

IN DEFENCE OF VYGOTSKIJ
AN ANALYSIS OF THE ARGUMENTS THAT LED TO THE
CONDEMNATION OF THE CULTURAL-HISTORICAL THEORY¹

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Summary

In this article we deal with three arguments leveled at Vygotskij's cultural-historical theory in the nineteenthirties. The first two, "empiricism" and "idealism" are only dealt with in passing. The third criticism, "eclecticism" is analysed in some detail. Our conclusion is that at least two of the three charges, "empiricism" and "eclecticism" were clearly unfounded. Whether the third argument, "idealism", was valid has to be a topic of future research.

1. Introduction

In 1936 Vygotskij's cultural-historical theory fell into disgrace. His well-known *Thought and Language* was suppressed and his work and that of his close collaborators couldn't be mentioned or quoted for some 25 years. The exact reasons for this unfortunate course of events are difficult to lay bare. We know that in scientific and political journals several arguments were leveled at Vygotskij's theory and in the following we will deal with three of them.

In Soviet psychology, and especially in the nineteenthenties and thirties, a purely rational, scientific debate is hardly possible. Almost every scientific point of view had political or ideological overtones. This means that to present the arguments

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which were leveled at the cultural-historical theory as purely rational arguments in a purely rational debate is to distort historical reality. The problem is that it is so difficult to uncover the ideological and political backgrounds. In the following we will touch upon some of these backgrounds, but surely other circumstances, as yet unknown, have played a role. In this sense, the picture presented here is a rational distortion or reconstruction of the actual course of events.

2. "Empiricism" and "idealism"

The first two arguments will only be dealt with in passing. First of all, most historians of psychology mention the fact that Vygotskij and his co-workers made extensive use of foreign sources in constructing the cultural-historical theory. It was claimed by critics that Vygotskij believed it possible to dissociate the "facts" of (bourgeois) psychology from the theories used to explain these facts, which would imply the so-called fault of "empiricism" (McLeish, 1975, p. 122; Vos, 1976, p. 101). This is a difficult charge to meet. Let us first have a look at Vygotskij's position as a theorist. An essay written in 1927, entitled *The historical significance of the crisis in psychology. A methodological study* reveals his epistemological point of view. He explicitly condemns an empiricist approach and defends the position that scientific facts are penetrated by theory. This is so, because (1) we select certain facts from a theoretical point of view, and (2) we phrase these facts in words, which are prototheories in themselves (Vygotskij, 1982, p. 316). The latter point Vygotskij took from one of his linguistic teachers, Potebnja. These arguments for the "theory-ladenness" of facts meant for Vygotskij that an atheoretical registration of facts is impossible and that the registration-induction model of science is untenable for psychology as well as for the natural sciences. Is Vygotskij's position compatible with the dialectical-materialistic epistemology? Yes, it is, in fact it is based on the writings of Engels and Lenin. Vygotskij explicitly refers to Engels' *Dialectics of Nature*, in which Engels condemns

empiricism, stating that in science we do not only observe certain phenomena, but use our intellectual capacity (*Denktätigkeit*) as well (Engels, 1978, p. 506). The emphasis on theory is also in accordance with Lenin's notion of the importance of theory (see Boeselager, 1975, p. 29). We thus may conclude that Vygotskij, at least in theory, was not an empiricist and that his epistemological position was in accordance with the classical dialectical-materialistic epistemology.

Now that we know Vygotskij's theoretical position, we can turn to his work as a practical scientist. Vygotskij indeed made extensive use of foreign data in constructing his cultural-historical theory. But he selected these data from his (dialectical) point of view and rephrased them in the conceptual language of dialectical materialism. This is completely consistent with the epistemological point of view formulated above. Perhaps we can clarify this procedure by mentioning Vygotskij's distinction between real facts and scientific facts. The term "real fact" refers to the raw material of science, the reality. The term "scientific fact" refers to such a real fact phrased in words and selected from a certain point of view (Vygotskij, 1982, p. 313). In this terminology, Vygotskij used the real facts of other theoretical schools, but made them into scientific facts compatible with his cultural-historical theory. In fact, he explicitly stated that (*marxist scientists have to conquer the facts of bourgeois psychology by rephrasing them and reinterpreting them in marxist concepts.* Can Vygotskij, the practical scientist, be considered an empiricist then? This depends, of course, on what we mean by the word "empiricist". In our opinion, one should restrict the word "empiricist" to those who believe that in science we deal with raw data and with theories based on these raw data. In this sense Vygotskij was, as we have tried to show, not an empiricist.

