

Is there a Vygotskian psychology after Marx?

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“we must be profoundly historical and must always present man’s behavior in relation to the class situation at the given moment. This must be the fundamental psychological technique for every social psychologist” (Vygotsky, 1926/1997, p. 212).

When Vygotsky’s texts were first translated into English some psychologists in the US noted that his work had strong connections to Marx’s analysis of capitalism. But more often these connections have gone unnoticed. Even when they have been acknowledged and examined there has been little consensus about their character, or their significance. Some have assumed that any scientist working in the Soviet Union had to pay lip service to Marx, and that Vygotsky did this and nothing more. Some have taken Vygotsky’s references to Marx merely as a political rallying call. Others cannot grasp the relevance to psychology of an economic critique. In addition in the US there has been among academics since the McCarthy purges a nervousness about Marx and Marxism, something that has never existed in the UK, for example.

Perhaps Russian writers on Vygotsky have inadvertently contributed to the problem when they write that Vygotsky “absorbed the new ideology of Marxism, its philosophical theory, which became an established feature of the social consciousness...” (Yaroshevsky, 1989, 10). The term ‘ideology’ has strong negative connotations for western readers, and indeed Yaroshevsky notes that some translations of Vygotsky’s work have omitted references to Marx and Engels, or treated these as “a forced concession to official ideology.”

One important and early exception to this tendency to ignore or downplay Vygotsky’s debt to Marx was Stephen Toulmin, who in his *New York Review of Books* article on Vygotsky, in which he famously dubbed him “the Mozart of psychology,” wrote that “the general frame provided by ‘historical materialist’ philosophy gave him [Vygotsky] the basis he needed for developing an integrated account of the relations between developmental psychology and clinical neurology, cultural anthropology and the psychology of art” (Toulmin, 1978)

And Cole and Scribner (1978) introduced *Mind in Society* by writing of the Marxist theoretical framework that was a “valuable scientific resource” for Vygotsky; of his use of “the methods and principles of dialectical materialism” and of the influence on his thinking of Marx’s historical materialist theory of society, especially the proposition that “the mechanism of individual developmental change is rooted in society and culture” (7). And they cite Vygotsky’s espoused wish “to create one’s own *Capital*.”

Wertsch has suggested that the period in the new Soviet Union immediately after the 1917 revolution offered Vygotsky a unique window of opportunity. He writes that the circumstances “provided Vygotsky and other young scholars with opportunities and challenges that remain unparalleled in the twentieth century. They were asked to reformulate entire disciplines in accordance with Marxist philosophical principles, and they were asked to create sciences that could assist in the construction of a new socialist

society” (1985, 1). To characterize the opportunity in terms of what Vygotsky was “asked” to do is a little misleading, however. Vygotsky himself, I will try to show, would have considered the opportunity to have been provided by the historical moment itself; by the fact that he lived at a time of profoundly significant historical and societal change, which both required and made possible a new form of scientific investigation. But Wertsch is surely correct in his view that “Vygotsky’s debt to Marx runs deeper than is commonly recognized.”

The paucity of attention given to Vygotsky’s debts to Marx has been noted also in some of the lines of work which his psychology inspired. For example, Engeström and Miettinen conclude that “it has become commonplace to omit Marx as an essential theoretical source from discussions of activity theory, in particular in assessments of Vygotsky’s work. This omission occurs largely for political and ideological reasons. However, the appropriation and creative development of central theoretical ideas of activity theory presupposes a careful and critical study of Marx’s work” (1999, 4-5).

In this paper I want to explore some of the ways in which Vygotsky’s conception and practice of psychology is intimately connected to the kind of analysis of society that Marx conducted, and the implications of this. Especially now, after the fall of the USSR and the growth, apparently without any opposition or limits, of capitalist economies in Russia, China, and elsewhere, it seems to many that Marx is now irrelevant. Is this so? If so, does that mean that Vygotsky is irrelevant too? What is the relevance of Vygotsky ‘after’ Marx?

I want to be clear about my aims in this paper. First, I am not interested in ‘exposing’ Vygotsky as a Marxist. In seeking to highlight and explore the links between Vygotsky and Marx I am not attempting to discredit Vygotsky. Marx was surely a brilliant thinker; reading *Capital* has been a transformative experience for many people. Rather, my motivation is to seek a more comprehensive grasp of Vygotsky’s psychology and in particular of his analysis of children’s development. What I would like to be able to do as a consequence of this is identify those aspects of Vygotsky’s projects that are still relevant and pertinent today, and those which need to be modified because of our historical and cultural distance from him. In the first section I shall explore what made Vygotsky’s psychology a Marxist psychology, and argue that the key here was the conception of history that Vygotsky drew from Marx and Hegel. I will show how this conception is visible both in Vygotsky’s general psychology and in his studies of child development. In the second section I shall consider two consequences of this Marxist-Hegelian conception of history: two specific problems that become visible in Vygotsky’s psychology: his treatment of cultural differences, and his lack of attention to social class. My goal in all this is to try to begin to answer the question of how Vygotsky’s work is relevant to psychology today in the West – a time and culture very different from those to which his work was intimately linked.

David Bakhurst was able to write in 1991 that “we still await an adequate analysis of Vygotsky’s debt to Marx” (1991, p. 87). I suspect the same can still be said today. This paper is surely not such an analysis, though perhaps it is a step in the right direction.

1. What is a Marxist psychology?

It should be noted at the outset that there are considerable difficulties in exploring the ‘Marxist’ character of Vygotsky’s psychology. It is not too great an exaggeration to say that there are as many Marxes as there are interpreters of Marx. Which Marx should we have in mind when we ask questions about Vygotsky’s links to Marx and Marxism? The ‘early’ Marx; the ‘later’ Marx? The Marx of *Capital*, or the Marx of *The Civil War in France*? The humanist Marx, or the structuralist Marx? For example, Bakhurst has documented the existence in the USSR in Vygotsky’s time of several different strands of dialectical materialism. In particular he contrasts the Mechanists and the Deborinites. In simple terms, the former saw dialectics as a general methodology for natural scientific inquiry. The latter, in contrast, saw the task as being a materialist reinterpretation of Hegelian dialectics, a philosophical rather than narrowly scientific task. Bakhurst suggests that Vygotsky most likely sided against the Deborinites (he goes so far as to say that Vygotsky “would have held [their] use of dialectics in contempt” 88), and concludes that “It thus seems that what Vygotsky appropriated from Marx is best represented as a method, conceived on the model of a skill or technique for following the specific nature of the object of inquiry” (88).

I do not share Bakhurst’s conclusions. I will propose that Vygotsky took from Marx much more than a method, let alone a method that amounted to a “skill or technique.” In particular I believe it is evident that Vygotsky found in Marx – and also in Hegel – a philosophical account of human history, and of the historical relationship between theory and practice. That he accepted these aspects of Marx’s analysis, not just a methodological model, is the only explanation for key presuppositions that are evident in Vygotsky’s work, presuppositions that have great import for cultural-historical psychology here in the west.

To begin with it seems quite likely that Vygotsky knew of Hegel’s work before he knew of Marx’s. Yaroshevsky tells us that while Vygotsky was still in high school (several years before 1913, when he entered university) he was enamored with Hegel’s great dialectical account of history, and in the debating society which he initiated he turned the discussion to “the philosophical aspects of the historical process.” Yaroshevsky tells us that “It was already in that period that Hegel became his idol in philosophy; under Hegel’s impact, he attempted to apply the general schema of thesis-antithesis-synthesis to explanations of the course of historical events” (34).[FN1]

That Vygotsky may have continued to be impressed by Hegel, and that he may as a consequence have been likely to conceive of Marxist analysis in broad philosophical terms, rather than as a narrowly specific scientific method, can be inferred from the fact that he consistently used the term *aufgehoben* (in Russian *sniatie*) to refer to the transformation of natural functions into cultural functions (Kozulin, Introduction to *Thought & Language*, p. xxv). *Aufgehoben* was the term used first by Hegel and then by Marx to refer to the way contradictory moments are both transcended and sustained in dialectical change. It is the movement from thesis and antithesis to synthesis. (It is

difficult to translate: one finds “superseded,” “sublated,” “abolished,” “negated,” “disposed of”... The Russian *sniatie* is apparently translated into English as ‘taking down,’ ‘reaping’ or ‘relieving.’ Cf. Vygotsky, 1993/1931, p. 124.)

Let’s quickly review some of the efforts that have been made to explore the ways in which Vygotsky’s psychology might be considered Marxist. Benjamin Lee (1985) has identified four fundamental assumptions shared by Vygotsky and Marx. First is the emphasis placed on the importance of practical activity. It is in practical interaction between humans and the environment that both objects and the human subject are created. Consciousness is an emergent aspect of this interaction. Second, analysis should be ‘functionalist,’ “showing what role or effect [an] item has in some system of which it is a part” (68). Third, consciousness has a dialectical character, a developing character. Fourth, cultural development must be distinguished from natural development.

