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A DIALOGUE ON THE LIFE AND WORK OF RENOWNED PSYCHOLOGIST/ METHODOLOGIST LEV VYGOTSKY

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A dialogue on the life and work of renowned psychologist/methodologist Lev Vygotsky

by Lois Holzman

•At the 1989 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in San Francisco, attended by over 8,000 educators, psychologists, anthropologists and other social scientists, three symposia on the topic, "Extending Vygotsky: Culture, Cognition and Communication," stood out among the over 500 sessions presented. Hundreds of people — some hearing for the first time about Lev Vygotsky, the Marxist Soviet psychologist and methodologist who lived and worked in the 1920s and 30s, and others who were themselves involved in Vygotskian research — attended these sessions, sponsored by, of all groups, the Association's Piaget Special Interest Group. What motivated Piagetian researchers to move to — or at least provide an opening for — Vygotskian researchers, particularly given that Piaget and Vygotsky in some ways represent fundamentally different views and approaches to education and its relationship to human development?

•Part of the American Psychological Association's 1989 Annual Conference (attended by over 14,000 psychologists) was a mini-conference on science intended for the public and psychologists to get an introduction to topics outside their fields of specialization. One of the speakers was Professor Barbara Rogoff from the University of Utah, a leading Vygotskian researcher and co-editor (with Jean Lave) of Everyday cognition: Its development in social context, *one of several scholarly books on Vygotskian research that were published in 1989-90.*

•In September 1989 "Vygotsky in Harlem: The Barbara Taylor School," appeared in Jeugd en samenleving, *a leading Dutch journal for professionals working with young people. Written by Siebren Miedema and Gert Biesta, educational researchers at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, it was based on their 1988 visit to the Barbara Taylor School, the six year old independent elementary school that is a laboratory in Vygotskian practice.*

•In June 1989 Valerie Walkerdine, a leading educational researcher in the Marxist-feminist tradition and co-editor (with John Broughton of Teachers College, Columbia University and David Ingleby of the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands) of a series of undergraduate texts in Critical Psychology, published by the London-based Routledge, met with Fred Newman and myself to discuss our writing a book on Vygotsky for the series. Entitled Lev Vygotsky — Revolutionary Scientist, *the book is set to come out in 1991.*

Was 1989 — the year of profound political upheaval the world over, the transformation of perestroika *and* glasnost *into mass surges for democracy in Eastern Europe, the death of European communism exposing the failure of revisionist politics to create "the new man" — the birth of the Vygotsky movement as well?*

I think so. As a Marxist activist and developmental psychologist who has been a "Vygotskian" for the past fifteen years (roughly from the beginning of Vygotskian research in the US), I believe we are in the midst of the development of a significant international scientific/political movement; that there is now something that can legitimately be called "the Vygotsky movement." What is this movement? What is it about? Who are the people building it? What are their activities? What political, cultural and scientific conditions are producing it? Where is it going?

The following discussion is based on interviews I conducted in the Spring of 1990 with eight Vygotskian researchers and scholars from around the world. In doing research for Lev Vygotsky — Revolutionary Scientist, *I had discussions with many people whose work is on the cutting edge of Vygotskian scholarship. I realized that what they were saying to me about the social, political and scientific location of Vygotsky's and their own work rarely got into print or public presentations — and it was at least as interesting as the detailed research that was published! I wondered if these colleagues had ever spoken to each other about such things, and wanted to give them the opportunity to do so in the pages of* Practice. *The following discussion, although it reads as one continuous interview, was produced by interviewing each person separately, transcribing and editing the interviews, and then excerpting and juxtaposing major sections of each to create the dialogue which follows.*

Those interviewed are: **David Bakhurst**, *Oxford-educated philosopher currently at Queens University in Ontario;* **Guillermo Blanck**, *psychiatrist, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina;* **Mariane Hedegaard**, *educational psychologist,* University of Aarhus, Denmark; **David Joravsky**, historian, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois; **Christine LaCerva**, *education director, the Barbara Taylor School, Harlem, New York;* **Siebren Miedema**, *educational researcher, University of Leiden, the Netherlands;* **Luis Moll**, *educational psychologist, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona; and* **James Wertsch**, *psychologist-linguist and chair, Psychology Department, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts. A listing of relevant works by these scholars appears at the end of the interview, along with other suggested readings by Vygotsky.*

Lois Holzman

Lois Holzman: Could you tell us a bit about your background? How did you get involved in Vygotsky and Vygotskian work?

Luis Moll: In graduate school in educational psychology I got interested — not in Vygotsky because you know how little known Vygotsky's ideas were in graduate school except possibly in special ed — but in Michael Cole's and his colleagues' work in cross-cultural research through a course in anthropology. I thought there were possibilities of using some of those ideas in education, especially the education of minority kids. I contacted Mike and went to the lab [Rockefeller University, ed] as a doctoral student.

The year 1977-78, when I was writing my dissertation at the lab in New York, coincided with the publication of *Mind in Society*. I started reading Vygotsky and thinking that those ideas and the interest I was developing in ethnographic work — both ethnographic work in the traditional sense and the classroom ethnographies of Mehan, McDermott and others — could be related. That was how I started to become interested in Vygotsky's work — through my interest in educational research, ethnographic work in particular.

Holzman: How has it progressed? How would you describe your work now?

Moll: I continued developing the qualitative angle and departing more and more from my training. Shortly after I graduated I did some work in Los Angeles and then went to San Diego and joined Michael Cole's lab there, continued doing educational research in the classroom and community and reading more. Being at a place where Vygotsky was so important and being involved in research helped in making connections and elaborating my understanding. So it was directly through the involvment in research.

Christine LaCerva: I first heard of Vygotsky in graduate school at Teachers College, Columbia University. It was a class on human development with a focus on the philosophy of science. The professor concentrated on Thomas Kuhn's work examining paradigm shifts in the history of science. We studied the work of Piaget and Vygotsky — how they understood learning and development, human behavior and their impact on the scientific community. We read *Mind in Society* and excerpts from *Thought and Language*. It was difficult reading — intellectually demanding. I loved it. I felt that Vygotsky's method, the whole social-historical approach to development, was in contrast to Kuhn's work. I wasn't fully able to articulate this at the time — all the material was very new to me — but I had a strong sense that Vygotsky was a Marxist methodologist and Marxism, I thought, was anti-paradigmatic! In contrast to Piaget, whom I found rigid and overdetermined by categories, Vygotsky was talking about human beings in the process of change. As an educator this was exciting and fascinating to me. It was counter to my experience of the social sciences — diagnosing, labeling and objectifying people in order to "help" them. At the same time I was beginning to learn about social therapy which is influenced by Vygotsky's work. I was participating in group therapy at the Institute for Social Therapy and Research, learning how to build environments that were non-abusive and non-repressive — where people could get help with their emotional problems. I could sense the link between Vygotsky and social therapy. In the therapy people were related to as producers of change — there was no diagnosis. I learned through my participation that emotionality and learning were social — that one's emotional life is something one produces with other people.

Holzman: And you found Vygotsky's work dealt with these issues?

LaCerva: At the time, I was a special education teacher working with deaf adolescents. I began to apply what I was learning in the classroom to do learning in a different way. Even though I didn't quite know what I was doing when I started, I could see that it was very powerful. I began to see learning as an activity of production and to use everything available — my own history, the students' race and class differences, emotionality, even the humiliation of being deaf and isolated — as a force of production.

Vygotsky and social therapy opened up all kinds of possibilities of what we could do. Students who you would think would be at the bottom of the barrel were the ones who would participate the most and provide leadership on how we were doing learning. I kept asking the kids — how should we do this? How can we build the conditions so everyone can learn? They became methodologists themselves.

I think in many ways I could practice this new methodology much better than I could articulate what I was doing. I was self-consiously using my new understanding of learning as social, the zone of proximal development, learning in advance of children's developmental level but I couldn't grasp the totality of what I was doing — I was alienated from my own process of production! As teachers we're trained to focus on the product, not the activity of production.

Changing how we produced learning in the classroom reorganized the totality of what was going on there. Using the specific histories of my students to build collectivity was very radical. Again, I didn't understand how it worked. I just knew that it worked. The students' reading scores went up two to three grade levels. Kids who couldn't write a sentence were working together to write three paragraph essays. It was a struggle for me not to view this as some magical process but as a new educational science. What was critical was that I stopped focusing on the individual to begin to build a collective zone of proximal development. It seemed like a contradiction to me at the time. People said, "But if you relate to the collective, you don't care about the individual kids. Special Education is supposed to be individualized educational programming." In fact, what I began to find was that the more attention I paid to building the group, the more I was able to use the strengths of the individual students instead of responding to their weaknesses.

Vygotsky was a way out of the nightmare of special ed classrooms. I could not have continued on with my traditional training. I found it oppressive. Vygotsky gave me the tools to develop new possibilities.

David Bakhurst: It goes back to the days when I was an undergraduate student in England studying philosophy and Russian. These subjects were taught in complete isolation from one another. So I set out to try to put the two together to see what there was of interest in the Russian, particularly the Soviet, philosophical tradition. In the course of trying to find out something about that I went to the USSR and met a philosopher who struck me as extraordinarily interesting, a man called Felix Mikhailov who was much more interesting than anything I had read previously of Soviet philosophers, which had been just the standard Marxist-Leninist textbook orthodoxy. This was 1980. On the strength of the discussion with Mikhailov and reading his book (*The Riddle of the Self*) I resolved to go back to Moscow for a long period in order to pursue the things we had been talking about. During 1982-3 Mikhailov introduced me to a lot of very interesting people.

