

Vygotsky's Cultural-Historical Theory and Marx's Ethnological Notebooks

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Abstract

Psychology by no means holds the “secret” of human affairs, simply because this “secret” is not of a psychological order. Georges Politzer, 1929, p. 170. In the 1920s, a vision arose which was to captivate the Soviet psychologists’ imagination for the next six decades: the vision of molding a new man for a new society as rationally ordered as the Marxian view of society. While fueling extraordinary advances in all fields of human, social, and natural sciences, this vision perpetuated a hidden yet persistent agenda: the delusion that human nature and society could be fitted into precise and manageable rational categories. Indeed, the question of molding a new human being was very soon to dominate the debates which took place in the early 1920s and 1930s. It was in the course of these debates that the foundations of the cultural-historical theory were laid in psychology for carrying forward the vision of molding a new human being for a new society. This new society will create a new human being, “In the future society, psychology will indeed be the science of the new man. Without this perspective of Marxism and the history of science would not be complete. But this science of the new man will still remain psychology. Among the prominent psychologists who seriously confronted that agenda in his writings is Lev Vygotsky, he stated that “man ... is social person - an aggregate of social relations, embodied in an individual (psychological functions built according to social structure)” (1989, p. 66). Vygotsky’s ideas are rooted in Marx’s Ethnological Notebooks. Marx put the *Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach* to the test in his critique of Maine (Henry Sumner Maine, 1875). Marx’s conception of the social individual as an ensemble of social relations became the kernel of Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory. Vygotsky, like Marx, moved away from the conception of the individual as a self-contained agency and grounded his theory on Marx’s conception of the social individual as an ensemble of social relations. Social individuals do not simply produce the means and conditions of their own lives and live under these conditions but produce the conditions under which they live. Vygotsky engaged in developing a theoretical framework to the two-sided reality of social individuals as not merely subject to their life conditions but simultaneously creating them. The ethnological notebooks were in circulation in Moscow as early as 1923. In sum, the *Ethnological Notebooks* is perhaps as important for cultural-historical psychologists as the *Method of political economy* is for economists. It is suggested that the Ethnological Notebooks should be reexamined for their implications for most present-day debates on Vygotsky’s cultural-historical psychology.

Keywords: Cultural-historical theory; Ethnological Notebooks, Sixth thesis on Feuerbach; Main concepts of cultural-historical theory; Human nature; Social change; postmodernism and foundationalism interpretations of cultural-historical theory.

Introduction

The cultural-historical theory is an interdisciplinary approach to human higher mental functions developed by Lev Vygotsky, Alexis Leontiev, Alexander Luria and others in the 1920s and early 1930s. Their ideas, originally, were influenced by the principles of Marxist philosophy and critique of European and North American psychology and drew from sources in literary critics, anthropology, and ethnology. The theoretical framework of cultural-historical research paradigm is grounded in socially, historically, and culturally concrete human reality, material conditions, and socially organized practical activity. Human higher mental functions originated in the lived concrete social life; social life has its ultimate origin in the forms and structures of different modes of production. The Cultural-historical theory is grounded conceptually and epistemologically within the materialist conception of history and dialectical materialist philosophy. Although we did not invent the concept “cultural-historical” (Cultural-historical theory, sociocultural theory, socio-historical-cultural theory, *non-classical psychology*, *metapsychology*, *activity theory*, cultural-historical activity theory, socio-historico-cultural theory, cultural social historic theory), we are convinced that as long as cultural-historical psychologists (Working within the theoretical framework of Vygotsky and his colleagues) underestimate the importance of Marx, there will be no challenge to mainstream psychology as a science of the abstract individual. Cultural-historical theory was formulated within the theoretical framework of Marx’s “*The sixth thesis on Feuerbach*” (1845), “*Grundrisse*” (1857–8), “*Capital*” (1863–7), and “*The ethnological notebooks*” (1880–2), and Engels’ “*The part played by labor in the transition from ape to man*” (1876), “*The origin of the family, private property and the state: In the light of the researches of Lewis H. Morgan*” (1884). In 1930, Vygotsky and Luria published their magnum opus, “*Studies on the history of behavior: Ape, primitive and child*”, which heralded the beginning of a new science, the science of human higher mental functions. What makes us human is the creation of higher

mental functions such as abstract thinking, language, symbols, writings, generalization, reflecting abstraction, creativity, and logical reasoning. It is through the processes of higher mental functions that the human has been liberated from the cage of biology. Human beings are the only species who live outside their skin. These higher mental functions produced culture as a socially organized practical activity. We are born twice, first is the biological birth, the second is the cultural birth. This second birth, the second nature, created human higher mental functions.