James Wertsch (1985) has highlighted three things Vygotsky “borrowed from Marx: his method, his claims about the nature of human activity, and his claims about the social origins of psychological processes” (5). First, the method is one of genetic explanation; Wertsch encapsulates it thus: “the issue is how to analyze the *genesis* of *wholistic living units*” (1985, 9, original emphasis). Wertsch cites what Vygotsky himself wrote concerning his debt to Marx on the matter of method: “The whole of *Capital* is written according to the following method: Marx analyzes a single living ‘cell’ of capitalist society – for example the nature of value. Within this cell he discovers the structure of the entire system and all its economic institutions. He says that to a layman this analysis may seem a murky tangle of tiny details. Indeed, there may be tiny details, but they are exactly those which are essential to ‘microanatomy.’ Anyone who could discover what a ‘psychological’ cell is – the mechanism producing even a single response – would thereby find the key to psychology as a whole” (Wertsch, 1985, 6; Cole & Scribner, 1978, 8).

Wertsch agrees with Lee that the second thing borrowed is the emphasis on the importance of attention to activity. Vygotsky, like Marx, saw practical, material interaction between humans and the environment as fundamental. Psychological processes and products, including consciousness itself, are constructed on this base. Where – as Marx put it in the first thesis on Feuerbach – others had given priority to contemplation of the world, both Vygotsky and Marx consider contemplation to be secondary and derivative.

Third, Vygotsky like Marx saw the social as having priority over the individual. Individual psychological functioning has social origins. Whereas Piaget, for example, sought to understand how the individual child, egocentric and even autistic, gradually becomes socialized, able to decentrate and communicate, Vygotsky saw the reverse: the child is initially a social creature, and only becomes individuated over time. This closely parallels remarks Marx made about the inherently social character of human existence, and the way only specific forms of society create the seemingly independent individual.

David Bakhurst is dissatisfied by these efforts to draw “parallels” between Vygotsky and Marx, because they do not solve the problem of understanding what kind of Marxist psychology Vygotsky was trying to create. He writes that “while such parallels are many and incontrovertible, their existence does not so much solve the problem as pose it more sharply” (1991, 87). In an effort not just to state parallels but to explain them, Bakhurst proposes, as I noted earlier, that Vygotsky was trying to apply Marx’s dialectical method to the problems of psychology. But Bakhurst emphasizes that in Vygotsky’s time there were at least two positions among Soviet thinkers on the nature of Marx’s method, and its appropriateness to psychology. In Bakhurst’s reading there are unresolvable ambiguities concerning two central aspects of Vygotsky’s psychology: the character of the dialectical method of inquiry, and the notion that consciousness (and mind) are social products. Was his method a codifiable procedure, or something more like an art? If the latter, how could he claim it was scientific? When he explored the relations between the natural line and the social line of development, why did he see the latter as influencing the former, but not vice versa? Bakhurst turns to Ilyenkov for clarification of both these aspects. While this is a perfectly reasonable scholarly enterprise, it does not throw further light on the character of Vygotsky’s Marxist psychology, and I will not pursue it further.

As I’ve already suggested, the task before us should not be treated as a straightforward comparing and contrasting of Marx and Vygotsky as though they were two separate and distinct entities. There are many Marxes, and indeed there are many Vygotskies: his short life has been divided into distinct phases across which, for example, his identification of the basic unit of analysis changed. And this identification of ‘different Vygotskies’ itself is not clear cut: the periodization varies from commentator to commentator. The task is more one of reading Vygotsky in order to infer how he comprehended Marx; or perhaps to read back and forth between the two to establish, as best one can, what Marxism offered to Vygotsky. Rather than try to lay out the detailed progression of such a reading here, however, I will simply present the results, provisional though they are, of my attempts to read Vygotsky and Marx in this manner. I will begin with ‘Vygotsky’s Marx,’ and proceed from there to the question of what a ‘Marxist psychology’ meant to Vygotsky, looking first at his conception of a general psychology, then at his vision of a psychology of the development of children.

1.1 Vygotsky’s Marx

The reading of Marx that can be glimpsed through Vygotsky’s texts can be summarized as something like the following. History has a logic to it. This logic is dialectical: history is a process in which contradictions form and are then *aufgehoben*. It is these contradictions which drive history; without contradiction and conflict there would be in a real sense an end to historical change. The contradictions arise from human productive activity: human labor which transforms the environment, and acts back to transform humans too. Human history has moved through a sequence of modes of production: primitive communal; slave; feudal; capitalist and finally socialist. The form of contradiction in capitalist society is that of conflict between classes. Socialist society, in contrast, has transcended this contradiction, eliminated this conflict, and is class-free. Inquiry – science; philosophy – is a matter of grasping this historical logic, identifying its

objective laws, and by doing so to strive to obtain freedom from necessity. Science has a practical intent: to bring about the formation of a socialist society.

This might seem a familiar, even prosaic gloss of Marx. It will be objected that there is more to Vygotsky's Marx than this short summary. This is undoubtedly true. My short sketch is intended to (1) provide an interpretive framework with which to read Vygotsky's writing in a way which highlights aspects that I believe are typically overlooked by western readers, and (2) enable us to recognize that *other* readings of Marx are possible; indeed, that other readings of Marx are *necessary* if we are to foster a sociocultural psychology here in the west. I will proceed by unpacking the components of this reading of Marx.

It is surprising that neither Lee, Wertsch, nor Bakhurst note the emphasis placed on history by both Vygotsky and Marx. Even if one believes that all that Vygotsky took from Marx was his 'method,' it was still a method with very strong links to history. For example, Vygotsky began one of his notebook entries with these words: "N.B.: The word *history* (historical psychology) for me means two things: (1) a general dialectical approach to things – in this sense, everything has its history; this is what Marx meant: the only science is history; ... (2) history in the strict sense, i.e. human history.... The uniqueness of the human mind lies in the fact that both types of history (evolution + history) are *united* (synthesis) in it. The same is true in child psychology" (1989, 54-55).

Inquiry – both philosophy and science (and the Russia term for science, *nauka*, signifies something much broader than the natural sciences, cf. Bakhurst p. 25) – properly understood, is the activity of grasping and understanding the logic of history. The concepts articulated in inquiry arise from the practical contradictions of a particular historical moment, and they can help resolve these contradictions. Theory, then, can be said to arise from historical praxis, and it returns to praxis and to history, because theory always has a practical intent. The aim of theory, properly understood, is to guide practice. Once one understands the logic of history, the objective (or seemingly objective) laws that have determined the course of history, one can act to intervene in history.

Marxism, then, is a philosophy of history, and a historically situated philosophy. At the same time it is also a philosophy of practice, and a practical philosophy. "Every science arises out of practical demands and is, ultimately, directed also towards practical application. Marx has said that it was enough for philosophers to have interpreted the world, now it's time to change it" (Vygotsky, 1926, p. 9-10).

How to change the world, though, if history has an objective logic? For Marx, as for Hegel, freedom and necessity are interrelated in complex ways. The scientific study of the objective laws of history permits us, paradoxically, the use these laws in order to become free. The necessity of these laws permits freedom. We study history to identify the laws of its logic, so as to be able to transcend them. We change from being the objects of history to being its agents. In a sense, however, we are free only to further the objective laws of historical development. Indeed our own knowledge is a necessary product of history.

“Hegel was the first to state correctly the relation between freedom and necessity. To him, freedom is the insight into necessity. ‘Necessity is blind only in so far as it is not understood.’ Freedom does not consist in any dreamt-of independence from natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws, and in the possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards definite ends. This holds good in relation both to the laws of external nature and to those which govern the bodily and mental existence of men themselves – two classes of laws which we can separate from each other at most only in thought but not in reality. Freedom of the will therefore means nothing but the capacity to make decisions with knowledge of the subject. . . . Freedom therefore consists in the control over ourselves and over external nature, a control founded on knowledge of natural necessity; it is therefore necessarily a product of historical development.”
 (<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/f/r.htm>)

1.2 A Marxist Psychology: A revolutionary moment in the history of psychology.

This reconstruction of ‘Vygotsky’s Marx’ enables us to offer a reading of what a ‘Marxist psychology’ might have meant to Vygotsky. I will consider the broad level of psychology in general before turning to the specifics of Vygotsky’s psychology of child development.

Once again, we must begin with history. According to Yaroshevsky, Vygotsky was “the first Soviet philosopher and historian of psychology” (1989, p. 28). At first glance this seems merely another statement of Vygotsky’s manifold interests and achievements: Vygotsky as Mozart. But within the context of Marx and Hegel, being a “philosopher and historian of psychology” is not something Vygotsky was in addition to being a scholar of children’s development. These aspects of his scholarship had intimate internal linkages.

For Vygotsky, a Marxist psychology meant a revolutionary psychology. That is to say, it would be a psychology which by becoming aware of the prior history of psychology would be able to create something new. We’ve seen that for Marx and for Vygotsky, science in general has a historical logic. In particular, there is an objective logic to the history of psychology which the revolutionary psychologist seeks to grasp. An awareness of the *contradictions* of psychology will enable the creation of a revolutionary psychology which will *overcome* (*aufgehoben*) those contradictions. A Marxist psychology is thus a revolutionary moment in the history of psychology, and it is possible only when the conditions are ripe. In other words, we see once again the Marxist/Hegelian conception of history in the way Vygotsky approached the task of creating a new, ‘revolutionary’ psychology. And – for Yaroshevsky at least – Vygotsky achieved a “revolutionary upheaval” (p. 29) in world psychology.