It seemed to me there were three camps in Soviet philosophy. One was the philosophical establishment — orthodox Marxist-Leninist and holding most of the positions of power in the academic world. Then there were philosophers who sort of rebelled against that by looking to the West and turning to the Anglo American philosophical tradition for a richer framework than anything that the orthodoxy could provide. The third group one might call critical Marxists. They were descendant of the German classical tradition in philosophy — very much Hegelian Marxists — and they were in a very uneasy relationship with the philosophical establishment. They were too Marxist for those who were guardians of the credo.

Holzman: You said they were Hegelian and also too Marxist?

Bakhurst: Yes. There's a certain species of Marxism which thinks Marx owes a tremendous debt to Hegel, particularly in relation to methodology. There's a section in my thesis on "the dialectics of the abstract and the concrete" which is all about philosophical method, something which the Hegelian Marxists think is tremendously important. You have to understand the dialectic as a way of conceiving of philosophical method and its relation to science, which is simply absent from the orthodoxy.

Finding that there was an intellectual culture that was very much alive in Moscow, I tried to find a way into it because it's one which is sustained by an oral culture as much as by published philosophical writings. And it seemed that a good way into this culture was to focus on a philosopher who was well thought of among this group (although they wouldn't conceive of themselves as a group). One philosopher, Ilyenkov, was tremendously important, and I resolved to try and write an account of the Soviet

philosophical tradition which was focused on him because I thought very important things were brought together in his work. One of the important things is the conception of the mind which owed its origins to Vygotsky or at least to those trained within the Russian intellectual culture of which Vygotsky is an excellent representative. That's why I felt in order to understand Ilyenkov I had to understand the Soviet psychological tradition which I believe informed his work.

It's very difficult to trace the lineage of all these scholars because Soviet writers, despite their insistence upon history as paramount to any discipline, never write their own history because of the political difficulties in so doing. To write history, to critically confront the past, was difficult to do in the Soviet Union until very recently. So you find in Ilyenkov no references to debates of the 30s even though, in my view, his work reproduces many of the central themes which were discussed in those years — including Vygotskian psychology. So it's very difficult to say if Ilyenkov is a direct disciple of Vygotsky or whether both of them are expressions of a certain kind of Marxist tradition which runs through the Soviet philosophical and pyschological traditions. They are both derived from the same source and hence the similarity or the complementarity of their views is not a question of one influencing the other but of both being immersed in the same base. So that's what led me to Vygotsky.

In Vygotsky there are a lot of the details concerning issues Ilyenkov deals with. You find in Ilyenkov, for example, a commitment to a certain kind of theory of the mind, one in which the idea of the mind as socially constituted is paramount, and you find certain kinds of philosophical argument which suggest that that's the way you have to go. But you don't find, as it were, the details of what such a theory would look like if you wanted to be a psychologist. In Vygotsky you do. Hence, there's a very interesting complementarity between Ilyenkov and Vygotsky; in some respects, Ilyenkov provides some philosophical guns and Vygotsky complements that with some fine detail, such as there is.

Holzman: Both of them, as Marxists, would take learning and development to be social since everything is socially constructed. What Vygotsky did was give some details about how you go about showing the mechanisms of the socialness, and then he actually did illustrate some of the mechanisms in relation to learning and development, in relation to language and thought. . .

Bakhurst: Yes, that's a way of seeing it. Much current philosophy and psychology still works in a framework from the 18th century; there are some who might find it difficult to take the idea of our social being seriously. Ilyenkov represents one of many voices seeking to rethink the philosophical framework in which we need to think about what it is to be a person, what it is to have a mind, what it is to have thoughts, and so on. To a certain extent, that's also Vygotsky's project, but their orientations are rather different. I hate to say one's philosophical since psychology is philosophical, and, further, that is in a sense to use categories which neither of them would adhere to, but ...

I think Ilyenkov's agenda was to revise Marxism after Stalin. He was writing in a post-Stalin period, and in the 60s there was a very brief revival within the Soviet tradition, with a new generation of Soviet philosophers getting back to Marx. In the course of that Ilyenkov "reinvented" certain aspects of the Soviet philosophical tradition which were suppressed during the Stalin period. One of them is the extent to which Marx's method owes a debt to Hegel; another is the extent to which the theory of objectification had to be a central part of a Marxist theory of culture; and another is the idea of the individual as socially constituted. All of those things were around throughout the Soviet tradition but as slogans or mere assertions, whereas Ilyenkov's point of view was to give them real philosophical content. So that's what he engages. In the course of that, he made some philosophical moves which were very congenial to Vygotsky.

Guillermo Blanck: I finished my university studies at the University of Buenos Aires as a physician and during my college years I practiced in the city's psychiatric hospitals. So my first approach — that I continue to this day — was working in psychiatry, mainly psychotherapy, something that you could call cognitive behavior modification. That is one part of my scientific life. The other is my interest in the theoretical aspects of psychology. I have been working in that for perhaps the last 20 years. My approach was to study all the different schools in psychology and its history. Among them I found the historical-cultural approach of Vygotsky, mainly through the work of Luria at the end of the 60s. Later I started to study Vygotsky's work. Now I have read almost all his work.

Holzman: In Russian?

Blanck: I can handle Russian a little bit, but I have almost all his work translated for me into Spanish. I have reached some conclusions about psychology that are very similar to the ones Vygotsky arrived at (I'm not trying to compare myself to Vygotsky, of course — he was a genius). I always thought that psychology was a great mess, that there is no clarity at all about its task, its subject, its method, etc. When I read Vygotsky's "The historical meaning of the crisis of psychology," I realized that for years I thought more or less the same things that he had written 50 years ago, e.g., the necessity of a theoretical framework that can embrace all the available knowledge in psychology.

In 1984 I presented a paper in English at the International Congress of Psychology held in Acapulco, where I defended Vygotsky's system as the most valuable theoretical framework for psychology. It was the 50th anniversary of Vygotsky's death. Vera John-Steiner and I organized a symposium in honor of Vygotsky for which I published a book I had edited especially for the event, containing about 100 pages of my writing and famous articles by Toulmin, Cole and others, and even some Argentinians. I believe it was the first book — at least in the Western world — covering all the different aspects of Vygotsky's theory. Later came much better books — more sophisticated and profound — but they didn't cover the whole of Vygotsky's work. The forthcoming book by Rene van der Veer and Jan Valsinar will be the most complete of all.

In the 80s, I was chairman at the University of Moron, taught Vygotsky there for five years and wrote a lot of articles and chapters about Vygotsky. In 1989, I was named chairperson of a Vygotsky postgraduate seminar at the University of Buenos Aires, in the department of education. This was an important seminar in Argentina, the first one about Vygotsky in my country. Now there are more.

Holzman: Is Vygotsky's work becoming more popular in Argentina?

Blanck: What is popular in Argentina now is to try to regulate what kind of streets we are going down into hell! People are very worried about other things. But yes, Vygotsky is a bit more popular. Piaget is the most important view in the field of education, but Vygotsky is entering with great strength.

Mariane Hedegaard: I read Vygotsky in a course in developmental psychology in Copenhagen in

"He rejected the methodology and results of Freud, but he held in high esteem the kind of work Freud was doing." — Guillermo Blanck

1965 and found him central to my interests in the development of thinking and knowledge. Later on, as I became more focused on the educational aspects of these developments, I was introduced to the work of Davydov on teaching mathematics. The translations of Vygotsky at that time were so selective; I could see that something was there, but there were so many gaps, especially concerning practice. In Davydov I found the practice. Then I could go back to Vygotsky and get much more out of it. Vygotsky laid everything out but very generally; Davydov helped me see what was in Vygotsky.

David Joravsky: For me, as an historian interested in the history of ideas, science is a testing ground. I've been studying the history of 20th century science for a long time. I wanted to examine the influence Marxism had on the Russian Revolution and vice versa. In the course of investigating the conflict among Soviet philosophers in the 1920s-30s, I found they were arguing quite a lot about natural science. I'd written extensively on the conflict between science at large and the ideological establishment, focusing on the natural sciences — the Lysenko affair for example. Then there was the question of how it was that the establishment was throwing support to Pavlov even though Pavlovian ideas were out of step with science at large.

I approach Vygotsky from the historical view, placing him in the context of Russian history, to get a picture of what he and others were doing both before and after the revolution. I found that both his literary criticism and his Marxism have been ignored for the most part.

Jim Wertsch: I had a long term interest in the Soviet Union and Russia even when I was a kid...

Holzman: Where did that come from?

Wertsch: Probably from Sputnik, I don't know; there is no family connection. I was a mid-western WASP on a farm so there were no Russians within a hundred miles. But I did have an interest in the Soviet Union, I learned a little Russian when I was a kid, and I took Russian as an undergraduate. But my interest developed mostly after that. I first went to the Soviet Union in 1967 as a tourist. For my last year of graduate school I got a fellowship to study there — it was for social scientists not Soviet specialists — and then a junior faculty exchange for the year 1975-76, which was my first long stay in Moscow. I've gone back just about every year since.

