

Reflections on Alterity from Lev S. Vygotsky's theory

Andréa Vieira Zanella

Ph.D. in Educational Psychology, Associate Professor, Federal University of Santa Catarina

Recently, we have seen the rise of intolerances of various orders, in different geographical contexts. Such intolerances, in turn, are not new: they are configured as expression of a historical process in which the unknown, an other presented as difference, is refuted, denied, and set at the condition of cause of ill omens and events that torment the person, the group, and the nation. These issues were not discussed by Lev Semionovich Vygotsky, still, his reflections on I-other relations, on alterity and constitution of the subject, bring relevant contributions to this theme that has been, currently, intensified. To reflect about this place of the other, of alterity, from the contribution of the historical-cultural approach in psychology, is the objective of this work.

Key words: alterity; I-other relations; constitution of the subject.

The signifier alterity is not frequent* in most of the writings available in Portuguese and Spanish from Lev Semionovich Vygotsky**, author recognized as the founder of the historical-cultural approach in psychology. If the signifier is rare, the dimension of an other, or rather the relation with an other, is a constant: the explanation about the process of constitution of the human psyche presented by L. S. Vygotsky is based on the assumption that everything that characterizes each person in particular arise in the context of social relations. Referring to the VI thesis on Feuerbach, L. S. Vygotsky [2] highlights: «Modifying Marx's known thesis, we could say that a person's psychological nature represents an aggregate of social relations, internally translated and converted into functions of personality and forms of its structure». But how does it happen?

The answer to this question is fundamental for the discussion on alterity, which becomes a relevant discussion since we have recently seen the rise of intolerances of various orders. Such intolerances, in turn, are not new: they are configured as expression of a historical process in which the unknown, an other presented as difference, is refuted, denied, set at the condition of cause of ill omens and events that torment the person, the group, and the nation.

Although these questions have not been directly discussed by L. S. Vygotsky, his reflections on I-other relations, on alterity and constitution of the subject, may

contribute to the comprehension of this contemporary issue. To reflect about this place of the other, of alterity, from the contribution of the historical-cultural approach in psychology, is the objective of this work.

Activity, semiotic mediation and alterity

Following the Marxist tradition, for L. S. Vygotsky [2; 3] it is through the characteristically human activity that human being changes the social context in which he is situated and, during this process constitutes himself as a subject. In other words, all human activity produces culture, and in the process of its own production, objectifies and subjectifies*** the human being. In other words, the result of the activity is both the production of a humanized reality and the humanization of the subject that attempts it, which affirms the inexorable relation of mutual constitution between subject and society, between collective and singular.

In this perspective, human psyche is social and historical, since it is neither given nor has its development characterized by stages that presuppose an apex. It is necessary to refer to the process of its constitution, originally social and marked by the historical achievements of human kind and by the singular marks which are socially produced.

* One of the passages in which he presents it is the following: «What moves the meanings and determines their development is the cooperation between consciousnesses. The process of alterity of consciousness» [11, 187].

** As basic references to this work, the first three volumes of the Spanish edition of The Collected Works of Vygotsky were chosen. Other works from the author and contemporary interlocutors were also used. Full references to this material may be found at the end of the text.

*** For the dialectics of objectivation/subjectivation, see Duarte [4] and Maheirie [5].

The movement of objectivation and subjectivation is made possible by the fundamental characteristic of human activity, i.e., the fact of being semiotically mediated. L. S. Vygotsky [2] defines the sign as «a means of social relation», in other words, something historically and socially produced, presented as mediator of the relationships between the subject and reality, between the others and himself, conferring them through this mediation, a symbolic dimension. Signs connect each person to many others, whether they are in presence — as interlocutors — or absent, in reference to human culture objectified in signs and carried out by them.

The fundamental aspect of the sign, which gives it the character of Gordian knot* in the process of objectivation and subjectivation is «... the property of being reversible, in other words, of being significant for both the one who receives it and the one who emits it... The sign acts in the field of consciousness, in which author and spectator constitute attributes of the same person. That is why the word directed to the other produces effects also on the one who emits it» [6, p. 59]. Therefore, through signs, the dual direction of human activity is processed, since by their mediation, the subject objectifies himself and transforms reality, at the same time as he transforms and subjectifies himself.