Another charge leveled at Vygotskij was that his conception of the role of the sign in mental development was in contradiction with Lenin's theory of reflection. According to this theory thought

is a product of (highly developed) matter. Thought and matter can't be dissociated (see Payne, 1968, p. 26). Vygotskij's notion of signs as a source of the development of higher psychological functions was considered to be in contradiction with this theory (see Van IJzendoorn & Van der Veer, 1984, p. 47-51). The signs were transmitted from adult to child in social interaction (*obšenie*) and it wasn't clear how these signs referred to (reflected) matter. If culture is transmitted from adult to child through signs, the origin of the development of the mind is seen as the result of a subject-subject interaction, rather than as the result of a subject-object interaction (Rahmani, 1973, p. 45). In fact, in the first edition of *Language and Thought* the editor, Kolbanovskij, had already stated this criticism in his introduction. The sign in Vygotskij's theory, he wrote, is not connected with labor or practical activity. In addition, he didn't think the connection with Pavlov's theory of the higher nervous activity satisfactory (Kolbanovskij, 1934, p. vi-xxxv). We thus see that according to this criticism Vygotskij's cultural-historical theory missed a clear materialistic underpinning. This is another way of saying that the theory was "idealistic". Elsewhere we have shown how later Soviet researchers have tried to avoid this criticism by adjusting Vygotskij's theory using the concept of activity (*dejatel...nost*) (Van der Veer & Van IJzendoorn, 1984). We there defended Vygotskij's point of view by stating that he tried to develop a dialectical view of mental development. In such an approach both reducing higher psychological processes to lower ones or to physiology and denying any genetical relationship between these two types of processes is inadmissible. It is clear that Vygotskij tried to retain some principal distinction between lower and higher psychological functions. It can also be shown that his distinction has several shortcomings (see Van IJzendoorn & Van der Veer, 1984, p. 47-51). Does this mean that Vygotskij really was guilty of "idealism"? This question is difficult to answer. In our opinion, Vygotskij did see the important role of material, biological factors in child development (see the next paragraph). But his opti-

mistic point of view might be called "idealistic". On top of that Vygotskij can indeed, from a dialectical-materialistic point of view, be reproached for not having given a material foundation of the signs of language. Such a foundation has been given by his contemporary Bachtin (1930).

3. Eclecticism

A third and perhaps the most serious error which lost Vygotskij the favor of the communist party was his so-called devotion to foreign fashions and, in particular, to the mental testing movement. To make use of the theories and data of all sorts of foreign schools and currents in psychology was called "eclecticism" and this was considered to be a serious fault. Why was the mental testing movement, which was part of a new approach called "pedology" considered harmful? In a recent Soviet textbook we can find some answers. The editor of the book, Smirnov, gives the following description of the "pedology" movement. According to him "pedology" was a current in bourgeois pedagogics which spread to the Soviet Union and which defended the reactionary and fatalistic conception that the fate of children is determined by biological factors (e.g. genes) plus a fixed, immutable environment. The "pedologists" didn't see the important formative role of education in child development. Using mental tests they measured the so-called IQ, a quantity that can never reveal the possibilities of the child. As a result of this procedure, says Smirnov, children were judged in a purely negative fashion and gathered in remedial schools according to negative characteristics. These schools were filled with children, who were not "backward" or "disabled" but just neglected. The authorities were extremely dissatisfied with this situation and in 1936 the party's resolution *On pedagogical distortions* resulted in the termination of all pedological activity (See Bejn, Levina & Morozova in Vygostkij, 1983, p. 354).

Because Vygotskij and his co-workers were identified with the pedology movement they also fell into disfavor. But did Vygotskij really underestimate the formative role of education in child deve-

lopment? Was Vygotskij really a proponent of mental tests used in the way Smirnov describes? These questions we will try to answer in the last part of this article. We will show that Vygostkij defended a much more sophisticated position, using his writings on defectology to do so. Most of these writings can be found in the recently published fifth volume of Vygotskij's collected works (Vygotskij, 1983).

3.1. Defectology: cultural tools

From the very beginning of his scientific career Vygotskij had worked with disabled children. He started to work with deaf and blind children in 1924 and continued to do so until his death. During the last years of his life he was head of the Experimental Defectological Institute in Moscow.

At first Vygostkij in his publications on disabled children was strongly influenced by various authors, notably Alfred Adler. Adler had written that organic inferiority through the subjective inferiority complex is transformed into the striving for compensation and overcompensation. Curiously enough, this paradoxal thesis seemed to Vygotskij to be compatible with a dialectical view of mental development. In these years he time and again returned to Adler's work for inspiration. It is only later, when the cultural-historical theory gets shape, that he develops a truly original view of the disabled child.

In his cultural-historical theory Vygotskij attached great importance to social interaction, through which the higher psychological processes develop. All the more serious, then, when a child is in danger of being cut off from this social interaction, as is the case with children with physical handicaps such as blindness or deafness. It is also well-known that to Vygotskij social interaction was chiefly verbal interaction. One might even say that he conceived higher psychological functions as verbal functions. Because it is so difficult for deaf children to learn to speak, it is in particular the mental development of the deaf child that Vygotskij believed endangered. However, he certainly did not regard

the situation of these children as hopeless. On the contrary, he believed these children capable of full social existence if they are provided with the means or tools to develop intellectually. The means particularly suited for achieving this goal, such as speech and writing, have been adapted to the average person in full possession of the faculties of hearing and sight. It is the task of psychologists, Vygotskij said, to uncover new, adapted means of enabling the disabled child to participate in society. If they fail, the child will remain primitive. In this regard Vygotskij made a rather daring comparison with primitive peoples lacking the means or tools which enable a culture to flourish, such as a written language (Vygotskij, 1983, p. 25). In both cases cultural development is limited for lack of tools. The notion of "primitivity" Vygotskij took from the French anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl (see Cole & Scribner, 1974, p. 20; Lévy-Bruhl, 1976, p. 31-42).

