

On: 14 February 2008
Access Details: Free Access
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Mind, Culture, and Activity

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t775653674>

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Online Publication Date: 01 January 2008

To cite this Article: Packer, Martin J. (2008) 'Is Vygotsky Relevant? Vygotsky's Marxist Psychology', *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 15:1, 8 - 31

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/10749030701798607

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10749030701798607>

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ARTICLES

Is Vygotsky Relevant? Vygotsky's Marxist Psychology

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This article explores the connections between Vygotsky's psychology and Marxism, arguing that his was a "Marxist psychology" in its "historical foundation": a specific conception of history. This conception of history is evident in Vygotsky's analysis and diagnosis of the crisis in psychology. The creation of a Marxist, general psychology was the historical task that was defined by this crisis, and his developmental psychology was the historical project of such a psychology. In his practice of the methodology of this general psychology, Vygotsky recounted "child history": the history of the genesis of mind. The conception of history evident in *Crisis* throws new light on Vygotsky's texts on child development: They tell a history of the objective tendencies of consciousness, of the dialectical processes of sublation, and of self-mastery. As Vygotsky interpreted the higher mental functions, they are manifestations of the child's ability to master himself or herself as a consequence of the "social moment" of consciousness. In fostering these functions, one shaped a human consciousness capable of free and deliberate choice.

We had better let others say of our psychology that it is Marxist than call it that ourselves.

Vygotsky (1926–27/2004, p. 340)

When Vygotsky's texts were first translated into English, some psychologists in the United States noted that his work had strong connections to Marx's analysis of capitalism, but since then these connections have often gone unnoticed and "many interpretations of Vygotsky have not attempted to position him within a Marxist framework" (Robbins, 1999, p. vi). Translations of Vygotsky's work have often omitted references to Marx and Engels, or treated these as "a forced concession to official ideology" (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 20). Consequently "Vygotsky's debt to Marx runs deeper than is commonly recognized" (Wertsch, 1985, p. 1), and

the political context of his work is virtually ignored by modern scholars concerned to recover it. Vygotsky is portrayed not so much as a Marxist theorist who negotiated a tense political environment and whose work was a victim of Stalin's purges, but as a thinker whose genius "transcend[s] historical, social and cultural barriers." (Bakhurst, 2005, p. 178)

Even when the references to Marx have been acknowledged, there has been little consensus about their significance. Some have assumed that any scientist working in the Soviet Union had to pay lip service to Marx. Others cannot grasp the relevance of an economic critique to psychology.

Important and early exceptions to this tendency to ignore or downplay Vygotsky's debt to Marx include Toulmin (1978) who, in the *New York Review of Books* article in which he famously dubbed Vygotsky "the Mozart of psychology," wrote that "the general frame provided by 'historical materialist' philosophy gave him 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." A second exception was the introduction to *Mind in Society* by Cole and Scribner (1978), who wrote that the Marxist theoretical framework was a "valuable scientific resource" for Vygotsky, that he used "the methods and principles of dialectical materialism" and intended "to create one's own *Capital*." More recently Cole, Levitin, and Luria (2006) proposed 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" (p. 244).

Exploring the Marxist framework to Vygotsky's conception and practice of psychology would appear an important yet neglected task. 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? Does this mean that Vygotsky's Marxist psychology is irrelevant too? What is the relevance of Vygotsky "after" Marx? Is his work relevant to psychology today in the West—a time and culture very different from those in which his work was begun? Today "we still await an adequate analysis of Vygotsky's debt to Marx" (Bakhurst, 1991, p. 87). This article aims to be a step in this direction.

I argue that Marx provided Vygotsky, most importantly, with a conception of history. Yet the literature on Vygotsky and Marx has not noted this, so to make the case I must trace the view of history visible in Vygotsky's analysis of the "crisis in psychology." This analysis identified the "historical task" of creating a "general psychology," a Marxist psychology. This general psychology is Vygotsky's psychology of child development, which is itself centrally a historical analysis, tracing the genesis of mind to recount a "child history." I suggest that the conception of history evident in *Crisis* throws new light on Vygotsky's account of child development.

THE RELATION BETWEEN MARX AND VYGOTSKY

Efforts have been made to identify what Vygotsky and Marx had in common. Lee (1985) noted four shared fundamental assumptions. First, they both placed emphasis on practical activity. Practical interaction between humans and the environment creates both objects and human subjects. Second, their analyses were "functionalist," "showing what role or effect [an] item has in some system of which it is a part" (p. 68). Third, consciousness was viewed as having

a dialectical, developing character, an emergent aspect of practical interaction. Finally, cultural development was distinguished from natural development.

Wertsch (1985) highlighted “three areas in which Vygotsky borrowed from Marx: his method, his claims about the nature of human activity, and his claims about the social origins of psychological processes” (p. 5). The method was one of tracing “the genesis of complete living units of functioning” (p. 5, emphasis removed), just as “Marx analyzes a single living ‘cell’ of capitalist society” (p. 6, citing Cole & Scribner, 1978, p. 8). Second, Wertsch, like Lee, noted that Vygotsky and Marx placed emphasis on activity. They saw practical, material interaction between humans and the environment as fundamental. Psychological processes and products, including consciousness itself, are constructed on this base. Whereas—as Marx put it in the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach—others had given priority to contemplation of the world, both he and Vygotsky considered action in the world to be primary and 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 sought to understand how the individual child, egocentric and even autistic, gradually becomes socialized, able to decentrate and communicate, Vygotsky saw the child as initially a social creature who only becomes individuated over time. This closely parallels remarks made by Marx about the inherently social character of human existence and the way only specific forms of society create the seemingly independent individual.

Trying to understand the kind of Marxist psychology Vygotsky sought to create by seeking parallels between the two has its limits, however. For “while such parallels are many and incontrovertible, their existence does not so much solve the problem as pose it more sharply” (Bakhurst, 1991, p. 87). Bakhurst proposed instead that Vygotsky was trying to apply “Marx’s dialectical method” to the problems of psychology. But in the USSR 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. The Mechanists saw dialectics as a general methodology for natural scientific inquiry. The Deborinites, in contrast, saw the task as being “a materialist reinterpretation of Hegelian dialectics” (p. 32), a philosophical rather than narrowly scientific task. Bakhurst suggested that Vygotsky most likely sided against the Deborinites (and that Vygotsky “would have held [their] use of dialectics in contempt”) and concluded 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” (p. 88).¹

It is striking that neither Lee nor Wertsch nor Bakhurst noted the emphasis on history shared by Vygotsky and Marx. Yet the central role that history played in Vygotsky’s thinking is quite evident. For example, one of Vygotsky’s notebook entries (Kozulin, 1986) began with these words:

¹I do not share Bakhurst’s conclusions, as becomes clear. In my reading Vygotsky did not appropriate from Marx a method, let alone a method that amounted to a “skill or technique.” It is true that he wrote “I want to learn from Marx’s whole method how to build a science, how to approach the investigation of the mind” (Vygotsky, 1926–27/2004, p. 331), but it is also clear that by “method,” he meant not a technique but a “methodology”: a “philosophy” (p. 304), a “theory of scientific method” (p. 305). (And “a theory of method is, of course, the production of means of production” [p. 248].) We see that he read *Capital* as a model to learn from, not take from. He sought to develop his *own* dialectical methodology, an “intermediate science,” a “theory of psychological materialism” (p. 330), which would be “a scientific methodology built on a historical foundation” (p. 236).