In '75 and '76 my advisor in Moscow was Alexei Leont'ev. With Michael [Cole]'s help and other connections that year I met Luria and I worked a lot with him. I also met Zinchenko, Zaporozhets and El'Konin, the whole group. The next year, at Luria's request, I returned but unfortunately he died a month before I got there. The more I talked with all these guys, the more central Vygotsky became in understanding what they were doing. So I moved more and more into looking at Vygotsky's work and translating it, reading it, collecting it.

Holzman: What was your attraction to that work as a psycholinguist?

Wertsch: I started out as a psycholinguist but during that '75-'76 year I realized that there was this missing link that we knew very little about, and that was *activity*. So, it was during that year that I started translating all those pieces that came out in *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology*. It is more typical to start out with Vygotsky and move to activity — I kind of did the opposite. But the more I went into activity theory, maybe because of my background, the more I thought that Vygotsky's really ingenious insights about language, literature, semiotic mediation in general, had not been appreciated by the activity interpretation of his work and that that's where its unique power for psychology lay. My work became much more focused on Vygotsky after that.

There were a lot of really world-class scholars in that generation of people, but reading Vygotsky is just a different experience, it always was for me. This guy just always has something to say, even when he seems to be saying the same thing.

Holzman: I know, I feel the same way.

Wertsch:: He certainly had a stronger intellectual mystique for me at that point as well. Again, it might have had to do with my own background being in language. It became a major attraction to try to come into contact with such a fantastic mind. It was always teaching you something in print, in this dead print way even, let alone if you would have met him. That really just pulled me in, in a way that made me focus on him for a long time. I feel more that way about Bahktin now. It's not that Vygotsky's less smart than I thought but there's just so much you can do with one figure. Bahktin now for me has the same kind of mystique, I guess.

Siebren Miedema: I'm not a Vygotsky expert. I haven't gone in depth into his work. I've read a little of his work and some about Vygotsky that has to do with the work that my colleague Rene van der Veer — he is one of the Vygotsky experts in the Netherlands — is doing. I am interested in Vygotsky and pedagogy, in the linkage between developmental psychology and pedagogical aspects of the work of Vygotsky in relation to critical pedagogy. How do his ideas — in particular the zone of proximal development — fit in with the critical pedagogical schemes and how can they be used? I think — if I am understanding him right — you have to focus on the individual child more from a developmental psychological view and you have to place the child in the political, cultural, societal environment. You can't talk about doing research about children without taking into account the cultural, societal, economic, political environment in which the child is growing up. There are these two emphases.

Against all these test movements which compare children with lots of other children, I think Vygotsky makes it quite clear that there is nothing wrong with testing as such, but you can't say anything adequate about children when you are only comparing a certain child with other children and putting children on a statistical range. What is of greater interest is the social, cultural situation in relation to the child or children, to their past or biography, and how we can make a link between the children and know their developmental possibilities — tracing back the lines of the past and putting the lines out to the future.

If you follow Vygotsky in stressing the cultural environment, the political, societal environment, interaction and language, then you could never speak as I just did when I talked about this "individual" child. You always have to say something about the cultural, political situation, and what the economic possibilities are for these children to grow up, what the boundaries placed by the political, societal environment are which stand in the way of these children growing up to be people who can autonomously and freely take part in life and make the decisions they want in a political and personal sense.

Holzman: It seems pretty clear that we've been in the midst of a "Vygotsky revival" for the last five years or so. Between the latter part of 1989 and so far in 1990, there's been a qualitative increase — a kind of critical mass — in the number of books on Vygotsky coming out and Vygotsky's name appearing in all kinds of semi-popular, professional places, like the magazine of the American Federation of Teachers, the Montessori Association newsletter, and other newsletters on education or literacy.

What is this revival about? What led up to it? Where is it going? Which leads to two other questions. One has to do with what I see coming out of this revival as a pretty well developed debate about who Vygotsky was. It seems that what's new in the past year or two is a change from looking at Vygotsky in terms of categories — was he a Marxist, more a psychologist than a methodologist, etc. — to exploring who he was in his own right. While the debate is still often framed as "Was he a this or a that, a Marxist, a Leninist;" etc., there seems to be something more emerging. A contribution David Joravsky makes is that he is trying to get at who Vygotsky was, while some of the earlier work insists on categorizing him. Do you see it that way?

Bakhurst: I think what you say is very fair. I think in part it's simply a consequence of our developing understanding of Vygotsky and his world. Look at the situation in which Vygotsky was brought to the West: he was brought at a time in which his own works had just been republished in the Soviet Union after being blacklisted from 1936-56. When he first appeared in the West he appeared as a very mysterious figure and the work had to be packaged for Western audiences. The first edition of *Thought and Language* was heavily cut; in retrospect, one could look back and say, "How silly — didn't they realize that all this methodology was not bullshit; it was actually somehow essential to the work." But on the other hand, you could sort of understand how that came about. Vygotsky was known by that first *Thought and Language* for a long time; it wasn't until 1978 that *Mind in Society* and a few more articles were published. If you think of that situation, what natural questions are there to ask in order to challenge whatever conception it is that is emerging? This guy is writing in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, an incredibly fertile time, at least in the early part of his career, and that doesn't seem to be present in these works. He looks more like someone who's arguing with Piaget to some extent and speaking to a debate which is very familiar to us — that's *prima facie* grounds to believe that we haven't got it right — where's the Marxism? It was cut out of the original version.

Wertsch: I think what benefited people like you, Lois, and me ten years ago was not just that Vygotsky was a genius and that we discovered him, but that we discovered him at an opportune time. Because in psychology there was, at least at a theoretical level, increasing recognition that individualism really pulls you down certain paths from which you can't answer questions. More specifically, for example, in response to Chomsky's kind of Cartesian, nativist claims about strong linguistic hypotheses, there was the literature on mother-child interaction showing that in fact language is not a messy corpus that the kid "runs in to"; its hypotheses need not be that strong in order for a child to sort out the appropriate well-formed utterances. The Piagetian paradigm was also running into problems in areas of cognitive development. Piaget had identified social correlates of cognitive development, but Vygotsky represented a quite different view on it. I think that as soon as those things started to open up a little bit, to make room for a new demand, a new perspective, Vygotsky appeared on the scene. And Vygotsky just makes a lot more sense and gives a lot more hope — to people in teaching and in clinical work for example — than do these other theories. Teachers hear Vygotsky and say, "Yes, that's what goes on; now I see why it works; and there I was trying to teach a Piagetian curriculum."

If anything, Piagetian curriculum, at least in American hands, tends to be kind of a pessimistic outlook. There's nothing you can do 'til the kids are ready and if they're not, then there is nothing you can do ever. It can be summed up in a nice thing Nikolaevich Alexei Leont'ev once told Urie Bronfenbrenner; I'll paraphrase: "The trouble with you Americans is you're only trying to determine where the kid has been, and we're trying to figure out where the kid can go." That's what Vygotsky was after. Vygotsky really is a critic of nativist assumptions and the kind of genetic epistemology that at least an American interpretation of Piaget adheres to. So one of the major reasons for its sprouting ten years ago, with things like the publication of *Mind in Society*, is that we were ready for a change, we were looking for something. The same attempt at publishing, the same group of people, might have had much less impact at a different time.

I don't think it had that much to do with the 60s; we were already too far past it at that time. If anything — it's ironic — we were moving into a more conservative time when Vygotsky became popular. There is, as you just said, a critical mass that has been building, but then, this explosion — I think it's kind of a delayed one — people saw a space to really get going. You're talking about Soviet emigres, for one thing, like Alex Kozulin and Jan Valsinar. They saw the acceptance of the earlier versions of Vygotsky's book and took advantage of it.

Moll: Frankly, I'm baffled. Almost the opposite occurred to me. I was so immersed — putting together my book [*Vygotsky and Education*, ed] and trying to understand the social-historical school, as well as my own research — that when I went to other places to talk I was always surprised that no one knew what the hell I was talking about, and very few people had read Vygotsky. Being in San Diego you tend to assume — erroneously of course — that a lot of people are reading Vygotsky. So I'm still not sure there's been a proliferation of the ideas and the work.

In my own area of research there's not so much a shift as an increase in ethnographic and other qualitative methods, and researchers in that vein are attracted to some of the Vygotskian processes — his emphasis on the importance of social relationships, social interactions — so that it becomes a nice match to the work you're already doing. Now that is both an advantage, because you become interested in this research, and a disadvantage, because I think many researchers are using Vygotsky in the way that Vygotsky criticized; many writers are using Vygotsky as sort of a tag on because it relates to something they're doing and they can go on.

There are also the specific social conditions. In my case it's easy to pinpoint. I'm interested in the education of Latino students. The kids and their families are at the bottom of the social order. So that when we seek interpretations of what's going on in school we always want to look beyond the classroom and beyond the school to the broader social conditions to try to make sense of what we're studying. In my case, these are the specific conditions that make Vygotsky attractive.

Now in the field in general, if there is indeed a proliferation, what broader social-historical factors contributed to that — I'm really at a loss. Joan Simon from Great Britain, who was one of the first ones to make Vygotsky available to the British, wrote a review of Jim Wertsch's book [*Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind*, ed] and started out by asking the very same question, "Why is this guy — a Marxist psychologist — becoming so popular in the US of all places?" There's really no satisfactory answer.