1.2.1 The crisis in psychology

That Vygotsky began with the assumption that science (and in particular psychology) has a historical logic which can be both grasped and, with the insights thus gained, mastered, can be seen from his discussion of the ‘crisis’ in psychology. This ‘crisis’ is not merely a matter of conflicting viewpoints or divergent opinions among psychologists who are

unwilling or unable to reach agreement. It is the manifestation of a fundamental contradiction which, once identified, offers the key to its own resolution. Vygotsky's diagnosis of a crisis, which might at first glance seem to be merely a powerful rhetorical strategy, one which joined the revolutionary rhetoric of the time, actually has a crucial methodological significance. The existence of a crisis in psychology is a sign that the time is ripe for something new. "New psychology must not put the time out of joint – that was the result of his reflections on the historical path of his science" (Yaroshevsky, p. 206)

As Yaroshevsky puts it, Vygotsky believed that "There exists an objective logic of the development of scientific knowledge" (8), a logic that is apparent in "world psychology." The importance that first Pavlov had and now Vygotsky has on the world stage is confirmation that these Russian scientists did indeed respond to the needs of this objective logic. The source of the significance of their contributions lies not (or not only) in their personal genius but in "the social and ideological atmosphere in which they worked; only by absorbing that atmosphere they were able to realize their personality potential" (Yaroshevsky, p. 9). Vygotsky's contribution in the late 1920s to achieving the "goal of reforming psychology from Marxist positions" arose from "requirements of the objective logic of scientific development" (Yaroshevsky, p. 27).

Cole, Levitin, and Luria tell us that "Vygotsky, Luria, and Leontiev undertook the wholesale reformulation of psychology along Marxist lines. As a result, cultural-historical psychology as a self-conscious solution to the 'crisis in psychology' was born" (2006, p. 244). Cole insists that "Unlike most contemporary scholars who are proposing a cultural psychology, the Russians were neither proposing a new discipline of cultural psychology nor a subdiscipline of psychology devoted to cultural studies. Instead, if their views were to prevail, all psychology would treat culture, along with biology and social interaction, as central" (Cole, 1996, p. 107).

As Yaroshevsky views it, Vygotsky's unique contribution stems, then, from three things. First, the crisis in psychology indicated that history was pregnant: it was time for something new. Second, Vygotsky's ability to penetrate the objective logic of the history of psychology and identify its contradictions enabled him to perceive these possibilities. Third, his positioning in the new society of the Soviet Union gave him an unequalled opportunity to transcend these contradictions and bring about a revolutionary upheaval in psychology. In "the struggle for a new Russia" there was "the historical need for a causal and strictly objective knowledge of man as an integral being whose behavior is subject to the laws of the material world" (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 13). Even Pavlov saw his work as contributing not to a mechanistic conception of man, but as "Shedding the light of science on the 'torments of consciousness,' on its mysterious structure, on the volitional activity of the individual transforming the world" (p. 13). This "was the task of the new psychology" and "Vygotsky became one of its leaders after the October Revolution" (p. 13).

1.2.2 Identify contradictions and transcend them

Crucial to the new psychology was that it would succeed in overcoming the dichotomies of world psychology – dualisms of physical/spiritual; mental/material; causal/semantic; explanation/understanding – in an *integral* conception of human psychology. Behaviorism seemed an alternative to the obsolescent introspectionism, but merely inverted its dualistic assumptions. Naturalistic and intentionalist psychologies were merely two sides of the same coin. Dilthey's conception of "two psychologies" was no better: Vygotsky considered "the Dilthey dichotomy, as the last act in the 'drama of ideas' ending in a total catastrophe both for the mechanistic determinism of explanatory psychology and for the intuitivism of the 'psychology of the spirit'" (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 311). Explanatory psychology and descriptive psychology (phenomenology) were merely two sides of the same coin; Siamese twins (p. 310). Most broadly, Soviet psychology "faced the task of overcoming the gap between the natural and the cultural. This task determined Vygotsky's creative career" (p. 18). Vygotsky was confident that this omni-present dualism was "a historically transient state" (p. 18) that was about to collapse.

The appeal that Pavlov's work had to Vygotsky was precisely that it promised to transcend the dichotomy of the biological and the social. A conditioned reflex is a biological stimulus-action connection that has been modified by socio-cultural factors, so that it has become *both* biological *and* socio-cultural. Pavlov's work seemed to offer a way of overcoming the idealism of pre-revolutionary Russia; reflexology was both a natural science (it offered causal explanations; it employed objective methods) and a historical science: "with its principle of socio-cultural determination of psychical phenomena, recognition of the individual's orientation towards the goals and values he chooses, of the specificity of acts and experiences involved in the choices, etc." (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 16-17).

1.2.3 With a practical intent

And this was to be a "new practical psychology" with "significance" "for the *whole* of science" (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 14). The task was "the everyday hard work of rebuilding men's consciousness, of shaping the citizen of a new social world on the basis of science" (p. 14).

So a 'Marxist psychology' meant, for Vygotsky, a psychology which would bring about a revolution in the science of psychology, grasping and articulating the contradictions and conflicts in which psychology had become mired, and resolving and transcending these contradictions. A dialectical method of analysis – focused on the 'cell' – would play a central role, but clearly what Vygotsky drew from Marx went far beyond a mere method.

Again it is crucial to recognize that this revolutionary psychology had a practical intent and would have significant practical consequences. The outcome of overcoming the theoretical contradictions in psychology was not merely a more adequate theoretical formulation, but also a practical, even an ethical one. Yaroshevsky tells us that Marx was read by Vygotsky and others as "a philosophy of man as a being consciously changing the earthly world through practical action... Marxism was a theory of direct action in concrete living space" (1989, p. 65). And so, "Vygotsky declared that the motto of new

psychology was ‘practice and philosophy’” (p. 15). Yaroshevsky describes Vygotsky’s thought as moving “shuttle-like... between practice and philosophy” and judges that this movement “determined his highest achievements” (p. 16).

Marx wrote of the “ultimate aim” of his analysis in *Capital*: “Even when a society has got upon the right track for the discovery of the natural laws of its movement—and it is the ultimate aim of this work, to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society—it can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments, the obstacles offered by the successive phases of its normal development. But it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs.” Vygotsky’s ultimate aim was to lessen the birth-pangs of the new socialist Soviet Union by providing the tools with which to form the new kinds of people needed for such a society. Luria (1979, p. 30) wrote of the efforts at “a scientific reconstruction of life” that started after the October Revolution. Newman and Holzman (1993) write of Vygotsky’s “quest to develop a Marxist psychology” as seeking “a revolutionary practice that would transform human beings in a post-revolutionary period.”

Indeed, Yaroshevsky insists that the originality of Vygotsky’s work “can only be understood in the context of the great tasks of social practice. Vygotsky the practical worker of socialist culture is inseparable from Vygotsky the thinker and philosopher.” Vygotsky was “making his own contribution to the upbringing of men capable of rebuilding the world on the principles of the good, of justice and beauty” and this transformed him into “Vygotsky the psychologist, guided by the firm conviction that only exact science could create, by discovering the causes and laws ruling behavior, the man of the new social world” (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 66).

1.2.4 Freedom and necessity

The link between overcoming theoretical dualism and constructing a theory with practical consequences may not seem immediately apparent. What connects them is the way in which conceptions of human being carry within themselves the potential to either foster or extinguish human initiative and agency. To Vygotsky, causal and determinist explanations of human thought, emotion, and other psychological capacities lock humans into a hopeless circle from which they are powerless to escape. But equally, intentionalist accounts of human cognitive functioning disconnect it from the real world. As the object of the natural sciences, human life appears to be something meaningless, without any value or purpose. As the object of a descriptive phenomenology, human experiences appear to lack real life, are stripped of their corporeality, and have been abstracted from the quotidian dramas of the real world. Both forms of inquiry, both sides of the dualism, rob humans of the capacity to be free agents. Vygotsky’s was a psychology which presumed that a human being has “infinite potential for mastery over nature and development of his own nature” (1930).

We have seen that the question of freedom, and of how to understand the relation between freedom and necessity, had concerned both Hegel and Marx.

“Only in community [has each] individual the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; only in the community, therefore, is personal freedom possible. In the

previous substitutes for the community, in the State, etc. personal freedom has existed only for the individuals who developed within the relationships of the ruling class, and only insofar as they were individuals of this class.” (Marx & Engels, 1845 [The German Ideology , Chapter 1d])

So, for example, in a capitalist society only the wealthy are free. To our articulation of Vygotsky’s ‘Marxist psychology’ we must add that it was centrally concerned with what one might call social engineering. One might anticipate that Vygotsky’s interest in developmental psychology was precisely that here was where the task of becoming able to “create the man of the new social world” would be carried out.

1.3 Marxist Psychology: tracing the history of child development to foster the higher mental functions

Having offered a reconstruction at the broad level of Vygotsky’s Marxist psychology as a revolutionary psychology, let me turn to the specifics of Vygotsky’s psychology of child development. Here I will again offer an overall summary before going into details.

The child’s consciousness has a logic, a personal history; child psychology is a form of inquiry which discovers this logic by tracing the history; it is inquiry with a practical intent; the intent is that of making history by making people. To put this last point a little differently: The overall aim of Vygotsky’s psychology of child development is to grasp individual development as socially produced and, by identification of the objective laws of this production, to achieve control of it and thus deliberately direct individual development towards socially valued ends.