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. (pp. 54–55)²

The centrality of history was, however, evident to Scribner (1985), who wrote that Vygotsky was “the first to explicate the historical formation of the mind” (p. 121) and suggested 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). She identified Vygotsky’s “main conclusion” as “the need to search for specifically human behavior in history rather than biology” (p. 123) and that

human behavior differs from animal behavior in the same qualitative manner as the entire type of adaptability and historical development of man differs from the adaptability and development of animals, because the process of man’s *mental development* is part of the *general historical development of mankind*. (Vygotsky, 1931/1997b, p. 39, as cited in Scribner, 1985, p. 123)

Yet even Scribner did not articulate the precise character of Vygotsky’s conception of history. Vygotsky makes repeated reference to history, but often in broad terms in which the details are not apparent. Writing where and when he did, Vygotsky could presuppose a familiarity with Marx and Marxist-Leninism on the part of his readers, something not the case when translations are read in the United States. But if “it was an early exposure to Marxian historical thinking that enabled Vygotsky himself to tackle the problems of child development in his own original way” (Toulmin, 1978), and if Vygotsky was “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 bretheren” (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 80), then it is crucial to examine how he conceived of history.

MARXIST PSYCHOLOGY: A REVOLUTIONARY MOMENT IN THE HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY

Let us begin at “probably the best place for scholars . . . to gain insight into what everyone agrees was Vygotsky’s main effort: to create a Marxist science of psychology appropriate to the new Soviet society” (Rieber & Robinson, 2004, p. 223). This is the manuscript written in 1926–27 yet was unpublished in Russia until 1982: *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology: A Methodological Investigation* (Vygotsky, 1926–27/2004). Here Vygotsky recounted a history of psychology and on the basis of a “diagnosis” of its condition proposed a “general psychology” which was the blueprint for his psychology of child development.

²In a deleted passage in *The German Ideology* Marx wrote, “We know only a single science, the science of history” (this passage appeared before the section heading; Marx & Engels, 1845/1947, p. 4).

The Objective Tendencies of Psychology

Vygotsky's history of psychology traced its "developmental path." This history, he argued, was not merely one of conflicting viewpoints or divergent opinions, and its troubles were not merely the consequence of psychologists' unwillingness or inability to reach agreement. Vygotsky's (1926–27/2004) reading of classic texts "points to an objective necessity underlying the development of the science, to a necessity which we may observe when we approach the facts of science from an equally scientific point of view" (p. 236). This was not merely "a critical investigation of the views of some author" but "the methodological analysis of the problem itself" which was "not entirely indifferent as to views" but "must be able to *explain* them, to lay bare their objective, their inner logic" (p. 309). As he explained, "We do not investigate thinkers . . . but their fate, i.e., the objective processes that stand behind them and control them" (p. 308).

This "inner logic" had not caused psychology to follow a straightforward path:

We are dialecticians. We do not at all think that the developmental path of science follows a straight line, and if it has had zigzags, returns, and loops we understand their historical significance and consider them to be necessary links in our chain, inevitable stages of our path, just as capitalism is an inevitable stage on the road toward socialism. (p. 336)

Vygotsky (1926–27/2004) described these stages. At first "there is some factual discovery . . . which reforms the ordinary conception of the whole area of phenomena to which it refers" (p. 236). Then "the influence of these ideas spreads to adjacent areas," and it is formulated more abstractly. The "idea accomplishes its campaign of conquest as a scientifically verified, reliable discovery" (p. 236). Next, "the idea controls more or less the whole discipline in which it originally arose . . . in the form of a more or less abstractly formulated principle," and it "is easily transferred to adjacent disciplines" where "it also transforms the areas it penetrates" (p. 236). Then it "spreads to the most remote domains of being, to the whole world—while transforming and being transformed—and is formulated as a universal principle or even as a whole world view" (p. 237).

The idea, now "inflated into a world view like a frog that has swollen to the size of an ox, a philistine amidst the gentry, now enters the fifth and most dangerous stage of development" (p. 237). It meets opposition on every side, and "it finally displays what it is in reality, shows its real face." Now an abstract "philosophical form" rather than a scientific fact, "the idea reveals what it wants, what it is, from which social tendencies it arose, which class interests it serves" (p. 237). As it expands in scope and reach, its content "falls just as impetuously to zero" (p. 240) and it becomes an empty formula. It is now deflated: "It is accepted as a particular discovery but rejected as a world view." Now "as an idea which revolutionizes the science it ceases to exist. It is an idea that has retired and has received the rank of general from its department" (p. 237).

For example, the idea of the conditioned reflex had its origins in the study of salivation in dogs. It was extended throughout animal psychology and then all domains of psychology: "Everything—sleep, thought, work, and creativity—turns out to be a reflex" (Vygotsky, 1926–27/2004, p. 239). It grew into a worldview: "Anna Karenina and kleptomania, the class struggle and a landscape, language and dream are all reflexes" (p. 239). And from there it finally overreached and was put firmly in its place.

Vygotsky (1926–27/2004) added that whereas “external factors” might speed or slow these stages, “to change the sequence of these stages is impossible” (p. 332). That diverse ideas in psychology have traveled this same path demonstrated, in Vygotsky’s view, “the objective need for an explanatory principle” (p. 241). The evident lack of a satisfactory general explanatory principle showed the need for an adequate “general psychology,” one that would differ from the empirical branches of psychology not quantitatively, but qualitatively (p. 245). Such a general psychology would deal not with abstractions handled logically, but with “concepts of a higher order” in which “reality is represented in another way than in the concepts of an empirical science” (p. 248). It was such a general psychology that Vygotsky intended to define.

The Dualism of Psychology

In Vygotsky’s diagnosis, psychology suffered from a fundamental problem. Behind all its manifold positions and camps, “contemporary psychology – this doctrine of a soul without a soul – is intrinsically contradictory, is divided into two parts” (Vygotsky, 1926–27/2004, p. 300). “Two psychologies exist—a natural scientific, materialistic one and a spiritualistic one” (p. 299), and “the two struggling tendencies are deeply and with objective necessity rooted in the development of psychology” (p. 305).

He offered a detailed review of the various ways in which this underlying dualism was manifest. I touch briefly on only two examples: Behaviorism had seemed a profound alternative to introspectionism but in fact had 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: Explanatory psychology and descriptive psychology (Husserl’s phenomenology) were merely mirror images.

