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Vygotsky and the History of Pedology

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ABSTRACT This paper briefly discusses the growth and demise of pedology within the context of the early history of child study in Europe, the influence of Vygotsky's writings upon Soviet defectology and the struggle of Soviet psychology for its Marxist-dialectical identity.

Readers, at least of American publications, must have noticed an increased interest in Soviet psychology in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Brozek and Mecacci, 1974; Brozek and Slobin, 1972; Cole, 1984; Holowinsky, 1978, 1985, 1986; Kozulin, 1986; Rahman, 1973; Razran, 1971; Russell, 1984; Staud and Misiak, 1984). It is likely that future reviewers will refer to the 1980s as the decade of increased international interest in psychology and education. 'International' became a popular word, with some journals emphasizing international in their title. The most recent addition to this group is the *International Journal of Special Education*, published in Canada.

Perhaps no other Soviet psychologist has generated as much interest among American psychologists as did L.S. Vygotsky. His contributions have been widely discussed both in the USA and USSR, and a number of his works have been translated into English.

Soviet sources (Tautundzhian, 1983) list forty-nine separate references in English to Vygotsky. Tautundzhian (1983) also mentions M. Cole and J.S. Bruner as prominent researchers of Vygotsky's works. Recently, Vygotsky received a distinctly unique honor in

the Soviet Union as psychologist. In December 1981, a conference was organized in Moscow devoted entirely to his works. Nineteen papers and six panels discussed in depth his contributions. This was the first such conference in the USSR organized to honor one psychologist (Radzikhovsky, 1982). Yet, in the 1930s, at the height of criticism of pedology, Vygotsky's work was pronounced as 'eclectic' and 'erroneous' (Kozulin, 1986) and parts of his book *Thought and Speech* were prohibited from publication (Kolbanovsky, 1968). Vygotsky's work *Historical Meaning of Psychological Crisis* written in 1926 had not been published by 1979 (Radzikhovsky, 1979). The years of Vygotsky's professional activity (1924–34) were the most turbulent in Soviet psychology. Those were also the years of the growth and demise of pedology in the Soviet Union, the development of which has yet to be adequately discussed in American psychological literature.

The roots of child study in Europe can be traced to the philosophical influence of empiricism. It is evident that empiricism was very strong in Europe in the nineteenth century and it did influence the thinking of Itard and

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Seguin, pioneers in the education and training of handicapped and mentally retarded children (Spitz, 1986). Toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the strong movement known as *pedology* emerged in Europe. It was defined as the study of the child from all facets (Depaepe, 1985). In the Fall of 1909, with the help of a group of teachers in Lviv (at that time in Austro-Hungary) Professor Twardoswki organized a pedological society. Next year, a similar society was organized in Cracow (Grudzinska, 1912).

A number of noted journals of child study were in existence at that time. In the USA, G. Stanley Hall began publication in 1891 of *Pedagogical Seminary*. In the United Kingdom, *The Paedologist* (later renamed *The Child Study*) was published. In Germany, Meumann and Lay edited the journal *Die Experimentelle Pädagogik*. In France, A. Binet began to publish some of his earlier works in *L'Année Psychologique*. Pedologists maintained that child study depended on three major variables: Biological, Psychological and Sociological. There was an attempt to design pedology in the likeness of natural sciences. The first World Congress of Pedology, held in 1911 in Brussels, Belgium, was attended by nearly 300 participants representing twenty-two countries (Depaepe, 1985). Among noted speakers who addressed the congress was V.M. Bekhtiariev, founder of the School of Reflexology. In 1912, in Brussels, the congress provided initiative for the establishment of the *Faculté Internationale de Pédologie* (Depaepe, 1985).

In the academic year 1913–14, there were thirty students in attendance representing a number of European countries. Huerta (as reported by Depaepe, 1985) suggested that the field of study of pedology should be divided into three areas, which he named: Pure, Applied and Auxiliary. Some examples of these areas of study include: *pure* — anatomy of children, physiology, child pathology, characterology, paedometry, psychosomatic study; *applied* — child care, paediatrics, art of child evaluation; *auxiliary* — anatomy, histology, cytology, biophysics, general biology, psychology, sociology. The First World War and political upheavals in Europe interrupted the work

of the *Faculté Internationale de Pédologie*.

Interest in pedology manifested itself considerably within emerging Soviet psychology and education in the 1920s. A number of reasons accounted for this interest. It should be remembered that Bekhtiariev, himself, was one of the pioneers of European pedology. In 1912, Bekhtiariev edited the *Journal of Psychology, Criminal Anthropology, and Pedology*. There was a general climate in the Soviet Union of the 1920s which fostered attempts at child study and restructuring of education upon materialistic, empirical and scientific foundations. Finally, an appropriate climate for child study was created by the Communist Party's explicit need to develop a 'new' person, the builder of Communist society.

