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The Vygotsky school and its contributions to a revolutionary practice

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ABSTRACT. The theoretical essay presents some elements of the School of Vygotsky, based on the foundations of Marxism, which brings an unique contribution to the understanding of the human psyche and its multiple determinations. Drawing on the ideas of Vygotsky and his direct collaborators, Luria and Leontiev, representatives of Soviet psychology, the article highlights the proximity of Vygotsky to Marx, when he selects the centrality of work as the genesis of social being, which allows relevant implications in the construction of the categorical complex of historical-cultural psychology. Thus, there is a close relationship between psychology and philosophy, based on the theoretical-methodological perspective of Vygotsky, indicating the socialist transformation of man. In this way, this article seeks to contribute to the construction of a categorical building for the understanding of how we become human, placing man in the midst of his social relations.

Keywords: Vygotsky; psychology; cultural history; socialist transformation.

A Escola de Vygotsky e suas contribuições para uma práxis revolucionária

RESUMO. O ensaio teórico em tela apresenta alguns elementos da Escola de Vygotsky, alicerçado nos fundamentos do marxismo, que traz uma contribuição ímpar ao entendimento do psiquismo humano e suas múltiplas determinações. Tomando como basilares as ideias de Vygotsky e seus colaboradores diretos, Luria e Leontiev, representantes da psicologia soviética, o artigo destaca a proximidade de Vygotsky com Marx, quando elege a centralidade do trabalho como ato-gênese do ser social, o que possibilita relevantes implicações na edificação do complexo categorial da psicologia histórico-cultural. Desse modo, assevera-se haver uma estreita relação entre psicologia e filosofia, fundamentada na perspectiva teórico-metodológica de Vygotsky, apontando para a transformação socialista do homem. Dessa forma, este artigo busca contribuir para a construção de um edifício categorial para o entendimento de como nos tornamos humanos, situando o homem em meio as suas relações sociais.

Palavras-chave: Vygotsky; psicologia; história cultural; transformação socialista.

La escuela de Vygotsky y sus contribuciones para una práctica revolucionaria

RESUMEN. El ensayo teórico presenta algunos elementos de la Escuela de Vygotsky, basada en los fundamentos del marxismo, que trae una contribución singular al entendimiento del psiquismo humano y sus múltiples determinaciones. Se toma como base las ideas de Vygotski y sus colaboradores más próximos, Luria e Leontiev, representantes de la sicología soviética, el artículo destaca la proximidad de Vygotsky con Marx, cuando elige la centralidad del trabajo como acto-génesis del ser social, lo que posibilita relevantes implicaciones en la edificación del complejo categorial de la psicología histórico-cultural. De este modo, se afirma que existe una estrecha relación entre sicología y filosofía, fundamentada en la perspectiva teórico-metodológica de Vygotsky, apuntando a la transformación socialista del hombre. De esta forma, este artículo busca contribuir a la construcción de un edificio categorial para el entendimiento de cómo nos volvemos humanos, situando al hombre en medio de sus relaciones sociales.

Palabras-clave: Vygotsky; psicología; historia cultural; transformación socialista.

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Introduction

Soviet psychology, grounded in the foundations of Marxism, makes a unique contribution to the understanding of the human psyche and its multiple determinations. Differing qualitatively from the other theoretical-methodological systems, from its base, it considers the centrality of the work as act-genesis of the social being, allowing relevant implications in the building of the categorical complex of Cultural-Historical Psychology. Thus, the relationship between psychology and philosophy is objectified in its theoretical-methodological outlines in the perspective of the socialist transformation of man.

Vygotsky and his direct collaborators, Luria and Leontiev, representatives of Soviet psychology, built a theoretical edifice which provided contributions that focused on understanding how we became human, situating man in the midst of his social relations. Thus, between 1920 and 1930, the Vygotsky School elaborated hypotheses and conducted experiments converging to the strengthening of the theoretical-practical field of a nascent Marxist-based psychology.