Driven by Practical Concerns

This contradiction had existed in psychology for a long time, but Vygotsky (1926–27/2004) saw it as having come to a head. Applied psychology—in the shape of “industrial, educational, political, or military” (p. 304) and other fields—was the “driving force” behind “the exacerbation and bifurcation of dualism” into a “crisis” (p. 303). “Let us say right away that the main driving force of the crisis in its final phase is the development of applied psychology as a whole” (p. 303). Academic psychology had been “somewhat disdainful” toward applied psychology, viewing it merely as an inexact science. But applied psychology had taken “the leading role in the development of our science” (p. 304). Vygotsky emphasized that “the importance of the new practical psychology for the whole science cannot be exaggerated. The psychologist might dedicate a hymn to it” (p. 304). It compelled psychology to incorporate practical skills and experience acquired over thousands of years. Psychology now “attempts not so much to explain the mind but to understand and master it” (p. 304). Practice was the “highest test” of theory; it “sets the tasks and serves as the supreme judge of theory, as its truth criterion” (p. 304).

Applied psychology would also be the impetus for resolution of the crisis: “Thus it will be in practice that the contradictions of psychology will be overcome” (Vygotsky, 1926–27/2004, p. 305); it “not only led to the development of the crisis, but continues determining its further course and fate” (p. 308). In particular, practical psychology was advancing the development of

methodology: “The most complex contradictions of psychological methodology are transferred to the grounds of practice and only there can they be solved. There the debate stops being fruitless, it comes to an end” (p. 305). The appropriate methodology of psychology, and the way forward for the science, would be established by the practical goals of applied psychology.

A Qualitative Leap: The Butterfly Leaves the Cocoon

Vygotsky employed several striking images to describe the resolution of the crisis and the creation of a new psychology. The first was of surgery. The crisis marked a moment in the history of psychology when its contradictions could finally be resolved, but a “rupture” was required, in which the idealist psychology was sliced away and only a materialist psychology remained. What was called for was not an “agreement” between the two fundamentally opposing positions, for “only a rupture and the selection of a single psychology will provide the way out of the crisis” (Vygotsky, 1926–27/2004, p. 309). It was “the fate and destiny of one of the psychologies” to survive while the other withered:

Following Spinoza, we have compared our science to a mortally ill patient who looks for an unreliable medicine. Now we see that it is only the surgeon’s knife which can save the situation. A bloody operation is immanent. Many textbooks we will have to rend in twain, like the veil in the temple, many phrases will lose their head or legs, other theories will be slit in the belly. We are only interested in the border, the line of the rupture, the line which will be described by the future knife. (p. 323)

It would be necessary, Vygotsky (1926–27/2004) insisted, “to cut the living tissue of psychology, cutting it as it were into two heterogeneous bodies which grew together by mistake” (p. 322). The result would be a new “general psychology” free from dualism and contradiction. This one psychology would achieve the “dialectic unity of methodology and practice. . . . This rupture began, continues, and will be completed along the lines of *practice*” (p. 309). Here Vygotsky’s image shifted from illness to childbirth. “Psychology,” he wrote, “is pregnant with a general discipline but has not yet delivered it” (p. 232). The butterfly was about to leave the cocoon; the nestling was about to depart the nest. Practical psychology had brought psychology to a point of no return. It “is pressing psychology heavily and pushing it to split into two sciences. It guarantees the right development of materialistic psychology in the future” (p. 308).

So the creation of general psychology would involve slicing apart the two contradictory psychologies and delivering a materialist science that unified methodology and practice. It is important to emphasize that “methodology” was not viewed by Vygotsky as merely a matter of technique: He described methodology as “the theory of scientific method,” “built on a historical foundation” (p. 236), in which “practice and philosophy are becoming” united (p. 308).

The crisis in psychology was a sign, then, that the time was ripe for something new. Wertsch (1985) suggested that the new Soviet Union immediately after the 1917 revolution

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. (p. 1)

To characterize the opportunity only in terms of what Vygotsky was “asked” to do would be misleading, however. Vygotsky himself evidently considered the opportunity to be provided by the historical moment itself—by the fact that he lived at a time of profoundly significant social change, which both required and made possible a new form of scientific investigation. “We have, thus, arrived at an indisputably historic situation” (1926–27/2004, p. 198). Vygotsky wrote that

our science will enter the new society on the threshold of which it begins to take shape. Our science could not and cannot develop in the old society. We cannot master the truth about personality and personality itself so long as mankind has not mastered the truth about society and society itself. In contrast, in the new society our science will take a central place in life. “The leap from the kingdom of necessity into the kingdom of freedom” inevitably puts the question of the mastery of our own being, of its subjection to the self, on the agenda. . . . It will indeed be the last science in the historical or prehistorical period of mankind. The new society will create the new man. When one mentions the remolding of man as an indisputable trait *of* the new mankind and the artificial creation of a new biological type, then this will be the only and first species in biology which will create itself. . . . In the future society, psychology will indeed be the science of the new man. Without this the perspective of Marxism and the history of science would not be complete. (p. 343)

It was Marx who had “mastered the truth about society and society itself.” Now a Marxist psychology could “master the truth about personality and personality itself” (p. 343).

Mastering Necessity to Achieve Freedom

The notion that the study of history enables humans to make the “leap” from being objects of the historical process to becoming its agents was central to Vygotsky’s conception of history, and we see that it was also central to his accounts of child development. Vygotsky was quoting Engels (1877/1966), writing on the relation of freedom and necessity:

Men’s own social organisation which has hitherto stood in opposition to them as if arbitrarily decreed by Nature and history, will then become the voluntary act of men themselves. The objective, external forces which have hitherto dominated history, will then pass under the control of men themselves. It is only from this point that men, with full consciousness, will fashion their own history; it only from this point that the social causes set in motion by men will have, predominantly and in constantly increasing measure, the effects willed by men. It is humanity’s leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom. (pp. 301–302)

In this conception of history, freedom and necessity are interrelated in complex ways. The scientific study of the objective laws of history enables us, seemingly paradoxically, to use these laws in order to become free. We can change from being the objects of history to being its self-conscious agents. It is the very necessity of these laws that permits freedom: Once we identify them we can master them. Indeed our scientific knowledge is itself a necessary product of history. Engels (1877/1966) attributed this view to Hegel:

Hegel was the first to state correctly the relation between freedom and necessity. To him, freedom is appreciation of necessity. “Necessity is *blind* only in so far as it is not understood.” Freedom does not consist in the dream of independence of 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 real knowledge of the subject. (p. 125)

The reference here is to a passage in Hegel's (1812/1904) *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* where he rejects both blind determinism and a completely free divine providence:

Necessity is blind only so long as it is not understood. There is nothing therefore more mistaken than the charge of blind fatalism made against the Philosophy of History, when it takes for its problem to understand the necessity of every event. . . . If man saw, on the contrary, that whatever happens to him is only the outcome of himself, and that he only bears his own guilt, he would stand free, and in everything that came upon him would have the consciousness that he suffered no wrong. . . . It is their view of necessity, therefore, which is at the root of the content and discontent of men, and which in that way determines their destiny itself. (pp. 269, 271)

Vygotsky was extending a powerful line of analysis. Marxism had already provided the knowledge needed to control social organization and make a new kind of society. What was now needed—and now possible—was “the mastery of our own being”: the control of human psychological organization and the making of “the new man.” The focus of the new general psychology would be “the laws . . . which govern the bodily and mental existence of men themselves.” Knowledge of these laws would make man “architect of his own fortune” (Hegel, 1812/1904, p. 271).