Vygotskij's point of view can be illustrated by the case of the blind child. He does not regard the loss of sight as fatal, for culture is still accessible through such cultural instruments as speech, reading and writing. These cultural instruments are not bound to one particular sense. The blind child does not read with its eyes but with its fingers. The deaf child does not speak with its mouth, but with its hands. In principle, Vygotskij believed, there is no difference. The culture is just as accessible to the disabled child, only through other means by using other cultural tools (Vygotskij, 1983, p. 171). Indeed, Vygotskij refused to regard the disabled child as inferior, but repeatedly emphasized that it is simply different. In 1931 he even wrote:

"We assume that even if human beings only had four senses, it would make no essential difference in the knowledge they could acquire, for fundamentally, thought - the means by which we assimilate experiential data - would remain the same. The picture we develop of the reality around us is not only based upon perceiving it directly, but also upon our rationally assimilating experience. In principle, both the blind and those possessing sight know much more than they imagine; they know much more than they can observe through the five senses

(...). And so for the blind child, thought is the most important means of compensating for this inadequacy in perceiving images" (Vygotskij, 1983, p. 211).

In this way Vygotskij linked his view of the disabled child to the epistemological notion that direct perception does not necessarily result in valid knowledge. This notion had been underlined in the work of Engels (see Kolakowski, Vol. I, p. 394, 1981).

3.2. *Defectology: the need for a qualitative diagnosis*

To Vygotskij's mind then, the deficiency of a lower function arising in phylogenesis, such as perception, can be compensated by utilizing a cultural instrument. In this regard a "disabled" child does not differ from a "normal" child at all. When, for example, the "natural" direct memory fails, the normal child will also use language (categorizing and labeling the objects to be remembered) and all kinds of mnemonic systems. The notion that psychological functions can be brought about in different ways, Vygotskij took from Binet (Vygotskij, 1931 in Vygotskij, 1983, p. 122). For each failure of an organic function psychologists must attempt to find a cultural instrument to replace it. In order to do so, a qualitative diagnosis of the disabled child is required. It is not only necessary to determine exactly which function is disturbed, but also which functions have remained unimpaired. Time and again Vygotskij opposed a purely quantitative diagnosis, determining only how far a child lags behind and what it is incapable of doing. The psychologist needs a qualitative analysis of the child's strengths and weaknesses. A mental test can perform a supportive role in this diagnosis, but no more than that (see also Lurija, 1979, p. 82). Measurement and diagnosis are two entirely different aspects of psychological research. "The tape measure sees nothing", Vygotskij wrote in 1931, "without subjective assimilation, that is, without thought, without interpretation, (without) decoding the results (without) evaluating the data, there is no scientific research" (in Vygotsky, 1983, p. 299).

We thus see that both questions raised above must be answered in the negative. Vygotskij neither underestimated the role of education in mental development nor was he a proponent of an unbridled use of mental tests. He explicitly condemned the latter approach because children are then characterized as "mentally retarded". But is that not like telling the patient that he is ill, he wrote, without specifying which actual disease he is suffering from? Only on the basis of a detailed, qualitative analysis recovery is possible.

In the nineteenthirties Vygotskij was accused of underestimating the formative role of the environment. Nowadays, in our opinion, it would seem that he expressed a rather optimistic point of view. After all, these children do suffer from an organic defect. Vygotskij did acknowledge that there are organic deficiencies, which in and of themselves cannot be remedied. But in his dialectical view of mental development a successful reorganization of the mind is possible. Vygotskij: "... the biological processes primarily responsible for the first stage in the development of the mentally retarded become concealed; they are not eliminated but neutralized (*snjatami*) during the process of development ..." (Vygotskij, 1931 in Vygotskij, 1983, p. 118). With this explicit reference to Hegel's dialectic Vygotskij once again expressed his optimistic view of the human being. Nature is overcome by nurture "The word overcomes the blindness" (Vygotskij, 1983, p. 95).

4. Conclusions

Three arguments aimed at Vygotskij's cultural-historical theory were presented. It was shown that two of them, "empiricism" and "eclecticism" were unfounded. Moreover, it was demonstrated that Vygotskij's ideas were in accordance with the general Marxist-Leninist framework. Whether the third argument, "idealism" was valid, is doubtful. It caused, however, much controversy in Soviet psychology and eventually resulted in the activity approach, of which Leont'ev was the principal spokesman (see Wertsch, 1981).

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