It is clear that the growth and demise of pedology in the Soviet Union can be understood only within the context of Soviet psychology, Marxist ideology and the socio-political realities of that time. As described by Leontiev and Luria (1956), already during the initial years of Soviet rule a group of revolutionary psychologists began a campaign for a Marxist orientation in psychology. Chelpanov became their target, who at that time was director of the Psychological Institute of Moscow University. The struggle was led by Kornilov, who was soon joined by a group of young psychologists, among them, Vygotsky. Kornilov argued in the 1920s that for psychology to become Marxist it must be materialistic, political and dialectical. He is now considered the first Russian psychologist who became Soviet in the political as well as ideological sense (Orlova, 1979). In 1923, at the first Russian psychoneurological congress, Kornilov accused Chelpanov of being an adherent of Wundt's introspective psychology and an adversary of behaviorism. Chelpanov was removed as the director of the Institute of Psychology and replaced by Kornilov. The intensity of the initial polemics could perhaps best be illustrated by the fact that during the decade, 1920–30, four different orientations evolved within Soviet psychology. McLeish (1975) lists those as: Sechenov's and Bekhtiariev's reflexology; Pavlov's conditional reflexes; Kornilov's reactology; and Vygotsky's cultural-historical emphasis.

Holowinsky: Vygotsky and Pedology

Perhaps no other psychologist achieved such a degree of influence in the Soviet Union, and became as widely known in the West, as Lev S. Vygotsky. His achievement is even more remarkable when we consider that Vygotsky died at the age of thirty-eight and published most of his works in the ten-year period (1924–34).

Vygotsky was born on 5 November 1896 in Orsha, near Homel, presently Belorussian SSR. He completed high school in 1913, and graduated from Moscow University in 1917. For the next six years (1917–23) he was a teacher of literature and psychology at a high school in the city of Homel (Cole, 1978). Perhaps under the influence of his literary interests, Vygotsky's first paper, written in 1915, was a psychological discussion of Hamlet. In 1924, Vygotsky participated in a psychoneurological convention and delivered a paper on methodology of psychological and reflexological research (Radzikhovsky, 1979). As a result of his presentation, he was invited to join the Moscow Institute of Psychology. At the Institute, Vygotsky concentrated his efforts on the study of memory, attention, will, arithmetical operations and comprehension of language (Kozulin, 1986). He played a central role in the establishment and development of Soviet psychology (Smirnov, 1967).

Vygotsky is credited by Leontiev, his former colleague and a prominent Soviet psychologist, with introducing the emphasis upon *a tool* as a crucial concept in the understanding of human behavior. This was an important notion, since within the context of Marxist philosophy it is the discovery by human beings of 'the tool of production', which led to the sociocultural evolution. As a result, a so-called instrumental emphasis in Soviet psychology emerged in the early 1920s, before the cultural-historical emphasis became firmly established.

Leontiev (1986) points out that the classical Stimulus → Response reflexological paradigm was changed to read: 'Not from stimulus to reaction, but from stimulus through a tool (represented by a triangle) to reaction' (Leontiev, 1986:110).

Vygotsky introduced into psychology an historical approach to the understanding of human mental development, and the study of

children's mental development based upon Marxist ideology. He maintained that from a psychological point of view a physical defect has meaning as a disturbance of the social form of behavior. He regarded training and education as a systematic, purposeful and conscious influence on the natural growth process of the child's organism. Leontiev and Luria (1956), former students and co-workers of Vygotsky, provided some explanation for his psychological position. They consider Vygotsky as one of the first Soviet psychologists who recognized the importance of the study of consciousness for materialistic psychology. He pointed out that by ignoring the problem of consciousness, psychology ignored complex problems of human behavior. By excluding the question of consciousness from the realm of scientific psychology, one perpetuates the dualism of subjective psychology.

Leontiev (1986) tells us that Soviet psychologists recognized a need to emphasize in the behavior and reaction of humans this aspect of behavior; one that definitely distinguishes human behavior from that of other animals. It is of interest that the question of consciousness, as a valid problem for psychology to study, has recently been suggested again (e.g. Jennings, 1986). Furthermore, Vygotsky maintained that Marxist psychology must be able to explain all phenomena of human behavior. Vygotsky described his psychological theory as cultural-historical, viewing development of all higher cortical functions within the context of social evolution. His interest in developmental psychology enhanced his interest in child study or pedology.

Pedology occupied a considerable and distinguished place in the psychological literature of the Soviet Union of the 1920s. It became dominant in pedagogical institutes, in educational establishments, and in the professional literature. However, some Soviet writers (Kolbanovsky, 1968) have suggested that a lack of a critical attitude toward pedology soon led to abuses and 'mistakes'. In 1925, the first edition of Blonsky's *Pedology* appeared and in a few months there was a demand for a second edition. Luria's positive evaluation of pedology, written in 1928, is a characteristic indication of its high esteem in

the 1920s. He stated that much has been done in Russia in the field of pedology. Luria described pedology as a science of developing organism and its somatic, psychological and social aspects. He underscored that: 'It is the first time that pedology has been regarded not as child psychology and not as experimental pedagogy, but as a genetic science of the growth of the child' (Luria, 1928:350).