Of course there would be obstacles along the way. Marx (1867/1906) 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. (pp. 14–15)

Vygotsky can be seen as aiming to lessen the birth-pangs of the new socialist Soviet Union by providing the tools with which to form the “new man” needed for such a society. Luria (1979) wrote of the efforts at “a scientific reconstruction of life” (p. 30) that started after the October Revolution. Yaroshevsky (1989) insisted that 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” (p. 66) 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” (p. 66). The new psychology would be a central tool for the new society. With its aid, the “new man” could self-consciously grasp and master the laws of his own formation.

VYGOTSKY'S CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

The *Crisis* is indeed a good place to begin, because we find Vygotsky not simply talking about history but *doing* history. Yaroshevsky (1989) called him “the first Soviet philosopher and historian of psychology” (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. Recall that “the only science is history.” It was crucial to identify the “historical foundation” on which to build the methodology that would be central to a Marxist psychology. For Vygotsky, creating a Marxist psychology was itself a “historical task.” A historical analysis was necessary to

see the lawfulness of the clash of ideas and opinions that is taking place . . . see an orderly blueprint of the fundamental options concerning the development of the science, a system of the objective tendencies which are inherent in the historical tasks brought forward by the development of the science and which act behind the backs of the various investigators and theorists with the force of a steel spring. (Vygotsky, 1926–27/2004, p. 253)

To analyze the history of psychology, then, was to disclose its underlying objective tendencies and trace the path these had determined. Knowledge of the historical laws of psychology enabled recognition and diagnosis of its crisis. The historical meaning of this crisis was the underlying dualism of psychology, the contradiction at its heart, which practical concerns had tested and exacerbated. This is evidently a “Marxist” history, though it may owe much to Hegel, Lenin, Trotsky, and others.³

Talk of crisis, which might at first glance seem merely a rhetorical strategy in tune with the revolutionary talk of the time, had for Vygotsky a crucial “methodological” significance. Understanding the logic behind the scenes made it possible to create something new: “It points to the possibility of a scientific methodology built on a historical foundation” (Vygotsky, 1926–27/2004, p. 236). The “historical task” became clear: the “realization of psychology as a science.” This science would not follow automatically; its existence was not guaranteed. Human action was needed, human will and determination; the surgeon must act on the basis of the diagnosis. But knowing the history of psychology offered the possibility of mastering it. Awareness of the laws of its objective tendencies offered the opportunity to finally break free from them. For psychology, there could be an end to its contradictions; its dualisms could be transcended through the creation of a general psychology. No third way was possible; a qualitative leap must take place in which idealism was cut away. There would be, then, an end to the history of psychology.⁴

In Soviet Marxism, inquiry—both philosophy and science (and the Russian term for science, *nauka*, signifies something much broader than the natural sciences)—was the activity of grasping and understanding the logic of history (Bakhurst, 1991). Marxism is a philosophy of history,

³This historical approach was of course further developed by Luria, Leontiev, Holzkamp, and others. My discussion in this article is limited, however, to Vygotsky’s formulation of general psychology and not to the way his project was carried on.

⁴Did Vygotsky read Marx and Hegel as believing that there will be an *end* to history? This is a complex topic, which I address in Packer (2006).

and a historically situated philosophy. At the same time it is also a philosophy of practice, and a practical philosophy. The “historical task” was also a practical task: “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, 1926/1997a, pp. 9–10).

THE HISTORICAL TASK: A GENUINE MARXIST PSYCHOLOGY

In *Crisis* we also see Vygotsky’s outline of the new psychology. What was the character of this “real psychology” that could develop only in the new Soviet state, and which could “master the truth of personality and personality itself”? We have seen that crucial to the new psychology was that it would overthrow the dichotomies of psychology’s history—dualisms of physical/spiritual, mental/material, causal/semantic, explanation/understanding—in an integral and materialist conception of human being. The two psychologies would have been sliced apart, the idealistic psychology eliminated, and the empiricist psychology—the natural science—would become a materialist psychology, a dialectical science. (So it was not the case that, as Toulmin, 1978, suggested, “Vygotsky sought to reintegrate the supposedly separate sciences of ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ phenomena”). This general psychology would achieve a dialectical unity, not in a synthesis of two psychologies but in a synthesis of methodology and practice.

The link between overcoming theoretical dualism and constructing a psychology with revolutionary consequences may not be immediately apparent. What connects them is the notion that 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 we 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 (1930/1994) psychology presumed, in contrast, that a human being has “infinite potential for mastery over nature and development of his own nature.” His general psychology, then, was intended to contribute to the historical project of forging a socialist society.

This would be a Marxist psychology, though Vygotsky was reluctant to use this name. The last section of *Crisis* deals with the question of what to call this general psychology. In the precise sense, psychology still “*does not exist*” (Vygotsky, 1926–27/2004, p. 334), so a “brand-new” name was inappropriate. “We do not want to deny our past” (p. 336). Nor did it need to be distinguished from other branches of psychology with the label “objective,” or “the psychology of behavior,” because those other branches had been cut away. “Marxist psychology is not a school amidst schools, but the only genuine psychology as a science. A psychology other than this cannot exist” (p. 342). Finally, the term *Marxist* was unnecessary because it was self-evident: *Marxist* should be “synonymous with ‘truthful’ and ‘scientific’” (p. 342).

We had better let others say of our psychology that it is Marxist than call it that ourselves. We put it into practice and wait a little with the term. In the final analysis, Marxist psychology does not yet exist. It must be understood as a historical goal, not as something already given. (p. 340)

But Vygotsky also went to pains to distinguish the general psychology he envisioned from the so-called Marxist psychology of Plekhanov, Frankfurt, and others. He was critical of any effort to resolve the contradictions in psychology by offering a “third way.” “Nobody contests that the general psychology will not be a third psychology added to the two struggling parties, but one of them” (p. 299). He described in detail the problems with three different proposals for a “third way”—gestalt psychology, Stern’s “personalism,” and the “Marxist psychology” of Plekhanov and others. The latter, Vygotsky (1926–27/2004) argued, was “looking, firstly, *in the wrong place*; secondly, for *the wrong thing*; thirdly, in *the wrong manner*” (p. 312).

Plekhanov’s Marxist psychology was looking in the wrong place because he had not appreciated the need to articulate “an accomplished methodology of psychology” (Vygotsky, 1926–27/2004, p. 312). It was looking for the wrong thing by searching for a “pompous ontological formula” rather than “a formula which *would serve us* in research” (p. 312); looking impatiently for answers which would come only after many years of research. It was looking in the wrong manner by proceeding “by authoritarian principles” rather than “in a critical, free and investigative way” (p. 312). And “all these three flaws follow from a common cause: a misunderstanding of the historical task of psychology and the meaning of the crisis” (p. 313).