Holzman: Using Vygotsky as a tag on is a way to keep going in the direction you're going without making a radical change. Qualitative methods have entered psychology and shown their limitations. The international political climate is changing so rapidly. All those categories that we

"I think many writers are using Vygotsky in the way Vygotsky criticized; many writers are using Vygotsky as sort of a tag on because it relates to something they're doing."
— Luis Moll

"One of the remarkable things about Vygotsky is his passion for critique."
— David Bakhurst

were used to thinking in are meaningless. Here is this very influential psychologist and you don't have to address whether he was a Marxist, and what it means to be one no longer is the same, so you don't have to feel like you're attached to him. At the same time if you're really interested in social change, then looking to the Soviets and Marxists is OK too. It just feels like there's a more free climate.

Moll: We could also think of a scenario where those changes would move people away from Vygotsky's work. I think many Soviet psychologists are attracted to American psychology; it really has a lot of status in the Soviet Union. I would think that the current changes could raise the relevancy of incorporating Vygotsky.

Holzman: You mean in the Soviet Union or here?

Moll: Even here. Like the interpretation of the failure of Marxism. "Why should I bother with a guy who based a lot of his work on the writings of Marx?"

Holzman: How do you feel about that?

Moll: That's probably nonsense. When I push Vygotsky I find that at first people don't know who he is. Then when they hear he's a Soviet psychologist I think many people turn off. "Who are you kidding?" But that may be an erroneous perception on my part.

Holzman: You said that it was nonsense in terms of how people respond. What about in terms of your own work?

Moll: Well, in my own work and within my own community his work is more relevant than ever. Especially for those of us doing research in education where it's impossible to divorce research in education from the broader social conditions. Although it's done all the time! I think we need to go with the methodological challenge to explore those relationships. It's absurd to think of education without thinking of broader social factors. Or to think of changes in education or outcomes in education without thinking of changes in education or outcomes in education *for what and for whose benefit.*

Holzman: Uh huh. Do you find in Vygotsky a methodological direction?

Moll: To some extent yes. For example, we're always interested in provoking change in instructional practice, and in making resources available to the kids to enter new activities, an idea not dissimilar to the basic experimental method of Vygotsky and an idea reminiscent of the zone of proximal development, especially the relationship between social resources and development. So that, to an extent yes. To an extent, no, because we're doing work in domains that Vygotsky never did. For example, our research in households and social networks that connect households with each other, in the community, and how knowledge is obtained and developed in both situations and how it's shared and distributed among households and within the household. Of course that's a domain of work that neither Vygotsky nor any of his colleagues to my knowledge did; it's an area where we're trying to use his ideas in a way that's sound; we're trying to break new ground.

Holzman: In some ways that's similar to what we're doing in social therapy. I mean Vygotsky never talked about emotional problems or therapeutic work, yet his methodology is extremely useful to us. One way to articulate the relationship between Vygotsky and social therapy is that, growing out of Fred Newman's interest in emotions, thoughts, etc., his expertise in methodology and philosophy of science, and his commitment as a Marxist activist to practical-critical activity, social-therapeutic practice developed successfully over a 15 year period. Even in its early days, we had a pretty good sense of what "pathology" is. Vygotsky, some 50 years earlier, had made some fascinating breakthroughs about what the "normal mind" is like, e.g., that the normal mind is social. Knowing what he did, how he thought about this, the directions he pursued in relation to so-called normal thinking, normal language development and how he delineated the mechanisms of their socialness was very helpful to us — that's one way he advanced our work.

Moll: I read a little bit of the new volume on the psychology of special education...There's some fascinating work being reported along the lines of remediation. How do you take advantage of all these strengths and resources that kids have and use them for their development, as opposed to trying to compensate for the weakness and then highlighting the dysfunction of the weakness.

Hedegaard: People are attracted to a person's ideas and writings because of where they themselves are coming from. It's clear that psychology today is in crisis. Many people can see the shortcomings of the existing traditions and the potential usefulness of Vygotsky — for example, in getting a grasp on how complex learning and development are. But what many don't grasp is that not only are things more complex than most psychological theories portray, but that the cultural aspects of life imply values. One cannot ignore the real content. So I think the methodologist/psychologist debate is a foolish one. Vygotsky was trying to establish a Marxist psychology — a new approach. Now if you are developing a new approach, you have to develop a new methodology, new tools. But there is no method without content and vice versa. Vygotsky was a methodologist, yes, but the content mattered deeply to him.

In the late 70s I was so frustrated with psychology I nearly gave it up. It was so difficult to give advice to people about raising children or education; psychology's tools and theories just weren't helpful. The socio-cultural tradition, including Vygotsky, gave me some new tools to look at developmental psychology and to be able to say something useful to parents and clinicians. I feel much more confident now. Specifically, the Piaget and Bruner traditions, which are strong in Denmark, don't take specific societal and cultural content seriously. They talk of human beings in general, not living in a specific society. What Vygotsky gives us is a way to analyze a person in relation to specific historical conditions.

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a very valuable tool. It implies that we have to have some values and an idea of what a good life is if we are to educate children. Some researchers try to use Vygotsky without seeing the ZPD as leading educational practices in this way, as if one could do education unconsciously. But if you read Vygotsky carefully, you see that the ZPD is not just a general psychological law. The next "zone" for a child is determined by the society in which we are living, the values and customs for the upbringing of youth, etc. So you must be conscious of this as an important aspect of education and socialization in the family, schools and other institutions.

Blanck: If you read the history of science, it is not a mystery that certain authors were not truly appreciated until a certain time after they lived.

In psychology, particularly, we now have more or less the same situation that Vygotsky had to face in the 20s. On the one hand, we have cognitive psychology which in its conception of human information processing has, in my opinion, forgotten history and culture, forgotten the person. I think that cognitive psychology — even behaviorism — did great things in their history, but they didn't answer simple questions

insights about language, literature, semiotic mediation in general, had not been appreciated by the activity interpretation of his work and that that's where its unique power for psychology

Vygotsky's name appearing in all k
popular, professional places, like th
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newsletters on education or litera

that psychology was supposed to answer — e.g., what is a human being? And it is impossible, in my opinion, to understand society and the person without taking into account certain achievements of social thought in history. One of them is Marx. There was a very close relation between Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky. Anyone who has read Vygotsky correctly is going to find this connection. I think it is very hard to understand his theory without understanding Marxism.

I am referring to authentic Marxism and not a Stalinist version. Georg Lukacs used to say that many people in his youth thought that the soul existed by itself because there was a college dedicated to its study! There is an inversion!

Psychologists who don't have a solid background in social sciences cannot really understand Vygotsky. They can understand some of what Vygotsky says, but they cannot apprehend the totality. So as our colleagues are currently organized — it doesn't matter if it's in Argentina or the US — people learn psychology that doesn't have links with social life.

I think that Vygotsky is now taken seriously for two main reasons. One thing is that people who are really interested in gaining a good comprehension of human beings and history, in such a difficult moment as the one we are now living, are going back to Weber and Marx, going back to all the great thinkers in social sciences. When we try to explain the world and how mental life takes place in ourselves, it is clear to me that it only can be explained through the concept of interiorization and all the other conceptions that Vygotsky developed so well. Of course, he was limited in some aspects and we must do the same thing that he did to the psychology of his own time — we must develop our own psychology. Psychology is an academic practice, but at the same time people are asking psychologists to *solve* some practical problems. Vygotsky faced the same thing. On the one hand, he thought that a general psychology was needed, but on the other hand, there was a great need for a psychology that could help people — to learn to read, to write, to form new psychological processes and functions for people, people with handicaps, etc. In the real application, people require more advances in fields like education. I read recently that there is a movement in the US to do something about illiteracy. I read that in the year 2000 two out of three people in the US will be illiterate. I remember Kennedy's speech after Sputnik when he made a strong critique of the educational crisis in the US, how education was not so developed as people thought and now the U.S. is facing real problems. We now know that we are not doing things correctly — we have the diagnosis but we don't have the therapy. And I think it's there that Vygotsky can make a very big contribution because of his conception of the human being. Because in Vygotsky's opinion our mental life is culture *within* us. In other educational frameworks, for example, the Piagetian one, the human being is seen up to a certain point as very passive and when it does take into account the social milieu, it takes culture and the social environment only as a decoration of the stage where the child is by his own means to construct his own psychology. This is very different from the position of Vygotsky, which he took from Hegel. If one reads Hegel from a materialist point of view, you can find almost all of Vygotsky, mainly Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Man makes himself but there is an active process of socialization. There is also the specific social practice of children in society. For me, it is impossible to see the formation of mind without considering this as a strong determinant. We all construct our psyche, but we do not construct our own personality independent and outside of the force of the determination that society has.