Cultural-historical theory and human higher mental functions

Just as Marx had come closest in the nineteenth century to be the Darwin of the social sciences, so Vygotsky had come closest in the 1930s to being the Marx of the sciences of human higher mental functions. Cultural-historical conceptions are a non-positivist strategy whose epistemological assumptions are rooted in the philosophical traditions of Karl Marx and dialectical historical materialism assumptions that led to the birth of Marxist psychology as an academic discipline. Cultural-historical theory as a research paradigm is concerned with the development of human higher mental functions, and systematic interaction between material conditions of social life, thought, behavior and personality, with conflicts as well as contradictions, continuities, and discontinuities, gradual and revolutionary changes. Cultural-historical theory stands opposed to mainstream psychology and its biological reductionist materialism such as those embodied in abstract individual explanations of cultural differences and similarities, universalism and relativism. It stands apart from the search for best predictors that provide accounts for human behavior (Al Najjar & Al Hilawani, 1999). Cultural-historical theory is a research program that seeks to explain human higher mental functions by means of the theoretical principles of Marx's dialectical historical materialism. Its aim is to discover the existence of hidden mental structures that accede internal dialectical laws of change. These mental structures are an ensemble of social relations connected according to internal laws of change yet to be discovered. Cultural-historical theory delves deeper beyond the surface of the ordinary state of mystified consciousness, personality, and alienated behavior (Elhammoumi, 2001, 2002, 2006, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2015). It surfaces out that which is taken for granted by disengaging that which is enmeshed (Al Najjar & Smadi, 1998). In this paper we defend the idea that cultural-historical theory has the potential to overcome the theory of human individual as a self-contained agency (having all that is needed in itself, not depending on or influenced by others, he/she self-sufficient and self-reliant) and replace it by Marx's conceptions of human individual as an ensemble of social relations as formulated in the *Six Thesis on Feuerbach* and tested in the critical review "*The ethnological notebooks of Karl Marx: Studies of Morgan, Phear, Maine, Lubbock*" (1972). Vygotsky pointed out that, "The development of higher functions is governed by historical laws" (1989, p. 55). In other words, the collective creates higher mental functions, they are historically created, progressively formed, and culturally elaborated and transmitted. Higher mental functions are internalized social relations.

Luria (1987) explained Vygotsky's method and approach to psychology eloquently when he said that "Vygotsky supposed that higher mental processes are of a social origin and that the basic unit of human conscious behavior is not to be found in unconditional or conditional reflexes ... Instead, a new method was proposed — to step outside the organism itself and to try to find the basic units of human conscious behavior in the relation of the subject with the social environment, treating these *relations* as an essential feature of human mental processes" (1987, p. 675-676). Politzer (1929) was pointing to the same idea that Luria was explaining, that psychology must "step out of the organism itself" when he argued that "Psychology by no means holds the "secret" of human affairs, simply because this "secret" is not of a psychological order" (p. 170). Vygotsky believed that dialectical materialism has the necessary conceptual tools to bridge the gap between human higher mental processes and consciousness and their social, historical, and cultural grounding.

Wallon said in regard to applying dialectical materialism to psychology that, "Psychology is by no means unique in this respect. Dialectical materialism is relevant to the entire realm of knowledge, as well as to the realm of action. But psychology ... must, more than any other science, find in dialectical materialism its normal base and guiding principles" (1951, p. 34).

Wallon developed this idea further, dialectics is the engine of human psychological processes, he explained: "It is dialectics that has given psychology its stability and its meaning ... Through dialectics, psychology is able to be at once a natural science and a human science ... Marxist dialectics has enabled psychology to comprehend the organism and its environment, in constant interaction, as a single, unified whole." (Wallon, 1951, p. 34).

By insisting on explanatory concepts such as discontinuity, conflict, contradiction, and crisis - underlying the development of higher mental functions - Vygotsky (1997a, 1997b) demonstrated his fidelity to the Marxian theses of the dialectic.

In this regard, Vygotsky (1997a, 1997b) - like Wallon (1951) - valorized Marxian dialectical concepts of material reality, consciousness, practice, conflict, contradiction, crisis, *aufheben*, negation, negation of the negation, quantity, quality, discontinuity, and change, and chose these over non-dialectical concepts such as permanent stability, continuity, adaptation, equilibrium, and equilibration.

This view suggests that materialist dialectics can give scientific psychology the ability to achieve its full scientific potential, epistemological meaning, ontological guidance, conceptual tools, theoretical clarity, and logical and methodological rationale.

If Vygotsky did not leave behind him a fully constructed and formulated theory of human higher mental functions, he did leave behind him many of the bricks needed for creating it.