1.3.1 Consciousness has a history

I don’t think it is possible to place too much emphasis on the notion, central to Vygotsky’s account of children’s development, that just as human society has a history so too does personal consciousness. This notion runs counter to much of our common sense, as well as most of our psychological theorizing. The division between perception and cognition perpetuates the conception – a misconception, from Vygotsky’s point of view – that perception is simply a direct and veridical input of uninterpreted data from the world. We tend to assume that, even though our thinking about the world changes and becomes more sophisticated as we develop, what we see around us stays the same. But Vygotsky took from Marx and from Hegel the notion that our perception of our environment – our consciousness – develops. Hegel’s phenomenology of mind is precisely a recounting of the development of consciousness: from simple sense-certainty onwards.

Let me offer a prosaic illustration. For the past several years I have been learning Spanish. I have also been listening to salsa music. Some years ago, the lyrics of these songs were simply an undifferentiated stream of unfamiliar sounds. With time, I started to perceive strings of words, with boundaries between them, even though the majority of the words were unknown. Now I hear songs about lost love, untrustworthy men, unreliable women. My perception, my consciousness, of this music has been transformed.

So we must come to appreciate that the child literally sees a world that is different from the world we see. To say that they see the same world but in a different way is merely to push consciousness back inside the head of the individual, as it were. Vygotsky, I think it is clear, wanted to place consciousness *in* the interaction between person and environment.

1.3.2 Psychology discovers this logic

Vygotsky is quite explicit that his psychology will provide explanations of mental phenomena by tracing their genesis. Here too we see the close link between psychology and history. It is not sufficient merely to grant that these psychological phenomena have a historical development. One might do this and then draw a distinction between diachronic and synchronic aspects, and decide that psychology must deal only with the latter. Vygotsky's view was very different: psychology explains psychological phenomena precisely by tracing their history; by providing a genetic account of them. In the history of human society, biological evolution has been superceded (not replaced but *aufgehoben*) by cultural evolution. In the personal history of consciousness, similarly, natural functions are superceded (not replaced but *aufgehoben*) by sociocultural functions.

Vygotsky's efforts to offer genetic accounts of psychological functions were, here too, efforts to overcome (*aufgehoben*) the dualisms of world psychology. His first version of a theory based on a genetic account drew from Pavlov's work. Pavlov viewed his reflexology as an objective study of behavior. Vygotsky came to believe that it was still dualistic, since it neither denied consciousness nor was able to explain it within human behavior. It left subjectivity as a separate realm outside science. Vygotsky sought to be "more of a reflexologist than Pavlov himself" (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 91); he reworked reflex theory to overcome the distinction between subjectivity and behavior. In doing this he focused on 'latent' or 'interiorised' reflexes, and argued that when a reflex is inhibited something is gained: "our reaction acquires greater flexibility, subtlety and complexity in its interrelations with the elements of the world, and our action may be realized in infinitely higher and subtler forms... Thought acts as a preliminary organiser of our behavior" (V, *Pedagogicheskaya psikhologiya*, 1926, p. 39, cited in Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 76-7). Between stimulus and (inhibited) response an 'inner space' is formed that is truly psychological, not physiological. In this space there occurs a mediation between stimulus and response, which in the reflex had been connected in a direct, unmediated way.

And if the stimulus is a word we have important consequences. First, a word can be a stimulus only for someone who speaks a language, and the language was created not by an individual but by the people as a whole. Thus, second, even when it enters the 'inner space' the word is social, not individual. Here we see Vygotsky working once again to overcome the dichotomy of individual and social. "Individual behavior, regulated by the word, was introduced [by Vygotsky] into a new causal sequence. It was made dependent on social structures of language common to the whole people" (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 79). The mediation between stimulus and response is now "an element of the people's cultural life" (80), though at the same time it is the individual's thinking.

1.3.3 With a practical intent: making history by making people

Vygotsky's conception of the study of child development – just like his conception of psychology as a whole – was not as a body of concepts or as a detached, objective theory, but as a social tool, designed to serve a practical purpose. I've already noted that "Every science arises out of practical demands and is, ultimately, directed also towards practical application. Marx has said that it was enough for philosophers to have interpreted the world, now it's time to change it" (Vygotsky, 1926, p. 9-10). In the new Soviet Union psychology was turned to for "tools for personality restructuring" (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 63), and was being asked to demonstrate "its capacity to really change behavior, to lend behavior new forms by relying on objectively verified knowledge of its causes, determinants and mechanisms" (p. 63). Vygotsky was "a teacher at a Soviet school," "the first 'labour school' which was opened after the end of the [German] occupation" (p. 57), and as a teacher he came to anticipate that psychology could guide teaching through objective scientific knowledge, not just "inspiration, intuition, and common sense" (p. 15).

He "began to see the teacher's role from the positions of someone who created the conditions for changing the child's psyche" and literature "as a tool in the remoulding of man" (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 59). Immediately after the 1917 revolution "projects for a Paradise on earth" sprang up (as Yaroshevsky, p. 56, quotes Ehrenburg, 1966). Education would "play the role in the transformation of man [on] this road of conscious social formation of new generations" (1930).

As Vygotsky wrote in his preface to *Educational Psychology*, "the term *conditional reflex* is the name given to that mechanism which carries us from biology to sociology and makes it possible to comprehend the very essence and nature of the educational process" (1997/1926, p. xvii). This educational process was to be "understood as one involving the social re-orientation of biological forms of behavior" (xiv). It was to be based upon an "objective and rigorous scientific system of educational psychology" (xix).

This was an approach to thought and cognition that began with practice. Vygotsky quoted Münsterberg: "We think because we are acting." So to start with the reflex was in accord with Marxism in this respect, too. And in the same vein, polytechnic education would overcome the division between intellectual and physical work.

1.3.4 Fostering self-mastery

To a Western psychologist, the attention that Vygotsky paid to motivation and the 'will' may seem odd, even antiquated. There hasn't been much discussion of 'the will' in US psychology since William James. But here again the underlying Marxist framework helps us understand Vygotsky's project. We've seen that for Marx, the scientific study of the logic of history enables us to identify the laws of this logic and by doing so to transcend them, so that we move from being the objects of history to being its agents. Vygotsky viewed children's development in the same way: in the dialectical relationship between freedom and necessity, agency and determinism, will and causality, consciousness is the highest psychical regulator of the individual's life activity (Yaroshevsky, p. 297).

It is Yaroshevsky's opinion that even as a young man, at the age of 17, already "Vygotsky firmly adhered to the principle that the life of a separate individual was subject to historical necessity, and that at the same time the individual had a certain self-value, his acts presupposing a certain freedom of choice, a capacity to assume responsibility and to play his role in the social drama independent of his will" (Yaroshevsky, p. 35). We see here a parallel between the Marxist/Hegelian view of the history of society as a whole and Vygotsky's view of the history of an individual: "Just like all human society, the individual personality must make this leap forward from the realm of necessity to the sphere of freedom, as described by Engels" (Vygotsky, 1930/1994).

It was practice that "demanded a theory 'that would bring about a subordination to and mastery over the psyche, and artificial control over behavior'" (Vygotsky 1982, cited by Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 15): a "psychological substantiation of the system of training and education developed in socialist society." Ultimately, Vygotsky suggested, this process of grasping through scientific inquiry the principles of our own behavior would lead to the "further evolution of man and to the alteration of the biological type of man." Vygotsky believed that our control over nature, including our own nature, will become so powerful that we will be able to transform our own biology and eliminate old age and disease.

This is the place not to debate the likelihood of such a possibility, or its ethics, but simply to point out that Vygotsky clearly viewed his own work as a contribution to such a transformation. In his own project and that of his co-workers he was interested in mastering human nature sufficiently to modify not our biology but merely our psychology, but nonetheless his interest was indeed one of mastery and transformation.

1.4 Marxist psychology and history

With such a conception of the way in which a child develops to become a competent adult member of society, exercising appropriate mastery of their own conduct and activity, Vygotsky was, as Yaroshevsky puts it, "Weaving the individual's brief life into the great age-long history of social being... the macroscale of the life of the people down the ages and... the microscale of the individual's routine contacts with his brethren" (Yaroshevsky, p. 80).

Silvia Scriber recognized and appreciated the central role that history played in Vygotsky's thinking. Vygotsky, in her view, was "the first to explicate the historical formation of the mind" (1985, p. 121). Scriber recommends that "His work may be read as an attempt to weave three strands of history – general history, child history, and the history of mental functions – into one explanatory account of the formation of specifically human aspects of human nature" (p. 138).

There is not the space here to explore all the details of Vygotsky's weaving together of these strands of history, nor to trace the history of Vygotsky's own progress in this work. What I have aimed to do is sketch this theory in sufficient detail that we can perceive the

kind of ‘cultural tool’ that Vygotsky was trying to create, in the form of a psychology which would provide not only an explanatory account but also create the conditions for change. To summarize what we have articulated so far:

Vygotsky’s psychology is a ‘Marxist psychology’ in the following respects. It is a revolutionary psychology, deliberately aiming to further the progress of world psychology through a study of the history of the science, a diagnosis of its internal conflicts and contradictions, and the formation of a unified account of human phenomena which transcends these contradictions. Centrally, it seeks to transcend the distinction between culture and nature.

