationships (which in fact are part of the task!) as they work together.

Reading Rubtsov's recent notes (2016), we recognize again, from a different perspective, the depth of his proposition. It invites us to reconsider our recent studies with new questions. Obviously, as educators and as researchers, we have too often invited the students to do group work with insufficient preparation, instructions and post hoc reflection. To take part in a social organization and to become competent and reflective enough to contribute to its advancement is a

learned skill requiring specific pedagogical design and devoted instructional attention. In line with our former research, we will be interested in observing how students understand the type of requests that these designs and instructions put on them. How will they explore the possibilities? Will they tend to re-interpret the goals according to their own stakes (and what are they)? How creative will they be when facing difficulties?

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#### **Acknowledgements**

We thank Athena Sargent for her help with language editing.

#### ***References***

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