These Marxist psychologists had arrived at a method they called “analysis,” which involved the contemplative study of single cases. They claimed that natural science proceeds inductively, whereas the mind must be studied through analysis. In Vygotsky’s view they had succeeded only in reproducing the same old dualism. But he insisted that “the analytical method is in principle too important for the development of the whole of social psychology, to render it without striking a blow” (Vygotsky, 1926–27/2004, p. 316). He did not want to lose analysis to introspectionism, did not want to surrender it before a blow had been struck in its defense. Vygotsky argued that natural science also proceeds through the study of individual cases. It does this not to generalize by means of induction, because analysis is the “highest form” of induction, and as such it “contradicts its [induction’s] essence (repetition)” (p. 317). Analysis is a form of induction that does not require the repeated study of multiple individual cases because it studies the particular case not as a particular, but from a special viewpoint that sees the general properties that are realized in it. We establish in advance (albeit provisionally) the general class that our particular case represents. For example, by studying salivation in dogs, Pavlov had studied reflexes in general, in animals in general. “Pavlov *maximally abstracted* the phenomenon he studied from the specific conditions of the particular phenomenon. He brilliantly *perceived the general in the particular*” (Vygotsky, 1926–27/2004, p. 317). The degree of extension of such findings is determined in advance; it is not that one has to study more cases to discover how much one can generalize. Of course, Vygotsky added, to determine the limits of generalization is a tricky business, and ongoing, never final. And analysis does not lead to essences, but “generalizations which have boundaries and degrees” (p. 321).

Vygotsky (1926–27/2004), then, envisioned general psychology as a detailed study of individual cases by means of analysis and experiment (“an analysis in action”; p. 319). (He noted that he began this in his own studies of fables.) “We must reconquer the right for psychology to examine what is special, the individual as a social microcosm, as a type, as an

expression or measure of the society” (p. 317). Analysis lies at the intersection of methodology and practice: It is the exhaustive study of a single case in all its connections, taken as a social microcosm. It involves what Marx (following Hegel) called “abstraction”:

Marx [1867/1977, p. 90] says essentially the same when he compares abstraction with a microscope and chemical reactions in the natural sciences. The whole of *Das Kapital* is written according to this method. Marx analyses the “cell” of bourgeois society—the form of the commodity value—and shows that a mature body can be more easily studied than a cell. He discerns the structure of the whole social order and all economical formations in this cell. He says that ‘to the uninitiated its analysis may seem the hair-splitting of details. We are indeed dealing with details, but such details as microscopic anatomy is also dealing with.’ He who can decipher the meaning of the cell of psychology, the mechanism of one reaction, has found the key to all psychology. (p. 320)

A science, Vygotsky insisted, studies not appearances but what really exists. Optics, for example, studies mirror surfaces and light rays, not the images we see in the mirror, for the latter are phantoms. In the same way a scientific psychology must study the real processes that give rise to appearances. So any descriptive, intuitionist phenomenology that treats consciousness as only an appearance (as Frankfurt had done) must be rejected. What really exists? A materialist maintains that both the brain and consciousness exist. Vygotsky (1926–27/2004) cited Lenin (1909/1960–78) to the effect that what is matter, what is objective, is what exists independently of human consciousness. And, seemingly paradoxically, consciousness can exist outside our consciousness: For we can be conscious without being self-conscious. I can see without knowing that I see. So a general psychology can, indeed must, study consciousness as objectively existing.

But to know consciousness we cannot rely on introspection because in self-examination mind splits into subject and object: a dualism arises in the act of self-reflection. We can’t establish a psychological science on the basis of what we experience directly (as Husserl tried to do); it must be based on knowledge. “*Not a single science is possible* without separating experience from knowledge” (Vygotsky, 1926–27/2004, p. 325). Knowledge is the result of analysis.

“The only rightful application of Marxism to psychology would be to create a general psychology” (Vygotsky, 1926–27/2004, p. 329), but what this required was neither the direct application of dialectical materialism (too abstract) nor the application of historical materialism (too specific). Historical materialism was appropriate for sociology, but psychology is “in need of an as yet undeveloped but inevitable theory of biological materialism and psychological materialism as an intermediate science which explains the concrete application of the abstract theses of dialectical materialism to the given field of phenomena” (p. 330). This intermediate science would be “a critique of psychology” (p. 331); this “theory of the psychological materialism or dialectics of psychology is what I call general psychology” (p. 330). It would not take from Marx, but learn from Marx. To do this “we must create our *own Das Kapital*” (p. 330).

I do not want to learn what constitutes the mind for free, by picking out a couple of citations, I want to learn from Marx’s whole method how to build a science, how to approach the investigation of the mind. . . . *Das Kapital* must teach us many things—both because a genuine social psychology begins after *Das Kapital* and because psychology nowadays is a psychology *before Das Kapital*. (p. 331)

So the scientific analysis of the crisis provided Vygotsky with an understanding of “the historical task of psychology,” and this led him to propose a Marxist psychology which would employ a methodology of analysis and abstraction (looking in the *right place*); an ontological formula in which both brain and consciousness are real and material (looking at the *right thing*); and a “psychological materialism” informed by, but not identical with, the historical materialism of *Capital* (looking in the *right manner*). The *Crisis* must be read as a prolegomenon to this Marxist psychology: Vygotsky was explicit that much work and effort would be needed to realize it.

Vygotsky's Psychology of Child Development

From this outline it becomes clear that this general psychology *is* Vygotsky's psychology of child development. It was the investigation of the topics of psychology—memory, cognition, personality, and so on—but studied *genetically*: that is, in the history of their development. Whereas in the United States we typically view developmental psychology as a specialized subdiscipline, for Vygotsky the importance of history, of employing a genetic approach, meant that developmental psychology was the truly general form of psychology. As genetic inquiry, it too involves a conception of history.

It is also clear that Vygotsky continued to work until his death to articulate and elaborate this general psychology, and so it is impossible to evaluate it as a completed whole. But we can make some broad statements, first about the psychology itself, then about the “child history” it offers. It involved “analysis,” which as we have seen is the detailed, idiographic—one might say qualitative—study of single cases to discern general laws, the objective tendencies that underlie the manifold appearances of development (e.g., Vygotsky, 1931/1997b). It would thereby overcome the dualisms of developmental theory. It was driven by practical concerns: centrally, education and “defectology.” It sought mastery of the laws of human psychology to accomplish a qualitative transformation of the human species.

The Objective Tendencies of Child Development

Vygotsky was quite explicit that his psychology would seek explanations of mental phenomena by tracing their genesis. It was 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 need deal only with the latter. Vygotsky's view was very different: General psychology would explain psychological phenomena precisely by tracing their history, by providing a genetic account. The overall aim of Vygotsky's psychology of child development was to grasp, by means of experiment and analysis, the objective tendencies operating “behind” psychological development. Vygotsky (1926–27/2004) wrote, “A general investigation establishes, ultimately, objective laws and facts” (p. 252).