It seeks to understand and explain human intellectual activity – human consciousness – by tracing its history, both in general history and in ontogenesis. It does this with a practical intent: the articulation of the objective laws of human development will enable the psychologist to gain mastery of these laws, and by doing so to deliberately shape human consciousness. And the end towards which the psychologist seeks to shape human consciousness is that of freedom and deliberate choice. As Vygotsky understood the higher mental functions, they were manifestations of the child’s ability to master him or herself.

In several respects this is a very different kind of psychological theory than we are familiar with. In the West, theory has generally been understood as a conceptual structure that seeks to represent knowledge of the external world to make testable predictions. In psychology, theory is assumed to seek general and unchanging knowledge about humans viewed as general information processors, entities who do not alter historically or vary culturally. Practice is conceptually separated from theory. Once a theory has been developed, tested, and survived efforts at its falsification, its practical applications may be explored. But these applications are secondary; they are not inherent in the theory.

Viewed in such terms, Vygotsky’s would merely be one more theory whose validity to the facts could and should be tested. If it has practical applications, so much the better, but any practical application would be quite independent of the truth or falsity of the theory. But Vygotsky himself viewed his work quite differently, I suggest. He would have viewed theory as always grounded in, and emerging from, the specific circumstances of a time and place. Theory for a Marxist psychology is a tool, forged to deal with particular problems of practical, even political, import. This is scientific inquiry with an emancipatory intent (Habermas, 1971). And the predictability of such a theory is inherently limited: to the extent that it succeeds in transforming society and the trajectory of human development, it contributes to the elimination of the conditions of its own truth. (For example, it is true that women earn less than men for comparable work. An adequate understanding of why this is the case might provide us with the conceptual and practical tools to bring about change. But then what was true would now be false.)

With such a view of theory, Vygotsky would surely not have sanctioned the notion that an account of child development that was developed in Soviet Russia could be applied – or tested, for that matter – in the modern USA. The culture is different, the time is

different, the problems and the contradictions that produce them are different. Vygotsky would himself, I think, have been the first to say that his writing and thinking were products of his time and place, and that we should not unthinkingly ‘transplant’ them to our current situation and circumstances. (By ‘transplant’ I mean an effort to abstract his conceptions from their original context and insert them in a new location, unchanged.) We are, after all, in the heart of the economic system which Vygotsky believed had been overthrown and left in the dust in Soviet Russia.

2. Problems with Vygotsky’s conception of history

I have argued that history was central to Vygotsky’s Marxist psychology. As a young man he embraced first Hegel’s philosophy of history, then Marx’s historical reconstruction of the rise of capitalism. As an adult he sought genetic explanations of psychological phenomena, and wove these together with a reconstruction of the cultural evolution of human society. As a Soviet psychologist he stood at a turning point in history, and he was concerned to help bring about a historical transformation in human being. The result is a rich and provocative psychological project, one which addresses pressing social issues, is conscious of its place in the discipline, and seeks to bridge or rather transcend the division between natural scientific and humanistic or cultural scientific conceptions of inquiry (Cole, 1996).

As I noted at the outset, my point in reconstructing the ways in which Vygotsky was influenced by and indebted to Marx is to be able to identify those aspects of Vygotsky’s project that are still relevant and pertinent today, and those which need to be modified because of our historical and cultural distance from him. If Vygotsky’s psychology had, as I have argued, intrinsic connections to its time and place, how exactly should we draw upon it in our own work, here and now?

In the remainder of this paper I shall examine two specific problems that have arisen as Vygotsky’s conception of psychology has been taken up in the west. The first is his treatment of cultural differences (Cole, 1996, p. 107). The second is his lack of attention to social class.

I shall suggest that both of these problems arise from the vision of history that Vygotsky found in Marx and Hegel. The first stems from what one might call a blind spot in Marx’s vision of historical change (though we must ask again, which Marx?). The second stems from a blind spot in Vygotsky’s vision of the Soviet Union’s place in world history (though we must ask, was Vygotsky truly blind or was he turning a blind eye?). Because of their common origins in the conception of history, the two problems interrelate in complex ways.

2.1 First problem: From primitive to advanced?

As Scriber interpreted Vygotsky’s work, history functioned in it on three levels. The first was that of “general history.” Vygotsky wrote that “mental development is part of the

general historical development of mankind” (Scribner, 1985, p. 123). The higher mental functions are of historical origin, as, through material labor, human kind “begins to fashion its own nature.” Vygotsky used the notion of general history to resolve, or at least to try to resolve, nature and culture.

The second level of history was that of “the subject’s individual history”; “the history of the child” (p. 124). This occurs *in* general history, but it is not a recapitulation of that history.

The third level of history was that of the higher mental functions, which have their own “particular history of development.” Whereas the child is a “natural object” for a theory of development, the higher mental functions constitute a “conceptual object.” For data for the study of the higher mental functions, Scribner argues that Vygotsky turned to ethnopsychology. His reconstruction began with contemporary adults, and the “rudimentary forms” of their everyday behavior which are “living fossils” (e.g. tying knots). He then traced the transformation of these forms through general history: specifically their internalization. Third, he sought to artificially evoke changes in children by means of experimental modeling. Finally, he traced children’s development as it occurs in real life.

Scribner suggests that in order to explore the interrelations of personal development and social history, Vygotsky turned to ethnopsychological material “principally for heuristic purposes” (p. 138). And here we find something rather disturbing: the characterization of “primitive” forms of cognition. Scribner recognized that to understand Vygotsky’s use of the term “primitive” we need to look at his uses of history. She noted that “the implications of his theory for comparative studies of cognition have proved ambiguous” (p. 119), and she directly addressed the issue of whether Vygotsky equated “childlike” and “primitive.” Scribner’s argument is that “some, if not all,” of the ambiguity in Vygotsky’s writings, and the controversy they have generated, “disappear when we go beneath the surface and examine the fundamental role of ontogeny-history comparisons in Vygotsky’s theory” (p. 129).

Certainly Vygostky did make some statements that ring discordantly to the modern ear, for example: “Thus, the child, primitive man, and the insane, much as their thought processes may differ in other important respects, all manifest participation – a symptom of primitive complex thinking and of the function of words as family names” (T&L, 130).

2.1.1 Luria’s work in Uzbekistan

One place where this conception of “primitive” thinking comes to the fore is the cross-cultural research conducted by Alexandra Luria in Uzbekistan. Luria (writing in 1976) described how in 1931-32 “the Soviet Union’s most radical restructuring: the elimination of illiteracy, the transition to a collectivist economy, and the readjustment of life to new socialist principles” offered “a unique opportunity to observe how decisively all these reforms effected not only a broadening of outlook but also radical changes in the structure of cognitive processes” (p. v). He describes the republics of Uzbekistan and Kirghizia, where “despite the high levels of creativity in science, art, and architecture

attained in the ancient culture of Uzbekistan, the masses had lived for centuries in economic stagnation and illiteracy, their development hindered among other things by the religion of Islam. Only the radical restructuring of the economy, the rapid elimination of illiteracy, and the removal of the Muslim influence could achieve, over and above an expansion in world view, a genuine revolution in cognitive activity” (p. vi).

Yet a brief history of the Uzbekistan region is sufficient to show, at least with the benefits of hindsight, that any notion that the Soviet influence was one of unmitigated progress in economic activity and social organization is impossible to sustain. Uzbekistan was conquered by Tzarist Russia in the late 19th century, and the government saw there the potential to greatly expand cotton cultivation. The crop was shipped away to be processed into textiles, and so industrial development in Uzbekistan did not expand greatly. But the shift from food crops to cotton led to local shortages in food, although before the revolution Central Asia remained largely able to provide sufficient food for its people.

During World War 1 Uzbekistan was a site of fierce resistance to the Red Army, but this was put down and a socialist republic established in 1924. The Soviet government was intent on achieving national self-sufficiency in cotton and, like the Tzarist regime, saw Uzbekistan as the means. Almost the entire agriculture of the region was shifted to this single crop. Such intensive cultivation of “white gold” required agricultural chemicals and considerable water consumption. Fertilizers were overused, and water sources depleted. Today the Aral Sea and many rivers are half empty, and the land poisoned.

With prestroika and glasnost, Uzbeks began to express their resentment over the cotton scandal, the environmental catastrophe, ethnic discrimination, economic stagnation, and other problems. In 1991 Uzbekistan won its independence, and has sought to diversify its economy and develop other resources, especially minerals and oil. Today Uzbekistan is 88% Muslim, and 99.3% literate among people 15 years or older. There have been efforts to make the Uzbek language the official language of the republic, and to restore the Aral Sea, though much of the population still supports the communist party.

But as Luria viewed it, the Uzbekistan research was a natural experiment which was comparing “different stages of social history and social development” (75). The Uzbekistan peasants had been in an earlier “stage” of “socioeconomic and cultural development” (74); collectivization would catapult them out of the past, in ways whose impact on their cognition would offer a natural experiment with which to test the new cultural psychology’s theories of the origins of higher mental functions.