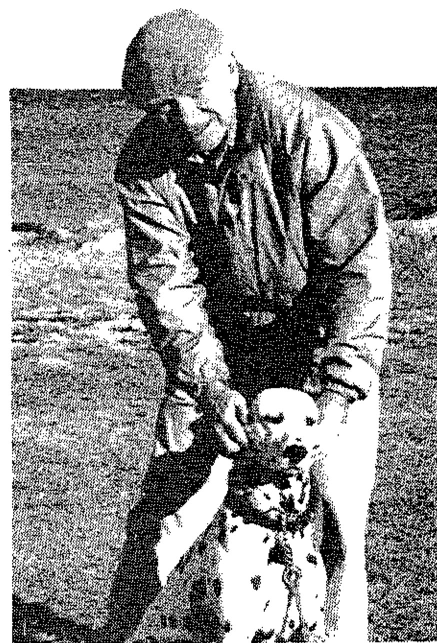
Holzman: Vygotsky seemed to be struggling to do away with a specific dualism. There are two ways to approach individual and society. One way is to assume that they are separate — and our task then is to try to get them together. I don't think that was what he was doing. I think he began with a very holistic understanding, assuming that individual and society are synthesized — the problem is that psychology had broken them up! The task, then, is how to construct a psychology that is coherent with a holistic view. That's a different task.

Blanck: I agree with what you are saying. There isn't sociological reductionism in Vygotsky.

Bakhurst: I see the methodologist/psychologist "debate" as slightly artificial. But again, it's a way of framing a substantial and profound debate about Vygotsky, namely, that much of what's most interesting seems to be at a level which most hard-nosed psychologists would think of as methodology, yet there's not the kind of experimental findings which the traditional mainstream psychological community thinks is solid or scientific. There is all this very very smart theoretical material interwoven with the experimentation in a kind of seamless narrative. How do we relate to this: Do we think of Vygotsky as simply doing psychological methodology and leaving some room to do the experimentation, or do we think of it in an entirely different way — as this is how psychology *has to be* because there's something fundamentally wrong with the traditional experimental paradigm?

Another thing that the methodologist/psychologist debate reflects is how people don't understand Vygotsky's conception of the relationship between the natural and the cultural very well. They think things pull both ways, and so, on the one hand, you have pronouncements that there's obviously some crucial relationship between the two; on the other hand, you have what Wertsch in his book refers to as a nihilistic attitude toward the natural. You have professions of how important the natural is and the obvious need to incorporate it into a psychological theory, but then you have some expressions which look like Vygotsky is simply uninterested in the natural and thinks of the cultural realm as functioning almost autonomously, with the influence of culture on the developing child such that the natural basis of the child's psychological functioning simply drops out of the psychological explanation after the child has begun to develop the kind of things we think of as human psychological functioning.

The methodologist/psychologist debate is one where that sort of categorization scheme is used as a front for discussing a very substantive question. What I'm trying to say is that it's "natural" that the debate has been "is he a this or is he a that." It's not as if that was an empty debate which was just due to categorization and now we're getting on to the real stuff, because I think the question of "is he a this or is he a that" was the only way the question could be posed. Now, as bits of the picture get filled in, as a number of different voices enter the debate, suddenly there are much richer possibilities. I think in the future we're likely to see greater discussion of semiotic and cultural aspects of Vygotsky's work. That hasn't been at the fore of discussion in part because those aspects of his work were suppressed to a certain extent. But I don't mean that to sound sinister. In the first place they were only embryonically expressed in Vygotsky's work and, further, in the 30s when he was denounced, his followers were able to continue to work within the framework they had created only by estranging themselves from the semiotic and cultural dimensions of Vygotsky's work which had been identified as stemming from an idealistic paradigm. So the way the work has developed has not emphasized those dimensions and now it's



"There's no question that Vygotsky accepted the revolution; you can see that in his writings up until the 30's, when the Stalinist 'revolution from above' changed that."
— David Joravsky

time we'll see them revived. The way the debate will go depends on a number of factors. It might be a debate about whether he was primarily a literary critic — someone doing cultural semiotic analysis whose only way to express that was in a psychological paradigm.

Holzman: I find what you're saying about the semiotic and cultural aspects coming more to the forefront helpful in seeing Vygotsky's conflictedness. He came from a tradition, culture, which is anti-paradigmatic and moved to psychology, which is extremely paradigmatic. So even though he made a break with existing psychology, the tradition he was entering — science — was still located within the 18th and 19th century paradigm.

Bakhurst: Yes. One of the remarkable things about Vygotsky is his passion for critique. A lot of his writings are attempts to rethink dominant mainstream conceptions. If you're a psychologist looking for a system, reading him can be very frustrating but that's one of the reasons I like him — as a philosopher I go in for that kind of thing. The process of deciding whether or not Vygotsky is or is not one of these things you're talking about, deciding what role the semiotic dimension has in his work, what the significance is of him choosing word meaning as the unit of analysis in *Thought and Language*, what the significance is of the interesting stuff about meaning in the last chapter of *Thought and Language* — to answer those questions you really have to *do* Vygotskian thinking. You can't appropriate it ready made from the text in any sense. It's not as if the answer to any of these questions is a matter of, "Well, let's just read Vygotsky properly and see how we should interpret him." Because so much of Vygotsky is telling us how *not* to do things; so much of it is suggestive and embryonic. That's in many respects why it's so interesting and intelligent. He sees the extent of a problem — and that these are not the kinds of problems that one solves by making some quick moves and neat assertions and then the problems go away. The question of what place semiotics plays in the Vygotskian framework will be answered by people attempting to work with these ideas, attempting to develop things, attempting to explore new avenues.

Holzman: Do you see yourself as having a different understanding and practice of Vygotskian conceptions and methodology from others? Is there an implicit or explicit critique of the "Vygotsky revival" in what you've been saying?

LaCerva: I experience a big difference between how the Barbara Taylor School is attempting to use Vygotsky and what I know about what most other people are doing. The incredible scope of Vygotsky's work is often reduced into a thimble — for example, looking at one person "mentoring" another person, or the scaffolding of a child's learning of math concepts. It seems to me that way of utilizing Vygotsky's concepts is in contradiction to who Vygotsky was, to what was going on politically and socially in the period in which he lived, to his wanting to actively change things, to create a new psychology, to see things in their social and historical process of production. I'm interested in Vygotsky as a Marxist methodologist to create the conditions to change the very racist, sexist, homophobic society we live in.

He's often forced into the very methodology that he was insisting not be used! It doesn't seem to me as if many Vygotskians are trying to build on Vygotsky's methodology. They're taking bits and pieces of his work and applying them to particular problems, let's say in education, but most are not taking on the challenge of developing the science Vygotsky launched.

We are using his method to bring an independent laboratory school for poor and minority children into existence. And we are doing this in Harlem. The entire school is an application of his work. Vygotsky's social-historical approach is a way to help kids be changers of the world and to advance their ability to think critically, to understand the social origins of the "isms" and so be better equipped to figure out what they want to do about it. We are using Vygotsky to build something decent and progressive in the community, not as a theory of cognition.

Miedema: Much more should be done following Vygotsky's insights about the importance of the cultural, political aspect of development. Vygotsky's thoughts on the relation between individualization and socialization are very interesting for both theoretical pedagogy and practical educational approaches and this is something I find missing in much of the contemporary work.

Holzman: When you say it's missing, are you saying that most of the research doesn't address this cultural, political aspect?

Miedema: They stress it some but it isn't clear how we can develop a profound pedagogical theory in which these concepts — cultural renewal, educational renewal, renewal of culture through education — can fit. I think that all the ingredients are in the theory of Vygotsky, as well as in the theory of Dewey.

But then I think, is that enough for a political, critical theory for the 1990s? I don't want to blame Vygotsky for that — it's *our* task to go along the lines Vygotsky had put out and try to answer the question now ourselves. He gave the tools, and we have to meet and work with these tools and get a better grip from a reconstructive as well as a constructive point of view. We have to reflect on these kinds of things. There is always an internal relation between the individual and society. You can't skip one of the two. They belong together. You can start from the individual but you have to end with society, and you can start with society but there must be a place where you can reflect on the individual. They are two sides of one coin. For example, at the Barbara Taylor School it is timely to use the ideas of Vygotsky in the specifics of the New York situation and try to find out how you can build an institution, how you can work to educate in such an environment using Vygotskian conceptions. But you have to invent them, they are not there ready made; you have to be creative and go along the lines of Vygotsky.

In my opinion, the Barbara Taylor School is an example of working out pedagogy along Vygotskian lines.

Wertsch: There's an increasing danger of the thing turning into a fad and people just ending up saying, "Well, we tried it and it didn't work." But they really didn't try it at all. That's the potential problem that's emerging right now.

Holzman: What's the specifics of that? How do you see it?

Wertsch: Well, on a theoretical level, one of the things that's happening is that Vygotsky is being assimilated in such a way that he's looking more like an information processing psychologist every day. That has to do with theoretical paradigms. But also — and this intrigues me now more than ever — Vygotsky was a product of his time and place and I think being a Russian Jewish intellectual — and the Russian part in particular — distinguishes his arguments from what count as good arguments in contemporary American psychology at a fundamental level, at the level something like what Charles Taylor would call *framework* in philosophy. Vygotsky had a cultural world view where you don't make such strong distinctions between individuals and group activity. You can see this, for example, in the recent spate of research and findings

"Vygotsky was trying to establish a Marxist psychology — a new approach. Now if you are developing a new approach, you have to develop a new methodology, new tools."

— Mariane Hedegaard

around so-called socially shared cognition or socially distributed cognition or collective memory. These are all terms that are coming back. But notice that, from a linguistic perspective, the unmarked terms are always cognition, memory, perception, attention, whatever, and they automatically mean — *of the individual*. There's no way that they mean anything except applying *necessarily* to the individual. We have to add additional modifiers (and say *socially shared* cognition, for example) if we want to mean anything other than what is meant by the unmarked term (e.g., cognition). There's a very powerful assumption of the individual there.