Vygotsky's theory of higher mental functions and the Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach

The idea of restructuring psychology in the 1920s along Marxist lines met with different difficulties theoretically, epistemologically, ontologically, methodologically and philosophically. Vygotsky set the task of developing a Marxist psychology. He argued that the way out of the crisis in psychology is back to Marx's writings. He drew his inspiration from Marx and the materialist philosophy. By the end of the 1920s and early 1930s, he developed the cultural-historical theory grounded within the theoretical framework of the materialist conception of history and dialectical materialism. The study of human activity (instead of behavior), is the study of the history of human activity or the behavior of man can be understood only as the history of behavior. Human activity is grounded in the social relations. Vygotsky argued that "the relation of psychological functions is genetically [developmentally] linked to real relations between people" (1989, p. 57). Social relations are the driving forces of human higher mental functions, "genetically social relations, real relations between people, underlie all higher functions and their relationships" (Vygotsky, 1989, 58). Psychology is the study of the social individual. The social individual is the object of psychology. Social individual, for Vygotsky "is neither a logical subject (Hegel), nor a soma, organism it is an aggregate of social relations, embodied in an individual (psychological functions built according to social structure" (1989, p. 66). The unit of analysis of psychology is social relations. In this connection, Vygotsky stated that: "(1) the most general-all things cultural are social; (2) a sign or symbol independent of the organism, such as a tool, is a social means; (3) all higher functions evolve in phylogeny not biologically, but socially; (4) the crudest meaning-the mechanism of such functions is a copy of the social. They are internalized relations of a social order, transferred to the individual personality, the basis of the social structure of the personality" (1989, p. 58). These ideas were developed and grounded within the *Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach*. In the *Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach*, Marx (1845) stated that "the human essence is ... the ensemble of the social relations". To paraphrase Marx, Vygotsky put it this way, "the psychological nature of man is the totality of social relations shifted to the inner sphere and having become functions of the personality and forms of its structure" (1989, p. 59). Cultural development, historical development, and social development are the driving forces of every function of human mental life. Marx argued in *Das Kapital* that human nature and human cognitive operations were always secondary to modes of production. He pointed out in the Theses on Feuerbach (1845) that it is not the dialectic of human consciousness that explains human concrete material life and human history, but it is the concrete material life of social individuals that explain human consciousness and human history. Human consciousness and human history are only the product of the concrete material life and the properties of objective social life. Similarly, human higher mental thought processes, consciousness, and activity are rooted in historically organized human activity. In the final analysis, human higher mental thought processes, consciousness, and activity are framed and shaped by culturally organized human activity.

What happened to the main concepts of cultural-historical theory?

The concepts of the cultural historical theory have been diluted in post-positivist and post-modernist cultures, the core concepts have been replaced by new one to fit contemporary mainstream psychology. These core concepts that provide a useful framework for cultural-historical theory have been dethroned. For example:

- Development and change of productive forces become Scientific and technological revolution
- Means of production become technology
- Social relations of production become inter-human relations, inter-subjectivity, shared understanding
- Exploitation becomes alienation or mental alienation
- Ideological transformation becomes mental structures
- Class becomes identity
- Class struggles become contestation or protest
- Contradiction becomes equilibration or equilibrium
- Social class becomes community
- Change becomes transformation
- Social individual becomes agency or abstract individual
- Revolution becomes election

The above analysis shows that the present versions of cultural-historical psychology are deeply concerned with individual internal mental structures as a self-contained agency.

Cultural-historical theory, human nature, and social change.

Psychology must stress consciousness and conscious change as a fundamental aspect of human activity. Tolman pointed out that "psychology is an unavoidably political endeavor" (1994, p. 8). Schaeuble (1968) stated that, "theory must measure up to something. However, since the thing... is not neutral but structured by society, theory cannot do without an adequate conception of society" (quoted in Charles Tolman, p. 17). Cultural-historical theory is shaped by the zeitgeist of the October 1917 Russian revolution. The cultural-historical theory is deeply rooted in Marxism. Hegel's paradigm in philosophy emerged from the impact of the French Revolution, and Marx's historical materialist dialectical philosophy emerged from the impact of a new era of proletarian revolts (The revolts of 1838, The Revolution of 1848, First International of 1864, the Paris Commune 1871). Vygotsky's Marxist psychology emerged from the impact of a new socially organized form of social relations of production (October 1917 revolution). This led Vygotsky to create a psychology which would be "subject to all the premises of historical materialism" (1986, p. 95).