Luria was convinced that the research showed how thinking advances from the practical to the theoretical, from concrete to abstract, from reasoning based on personal experience to reasoning grounded in logic, from situational thinking to categorical thinking. He emphasized that this “transition from sensory to rational consciousness [is] a phenomenon that the classics of Marxism regard as one of the most important in human history” (74). Complex logical thinking is not possible for “people who live in a society where rudimentary practical functions dominate their activities.” As “Words become the principal agent of abstraction and generalization” (p. 73) there is a “transition to abstract

thinking” and a development from a form of consciousness that is intent in establishing practical interrelations among things to one which seeks to codify objects into conceptual schemes. The acquisition of verbal and logical codes allows abstraction of the essential features of objects and their assigning to categories. This in turn permits more complex logical thinking (p. 74)

Michael Cole has written of the ways Vygotsky and Luria’s conception of a cultural psychology helped him to clarify “the methodological quagmire of cross-cultural psychology” (1996, p. 107). But at the same time he writes that “On the basis of my own research, I was critical of their methodology in cross-cultural research. I rejected their inferences about cultural differences and was skeptical about their broad conclusions concerning the cognitive impact of writing and schooling” (107). As Cole notes in his Forward to Luria’s autobiography, there are “ambiguities in the interpretation of cultural differences” (xv), and he shares the fact that he is “skeptical about the usefulness of applying developmental theories cross-culturally. Thus, what Luria interprets as the acquisition of new modes of thought, I am more inclined to interpret as changes in the application of previously available modes to the particular problems and contexts of discourse represented by the experimental setting” (xv).

“I am regularly taken to task by contemporary/immigrant Russians for being a mushy headed relativist and failing to understand that more advanced society means more advanced thinking. While still in the USSR this was the position taken by Peeter Tulviste as well in his fine book. But in more recent writing as an Estonian he makes activities the unit of analysis and arrives at a position very similar to mine. Others, however, continue to believe that non-literate/traditional people are incapable of thinking in true concepts, unable to evaluate themselves, etc.” (Cole, xmca email, 3/13/2006)

2.1.2 History as a world process

Cole has emphasized that the Uzbekistan research was construed by Luria and Vygotsky not as cross-cultural but as cross-historical. This is an important insight (cf. Wertsch, 1985). Scribner noted that for Vygotsky, general history “appears as a single unidirectional course of sociocultural change. It is a world process ... one stream of development” (1985, p. 138-9). The contrast between primitive and advanced is closely tied to the vision of history as a linear and unidirectional process.

Both Marx and Hegel saw a telos in history. They have often been interpreted as viewing history as a determinate movement through invariant stages. Marx did indeed write of “the crudeness of primitive forms of society”; of the ways that “tradition must play a very powerful role in the primitive and undeveloped circumstances.” He wrote that “there is a devil of a difference between barbarians who are fit by nature to be used for anything, and civilized people who apply themselves to everything.” (Grundrisse, 105). The position of history as governed by iron laws is well-summarized by Francis Fukuyama:

“History: that is, history understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process, when taking into account the experience of all peoples in all times. This understanding of History was most closely associated with the great German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. It was made part of our daily intellectual atmosphere by Karl Marx, who borrowed this concept of History from Hegel, and is implicit in our use of words like “primitive” or “advanced,” “traditional” or “modern,” when referring to different types of human societies. For both of these thinkers, there was a coherent development of human societies from simple tribal ones based on slavery and subsistence agriculture, through various theocracies, monarchies, and feudal aristocracies, up through modern liberal democracy and technologically driven capitalism.” (Fukuyama, 1992)

Certainly this seems to have been Lenin’s interpretation of the Marxist conception of history, who like Luria viewed economic reorganization as historical transformation:

“One has only to picture to oneself the amazing fragmentation of the small producers, an inevitable consequence of patriarchal agriculture, to become convinced of the progressiveness of capitalism, which is shattering to the very foundations the ancient forms of economy and life, with their age-old immobility and routine, destroying the settled life of the peasants who vegetated behind their medieval partitions, and creating new social classes striving of necessity towards contact, unification, and active participation in the whole of the economic (and not only economic) life of the country, and of the whole world” (1899, some remarks...).

“competition and capitalism perform a useful historical function by dragging them out of their backwoods and confronting them with all the issues that already face the more developed strata of the population.”

“Capitalism draws these markets together, combines them into a big national market, and then into a world market, destroys the primitive forms of bondage and personal dependence, develops in depth and in breadth the contradictions which in a rudimentary form are also to be observed among the community peasantry—and thus paves the way for their resolution.”

2.1.3 Baudrillard’s critique

Jean Baudrillard, in *The Mirror of Production*, has criticized Marxism strongly for its “blindness about primitive societies” and he advances the argument that this blindness “is necessarily linked to a weakness in the radical critique of political economy” (1975, p. 90). In Baudrillard’s interpretation, Marx made the mistake of adopting the very abstract categories that he criticizes. For example, the concept of abstract labor became the basis for the abstract category of labor, a category which was then applied to earlier societies. “This abstraction is precisely what causes the problem” (p. 85), writes Baudrillard. It is, as Baudrillard points out, like saying “the adult can comprehend the child only in terms of the adult.”

Marxism is in this regard like so many other aspects of Western culture's reflection on itself, even its critique of itself. These self-reflections and self-critiques by the West, in Baudrillard's view, have only resulted in a "universalization of its own principles" (p. 89). Western tendencies towards economic and political imperialism get repeated at the level of analysis and theory.

As Mark Poster summarizes Baudrillard's point, "historical materialism becomes ideological when it forgets its historical limits and pretends to universality, an error that is characteristic of the whole tradition of Western thought" (Poster, 1975, p. 13). Baudrillard sees here the operation of Marx's Hegelianism: in his view Marx believed that "capitalism creates the conditions for universal, scientific knowledge" – an objective reading of history, based on a favored historical position. The notion – also present in Marx – that knowledge always arises from, and never transcends, a specific historical circumstance is forgotten. Baudrillard argues that Marxism can never truly critique capitalism if it believes that it owes to capitalism the possibility of its own existence.

If this connection between Marxism and the evaluation of past social formations as 'primitive' is so tight, it bodes ill for any project of creating a Marxist psychology that respects cultural differences. But is this an adequate reading of Marx? Or are other readings possible? It is interesting, in this light, that in his introduction to the Russian translation of the *Communist Manifesto* Marx envisioned two possible directions Russian history might take: "Now the question is, can the Russian *obshchina* [village community], though generally undermined, yet a form of the primeval common ownership of land, pass directly to the higher form of communist common ownership? Or, on the contrary, must it first pass through the same process of dissolution as constitutes the historical evolution of the West?" (1882/1983, p. 557). Marx himself was unable to predict, in this particular case, the future progression of so central a component of society's economic organization as property ownership.

And Marx also wrote, in terms that virtually anticipate Baudrillard (and to give him credit Baudrillard cites these words), that "The so-called historical presentation of development is founded, as a rule, on the fact that the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself, and, since it is only rarely and only under quite specific conditions able to criticize itself—leaving aside, of course, the historical periods which appear to themselves as times of decadence—it always conceives them one-sidedly" (Grundrisse, 106).

Marx's view of history is complex, ambivalent, perhaps contradictory. And it is important to acknowledge that against the dominant ideology of history as progress on various fronts – technological innovation, increased options in a consumer culture, and so on – Marx posited neither this nor the return to a golden age, but a conception of historical progress as something that capitalism furthers ironically, by producing the conditions of its own downfall. Progress for Marx is indeed to be found in the historical movement from feudal through mercantile to capitalist societies, and then beyond these to a communist society. But it is progress of a peculiar kind, because Marx saw the

transition to a socialist society as following from the imiseration of the working class. There is a drama to historical development: progress comes only through pain.

So Vygotsky seems to have adopted a rather straightforward reading of Marx's conception of the movement of history, one that owed as much if not more to Lenin than to Marx himself. With a view of history as "a single unidirectional course of sociocultural change... one stream of development" (Scribner) it is easy to place "primitive" and "advanced" thinking in a simple hierarchy. The consequence is a great irony: it would appear that Vygotsky's version of Marxist psychology offers no way to conceptualize different cultures except along a unilinear historical time line. As Cole noted, the Uzbekistan research was not so much cross-cultural as cross-historical. It would seem that to conduct genuinely cross-cultural research will require modifications to the conceptual framework that Vygotsky has provided, modifications that acknowledge the tendency that Marx himself noted that one cultural/historical form "always conceives... one-sidedly" of another.

Further work is needed here. Scribner has proposed that what is required is attention to a fourth level of history: the history of individual societies. "Individual societal histories are not independent of the world process, but neither are they reducible to it." This seems a very promising direction, but a lot depends on the form these histories take. The problem lies not in the number of levels at which we tell historical stories but in the form of historical understanding – the general trajectory that history is assumed to have. What Marxism arguably lacks, along with other Western metaphysical intellectual frameworks, is a way of a way of granting and respecting the radical difference of the Other, and a way of grasping history in which radical discontinuities are acknowledged and made intelligible without imposing contemporary categories retrospectively onto the past. A form of historical understanding is needed that has a place for contingency and rupture, rather than assimilating events to a narrative of inevitable advancement and evolution. Put this way, what is needed sounds very like what Foucault called a genealogy (1971/1977).