Signs are socially and historically produced, that is, they only exist as joint human production, which, in turn, constitutes human beings. If the historical achievements of hundreds of thousands of years guarantee the human species elementary psychological processes and hominization, the appropriation of signs, that is, of culture, allows each particular subject to develop semiotically mediated psychological processes**. In short, signs make it possible to become human.

It is necessary to emphasize that, for L. S. Vygotsky, the subject appropriates the sign in its signification, that is, in what the sign means, in how it affects and moves the subject***. To conceive the sign in its signification is to consider its shared dimension — the meaning, as referred by L. S. Vygotsky — and also its singular dimension, i.e. the various senses which it can engender****.

It is important to explain that meaning is not opposite to sense: on the contrary, for L. S. Vygotsky the meaning is a shared sense, and to meet this condition, it reveals a relative stability. But just like the senses, the meanings are continuously modified as reality itself is transformed. The relation that each person establishes with reality is, this way, always and necessarily mediated by the characteristic collective and singular senses of

the social and historical moment in which he lives, and constituted in what is significant in his life history.

Considering the relations between subjectivity and objectivity, L. S. Vygotsky highlights that human psyche consists in a subjective expression of brain processes, «as a particular facet, an especial qualitative characteristic of the higher functions of the brain» [3, p. 100]. Human psyche comprehends the psychological processes — such as memory, attention, language, thought — and the emotional dimension that is necessarily related to these processes. For the author [10], there is an inexorable connection between emotions and psychological activity as a whole, between emotions and man's real life. Hence, his theory is opposed to those perspectives which conceive cognitive activity disconnected of the interests and motivations, of its affective-volitional bases.

Human activity, in turn, may be conscious or not, as long as «... we must consider it (the psyche) as part of a complex process that is not limited to its conscious feature; that is why we consider that in psychology it is completely licit to speak about the psychological consciousness and unconsciousness: the unconsciousness is potentially conscious» [3, p. 108].

Consciousness and unconsciousness concern, in this perspective, not to psychic instances, but fundamentally to characteristics of human activity itself objectified in a word, gesture, expression, or any other sign. Consciousness and unconsciousness affirm that the singular characteristics of each person are the result of the complex weave between objectivation and subjectivation, in which every and each person is marked by the things they know and choose and, at the same time, by the things that escape, things that are invisible and not captured, but do not pass by without leaving traces.

The distinctive characteristic of human activity, understood as explanative category for both phylogenetic and ontogenetic development and that allows us to affirm that human psyche is originally social is, we reiterate, the fact of being mediated. While Marxist writings provide references to technical tools that mediate activity [11], works of L. S. Vygotsky introduce the signs as symbolic tools responsible for the specificities of the human psyche and its essentially mediated condition.

Considered as psychological instruments, L. S. Vygotsky refers to signs as «... social devices directed toward the mastery of processes, one's own or someone else's» [3, p. 65], as instruments that reorganize psychic operation as they enable the regulation of one's own

* The metaphor of the Gordian knot is used here to talk about sign because it is a type of knot that is almost impossible to untie. There is only one point in which it can be undone; all the others intensify the knot. In the case of the sign, this definitely ties the subjects in the weave of the society where they are situated, in a tangle of which the begging wire can not be identified and can not be undone.

** The concept of higher psychological process, for L. S. Vygotsky, «... is constituted by the processes of mastery of the external means of cultural development and thought: language, writing, calculation, drawing; in second place, it is formed by the processes of development of the special higher psychic functions, not limited or determined in any precise form, and that have been called by traditional psychology with the names of voluntary attention, logical memory, formation of concepts, etc» [7, p. 32].

*** For the appropriation of the meaning, see Zanella [8].

**** For meaning and sense, see chapter 7, Thinking and Speech, in L. S. Vygotsky [9].

conduct*. Signs allow, therefore, the establishment of qualitatively differentiated relations with reality: instead of direct and immediate, they become mediated by signs, by culture**.

As signs consist in forms of language, it may be established the relation between language and consciousness: «... if language is the consciousness that exists in practice for the others, and consequently for himself, it is evident that words play a central part not only in the development of thought but in consciousness as a whole... Consciousness is expressed in words as the sun is expressed in a drop of water. A word relates to consciousness as the microcosm relates to the macrocosm, as a living cell relates to a whole organism, as an atom relates to the universe. It is the microcosm of consciousness. A meaning word is the microcosm of human consciousness» [9, p. 346–347].