Vygotsky's general genetic law of cultural development as well as his conceptions, e.g., the zone of proximal development, stem from the fact that he didn't see such a watertight distinction between looking at the individual in isolation and looking at social processes, with each belonging to a different discipline. He was much more facile at moving back and forth. It wasn't just that he was good at it. I think the point is that the boundary was much less pronounced in his cultural background.

Holzman: In your own work, you sometimes set up a distinction between Vygotsky as a Marxist and Vygotsky as a semiotician. I've never understood this — it's like mixing apples and oranges to me. For example, when you talk about Vygotsky's views on language, you separate language out from other social products even though I know you believe it is a social product.

Wertsch: Earlier you mentioned "Vygotsky the this" and "Vygotsky the that." One of those versions is Vygotsky the methodologist and Vygotsky the psychologist. And I do think it is the case that Vygotsky, first of all, had in mind and even partially laid out a psychology. But it's not that he just didn't get it all done; I think some things he did were actually antithetical to it. For example, in the very beginning and the very end of *Thinking and Speech* (the title of the 1987 translation by Minick for Plenum is accurate. *Thought and Language* was used earlier in an attempt to appeal to western readers), he says thinking and speech are problems of interfunctional relationships. And there's a full discussion of how human consciousness is defined in terms of the interrelationships among functions. He says there's a basic division that we can make between emotional and intellectual, and within intellectual we have all those things he looked at, mainly thinking, perception, memory, etc. He says you can't make any sense out of any one of them unless you do the whole of them. And then he turns around and tries to make sense out of just a very small subset! So I mean there's a place where Vygotsky the psychologist is to the left of Vygotsky the methodologist.

Holzman: Much of the current debate concerns the intellectual and political influences on Vygotsky's work over the course of its development. How much did his methodology, politics, intellectual interests, etc., change?

Joravsky: In my opinion, Vygotsky's earlier work is more philosophical, more reflective and more wide ranging. There was a sharp shift in his work in the 30s which I see as an effort to prove to the Stalinist ideological establishment that he was distinctively Soviet and doing something of practical benefit to society — therefore his interest in children's development, education and the brain damaged.

There's no question that Vygotsky accepted the revolution; you can see that in his writings up until the 30s, when the Stalinist "revolution from above" changed that. I'm not a psychologist so I'm very much an outside observer to some of the issues of controversy related to Vygotsky. But I do think that the difference, for example, between Vygotsky and Piaget has been exaggerated. Vygotsky didn't make such a big distinction between himself and Piaget in the early 20s; it was only in the 30s when there was ideological pressure to separate from bourgeois psychology that his writings about Piaget take on an entirely different spirit.

Bakhurst: The idea that Vygotsky is someone who said things he said because he was kowtowing to the ideologues doesn't ring true. I don't see in Vygotsky the sort of idiom which is the characteristic mark of people who are being very careful of what they say because they're supposed to be doing one thing or another. Vygotsky's work is remarkably refreshing in that respect. I think the issue of whether Vygotsky is or is not a Marxist is much more complex than that. Because it's not just a question of whether he really thought one thing and wrote what he did in order to compromise or pay off the authorities or whatever. In Vygotsky's case you just can't see it like that; very rarely in the Soviet work can you see it like that for anyone who's interesting. I mean, there are some very boring people who write one thing and think something different. You don't see that in great thinkers.

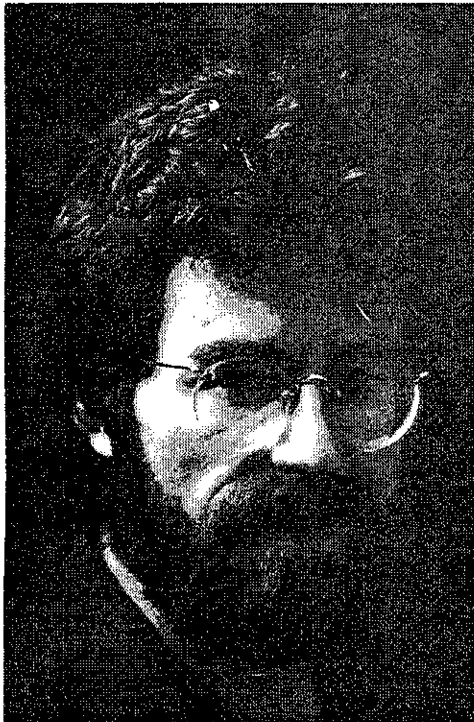
To a certain extent Vygotsky found the Marxist tradition a congenial medium in which to work. I haven't thought this out before — Vygotsky's critique of psychology is in many respects a critique of precisely the kind of framework psychology inherited from the 18th century, the Cartesian and post-Cartesian framework we were talking about earlier. The Marxist intellectual climate of the Soviet Union in the 20s was a congenial medium for someone who was seeking to break with those 18th century categories, someone who was trying to diagnose the crisis in contemporary psychology as a crisis which was tied up with the legacy of the 18th century. Hence, insofar as the project of building a Marxist psychology was a project of building a new psychology which would overcome this crisis, a project of building a psychology which would be of enormous practical significance, which would contribute to the building of the kind of society in which the injustices of the old regime would be overcome, and which would itself facilitate a richer flowering of human psychological capacities — then that's what Vygotsky wanted to do. In some respects, then, that's what it is for Vygotsky to be a Marxist, at both the theoretical and the practical level.

It's not a question of did he favor the party or was he against the party, because he was a very undogmatic thinker. He's someone who sees problems where others would think things are hunky dory. He has a real nose for a philosophical problem too, which is why he's so exceptional and so unusual. If the question is would Vygotsky have been hostile to the kinds of things which were happening that led to the Stalin period, the answer is *yes* — if that's what Marxism was, Vygotsky was no Marxist! Because he's much too critical, he's too much driven by a quest for — his critical nose, as it were, his critical edge, is something that is incompatible with the whole ethos of the dominant Soviet ideology of the late 20s, early 30s. So there's no way you can associate Vygotsky with that. And who knows? Had Vygotsky lived and continued to think in psychology, he may well have rethought his project. He may well have become a post-Marxist.

One has to remember that this was a time in which if you made the wrong moves you fell into obscurity and, in fact, after 1930 if you made the wrong moves you could find yourself shot. So I would respect anyone who decided it wasn't worth writing that chapter about such and such. But in Vygotsky there's remarkably little of that. And I don't know why. How did he manage? How did his followers manage? How did they

"I'm interested in Vygotsky as a Marxist methodologist to create the conditions to change the very racist, sexist, homophobic society we live in."
— Christine LaCerva

"If you follow Vygotsky in stressing the cultural environment, the political, societal environment, interaction and language, then you could never speak (of an) 'individual' child."
— Siebren Miedema



survive? I suppose they survived by distancing themselves from Vygotsky, but the question is why was that sufficient?

A piece I wrote on memory in Soviet thought which has just come out in a book called *Collective Remembering* [edited by David Middleton and Derek Edwards, published by Sage, ed] addresses a lot of what we've been talking about. It's an attempt to explore issues of social memory. I was asked to write a piece on the Soviet tradition. And I thought, "Well, these people interested in collective remembering are interested in two things — one, the way in which certain kinds of social practices preserve the continuity of the life of a community, functioning as it were as part of the group memory; and two, questions about the social bases of individual memory." It seemed to me that one could write about that in Vygotsky — his work on memory, for example. When I started to do that I found myself immediately up to my neck in questions about how a tradition preserves the continuity of its intellectual life. Because you couldn't interpret what Vygotsky thought about the social basis of individual memory without looking at the ways in which the Soviet tradition remembers *itself*, the ways the social-historical school has from generation to generation understood itself in relation to the past. So I tried to do a piece that would talk about both the sense in which Vygotsky would have thought individual memory was a social phenomenon and show how you couldn't understand that without looking at the collective memory of the social-historical school. It addresses the sense in which Vygotsky's semiotic dimension is or is not central to those kinds of views and the sense in which it is preserved. There's very little writing that does more than say Vygotsky was suppressed from this period on. One must ask what was the significance of that for our present ways of understanding? There's no one who says anything about this. For example, Jim Wertsch's book is a wonderful book but he doesn't address how the political climate affects the ways we presently interpret these views. And that's a really interesting interpretive and hermeneutical problem.

Wertsch: Like any of us, Vygotsky is a product of many theoretical strands. There's absolutely no question in my mind that he was a very serious and dedicated and intelligent Marxist. He really believed in Marxism and building a socialist state. I've never seen anything that questions that whatsoever. But that doesn't mean that he started with Marxism and then read other things to help him understand and interpret Marxism. As a matter of fact, he'd done a lot of other things first (and it's still a mystery what he was doing in Gomel for several years after the Revolution — and he didn't take a major stance on the revolution). Vygotsky certainly was a Marxist and I think he ended up with one viable interpretation of Marxism that has a very strong Eurocentric stamp to it.