2.2 Second problem: Lack of attention to social class

But there is a second problem that the Uzbekistan research brings to light, a problem which also stems from Vygotsky's conception of history. Hassan (1992) insists that the Uzbekistan peasants, even though their lifestyle, their productive activity, and their forms of thinking might be said to be 'primitive,' cannot be said to have been using 'natural' mental functions, as Vygotsky used this term. She insists that every adult – even a rural peasant – has learned how to use language to transcend time and place, and so must be viewed as capable of what Vygotsky called the higher mental functions. What we are seeing in Luria's work in Uzbekistan has to be interpreted as a distinction between *differently valued* forms of higher mental functioning. The higher functions that are more valued, then, cannot be the result of language per se, but must be the result of a specific use of language, indeed "a specific kind of social process" (502) – namely "reflection on decontextualized meanings of the verbal sign." Hasan's research indicates that "engagement in this kind of language use is the prerogative of a speaker's privileged

socio-economic position in the wider community” (502). She concludes that “the Vygotsky-Luria framework for socio-genesis of mind calls not only for a more sophisticated theory of language as suggested by Wertsch; it also needs a sophisticated theory of social organization.” Vygotsky, Hasan argues, lacks a theory of social context.

Hasan is not the first to notice this lack. She notes that Wertsch has recommended Bakhtin’s notion of speech genre to fill this gap. As Wertsch points out, Vygotsky “did not deal with class consciousness or the psychology of fetishism or alienation” (1985, 5), and he introduces the concept of multivoicedness from Bakhtin. But Hasan argues that an articulated theory of social context is missing in Bakhtin’s work too. Hasan suggests that “A developed theory of social context would at least have two attributes: one, it would explain the principle whereby the immediate social situation is related to social milieu; and two, it would specify the composition of social situation itself, making salient those of its significant elements which are relevant to the understanding of the linguistic facts as they impinge on utterances and utterance types” (505-6). Bakhtin does not provide this. For Hasan, it is Basil Bernstein’s work that promises to provide what is missing: “relating the distribution of power and control to the regulation of social interaction and personal experience” (520).

Panofsky (2003) makes a similar observation. While suggesting that “The sociocultural approach of Vygotsky and others opens the way” to answering questions such as “What is ‘class’ and how does it operate in learning?” (1) she notes that “Vygotsky did not research the functioning of class in school” (2). Panofsky draws upon Bourdieu to fill the gap: in his view, classes do not exist substantively, but “as *something to be done*” (Bourdieu, 1998, 12). She relates Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* to Vygotsky’s proposal that psychological functions appear first on the social plane and then on the psychological plane, and she concludes that there is “a need in sociocultural theory... for an articulated theory of social space, such as Bourdieu’s, to account for the dynamics of conflict and power in learning and development” (15). But Bourdieu’s own work on schooling (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970) has been criticized for failing to grant that students are active agents (e.g., Willis, 1981), something central to Vygotsky’s account of development, and to cultural psychology in the West (cf. Packer, 2001a, b).

Hasan raises an important question: “what is the basis for assigning value to forms of semiotic mediation: why are some forms of human consciousness considered more desirable, others not?” (521). Hasan’s answer is that such valuation “is irrational” (522), but “*rationalized* by appeal to our ideas about what counts as human evolution, what is construed as human progress” (522). And she cites Marx: the “ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas.”

There is of course great irony in this: quoting Marx to a Marxist psychologist of human development. Vygotsky surely knew Marx’s views on this matter. He wrote, after all, “It is essential to keep in mind the class nature of all ideals” (1926/1997, 212). What has gone wrong?

2.2.1 Class was central to Marx

Of course class is central to Marx's analysis of capitalism. He wrote that "the fundamental political issue of capitalism, as of every stratified society, concerns its class relations." Marx identified three features basic to any capitalist mode of production. First, it is growth-oriented, and this growth rests on the exploitation of living labor in production. Second, the control of this labor is thus vital, and so a relation between two social classes, capital and labor, is central. Third, the orientation to growth is also manifest in the ways competition drives innovation, giving capitalism its technologically and organizationally dynamic character, and these innovations modify the class struggle. Marx showed that these three features, while necessary, are inconsistent, so capitalism is prone to crisis. Regulatory apparatuses are crucial to deal with crises, especially those designed for regulation of class conflict. Thus the inherently unethical character of capitalism – exploitation; squeezing value from other's labor – is the core of the process of production in such an economy.

Vygotsky was clearly well aware of the centrality of class in Marxist analysis. Indeed when he wrote about class he wrote with passion; of the "crippling of human beings," of the "one-sided and distorted development of his various capabilities." The division of labor in capitalism, he continued, results not only in:

"the single human type becoming differentiated and fragmented into several separate social class types which stand in sharp contrast to one another, but also in the corruption and distortion of the human personality and its subjection to unsuitable, one-sided development." (1930/1994)

In his book on educational psychology Vygotsky wrote about the "social stimuli... legal statutes, moral precepts, artistic tastes, and so on" which are "permeated through and through with the class structure of [the] society that generated them and serve as the class organization of production... in modern society, every person, therefore, whether he likes it or not, is inevitably a spokesperson of a particular class" (1926/1997, 211-2) He concluded that "we must be profoundly historical and must always present man's behavior in relation to the class situation at the given moment. This must be the fundamental psychological technique for every social psychologist" (212). And he emphasized the need for education relevant to "the international working class out in the historical arena" (213).

And of course Vygotsky maintained that "an individual only exists as a social being, as a member of some social group within whose context he follows the road of his historical development." Such a statement is clearly intended to apply to any society, not only capitalist ones, so it should have been applied to soviet society too. Yet Vygotsky made no references to the child's social group within Soviet society in his analyses of the development of higher psychological functions.

2.2.2 Why did Vygotsky leave out class?

Why Vygotsky's lack of attention to class? I think we have to assume that Vygotsky held that the Soviet Union, as a socialist society, had indeed eliminated the class relationship that Marx saw as central to capitalism. The socialist revolution, he wrote, had brought

about “a transition to a new social order and a new form of organization of social relationships. *Alongside this process, a change in the human personality and an alteration of man himself must inevitably take place*” (original emphasis). This new social order involved a combination of collectivism, education, and large scale manufacturing – “labour situations where all ages and both sexes have to work together.”

One might imagine that large scale manufacturing would require a division of labor, and Vygotsky agreed with Engels that “Along with the division of labor man himself becomes subdivided.” Yet in his 1930 paper Vygotsky wrote glowingly of the potential of “large scale industry”: “it contains within itself endless possibilities for the development of the human personality” (emphasis removed). The Soviet Union would apparently be able to organize large scale industry in such a manner as to avoid any division of labor, and consequently avoid too any division of society into economic classes. “Collectivism, the unification of intellectual and physical labour, a change in the relationships between the sexes, the abolition of the gap between physical and intellectual development, these are the key aspects of that alteration of man which is the subject of our discussion.” In fact large scale manufacturing in the new Soviet state, he wrote, far from distorting human capacities would actually foster the creation of whole, well-rounded and flexible human beings:

“So it appears that not only will the combination of manufacturing labour with education prove to be a means of creating all-round developed people, but that it will also mean that the type of person who will be required to work in this highly developed manufacturing process, will differ substantially from the type of person [who] used to be the product of production work during the early period of capitalist development.... the very requirements of manufacturing require an all-round developed, flexible person, who would be capable of changing the forms of work, and of organizing the production process and controlling it.” (1930)

All of this is to say that Vygotsky wrote as though with the Russian Revolution and the formation of the Soviet Union, the peculiar form of the division of labor characteristic of a capitalist society had been eliminated, and with it the corruptions and distortions of the human personality which it had induced. Large scale manufacturing would certainly continue, but it would organized now in a way which far from producing one-sided development would foster the creation of “an all-round developed, flexible person.” Whether or not he actually believed this is impossible for me to judge. If he didn’t believe that the Soviet Union was classless, expressing such a view in print in the 1930s would have been suicidal.

To put the matter another way, Vygotsky was voicing the view that, with the Soviet Union, *history had ended*. Let me quote Fukuyama again:

“Both Hegel and Marx believed that the evolution of human societies was not open-ended, but would end when mankind had achieved a form of society that satisfied its deepest and most fundamental longings. Both thinkers thus posited an ‘end of history’: for Hegel this was the liberal state, while for Marx it was a

communist society. This did not mean that the natural cycle of birth, life, and death would end, that important events would no longer happen, or that newspapers reporting them would cease to be published. It meant, rather, that there would be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions, because all of the really big questions had been settled” (Fukuyama, 1992).

The one ‘really big question’ that had seemingly been settled was that of class conflict. Since class conflict drives history, the elimination of classes removes the impetus for historical change. There will of course be events that occur, but no further structural reorganization of society will take place.

2.2.3 From an abstract to a concrete psychology

One consequence of Vygotsky’s belief that the Soviet Union had successfully transcended class conflict, I would argue, is that he offers an *abstract* account of development. He writes of the development of a *generic* child, rather than one who is living in any specific social group. His accounts of development are always about the ‘child in general.’ Engestrom and Miettinen have argued that Marx’s work offers “invaluable analytical instruments,” primary among which is “the concept of commodity as a contradictory unity of use value and exchange value” (1999, 5), without which we cannot understand the “contradictory motives of human activity and human psyche in capitalist society.” Without this we would be led into a psychology of “an abstract man, of ‘man in general’” (Leont’ev, 1981, 255). I would propose that this is exactly what Vygotsky has given us. As Axel puts it, Vygotsky “did not arrive at a clear distinction between general principles and specific historical realizations of human development on a Marxist base. He merely plotted out the course for such a project, and also set up an apparently arbitrary end point” (Axel, 1999, 133).