In this article we present initially data on Vygotsky's work from Leontiev's writings. Next, we seek to situate the ontological bases of cultural historical psychology, according to the troika studies¹, especially regarding the categories work and conscience. In this sense, we highlight issues of the centrality of work in the formation of social being and discuss the role of consciousness as a mediator in the exchange between man and nature. Finally, we bring to the debate the quarrels between gnosiology and ontology, seeking to clarify the inadequate articulation between theory and practice that surrounded psychology in the 1920s, based on both idealism and mechanistic materialism; pointing briefly to the contributions of Vygotsky and his collaborators, with a view to the socialist transformation of man.

Vygotsky's genius: a brief foray into his creative work

Leontiev (1999), in writing about Vygotsky's creative work, clearly shows that in his short and productive existence the Soviet psychologist demonstrated his erudition marked by a wide and complex formation. The young man from Gomel began his scientific activity while simultaneously attending law school at Moscow University and History at the Faculty of History and Philology at A. L. Chaniavski University. Circulating in various fields of knowledge, Vygotsky wrote theatrical reviews, coordinated history circles for upper-class students in Gomel, making exemplary participations in the field of political economy in seminars on this subject. With the same theoretical and methodological rigor he studied philosophy, especially German classical philosophy. From those green years, he began his approach to Marxism (1913-1917).

Vygotsky's Marxism encompasses a reading of the world that mediates social being, which builds man's relationship with nature, within the scope of totality, historicity and uniqueness. In this context, dated by the mode of capitalist production, his analysis of social relations reveals, in the wake of Marx, the strangeness of being, certain private property, and the reification of relations between men, exchanged in the form of commodity.

The concerns of Vygotskian researches brought studies on labor, activity, consciousness, attention, perception, memory, thought and language, meaning and significance, art, education, defectology etc. From this framework of scientific themes, the interest in the field of art guides his studies, initially to literary criticism, which occurs objectively in 1915 with the analysis of *Anna Karenina* and *Hamlet*. Situating art within the scope of objectivity and subjectivity, Vygotsky (2001) is concerned with its sociopolitical meaning, that is, with the examination of the bond between labor and the sociopolitical landscape of his time, as well as and to what extent the literary work touches the reader, that is, how the content of the work impacts the uniqueness of the individual. In the words of Leontiev (1999, p. 433), the author sought to trace "[...] both an objective analysis of the literary work and an objective-materialist analysis of the human emotions that arise when reading a work. This monumental work of Vygotsky was published only in 1968".

The 1920-1924 period becomes precisely the transition from art-centered studies to psychological science, whose crisis faced at that time becomes the north for Vygotsky's monumental manuscript entitled *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology* (1999b), with which we make some interlocutions at the end of the article. Alongside the report 'Methodology of Reflexological and Psychological Investigation' and the article 'Consciousness as a Problem of Psychology of Behavior' this block of Vygotsky productions form the initial set of his work, as identified by Leontiev (1999).

¹ Expression attributed to the meeting and collaboration of the three Soviet theorists: Vygotsky, Luria and Leontiev (Valsiner & van Der Veer, 1991).

For Vygotsky, consciousness was not considered the absolute queen of higher psychic functions, [...] but as a psychological reality of enormous importance in all man's vital activity and deserving of a specific study" (Leontiev, 1999, p. 435).

It is opportune to note that Vygotsky was the first psychologist to question the elaborated theses on consciousness in the 1920s, thus feeling the "[...] need to conduct a concrete psychological study of consciousness as a concrete psychological reality" (Leontiev, 1999, 434-435). Consistent with what Marx and Engels tell us (2006, p. 51):

In the act of work, manifested from a necessity, man plans in his consciousness an alternative that has an end, to transform nature, to satisfy his needs in the objectification of his thought. Man in this act builds the new and becomes a different being than before, pre-ideation is a planned act that aims at the transformation of nature.

Consciousness can never be anything other than the conscious being, and the being of men is their real life process. And if in all ideology, humanity and its relations appear upside down, as in a darkroom, such a phenomenon results from its historical process of life, just as the inversion of objects in the retina stems from its directly physical process of life.