The word, in turn, contains the phonetic and semantic dimensions. While the first one refers to the physical reality of the sign, the second concerns the properties of the sign itself, that is, the fact that it expresses reality in a general form. Stands out, thus, L. S. Vygotsky's affirmation: «consciousness as a whole has a semantic structure» [3, p. 129].

If what characterizes consciousness is the fact of being semiotically mediated, the social origin of consciousness, as referred above, is explained by the inexorably social dimension of the signs. These are products of joint human activity and its origin dates back to the beginnings of our civilization, when the struggle for surviving demanded communication between men. Collectively produced, signs are particularly appropriated and, even when become particular, they bring the marks of the context, of the time and social group in which they appeared.

Signs, therefore, relate inexorably subject and society, self and other. This fact is explained by M. Bakhtin when referring to words: «In fact, every word contains two sides. It is determined by both the fact that it precedes from someone and the fact that it is addressed to someone. It constitutes precisely the result of the interaction between speaker and listener. Each word serves as expression of one in relation to the other. Through words, I define myself in relation to the others, and that means, ultimately, in relation to the community. Each word is a kind of bridge built between me and the others. While it leans on me on one end, it leans on my interlocutor on the other end. The word is the common territory of speaker and interlocutor» [13, p. 113].

At this time, we can bring back the main theme of this work, the alterity. What has been exposed thus far allows the affirmation that in L. S. Vygotsky's perspec-

tive, the dimension of the relation with the other is the founder of the subject, since, even when «... alone with himself, he continues acting in communication» [7, p. 162]. The mediation of the sign characterizes the relation of the subject with himself as inexorably social, collective, cultural. In other words, the assumption of a self is only possible by the culture and the social relations that engender it. Although singular, the self is always and necessarily marked by the permanent encounter with many others that characterize the anonymous collectivity that founds reality.

If generally the subject is understood as socially constituted, the social sphere is considered not as belonging to the other, as an instance apart from the subject and closed on itself, but fundamentally as the one of the relation with the other, of interlocution in which my speech or gesture originates from the other and is addressed to him. In this sense, it doesn't necessarily presuppose physical presence, since the relation I-other can be built in the dialogue with an absent or imaginary character, ideas or values that characterize the anonymous collectivity in which we participate, or even another one that we elect as partner for dialogue.

What stands out in these reflections is what characterizes the properly human: the possibility of recognizing the other, the different, what is made from the reference of what is known, as well as the possibility of becoming another of himself, which permits knowing himself: «We have consciousness of ourselves because we have consciousness of the others and by the same procedures by which we know the others, since ourselves in relation to ourselves are the same as the others in relation to us. I have consciousness of myself only so far as for myself, I am another...» [1, p. 82].

The contribution from L. S. Vygotsky to the discussion on alterity is, therefore, unique, since it explains the basis of the I-other encounter: this is based on the presence of the signs as founders of the characteristically human activity. Socially produced, signs carry inexorably both a collective and a private dimension; they speak for the collective history as much as for the histories of the subjects and the social groups from where they come from and participate. The encounter with the other, thus, comprehended as alterity, is characteristic of each and every human activity, as long as mediated.

This distinction is necessary because L. S. Vygotsky, when speaking about social relations, emphasizes that these may be immediate or mediated. While immediate relations are characterized by the fact of being based on instinctive means of movement and expressive action [2], mediated relations find basis on the signs which

* «As examples of psychological instruments and their complex systems may serve the language, the different forms of numbering and reckoning, mnemonic devices, algebraic symbolism, works of art, the writing, the diagrams, the maps, the drawings, all sorts of conventional signs, etc.» [3, p. 65].

** «With the invention of systems of signs, man has armed himself with a powerful instrument that allowed him to give nature and himself a new form of existence: a cultural existence. His relations with nature and with his peers were profoundly modified. Through his definite entrance in the "symbolic order", man broke the "sensorial barriers", transforming natural reality in significant reality, object of knowledge and communication, while he became a speaking and thinking being. Nature and culture meet in the universe of sign (...), of which, man, is the articulator» [6, p. 318].

enable communication. N. Duarte [4, p. 133] warns, however, that «... even the apparently most immediate relation between two individuals is a relation mediated by the generic objectifications, i. e. it is a historical mediation», which relativises L. S. Vygotsky's statement about the possibility of immediate relations.