However, almost from the beginning of the growth of pedology, there were forces in the Soviet Union opposed to it. It is somewhat curious that only three years after the publication of his well-accepted book on pedology, Blonsky indicated that he no longer considered himself a pedologist (Nikolskaya, 1974). It was not until the 1950s that Blonsky's contributions were again recognized.

Vygotsky was also recognized as a leading pedologist in the USSR. He delivered several lectures on pedology of preschool children, pedology of school-age children, and the pedology of teenagers at the Second Moscow State University. In 1929, he published a chapter on the structure of adolescents' interests and the interests of the teenage workers, which appeared in the *Problems of Pedology and the Teenage Worker*. Vygotsky published *Fundamentals of Pedology*, and in the same year, a book with the intriguing title *Fascism in Psychoneurology* (1934).

Vygotsky's ideas about children are contained in *Pedology of the Preadolescent*, published in 1931 (Elkonin, 1976). In this book, Vygotsky criticized naturalistic theories of child play. He emphasized that children's play is primarily social in nature, and anticipates future social activity. Vygotsky emphasized that the psychological development of the child takes place within the realm of the child's interaction with adults. What the child cannot do alone, he may be able to do with an adult's help. This interaction determines children's further development. Vygotsky believed that what a child can do today, with help from an adult, tomorrow he will be able to do alone. This thinking suggested to Vygotsky a notion of the *zone of proximal development*, where the baseline is what a child can do alone without help, and the range of possibilities is determined by what a child can do with adult help. Leontiev and Luria explained that Vygotsky

persistently argued against attempts to understand the development of children's individual consciousness as a spontaneous result of the influence of social consciousness. Leontiev and Luria consider this view to be the central position of all of Vygotsky's criticism of Piaget (1931:22).

Vygotsky, in spite of his support for pedology, also criticized contemporary psychometric methods. He pointed out that pedology will become a science only when it learns to diagnose not only on the basis of arithmetical averages of the tests, but on the analysis of psychological processes (Shakhelovich, 1974).

Vygotsky's own view of pedology was published in 1931 in 'Questions of Pedology and Sciences'. In this article, Vygotsky reviewed the early history of pedology, G.S. Hall's view of pedology, and his own views. He pointed out that pedology considered itself not as a particular science among other specific sciences, but as a general science of child development. He criticized the subjectively idealistic foundations upon which pioneers of Western pedology attempted to construct the new science. Vygotsky was critical of G.S. Hall for what Vygotsky described as a mechanistic approach to the methodology of the new science. He pointed out that emerging alongside other sciences, pedology needed to depend upon them. The problems of mutual interdependency with other sciences was of paramount importance. He suggested that such a relationship needed to be understood in terms of dialectical logic. According to Vygotsky, development from a holistic perspective should be understood as a continuous struggle and a resolution of contradictions.

It is surprising that at the time of the campaign against pedology, Vygotsky himself was accused of advocating mass psychological testing (Cole, 1978). Leontiev and Luria (1956) provided some explanation for the criticism of Vygotsky. They acknowledged that Vygotsky criticized the testing movement associated with pedology. However, they maintained that he committed an 'error' by not criticizing pedology as a field of study, and by publishing some of his works in pedological journals.

Pedology became an easy target at the time of Stalin's increased suspicion of foreign influences. The fight against pedology was led

by Makarenko and Medinsky. The prominence of Makarenko in Soviet education seemed to be associated with two factors — being a staunch Communist, and his friendship with Gorki, a noted Russian writer admired by Stalin. Makarenko became friendly with Gorki in the early 1920s and in 1929 Gorki published an article where he described Makarenko as a Soviet educator of the ‘new type’ (Kairov et al., 1950:694). Makarenko maintained an extreme environmental and behavioral position. He disregarded information on past behavior and believed it possible to train a ‘new person’ by employing appropriate educational strategy. Such thinking was very appealing to Stalin, who had promised to build a ‘new society’. By profession Makarenko was an elementary classroom teacher who, since 1905, had been active as a revolutionary. In 1920 he was appointed administrator of the city school in Poltava. Between 1920 and 1937, Makarenko directed various labor communes and penal colonies. In 1935 he was promoted to assistant director of the NKVD labor colonies in Ukrainian SSR (Kairov et al., 1950).

Equally critical of pedology in general, and psychological testing in particular, was Medinsky. His criticism of standardized testing had been especially damaging:

Intelligence and achievement tests were made with such calculations that the children of the indigent parents should appear as weakly endowed and nonachieving. Those tests claiming objective proof were in reality the means to enable the children of the bourgeois to continue their education and to accept the children of toilers. (Medinsky, 1954, p. 179)

The final blow to pedology in the Soviet Union came in 1936, when the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR pronounced pedology to be pseudoscientific and anti-Marxist (Shore, 1947). A decision of the Soviet Central Committee terminated development of pedology, and encouraged Soviet educators and psychologists to develop ‘Marxist’ child study.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the growth and demise of pedology provides an historical example how pedagogical theories have been influenced by sociopolitical realities, philosophical attitudes and ideological considerations.

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