Returning to the steps of Vygotsky's trajectory, we consider that the turning point, as we may say, took place during the II National Congress of Psychoneurology in Leningrad, during which his brilliant speeches and presentations, as well as the presentation of his report 'The method of reflexological and psychological research' - (Leontiev, 1999) had such a powerful impact that Kornilov invited him to work at the Institute of Psychology. With Vygotsky's move from Gomel to Moscow "[...] the properly psychological creation of Vygotsky [...]" begins, as noted by Leontiev (1999, p. 431).

The time in which Vygotsky lived reverberated in his theoretical-methodological elaborations. Indeed, the October Socialist Revolution demanded radical changes in psychological science in the face of a war-torn country. In this sense, the first objective requirement was to analyze problems that had practical applications. Hence the need for the reconstruction of Soviet psychology; even more than that, it had to be grounded in dialectical historical materialism, since the introspective psychology of individual consciousness, based on philosophical idealism, took center stage.

It is important to note that at the I National Congress of Psychoneurology, according to Leontiev (1999, p. 428), Kornilov, when presenting the communication 'Psychology and Marxism', marked the prelude to this restructuring. Indeed, Leontiev (1999) draws attention to the fact that, in this exhibition, some theses of Marxist principle were highlighted such as: the conscience as property of organized matter and the social character of the human psyche. Given the foundations presented, the decanted restructuring of psychological science was not an easy task, since idealistic psychologists did not readily accept it, even considering that their theses were paradoxical.

Given this endeavor Vygotsky and his collaborators, A. Luria and N. Leontiev, launched themselves with revolutionary ardor to that project, having in the genius of the Russian thinker the mainstay for their future research, envisaging the consolidation of the theoretical and practical foundations of a truly new psychology.

Cultural-historical psychology and the basis for the socialist revolution of man: labor and conscience in debate

Concerned with the theoretical conceptions underlying the studies of consciousness, which were conducted both by the so-called 'old psychology' - introspective, as well as by the 'new psychology' - behaviorism, Vygotsky (1999a) argues that the phenomena of man's psychic life, among which was consciousness, would find only theoretical-methodological support by having Marx as guide.

Moreover, his sharp criticism of the so-called Marxist studies of consciousness at the time pointed out that Marx's theses were used only as annexes to the results of any psychological theory. The Soviet psychologist recognized that all psychological theories have a philosophical basis, sometimes hidden, sometimes clearly expressed, hence the need to restructure their foundations in view of the psychology they sought to build.

The opposition to these foundations has been undoubtedly highlighted in the famous and still current manuscript entitled *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology*, in which Vygotsky (1999b) exposes neuralgic points that exist in the psychological science of the 1920s. The epigraph at the beginning of the

text purposely appears here in order to clarify profound questions concerning the relationship between theory and practice, objectivity and subjectivity, spirit and matter, gnosiology and ontology.

Indeed, in quoting from the Gospel passage “[...] The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone [...]” in the opening of the text to which we refer above, Vygotsky, as Leontiev points out (1999, p. 437), explains that the ‘capstone’ has double meaning: on the one hand, it refers to the philosophical-methodological theory of ‘intermediate level’ and, on the other, to the practical activity of man. From the rejection of the capstone by the builders in its double sense, as Vygotsky (1999b) illustrates, the inadequate relationship between theory and practice based on the psychology of the time is noted. At the root of such disarticulation, strictly speaking, are the fragmentation of knowledge, the opacity in the precise apprehension of the real in motion, a myriad of theories emptied of foundations, as well as practices emptied of meaning.

According to the Soviet psychologist, the analysis of practical activity with a view to the psychology of a new man was crucial. However, this was not the understanding that guided psychology in the 1920s. The problem was that this activity was not considered in all its complexity, even for those who specialized in labor psychology, as Leontiev (1999) makes clear.