Alterity in the light of the historical-cultural perspective in psychology: By way of conclusions

In his writings L. S. Vygotsky discusses, among several issues, the constitution of the human psyche. From his initial question when he approached psychology, from his interest in explaining the process of constitution of the human being as a producer of culture, until his last work, *Thinking and Speech**, in which sense emerges as fundamental category for the explanation of singular and collective traces of each person and, at the same time, of everyone, dialectics and historicity of the social relations are present.

L. S. Vygotsky does not discuss several aspects of this process, which are currently focus of academic debates, aspects that characterize each person and everyone such as genre, ethnicity, class, profession, social places of knowledge and unawareness. This absence is probably due to his many other concerns, which can be recognized in the dialogues he establishes with his contemporary theorists and to his commitment to the construction of a new society. In this sense, L. S. Vygotsky was a man of his time.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that L. S. Vygotsky also transcended his time, since he talked very much about the movement in which interests, desires and motivations are produced in the living daily

and collective relations and are subjectified, becoming difference, alterity. Each person, for L. S. Vygotsky [14, p. 33], is an «aggregate of social relations embodied in an individual», from which it can be conceived that there is a subject only because constituted in social contexts which, in turn, result from the concrete action of human beings that collectively organize their own living.

The assertion is apparently simple as well as complex, since it refers to a whole, to an anonymous aggregate that is viscerally interconnected — the social relations — and at the same time, dissipates becoming multiple compositions, infinite possibilities of come to be that are objectified in each person, that embody and mark the flesh that becomes person, that becomes one, that is indivisible.

To consider that each person is an «aggregate of social relations embodied in an individual», is to affirm that, at the same time, there is and there is not an «I». There is no original «I» apart from the others, in short, from what constitutes someone as human and as possibility of differentiation. There is no essence, there is no a priori. In turn, each concrete person extracts aspects of reality according to what is signified as relevant, of what excites and moves, constituting therefore, ways of being that are both social and singular.

From these reflections, it may be emphasized that the contributions from L. S. Vygotsky allow the affirmation that the permanent and incessant encounter with the other, the alterity, is the founding of the subject. The other is distant and near, exterior and interior, constant presence of human activity that affirms the plurality of what one is, and of what it may come to be. Finally, alterity is to be recognized, since it is presented as a paradox to social practices that affirm an «I» in the denial of the difference, unaware that this is the very condition for its existence.

References

1. *Vygotski L. S.* Teoria e Metodo em Psicologia. Sao Paulo, 1996.
2. *Vygotski L. S.* Obras Escogidas III: problemas del desarrollo de la psique. Madrid, 1995.
3. *Vygotski L. S.* Obras Escogidas I: problemas teoricos y metodologicos de la psicologia. Madrid, 1991.
4. *Duarte N.* A Formacao do Individuo e a Objetivacao do Genero Humano. Campinas, 1992.
5. *Maheirie K.* Constituicao do sujeito, subjetividade e identidade // *Interacoes*. 2002. V. 13.
6. *Pino A.* O social e o cultural na obra de Lev S. Vygotski // *Educacao & Sociedade*. 2000. V. 71.
7. *Vygotski L. S.* Historia del Desarrollo de las Funciones psiquicas Superiores. Ciudad de La Habana, 1987.

8. *Zanella A. V.* Atividade, significacao e constituicao do sujeito: consideracoes a luz da psicologia historico-cultural // *Psicologia em Estudo*. 2004. V.9.
9. *Vygotski L. S.* Obras Escogidas II: problemas de psicologia general. Madrid, 1992
10. *Vygotski L. S.* Teoria de Las Emociones. Madrid, 2004.
11. *Marx K., Engels F.* A Ideologia Alema (Feuerbach). Sao Paulo, 1989.
12. *Pino A.* As categorias de publico e privado na analise do processo de internalizacao // *Educacao e Sociedade*. 1992. V. 42.
13. *Bakhtin M.* Marxismo e Filosofia da Linguagem. Sao Paulo, 1990.
14. *Vygotski L. S.* Manuscrito de 1929 // *Educacao & Sociedade*. 2000. V. 71.

* This text is published in volume two of The Collected Works [9].