This raises significant questions if we are to make use of Vygotsky’s analysis for our understanding of children’s development in the US. We live in the heart of the capitalist system, in a society where class divisions have clearly not been eliminated. What is the relevance of a theory of child development that was articulated in a society where such divisions had been eliminated, or at least where people, Vygotsky perhaps included, believed that this was the case? Can we successfully deal with the problem by ‘adding’ something to Vygotsky: the concept of multivoicedness from Bahktin (as Wertsch proposes), or of habitus and social field from Bourdieu (as Panofsky suggests), or of codes and control from Bernstein (as Hasan recommends)?

The problem seems to be that two aspects of Marxist analysis – and of a Marxist vision of history – have turned against one another. First, Marx’s picture of the communist society as completely free of class contradictions lends itself to a belief that in such a society all relevant social differences have disappeared. And so too disappear some of the most powerful theoretical concepts that Marxism has offered: concepts such as class relations, class consciousness, class culture, positional epistemology, dominant ideology, and others. With such concepts one might interpret the Uzbekistan peasants’ refusal to abandon concrete thinking as a perceptive but intuitive rejection of the abstract cognition

of a dominant class; as a way of thinking closely rooted to the particularities of local setting upon which all human attempts to rest control over the natural environment must depend, as Hasan puts it. Their apparent inability to understand the researchers' questions, or accept the validity of their syllogisms, might be seen as resistance to privileged outsiders from Moscow, the center of imperial power. But with the axiological dimension of class no longer available, the other axiological dimension of Marxism gets brought to bear: the peasants' thinking is 'primitive.'

This statement of the problem has the merit of suggesting the general form of its solution. Vygotsky may have had reasons for considering the Soviet Union to be a class-free society; we certainly have no reasons for thinking the same of the US. So the first axiological dimension is still available to us. Concrete thinking has its own validity and logic. Working-class consciousness can be judged as in many ways superior to the abstract calculus of middle-class rationality. To put it in simple terms, management has a lot of theories about how things *ought* to work; the workers know how things *actually* work. Once we allow class back into the picture, the 'primitive-advanced' valuations would cease to dominate, and the *political* character of all such valuations would become evident again. The result would be a way of thinking and theorizing about cultural difference which would not embrace cultural relativism (Schweder), but would articulate instead a cultural positionalism in which interlinking of cultures in a complex and dynamic global economy would be acknowledged.

5. Conclusions

I have argued that to understand Vygotsky's psychological project we need to place it in the context of what Paul Ricoeur (1979) called Marx's "great phenomenology of economic life." This means that we see theory as arising from and returning to practical activity, the individual as both social product and social agent, and the goal of critique as not only diagnosing the status quo, but also helping transform it. But after Marx's analysis have come historical changes and conceptual challenges. The former include the fall of the Soviet Union and capitalism's transformation into a system of abundance (for some), with the rise of consumerism, advertising, and the "bureaucratically controlled society of consumption" (Baudrillard). The latter include disclosure of Marxism's latent patriarchy and western bias by feminist and post-colonial theorists, the critique of Marx's unquestioning use of the concept of production, and an alternative "economy of signs."

These all call into question the scientism, Hegelianism, and utopianism of Marxist theory: the notion that Marx's was an objective analysis, that history is unfolding according to universal laws, and that a post-revolutionary society can be anticipated and fostered. The result is not a complete discrediting of Marxist inquiry, but nonetheless a recognition that a project such as Marx's – and with it Vygotsky's – is considerably more complex than it seemed.

Vygotsky's psychology might be said to start from the supposition that Marx had correctly diagnosed the ills of capitalism and the likely outcome of its illness. But today capitalist economies show no signs of immanent collapse. We have a new appreciation of

the flexibility and dynamism of an economic organization which can generate increasingly complex forms and relations of production, even while the underlying logic of the creation and appropriation of value is unaltered (cf. Heilbroner's 21st Century Capitalism). If educational researchers cannot hope to bring about a classless society (let alone presume, as Vygotsky was able to, that such a society was already forming), what can we do?

There is a danger that with the end of the USSR western psychologists will believe that Marx's relevance has vanished, and that there is no need to understand the connection between Vygotsky's work and Marxist analysis. One sign of this is, perhaps, is the ease with which concepts like interiorization and the ZPD have been assimilated to otherwise dualistic and ahistorical conceptions of development: the individual, the mental, cognition etc.

Perhaps because Vygotsky's account of children's development is an abstract one, in which concrete particulars of time and place are missing despite his insistence that they are always relevant, his work has been adopted by many in the west as a generic description of development, true for *every* time and place. One form of this is the application of Vygotskian concepts to the learning of science, construed in typically western terms as a body of disinterested knowledge which enables instrumental control of the environment in which we live. Learning science is taken to be a self-evident and self-sufficient good: it is simply what an educated person ought to know. And this is a goal for an education which bears no concrete connection to the state of our society, or its conflicts and contradictions. Such a view of science is, as we have seen, very different from Vygotsky's .

A Marxist psychology of child development applied to education would be quite different. First, it would not separate the cognitive aspect of development from other aspects. Cognition would be conceived of as operating within an integral system. Yaroshevsky notes how among Western psychologists "The principle of communicative mediation of cognitive functions in terms of signs is believed to be Vygotsky's principal achievement. This idea, however, should be regarded as one of the premises for a theory visualized by Vygotsky as an integral schema of the psychical organization of the human personality, as psychology in terms of drama, in terms of the dialectic of thought, emotional experience and practical action in the flow of man's being in the sociocultural world" (Yaroshevsky, 1989, 317).

Second, science would be reconceptualized as a form of inquiry arising from and returning to practical concerns. Science could be, should be, a cultural tool forged to resolve social contradictions. For example, capitalist economies tend to appropriate the natural environment as a source of raw materials at an accelerating rate, with problematic yet familiar consequences: pollution, climate change, loss of wilderness, de-forestation, etc.. At the same time, these economies also stimulate technological innovation and knowledge creation that have the potential to monitor these consequences, identify clean sources of energy, design efficient recycling, etc.. Such a contradiction creates both the need for education and a space for it, in that the contradiction can only be resolved

through human ingenuity, fostered by effective pedagogy. Young people who are both aware of the dangers and informed about science and technology offer the best hope for new rounds of what Schumpeter called “creative destruction” in which capitalism’s treacherous tendencies are, if not overcome, at least redirected. The design of appropriate pedagogy requires an understanding of how the economy works, as well as an awareness that schools are sites of the potential formation of new kinds of creative mentation.

But it is equally clear that a Vygotskian psychology here in the USA cannot ignore social class. The distortions and fragmentations of the human personality which capitalist societies produce – and which Vygotsky wrote about eloquently – can hardly be ignored by western educators and educational researchers. Heilbroner notes that “societies driven by the need to accumulate capital, and subject to the pressures of the market, suffer from severe deformations, including the alienated consciousness induced by extensive commercialization, the deformation of individual character caused by the over-division of labor, and the socially harmful bias toward self-directed, rather than other-directed values” (1993, 151). He adds that “Capitalism is assuredly a social order that draws its acquisitive energies from the unconscious substratum of behavior” (160); and as a consequence, socialization in capitalist societies tends to foster infantile yearnings: sublimated rage, denials, acting out of fantasies of oppression, both active and passive. There is plenty here for a Vygotskian psychology to explore.

A Vygotskian psychology of children’s development in the US cannot be content with abstract conceptualization. It must be a concrete psychology. There are a few places where Vygotsky offers a hint of what a more concrete developmental psychology might look like. He wrote, for example: “My history of cultural development is an abstract treatment of concrete psychology.... Social role (judge, physician) determines a hierarchy of functions: i.e, functions change the hierarchy in different spheres of social life. Their conflict = drama.... Task: among adolescents and in tien [sic] (concrete psychology) to study the different spheres of behavior (professional complex etc.), the structure and the hierarchy of functions where they relate to and clash with one another. Ideal: this is how the professional complex of a Moscow worker is structured, etc.” (1986, 68-70).

A concrete psychology, then, would need to consider not single functions, such as cognition, but the entire hierarchy of functions that together define a whole personality. It would need to examine how this hierarchy varies with different spheres of social life. To quote Yaroshevsky again: “The task of a new psychology was to comprehend personality in terms that would capture the integral quality of man as a corporeal-spiritual being uniting in his flesh and blood the natural and the socio-cultural” (Yaroshevsky, 1989, 312-3). And under the influence of such a Vygotskian psychology, education would perhaps aspire to a higher goal than teaching math and science. Vygotsky’s goal was to foster human freedom. We like to think of the US as the land of the free. But Vygotsky surely would have said that we should have listened attentively when Marx reminded us that, “In fact, the realm of freedom does not commence until the point is passed where labor under the compulsion of necessity and of external utility is required” (1867).

Notes

1. I have replied extensively on Yaroshevsky's (1989) biography of Vygotsky, largely because it is written on the basis of considerable, first-hand knowledge of the Soviet Union.

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