Overcoming the Dualism of Developmental Psychology

Vygotsky's child psychology sought to avoid the dualism of developmental theory. The appeal that Pavlov's work initially had for him 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 sociocultural factors so that it has become *both* biological *and* socio-cultural. Pavlov's work seemed to offer a way of overcoming the idealism of prerevolutionary Russia; reflexology was both a natural science (it offered causal explanations; it employed objective methods) and a historical science. Vygotsky wrote in his preface to *Educational Psychology* (1926/1997a), "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" (p. xvii).

The Practical Concerns of Teaching and Defectology

Vygotsky's study of children's development was driven by his practical concerns with education and defectology. Between 1917 and 1924 he worked as a teacher at state schools, including the Soviet Labor School and the Gomel Teacher College (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). In the preface to *Educational Psychology* Vygotsky (1926/1997a) wrote that the educational process was to be "understood as one involving the social re-orientation of biological forms of behavior" (p. xix). He wanted to take "the first step on the path toward the construction of an objective and rigorous scientific system of educational psychology" (p. xix). This would be an applied science, a practical science. "Now, when psychology has begun to study behavior, it is natural to wonder how to alter behavior. Educational psychology is also a science of the laws of variation of human behavior and of the means of mastering these laws" (p. 10). The study of child development would not merely generate a body of data or a detached, disinterested theory; it would be a social tool, designed to serve a practical purpose, and would be 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" (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 63). Vygotsky concluded his book with these words:

To the extent that the pedagogical process is itself transformed in the light of scientific knowledge, all idea of the foundation and nature of education has been altered. Above all, the very concept of education has expanded. The concern is not simply with education, but with the "reforging of men," in Trotsky's expression. . . . Thus does the creative nature of the educational process, directed not towards the simple cultivation of natural data, but towards the creation of "super-natural" human life, become understandable. (p. 347)

Mastery of the Laws of Psychological Development

These practical concerns were not merely the application of the laws of psychological development, but their sublation. Practice "demanded a theory 'that would bring about a subordination to and mastery over the psyche, and artificial control over behavior'" (as cited in Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 15). Ultimately, Vygotsky suggested, grasping the principles of human behavior through scientific inquiry would lead to "the artificial creation of a new biological type" (1926–27/2004, p. 343). He suggested that human control over nature, including our own nature, would become so powerful that we would 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 coworkers 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. Just as Marx had sought to understand the history of society to transform it, so general psychology sought to understand the history of human being to enable us to alter ourselves.

VYGOTSKY'S ACCOUNT OF "CHILD HISTORY"

Vygotsky's "general psychology" was, then, a developmental psychology that offered genetic accounts of psychological functions. In doing so it recounted the history of the genesis of mind—what Scribner (1985) called "child history." We must now ask what form this history took. I believe that the conception of history evident in *Crisis* shows Vygotsky's texts on child development in a new light. I have space here to offer only a few preliminary and provisional remarks, which must be developed in detail elsewhere.

Ontogenesis as the History of Consciousness, not of Knowledge

I don't think it is possible to place too much emphasis on the notion, central to Vygotsky's concept of ontogenesis, 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, our awareness of the world, 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, our consciousness of it remains the same. But like Marx and Hegel, Vygotsky saw that our consciousness develops.

We have already seen that Vygotsky considered it central to general psychology that it would deal with consciousness, scientifically rather than through introspection. He took pains to argue that consciousness is something real and objective, even material. In modern terms, consciousness is an emergent property, not an epiphenomenon. As a consequence his account of child development should be read, I suggest, not as a history of the acquisition or even the construction of knowledge, or of the appropriation of cultural tools, but as tracing the objective tendencies in the development of consciousness.

This is not the study of some inner realm, for that would amount to a relapse into dualism. Vygotsky, it is clear, wanted to locate consciousness in the *interaction* between person and environment. He cited Marx: "'My relationship to my environment', says Marx, 'is my consciousness'" (Vygotsky, 1930/1994).⁵ This focus on consciousness can be seen even in

⁵The reference seems to be to Marx and Engels (1845/1947, p. 19). Avineri (1968) considered that this "identification of human consciousness with the practical process of reality as shaped by man is Marx's epistemological and historiosophical achievement" (p. 71). Marx and Engels (1845/1947) insisted that "consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process" (p. 14). This, I would argue, is the same "radical realism" that Bakhurst (1991) found in Lenin (1909/1960–1978).

Vygotsky's earliest writing on the reflex, where he suggests that consciousness begins when a reflex is interrupted. Having come to believe that Pavlov's reflexology was still dualistic, he reworked reflex theory to overcome the distinction between subjectivity and behavior. In doing this he focused on "latent" or "interiorized" reflexes and argued that when a reflex is inhibited something is gained:

Because of the subdivision and suppression of a reflex . . . our reaction gains in terms of the flexibility, subtlety, and complexity of its interrelations with the elements of the world. . . . Thought plays the part of an advance guide of our behavior . . . [and] all distinction between the deliberate or conscious type of behavior and the reflexive or instinctive type vanishes. (Vygotsky, 1926/1997a, pp. 165–166)

Between stimulus and inhibited response an "inner space" is formed that is truly psychological, not physiological, as stimulus and response, which in the reflex had been connected in a direct, unmediated way, are now mediated. This focus on consciousness continued in Vygotsky's later work.⁶

Development as Sublation, not Internalization

Vygotsky saw child development as a process through which contradictions are overcome. He described this in terms of Hegel's dialectical notion of *aufheben*, often (but inconsistently) translated as "sublation." Vygotsky (1931/1993) explained the notion with reference to two Russian terms, *sniatie* and *skhoronit*:

Allow me to say a few words with respect to the concept known as the *sublation* of biological laws. The Russian word for this term, *sniatie*, is sometimes misunderstood. It was taken from the German *aufheben* but the German conveys a double meaning. When the word *sublation* is used in relation to some organic feature, this does not mean that this feature is eliminated. Instead, the feature is sublated and preserved, embedded somewhere within; it recedes into the background, yielding to those regular features which arose at later stages. (p. 124)

From a translator's note we learn that *sniatie* is translated as "taking down," "reaping," or "relieving." Elsewhere Vygotsky (1931/1997b) wrote,

Hegel indicates that we must remember the dual meaning of the German expression "to remove." In this word, we understand, first, "removal," "rejection," and, according to this, we say that the laws are revoked, "cancelled," but the same word also means "preserved," and we say that we will "save" something. The dual meaning of the term "remove" is usually translated well into Russian by the word *skhoronit* ' [to bury], which also has a positive and a negative sense—destruction and preservation. (p. 81)

Whatever the terms used, it is clear that Vygotsky viewed child development as a process in which earlier forms are both overcome and preserved. Kozulin (1986) wrote that "Vygotsky used the Hegelian term . . . to designate the transformation of natural functions into cultural ones" (p. xxv). In the history of human society, biological evolution has been sublated (not replaced

⁶If consciousness is a central component of "child history," we need to take care with translations of Vygotsky's writing. A translator's note in *Thinking & Speech* points out, "By the phrase 'conscious awareness' we gloss the Russian *osaznanie*, which Vygotsky carefully and consistently uses and distinguishes from the term *soznanie* or 'consciousness.' Vygotsky clarifies the difference between the two at several points in the text. . . . [However] the earlier translation of this volume . . . rendered both terms as 'consciousness,' introducing a confusion not to be found in the original Russian text" (Vygotsky, 1934/1987, p. 388).

but *aufgehoben*) by cultural evolution. In the personal history of consciousness, similarly, natural functions are sublated (not replaced but *aufgehoben*) by sociocultural functions. Hegel's (1807/1967) phenomenology of mind was a recounting of the dialectical development of consciousness from simple sense-certainty onwards. For Vygotsky too, the logic, the personal history, of child development is a sublation that moves from unconscious reflexes to consciousness of objects, to self-consciousness and self-mastery, and finally to scientific thinking which is conscious of the world's objectivity. Vygotsky offered an account of how the child, a biological organism, becomes first conscious, then self-conscious, and finally achieves a scientific form of consciousness, as a consequence of living in culture.