Their understanding was that the fundamental laws governing the human psyche could not emerge through the analysis of labor activity. In this regard, Shuare (1990), following Vygotsky’s thought, clarifies that for the latter, human time is history and to understand the process of development of society, it is necessary to understand the concept of activity, first of all, the productive activity of men. The author, complementing this block of ideas concerning Vygotsky’s formulations, points out that for the Soviet psychologist, “[...] any science that studies man in any aspect and even more, psychology; must assume as constitutive of its investigation the fact that it has in front a historical-social object” (Shuare, 1990, p. 60, our translation)².

Let us look at what Vygotsky (1999a, p. 223) tells us about the relationship between man and nature mediated by work:

In fact, scientific interpretation is nothing more than a form of social man’s activity, one among other activities. Therefore, scientific knowledge, considered as knowledge of nature and not ideology, constitutes a type of work and as all work is, above all, a process between man and nature. And in this process, man himself faces nature as a force that arises within him.

In this sense, we bring the Marxian conception of labor, in its ontological sense, as a protoform of human activity in order to clarify the ontological basis of Vygotsky’s psychology. For Marx (1983, p. 149):

First of all, work is a process in which man and nature participate, a process in which the human being, with his own action, drives, regulates and controls his material exchange with nature. It faces nature as one of its forces. It sets in motion the natural forces of his body, arms and legs, heads and hands in order to appropriate the resources in nature, giving them a useful form for human life. By thus acting upon and modifying external nature, at the same time he modifies his own nature. He develops the potentialities asleep in him and subjects the play of natural forces to his domain.

Regarding the role of work in hominization, Luria (1991) recognizes with Vygotsky that social work and the use of work tools, together with the emergence of language, constitute two primary factors, being sources of transition from “[...] natural history of animals to the social history of man” (Luria, 1991, p. 75). Highlighting work as an act-genesis of social being, Luria (1991) points out that theories dating from the second half of the nineteenth century attest that the first sounds designating objects emerged in the process of joint work.

Similarly, Leontiev (1978) in his text ‘Man and Culture’ highlights the role of work in hominization and humanization, seeking to answer questions about the passage from the sphere of life to the sphere of social being, consequently about the transmission of the acquisitions of evolution between generations. The author acknowledges that these acquisitions were:

[...] not by biological inheritance but by an absolutely particular form, a form that only appears with human society: that of the external phenomena of material and intellectual culture. This particular form of fixation and transmission the next generations of evolutionary acquisitions differ from animals in that men have a creative and productive activity, which is the fundamental human activity: labor (Leontiev, 1978, p. 265).

² “[...] cualquier ciencia que estudie al hombre en cualquier aspecto y más aún la psicología debe asumir como constitutivo de su investigación el hecho de que tiene ante sí un objeto histórico social”.

Leontiev (1978) goes on to assert that men, by their greater activity, by having labor as the matrix of all human activity

[...] change nature as their needs develop. They create objects that must meet their needs and also the means of production of these objects. They build housing, produce their clothes and material goods. Progress in the production of material goods is accompanied by the development of men's culture, their knowledge of their surrounding world enriches, science and art develop (Leontiev, 1978, p. 265).

Indeed, the understanding of Russian psychologists is in line with what had already been formulated by Marx and Engels (2006), recognizing that the being of men is their real life process and that consciousness, the production of ideas, of representations are in their origin linked to their material activity.

In accordance with such formulations of Marx and Engels, Vygotsky (1999a) in his study of thought and language identifies that the word is the microcosm of consciousness and, while the word grows in consciousness, it modifies all other processes. The very meaning of the word changes because of the modification of consciousness.

Marx (1985), in his celebrated quote about the work of the bee and the architect, shows that the architect, transforming nature, makes it mediated by the teleological capacity that he possesses. Marx (1985, p. 149-150) affirms:

A spider performs operations similar to a weaver's, and the bee shames more than one human architect with the construction of its honeycomb combs. But what distinguishes, in advance, the worst architect from the best bee is that he built the honeycomb in his head before he built it in wax. At the end of the work process one gets a result that already existed at the beginning in the worker's imagination and therefore ideally. Since man is the only being able to do work, he does so by his teleological ability to relate the ideal plane to the concrete.