At the core of Marxist psychology is the formulation of the laws of human higher mental functions, consciousness, and human activity, a science of human higher mental functions. These laws can be summarized in three main propositions. First, is the general law of cultural development, which means that human higher mental functions have their origin in the processes of social relations of production. Second, is the law of semiotic mediation, which means that human higher mental functions can be understood only if we understand the signs and tools that mediate them. Third, is the genetic method, which means that human higher mental functions can be understood only in the processes of their development and growth. Psychology is the science of social production of the individual with special emphasis on higher mental functions, consciousness, activity, praxis, and inner life. Vygotsky incorporated Marx's concept of labor –activity, and praxis- to his ontological –epistemological approach to the study of human higher mental functions. Vygotsky argued that,

"Labor is that fundamental pivot around which the life of society is structured and erected. Man's social life and his study of nature are linked to the activity of labor." (1993, p. 119), and "It is labor which created man." (1994, p. 183). "Labor, society, and nature are the three fundamental channels which guide educational and formative work in school." (1993, p. 11), and he added that "Even man's intellect could not have developed outside the conditions of specifically human activity, in particular, outside of labor." (1993, p. 236).

Psychologists have interpreted human nature, behavior and higher mental functions in various ways, but their goal is to change human nature. This later thesis can be expanded a step further by stating, if we want to change human nature we must change social relations of production. In our view, *social relations of production* is the unit of analysis of psychology, as the *cell* is the unit of analysis for biology, *the atom* is the unit of analysis for physics, and *value* is the unit of analysis for economics. Social relations of production as a unit of analysis will free psychology from being mainly limited to academic audiences to a psychology that is involved in the development of human individual potentialities, rising consciousness, emancipation, and liberation, as well as overcoming alienation and reification of human mental make-up. This leads to assuming that the human individual has changing psychological nature and that, as society develops new social relations, new forms of higher mental functions and consciousness emerge. For Marx, any psychology that ignored the historical development of human labor activity and human consciousness could not become a genuine and real psychological science.

Cultural-historical psychology: Postmodernism and foundationalism interpretations

This leads to the idea that, if you want to understand what is going on in the cognitive structures of culture in a given society, the best starting point is to look at the economic relations of production in that society and try to fit everything else into that. The social relation of production is the cornerstone that regulates the concrete social life, human rule-governed behavior, consciousness, activity, higher mental functions and inner life. Social relations of production regulate our psychological mode of production, psychological forces of production, and psychological means of production. Production of all human cognitive tools such as thought production, consciousness, personality, and constructs shape our way of behaving and acting in socially organized practical activity. In this regard, Vygotsky argued that "A fundamental change of the whole system of these relationships which man is a part of, will also inevitably lead to a change in consciousness, a change in man's whole behavior" (1994, p. 181). This leads us to the idea that human nature is revealed in change. A first-hand study is always instructive, insightful and often, as in this case, full of surprise. In general, we think most work in "cultural-historical psychology" has stayed too close to both the form and content of postmodernist epistemology, post-positivist epistemology and foundationalism epistemology of Descartes, Locke, and Kant (Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian project of foundationalism), which means the attempt to justify our realistically true knowledge of nature, society, and real world. The use of these epistemologies had not led to the development of a genuine understanding of human higher mental functions and human nature. Cultural historical psychologists (Leontiev, Luria, Holzkamp, Sève, Zazzo, Cole, Engestrom, Wertsch, Valsiner, Van der Veer, Parker, Roth

among others) did some very important work and made some real contributions, particularly in the field of human mental development. But in general, we think they tried to produce a cultural- historical version of psychology that has the same form as postmodernist and foundationalist epistemologies, fitting neatly into the same academic categories: cognition, motivation, perception, intelligence, attention, development, etc. This is understandable in the context of the academic politics (Staeuble 1968, Tolman 1994) at that time. The best theoretical tool for re-conceptualizing cultural-historical psychology is Marxism itself.

Conclusion

Vygotsky was part of a new generation of Soviet psychologists who dedicated themselves to developing a new psychology based on the principles of dialectical historical materialist philosophy. These scientists believed that dialectical and historical materialism would shed light on the psychology of oppression and pave the way to a psychology of liberation. In Vygotsky's view, dialectical materialism places psychology on its feet and guides it to becoming the science that emphasizes human potential, creativity, and development.

Though Vygotsky touches on many topics, subjects and ideas originating from Hegel, Marx, Engels, and Lenin, among others, he was not able to systemize them in a unified, integrated theoretical framework. This is what Vygotsky meant when he said that psychology still needed its own *Das Kapital*. One of the key challenges, he explained, is to apply the philosophical and methodological concepts of Marxism to the science of psychology.

Psychology is in need of a unified, systematic theory in order to develop as a science. In our view, Marx's dialectical materialist method is an essential tool in this quest for understanding human development, social change, contradiction and concrete totality, and for developing a new psychology complete with its own *Das Kapital* along the lines envisioned by Vygotsky.

As we close this paper, let us emphasize that individual development and social change, as envisioned by Marx and Vygotsky, is a real possibility, given the state of social relations that govern society today.

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