The genesis of the "higher psychological functions" is described in the same terms. Even with these sophisticated, higher order functions, stimulus-response connections do not cease to operate, rather they "are buried in the higher form of behavior, that is, they appear in it in a subordinate and cryptic form" (Vygotsky, 1931/1997b, p. 81). Among other implications, this suggests that Vygotsky never "abandoned the view that complex behaviors are constructed on the foundation of stimulus response units" (Minick, 1987, p. 23). Notions of foundation and construction must be considered dialectically.

Sublation also occurs in the relationship between self and others. Of crucial importance for the growth of consciousness is the fact that we exist for others. As early as his *Educational Psychology* Vygotsky (1926/1997a) wrote that "we are conscious of ourselves only to the extent we are other for ourselves, i.e., somehow alien to ourselves" (p. 172). This same principal is at work, I propose, in what Vygotsky (1931/1997b) called "the general genetic law of cultural development" (p. 106). One of the most-cited passages from Vygotsky (1930–31/1998) introduces this law⁷:

Every function in the cultural development of the child appears on the stage twice, in two forms—at first as social, then as psychological; at first as a form of cooperation between people, as a group, an intermental category, then as a means of individual behavior, as an intramental category. This is the general law for the construction of all higher mental functions. (p. 169)

This is generally read as a statement about "internalization," the change from "intermental" to "intramental" understood as a move from "outer" to "inner." Yet strangely, the example usually offered to illustrate the law—a child reaches unsuccessfully for an object; their mother retrieves it; subsequently the reach becomes a pointing gesture—seems to involve nothing becoming "inner." I suggest that the law should be read instead as a statement about the *social character* of consciousness. Vygotsky (1931/1997b) introduced the example of pointing with these words: "All cultural development of the child passes through three basic stages that can be described in the following way, using Hegel's analysis" (p. 104). And he followed it with these words:

Thus we might say that through others we become ourselves, and this rule refers not only to the individual as a whole, but also to the history of each separate function. This also comprises the essence of the process of cultural development expressed in a purely logical form. The individual becomes *for himself* what he is *in himself* through what he manifests *for others* [italics added]. This is also the process of forming the individual. (p. 105)

This indicates that what Vygotsky meant by "Hegel's analysis" was the dialectic of "in-itself," "for-others," and "for-itself." The child is at first conscious of the object but not conscious

of his or her own reaching movement toward it. The movement is “in-itself.” Other people, however, interpret the reaching and grasp its intention, so it is a direction “for-others.” Their reaction enables the child to become conscious of this movement, which now becomes a gesture consciously directed toward the people who can provide the object. The movement has become “for-itself.” The “internal” stage is reached when the child recognizes the social significance of his or her own reaching movement. And “the child is the last to recognize his gesture” (p. 105). Finally the movement becomes an abbreviated gesture the child makes for himself or herself.

But movement becomes a gesture for oneself in no other way than being, at first, direction for oneself, that is, objectively having all the necessary functions for direction and gesture for others, that is, being thought of and understood by the people nearby as a direction. (p. 105)

Even in his discussions of “inner speech,” the transition that Vygotsky emphasized is not speech to oneself becoming silent but the moment at which speech to others become speech to self. He (1930–31/1998) wrote that “egocentric speech is a transitional form from external speech to internal” (p. 170). That is, speech directed toward others changes into speech out loud directed toward self, before it becomes silent speech directed toward self, and “the child’s egocentric speech is speech for himself that fulfills a mental function completely different from that of external speech” (p. 170).

The function of speech has changed *before* it becomes silent. It makes sense then that Vygotsky wrote that “speech becomes internal mentally sooner than it becomes internal physiologically” (p. 170). To become “internal mentally” is to change from other-directed to egocentric, that is, to turn from directing others to directing oneself. To become “internal physiologically” is to change from speaking aloud to speaking silently. The first of these is a change in consciousness, the change from “in-itself” to “for-itself” (by way of “for-others”); the second is a change in physiology. It is consequently ambiguous to say that “Vygotsky claimed that inner speech enables humans to plan to regulate their action” (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992, p. 550); it depends on which “inner” one is referring to. Speech that is aloud but egocentric does this first; what enables planning is not that speech be silent but that it be self-directed.

What Vygotsky emphasized, then, about child development was not the transfer of something “outside” to “inside,” but what he (1925/1999) called the “sociologising” of consciousness, the “primacy” of the “social moment” of consciousness:

We are conscious of ourselves because we are conscious of others; and in an analogous manner, we are conscious of others because in our relationship to ourselves we are the same as others in their relationship to us. I am aware of myself only to the extent that I am as another for myself, i.e., only to the extent that I can perceive anew my own reflexes as new irritants. Between the fact that I can repeat aloud a word spoken silently to myself and the fact that I can repeat a word spoken by another there is no essential difference, nor is there any principal difference in their mechanisms: both are reversible reflexes—irritants. Therefore, a direct consequence of this hypothesis will be the “sociologising” of all consciousness, the recognition that the social moment of consciousness is primary in time and in fact. The individual aspect of consciousness is constructed as derived and secondary, based on the social and exactly according to its model.

Self-Mastery: A Qualitative Leap to the Higher Psychological Functions

I have argued that Vygotsky's Marxism is visible in his conception of history. Central to this conception is the belief that the scientific study of history enables us to know the laws of its objective tendencies and so to sublimate them, so that we move from being objects of history to being its agents. Vygotsky wrote of "child history" in the same way, as a dialectical relationship between necessity and freedom, determinism and agency, causality and will. As Bruner (1987) noted, "I think that Vygotsky *had* to confront the issue of will . . . because he was so dedicated to the concept of self-regulation, a concept that demands one take a stand on the issue of will" (p. 15).