Marx demonstrates that in meeting his needs man, in the process of acting, plans and aims, among the alternatives, the construction of the new. Doing so not only transforms nature but also becomes another being, with knowledge and skills that he did not previously possess. This important productive activity, in which man transforms nature to guarantee his needs, express the understanding of the ontology of the social being and its history in the context of the process of social production and reproduction.

Luria (1991) makes far-reaching considerations about the differences between the conscious activity of man and the behavior of animals, emphasizing that the characteristics of the superior form of life, proper to man, find their origins in the historical-social form of activity related to work with the use of instruments and the emergence of language.

Leontiev (1978), converging with the previously outlined designs, seeks to demarcate the relationship between the productive activity and the structure of men's conscience, opposing "[...] the metaphysical conceptions that isolate consciousness from real life [...]", as Asbahr (2011, p. 6) clarifies. In examining the working conditions prevailing in primitive society, Leontiev (1978) identifies that the rebounds of the communal form of work in consciousness were given in a direction diametrically opposed to the transformations suffered by men as a result of the social division of labor. Once everything is converted into a commodity, consciences operate to compromise the relationship between meaning and significance, denoting the alienation engendered by the antagonism between capital and labor.

Indeed, Leontiev (1978), referring to the conditions of the primitive community, draws attention to the fact that both the means and the fruits of production were under the validity of collective property; consequently such products were reflected in both individual and collective consciousness. It is worth noting that men owned the means of production and the fruits of their labor did not put them in opposite positions.

The transformation undergone in the internal structure of consciousness occurs from the social division of labor. Most producers separate themselves from the means of production, and relations between men increasingly become relations of things that separate and alienate themselves from man himself. Thus human activity is no longer the source of realization for man. Alienation now determines his formation and the concrete conditions of his existence that, due to dehumanization, end up mischaracterizing him, no longer a social being capable of fully free and conscious activity.

In this way, concrete problems arise before us whose resoluteness operates on the real plane. Vygotsky warns us (1999a, p. 417, emphasis in the original):

We do not want to differentiate our school from science, but from the unscientific, the psychology of the nonpsychology. [...] Owning the truth about oneself and of oneself is impossible as long as humanity does not own the truth about society and of society itself. On the contrary, in the new society our science will be at the center of life. 'The leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom' will inevitably pose the question of the mastery of our own being, of subordinating it to ourselves.

This was precisely the starting point of the Vygotsky School: to reconstruct psychology to make it the science of the new man and of a new sociability.

From the crisis of psychology to the transition from a psychological science to a new man

Leontiev (1999) acknowledges that Vygotsky's Psychology was not easily accepted by Soviet psychologists in the 1920s. Faced with this fact, to face the hegemonic theoretical conceptions that opposed the theoretical-methodological foundations defended by his School was a decisive step in building a revolutionary praxis.

Now, empiricism was one of the obstacles in this path, since by defending the historical essence of man, Vygotsky (1995) was opposed to the realm of appearances. The Soviet psychologist refers to Marx and Engels, pointing out that: "[...] if the way of manifestation and the essence of things coincided directly, all science would not matter at all" (Vygotsky, 1995, p. 103, our translation)³. Strengthening these ideas, Vygotsky (1995) asserts that in psychology two actions can occur similarly in their outward appearance and completely distinct in their origin, essence and nature. Therefore, scientific analysis is necessary in order to discover what is behind the similarity of external appearance: its internal content, its nature and origin.

Consistent with Vygotsky's thinking, Leontiev (1978, p. 178) also points out that:

Man's real, immediate world, which most of all determines his life, is a world transformed and created by human activity. However, it is not immediately given to the individual, as a world of social objects, of objects embodying human aptitudes formed in the course of the development of socio-historical practice; as such, it presents itself to each individual as a problem to solve.

In this sense, another obstacle to psychology as a science of the new man, regarding the ways of apprehending the real in motion, resided in the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity. In fact, the methodological path hitherto used was further away from what was truly approaching the rich and complex mediations of the world of men, with a view to transforming it. As Vygotsky (1999b) points out, the crisis of psychology was situated in both objective and subjective problems arising from the postwar context; in a still war-torn Russia. Given this, the demand on the applicability of psychology was urgent.