It's difficult in many Russian texts to distinguish civilization from culture — those two words mean practically the same thing. As a result, ironically, I think he ended up with some conservative sounding ideas. Namely, that there's an evolution of mind. Taking the basic distinction borrowed from Levi-Bruhl and others between primitive and modern man, you can make an evolutionary ladder, and it always turns out that the Europeans are at the top of that evolutionary ladder. I think that showed up in, for example, the way Luria interpreted his results from Central Asia, which were done in very close collaboration with Vygotsky. It's a dilemma. On the other hand, I think he was trying to deal with a critical problem there, the nationalities problem, and the only way he could deal with it was by saying these are basically primitive people. In this case it seems to me that at least from today's perspective — and I have to emphasize that — his Marxism turns out to be a pretty conservative kind of thing. It says there is no hope for a people becoming really socialist until they've gone through certain stages of social evolution. But there again, it's really tied up with the arguments of his time: could Russia become a socialist state? It hadn't really been capitalist and you have to go through capitalism, classic Marxism held, to get to socialism. So, two schools of thought: one, that it's possible to skip stages Marx laid out; and the other, that you're going to have to sit back and let it go through capitalism before you get to socialism. To Vygotsky the methodologist/Vygotsky the psychologist, I'd add Vygotsky a hard-line Marxist of the times/ Vygotsky the emancipator. I see all kinds of contradictions and struggles in what he was trying to do.

Holzman: I don't know if I understood what you were saying, Jim, about his Marxism being conservative in retrospect. Do you mean the Central Asian studies in particular? Because if his position, as a Marxist, was to take seriously that everything is a social activity and product and that how people live their lives produces everything, including how we think and feel and all that, then it seems that a *non-Marxist* interpretation of the results is that there are such things as primitive people who will stay primitive unless they "go through particular stages," as opposed to the fact that constant reorganization of culture and society can advance people. So my question then is why are you saying his Marxism is conservative?

Wertsch: Well it shows up in some other writings of Vygotsky as well. The big problem again is one of not distinguishing society from culture. In anthropology there is a distinction between social and cultural anthropology, coming from two different theoretical perspectives. This is conflated in Vygotsky and Luria and others, and the result to this day — and I think it's a Russian kind of issue, not just a theoretical issue — is that with that perspective you have a very tough time recognizing the unique power of other cultures because they always have to be viewed as being behind yours. I mean, there's no way to look at a culture and say this is a rich culture with its own modes of thinking. That's a big dispute that Mike [Cole, ed.] had with a lot of Marxism and social science. Primitive peoples are basically like modern peoples except the adults in primitive culture look like children in our culture. That's the kind of thing you end up with if you don't say that culture is a qualitatively distinct concept from civilization or from society. And there's a very strong tendency to not see the notion of culture at all in Soviet psychology and the Russians in general.

Holzman: That's very interesting given that again, in retrospect, one of the errors of Stalin was to let nationalism be. What we're seeing now is the effects of not dealing with some of the pretty backward things people do.

Wertsch: Yeah, well it's a really mixed bag because you look at Azerbaijan and Afghanistan, for example, and maybe Azerbaijanis want to be loose from Russian domination, but the point is in terms of the living standard, education, etc. — for 70 years they've been just light years ahead of what's on the other side of the border. The Soviets did a lot of progressive things but they did them typically with the underlying assumption of a hierarchy of cultures toward higher levels of civilization, with the Russians at the top with the responsibility to lift these lower people up.

Holzman: What I'm saying is that they left a whole lot of things about those cultures untouched. They abandoned the reorganization of the totality of society.

We are using his method to bring an independent laboratory school for poor and minority

in the recent spate of research and

Wertsch: Oh yeah. No, they didn't succeed.

Holzman: They didn't even try!

Wertsch: Well, yes and no. They recognized that they had to live in a multi-cultural society and a lot of people really did think that someday issues of nationality and culture would just disappear because it was a class issue, not a cultural issue.

That's a problem with all versions of Marxism, why Marxism is great in theory but has its limitations in anthropology, say. There certainly are class differences, there certainly are cultural differences, but cultural differences cannot be reduced to class issues. It's not only that they didn't succeed; in some ways they've created their own destructive mechanism because they enfranchised these people who now have higher birth rates and better health standards than they would have had otherwise, and they made them literate (even if it had to be in Cyrillized versions of their language) and these things made it possible to mobilize the people. Yeah, it's a very ironic and mixed picture.

But going back to what I said before — I think it's very important that Vygotsky was Russian. I think there's a lot of things that are uniquely Russian and don't have that much to do with Marxism at all. If you look at things that are going on today, debates with Gorbachev and others, Gorbachev comes on with a very strong Westernizing statement: "We are a part of Europe." But this rests right alongside the insecurity about whether they are as civilized as other societies or not. That argument is central to the Russian psyche.

Holzman: Do you think that Vygotsky was more radical thinking in his earlier work? Have previously unpublished manuscripts on culture and literary criticism shed any light on his development?

Blanck: In addition to the five literary reviews listed in the standard bibliography by Shakhlavitch-Lifanova, there are five other reviews which I have no doubt were written by Vygotsky. They were found by a teacher in some archives of Gomel; the problem is they were signed merely "L.S." The one on *Ten Days that Shook the World* is in this second group, which is about Soviet writers and more ideologically biased than the earlier ones on classical writers. Vygotsky wrote them when he was inside the milieu of the first years of the Russian Revolution.

There are also two copies of his 180-page essay on Hamlet, one written when he was only 18 years old. It is a pity that it is not in *The Psychology of Art* (MIT Press) but only in the second Russian edition as an appendix. It is a classic even for literary scholars, and very different from the one he wrote when he was 25 (the one which appears as a short chapter of *The Psychology of Art*). The earlier one was somewhat mystical; the later one was a more mature work of a man of science.

One of the ways Vygotsky entered the field of psychology — and not merely psychology but *experimental* psychology — was through the psychology of art. He tried to develop a psychology of art that could explain art in objective not subjective terms, which in his time were very arbitrary. He tried to find some laws that could explain the specific emotion that a fable or story could generate in a person.

Pavel Blonski said something very interesting. I don't think it's correct but Vygotsky used it, and it is useful for us to understand as one of the ways he entered the field of psychology. Blonski believed that the writer wrote in a rhythm that was in direct correlation with breathing and he tested this experimentally.

At least in the first part of the '20s, Vygotsky believed that the rhythm of breathing could be experimentally shown to be related to writing and reading literature, and Vygotsky tested this experimentally. In spite of the fact that this may not be right at all, it shows that one of the ways Vygotsky moved from art to psychology — experimental psychology — was art. Previously I wrote that education was the main road to psychology for Vygotsky. But now I don't think so. I wouldn't say that art was the main one; I would say that there was a complex of paths.

It cannot be the case that Vygotsky became a significant figure in psychology overnight as Levitan says [in *One is Not Born a Personality,* ed]. Vygotsky's entrance into psychology was a tremendously contradictory process that took several years. It is only for a picture made in the Hollywood style of the '50s that an obscure teacher from a provincial town overnight became a great psychologist! No. In his first period of work, Vygotsky had strong Pavlovian assumptions. If you read his works chronologically, you will find how these contradictions are played out. You will find that he leaves them behind after 1927. Another thing that is ignored is Vygotsky's interest in psychoanalysis. His name can be found in the archives of the International Psychoanalytical Association as a member up to 1927. He rejected the methodology and results of Freud, but he held in high esteem the kind of work Freud was doing — and something that Vygotsky took from Freud, directly or indirectly through Piaget (we don't know), was the clinical method of investigation.

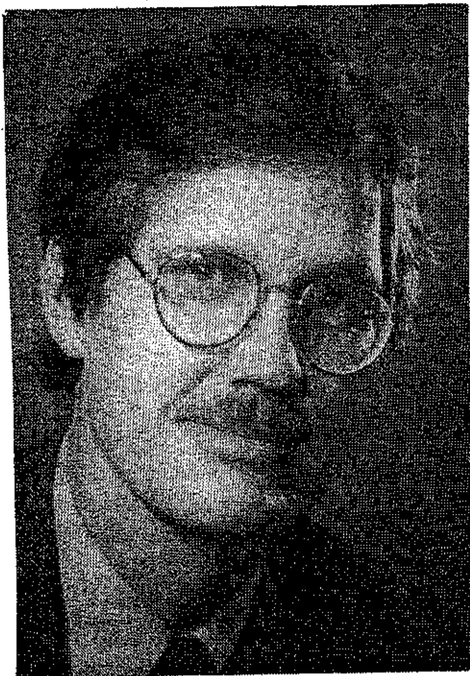
In the last two years things that have been in the dark are becoming clearer because we now have access to books that were banned and people are more likely to speak openly. So we know a lot of things, for example about Vygotsky's relationship with Leont'ev which is important in understanding activity theory, the last years of his life, and his real relation with Bolshevism. You know Vygotsky was a Bolshevik — there is no doubt about this. He never was a member of the party, but he was a deputy of a Soviet and, at least until 1926, a socialist. His book *Pedagogical Psychology* clearly counters those who think Vygotsky had nothing to do with socialism; in the last chapter especially, Vygotsky is very enthusiastic about the possibilities of socialism.

Holzman: Where do you see Vygotskyian research going in the West, the Soviet Union and elsewhere?

Wertsch: I think there's going to be more of a confluence of, on the one hand, people interested in the psychological and the social in the narrow sense — you know, the dyadic kind of research, and on the other hand, people coming from other disciplines interested in the cultural, institutional and historical situatedness of these processes. People from Shirley Brice Heath on the one hand to Ann Brown on the other, working together, will create a situation where there might be a chance of pulling psychology out of its individualistic bias and recognizing that we are all situated.