Vygotsky drew an explicit parallel between the mastery over its history that a society as a whole can achieve and the self-mastery achievable by 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). Yaroshevsky (1989) maintained that Vygotsky's interest in Spinoza and Shakespeare demonstrated that even as a young man, at the age of 17, he

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. (p. 35)

Will and self-mastery are right at the center of Vygotsky's account of the genesis of the higher psychological functions. He viewed the ability to control oneself, to master one own natural psychological functions, such as memory and perception, as what makes possible these higher functions. In these higher processes the individual is not simply using more sophisticated forms of cognition, they are *acting upon themselves*. Complex thought is a kind of reflexive action. It is important to recognize that with this formulation of the higher processes Vygotsky (1934/1987) maintained a close connection between thought and action:

The higher form of activity is present wherever there is mastery of processes of one's own behavior and, first of all, its reactive functions. In subjecting to his will the process of his own reactions, man enters in this way into a substantially new relation with the environment, comes to a new functional exploitation of elements in the environment as stimuli-signs which he uses, depending on external means, and directs and controls his own behavior, controls himself from outside, compelling stimuli-signs to affect him, and elicits reactions that he desires. (p. 63)

There are links between the development of consciousness, sublation, the social moment, and self-mastery. Self-mastery is a matter of achieving consciousness of one's own psychological processes, and this requires that consciousness have a social moment:

At first, every higher form of behavior is assimilated by the child exclusively from the external aspect. From the objective aspect, this form of behavior already includes in itself all the elements of the higher functions, but subjectively, for the child himself who has as yet not yet become conscious of it, it is a purely natural, innate method of behavior. It is only due to the fact that other people fill the natural form of behavior with a certain social content, for others rather than for the child himself, that it acquires the significance of a higher function. Finally, in the process of a long development, the child becomes conscious of the structure of this function and begins to control his own internal operations and to direct them. (Vygotsky, 1930–31/1998, p. 171)

The heart of the issue is not internalization but coming to act on oneself as one acted on others, or as others acted on one. One must exert one's will on oneself. One must master the objective laws of one's own psychological functioning, and this requires an external, social stage:

Every higher mental function necessarily passes through an external stage of development because function is primarily social. This is the center of the whole problem of internal and external behavior. Many authors have long since pointed to the problem of interiorization, internalizing behavior. . . . But we have something else in mind when we speak of the external stage in the history of the cultural development of the child. For us to call a process 'external' means to call it "social." Every higher mental function was external because it was social before it became an internal, strictly mental function; it was formerly a social relation of two people. The means of acting on oneself is initially a means of acting on others or a means of action of others on the individual. (Vygotsky, 1931/1997, p. 105)

Scientific concepts, too, are consequences of self-mastery. Here too, Vygotsky has, I believe, been misunderstood. Often his position is taken to be that concepts are based on verbal thinking and word-meaning. Words are indeed involved, but again Vygotsky's emphasis is elsewhere:

Fundamental to the process of concept formation is the individual's mastery of his own mental processes through the functional use of the word or sign. This mastery of the processes of one's own behavior through auxiliary means attains its final form only in adolescence. (Vygotsky, 1934/1987, p. 132)

Van der Veer and Valisner (1991) suggested that "scientific concepts . . . lead the child to the conscious realization and deliberate use of his own mental operations" (p. 277), but the reverse was Vygotsky's view: Concepts *require* deliberate selection and attention, and follow from control and mastery of the processes of one's own thinking (cf. 1930–31/1998, p. 64ff; 1931/1997b, p. 203ff). When scientifically informed educators foster the higher psychological functions, they do so by fostering a human consciousness capable of free and deliberate choice.

VYGOTSKY'S RELEVANCE

I have suggested that Vygotsky's psychology was Marxist primarily in its conception of history. I have described this conception as it is evident in the analysis and diagnosis of the crisis in psychology, and the creation of a Marxist, general psychology as the historical task defined by this crisis. I have outlined how this general psychology was itself located in history, part of a historical project, and I have sketched the account of "child history" that Vygotsky began to write. I have proposed that when read in light of the conception of history evident in *Crisis*, child development is a history of consciousness, of sublation, and of self-mastery.

With such a conception of the way in which a child develops to become a competent adult member of society, exercising appropriate mastery of his or her own conduct and activity, Vygotsky was indeed "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 bretheren" (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 80), working "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” (Scriber, 1985, p. 138). Vygotsky viewed each of these strands as organized by hidden objective tendencies that could be disclosed through scientific analysis. Each was riven by contradictions that could be, indeed must be, sublated. And in each, sublation required an act of will, of mastery. The revolutionary psychologist could master the history of psychology and create a new, general Marxist psychology, a genetic investigation of the truly human psychological functions. This general psychology would trace the history in which individual human beings live at the intersection of biology and culture, and in moments of sublation master their own objective psychological tendencies and achieve the fruits of self-mastery. This general psychology, through its analysis of this ontogenetic history, would enable educators, defectologists and others to collectively transform the very nature of the human species.

In several respects this is an unfamiliar kind of psychology, based as it is on a conception of history unfamiliar to many Western psychologists. Future scholarship must explore the sources of this conception, in Marx, Hegel, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, and elsewhere. In the West, practice is conceptually separated from theory. Theory is generally understood as a purely conceptual structure that represents objective knowledge of the external world and makes testable predictions. Once a theory has been developed, tested, and survived attempts at its falsification, its practical applications may be explored, but these applications are secondary; they are not inherent in the theory. 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.

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 such application would be quite independent of the truth or falsity of the theory. But Vygotsky himself viewed his work quite differently, I suggest. He viewed theory as grounded in, and emerging from, the specific circumstances of a time and place. Theory for a Marxist psychologist is a tool, forged to deal with particular problems of practical, even political, import. This is scientific inquiry with an emancipatory interest (Habermas, 1971).

Vygotsky would surely not have sanctioned the application to the modern United States of a general psychology created in Soviet Russia. 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, abstracting his conceptions from their original context and inserting them in a new location, unchanged. We are, after all, in the heart of the economic system that Vygotsky believed had been overthrown and left in the dust by Soviet Russia.

At the same time, Vygotsky's psychology provides us with an exemplary model of inquiry that is practical and political in the broad sense of the word. The notion of studying development to influence it in such a way as to foster children's capacity for freedom is a powerful one, worthy of emulation. *His was* a rich and provocative psychological project, addressing pressing practical issues, conscious of its place in the discipline, eager to transcend the divide between theoretical and applied science. Here in the United States, and surely elsewhere, we need such a tool. But it would be optimistic and perhaps naïve to think that we can use the one that Vygotsky fashioned, unmodified.

In particular, we have to ask whether Vygotsky's conception of history is one we should adopt, or adapt. This conception of history underlies two major problems in his psychology (cf. Packer, 2006). The first is his treatment of cultural differences as historical differences, and in particular the characterization of "primitive" forms of consciousness. The second is the abstract character of his account of child development, and specifically its lack of attention to social class. These are flaws in the tool he fashioned that should alert us to the need to construct our own. But he has shown us one way to do this, one way to make a sociocultural psychology that is suitable for our time and place. Is Vygotsky relevant? Certainly, but as a model to learn from, not a decontextualized theory to be transplanted.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An earlier version of this article was presented at the American Educational Research Association conference in San Francisco, April 2006. I thank Lilian Pozzer-Ardenghi and Bruno Jayme for their helpful reviews of an earlier draft.

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