Holzman: Do you see that having any direct or indirect impact on social conditions, on institutions such as the family and education, on social change?

Wertsch: The place where I have my biggest political goals, what I see as potentially very important is the lesson that it might be able to teach Americans about something we have had to deal with for a long time, since World War II especially, namely, that there are very legitimate well-grounded alternative world views or modes of thinking. There are clearly some things we can learn within our own country — and people like yourself and people in linguistics like Bill Labov are trying to make that point with regard to language — but in the long run what I really want to understand and have other people understand as a real-life implication of all this is that the American ideology of individualism is not the



"To Vygotsky the methodologist/ Vygotsky the psychologist, I'd add Vygotsky a hard-line Marxist of the times/Vygotsky the emancipator."
— Jim Wertsch

only way of organizing a legitimate world view. I would hope all the Vygotsky research would lead to wider respect for alternative world views. It's timely because right now the US is losing hegemony in the world (what we've had anyway) so we can no longer afford to just ignore or impose a single world view attitude. And I think the Vygotsky perspective could have a lot to say on that. That's my fondest long term hope.

Put another way, it really bugs me that, in an era when the Berlin wall comes down, the Soviet Union is falling apart, South Africa's changed, all the things in Eastern Europe that are going on, psychologists in the traditional American mode have practically nothing to say about any of this stuff! And if everybody else is saying that all that's going on has something to do with the human mind in general and the particular human minds that are involved in these events, why is it that we not only haven't but that we *can't* even talk about it? The reason we can't is not that we're neutral — although that's the claim — but because we presuppose our own world view as the ideal one. That's what's got to come tumbling down with other things in order for us to make progress on that front. So it's not that we've avoided those issues, because we actually have what Charles Taylor calls the disembodied self, or an unencumbered image of the self. We can no more stand outside these things and look at them objectively than you can look at your eyeballs objectively without a mirror. But psychology's pretended it can do that, all the while hiding the fact that it's grounded in American individualistic ideology. Exposing that and "proving" it scientifically is what I see as the powerful lesson that is potential in Vygotsky. This would be a major political act, although many people wouldn't consider it to be political (but then psychologists usually don't think most things are political).

Miedema: I am trying to link critical pedagogy, which is usually very abstract and meta-theoretical, with hermeneutics and pragmatism, as a way to make critical pedagogy more practical. That's why I am interested in pragmatism; it's a very practical movement; it has to do with action. The same is true for Vygotsky. In the end there is always the question — how can this reflection work out in action? That is a really important question for any critical pedagogy. How do all the things we reflect on return in action? They come out of action; we reflect about things; how can we with these reflective products go back to action?

Hedegaard: There has been a strong activity theory tradition in Denmark since the 1970s. In psychology, Vygotsky is standard — even obligatory — in the teaching of psychology. But in education it is a different story. It's only recently that the field of education is beginning to be influenced by Vygotsky. Thus far, unfortunately, he has had very little influence on teachers. I hope that changes.

LaCerva: My current work is to continue building the Barbara Taylor School, an independent school for the development of social-therapeutic education (which is influenced by Vygotsky). We will continue creating educational programs that use this methodology, creating non-repressive, non-abusive developmental environments so that kids and teachers can learn, so we can in fact reorganize what education is. That's what we're doing — training teachers in our approach and building relations in the community so we can all be working together. We want people to know what we are doing — our failures and our successes. We want to teach people about Vygotsky, about social therapy and how to use it in the classroom. For example, teachers of poor and minority students cannot ignore the fact that 23 youth of color have been murdered in New York City since January '90. What's the impact of this on how children learn, on how we teach, how we understand children's anger in school? It is critical to create the conditions where these issues can be opened up and discussed. As progressive educators we have to deal with the social-historical conditions we are living in.

In some ways Vygotsky gave me a starting point, a way to begin to look at things, which opened up all kinds of possibilities. The radical statement that learning is socially produced creates many possibilities. For example, it allows for enormous creativity in educational design and how to organize teacher-student relationships. It's difficult to know what's going on in a traditional educational setting. But when you start reorganizing it,you discover what's going on. Particularly when you begin to reorganize race and class issues. We've done some really good work on that.

One way we are deepening Vygotsky's work is how we self-consciously organize learning to be ahead of development. We ask the students questions that are ahead of where they're at developmentally, questions they couldn't possibly answer "on their own." Actually, we don't want them to answer the questions! The process of beginning to explore them and to look at what they need in order to do that, what needs to be built so that we can even have a discussion on the topic, builds the conditions for learning and advances their development. In other words, they have to make the tools to get to that advanced place. We self-consciously think about the kinds of questions we are going to ask and what they have available at whatever level they're at. It's definitely education focused on development.

The students begin to learn how to think self-consciously about who they and the teachers are. This year I'm learning more about how to help the teachers step out of their role and learn who their students are, how best to support their strengths and be close to them. I think teachers are terrible at that. They go into the classroom with very reductionist plans and assumptions and try to teach information. That's traditional. It's horrible and the kids climb the walls. Using our model forces the teachers to work more collectively with the kids because you don't know beforehand what the tools are that you'll need to explore the question. It's very anxiety producing for them; they feel like they don't know what's going on, and in some sense they're right! The learning is structured so they have to work with the kids. The development of the teachers in this model is a qualitatively different activity from any other training; it's very much about learning to work in a collective.

One result is that the students' activity is at a far more advanced level. They have to work together, so they figure out who's good at what, who's not so good at it, and how to structure the activity. The task is to use everything they've learned together. It opens all kinds of possibilities. One of the things we identified in the middle grades class was that the teachers are angry a lot. The kids raised this, and they told the teachers they had to stop "doing anger" that way. When we worked on this in a staff meeting, the teachers kept saying, "Well, what else should we do," meaning 'What's the technique to stop being angry?' " We said, "No, you just stop." This week the teachers said we were doing well; they weren't in the same place. It's a very different — a developmental — experience for the kids to have an opportunity to be heard. The teachers are struggling with it but they see the kids developing.

Bakhurst: One of the things I might do next is see how the various critics of Western philosophy fit together. As I said, Ilyenkov is very hostile to a concept of philosophy which is ultimately indebted to Descartes and the philosophers of

the 18th century. In recent years in the Anglo American philosophical tradition there have been a number of voices that are hostile to that tradition. But it's very hard to put the different complaints of these people together into some kind of alternative to the Cartesian framework. In part that's because that conceptual framework operates rather like a political ideology; hence, it makes its opponents appear to be saying something nuts. It marginalizes and fragments them. It makes them appear as if each is defending some petty criticism so that you can't see how the criticisms fit together. I'd like to see how the different complaints about the orthodoxy and the Enlightenment fit together — the anti-theoretical, anti-philosophical strands in the Anglo American tradition which are a reaction to the 18th century framework (people like Wittgenstein), the post modernists who are very hostile to the 18th century framework, the Marxist thinkers like Ilyenkov, those in liberal critical theory who associate the Cartesian conception of the self with the atomic individual and believe that conceptions of the self are implicated very deeply in critical philosophy and the critique of liberalism. Vygotskian psychology is one aspect of that.

Moll: While I don't read Russian and consider that a major limitation, the fact that I read Vygotsky in Spanish as well as English has introduced me to material that is accessible in Spanish. I believe there's more Vygotsky translated into Spanish than English.

Holzman: How do you account for that?

Moll: I'm not sure. A couple of things. In Spain they're rediscovering translations that were done before Franco took over, that were translated close to the time the originals were first published in Russian and that were then dumped. They are now being republished. So there was already a tradition of paying attention to Soviet work.

I learned this from my contact with colleagues in Madrid and reading some of their work. Also the tradition of psychology in Europe and Latin America is very different from the North American. You find a closer affinity with Vygotsky's line of work among psychologists in those countries than you find among psychologists in the US.

Holzman: That's really interesting that they found translations of that work. Are there any old timers that are still working as Vygotsky is becoming more popular?

Moll: A good question. I don't know.

Holzman: What do you see happening and how do you see the work in Latin America and Spain impacting on the US? Is the work different, for example, is it more practical, is it more connected to schools and community or less so?

Moll: From what I've read from Spain, I don't think there's any doubt that the work is more practically oriented. The empirical work of Rosa is with blind kids and the work of River — a terrific Spanish psychologist who's written a really excellent book on Vygotsky — is with kids with learning disabilities. The work of colleagues in Barcelona has to do with adult literacy development. All of it is conducted by researchers inspired by the work of Vygotsky.

Holzman: How do you see all of this in relation to social change? Do you see this as an important way that psychology can contribute to liberation, empowerment, the end of oppression, etc.?

Moll: It could very well be that many of the concepts Vygotsky proposed are erroneous, but his broader theoretical stance, his broader framework, I think, is of great value in providing coherence to the work we're doing in households, classrooms, with teachers, parents, computers, etc. It may well be that Vygotsky's broader theoretical position, which highlights so much of the social cultural aspects of thinking, has in it the potential to contribute positively to broader social change — or at least to contribute to the thinking of those who are trying to contribute to greater social change. ★

"It may well be that Vygotsky's broader theoretical position, which highlights so much of the social cultural aspects of thinking, has in it the potential to contribute positively to broader social change — or at least to contribute to the thinking of those who are trying to contribute to greater social change."
— Luis Moll

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