The quarrel between gnosiology and ontology was present as one of the central axes of the problem and was nonetheless contemplated by the forceful criticism of Vygotsky (1999b). He acknowledged that the subjective assumptions from which the processes of knowledge originate manifest themselves in the ways of expressing the laws of nature, as well as in relating different concepts, and should therefore always be considered as a reflection of objective dialectics. In addition, he asserted that dialectics should oppose both gnosiological criticism and formal logic.

In his lucid analysis of the theoretical-methodological problems of psychology, Vygotsky (1999b) argues that scientific psychology must recognize the facts of consciousness, not ignore them. In seeking to materialize them, they must transcribe them to "[...] an objective language that exists in reality and unmask and forever bury all fiction, ghostly and similar to each other" (Vygotsky, 1999b, p. 63).

In this sense, the psychologist, recognizing the role materiality plays in subjectivities, considers, however, that the dynamic-causal relations of the social capital form are not presented in their entirety in a single form, since society itself is divided into classes. In the same line of thought he considers that at a given historical time the composition of human personalities does not represent something homogeneous, univocal, since for the author the history of the human psyche is the social history of its constitution.

Faced with such reflections, glimpsing the socialist transition, Vygotsky (1998) rightly points out that psychology, taking into account historical-dialectical materialism, asserts that the individual only exists as a social being, having as its direct conclusion:

³ "si la forma de manifestarse y la esencia de las cosas coincidieran directamente, sobraría toda ciencia".

[...] to confirm class character, class nature, and class distinctions as responsible for the formation of human types. The various internal contradictions, which are found in the different social systems, find their finished expression in both the personality type and the structure of the human psyche of a given historical period. (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 111, our translation)⁴.

The Russian thinker considered that Marxist dialectic encompassed both nature, thought, and history, making it clear that the theory of psychological Marxism or dialectic of psychology was truly general psychology. Converging with Vygotsky on the supremacy of Marx's ontology over all previous ontological conceptions, Lessa (2001, p. 94) identifies that:

[...] In Marx, both the essence and the phenomenon consist in a determination inherent in history. In this sense he did not conceive of essence as eternally fixed, ahistorical; while the phenomenon was the historicity, the transformation. [...] This conception allows Marx to postulate that the human essence is a construct of human history and that within it it is distinguished as a category by concentrating the elements of continuity of human-generic development and never by constituting the insurmountable limit of human history.

The Marxian onto-historical method, which approaches the real and goes beyond the phenomenon to unveil the essence, returns to the real with rich determinations present in all Vygotsky's analysis, relating subjectivity and objectivity as constituent elements of social being, whose personality is historically dated.

Concluding remarks

Vygotsky (1998) identifies that the root of man's exploitation of man in his historical *démarche*, from the social division of labor to the most demeaning forms of dehumanization present in the process of industrialization, is the source of the degeneracy of mankind. He further asserts that, while on the one hand there is a growing dominance of man over nature, denoting freedom, on the other, his increasing slavery and dependence on the things he produces are unquestionable proofs of alienation in the world of men.

Recognizing that human time is history Vygotsky, Luria and Leontiev sought to understand man in his processuality, placing labor as a transformative productive activity par excellence. Faced with the antagonisms arising from the exploited work and certain that the logic of capital seeks to maintain within it a constant pressure for the destruction of mankind, the *troika* representatives unquestionably devoted themselves to tracing theoretical and methodological paths with a view to consolidating a Marxist-based psychology, which had as its horizon the socialist transformation of man.

In warning about the builders' contempt for the so-called 'capstone', Vygotsky (1999b) refers to psychologists in the face of the mistaken analysis of both consciousness and labor activity, which implied an inadequate relationship between theory and practice. In this sense, he criticizes psychologists for continuing to pursue problems in a straight line, since it was sterile in view of the complexity with which they presented themselves. In view of this Vygotsky (1999a, p. 203) argued that "[...] to move forward one must demarcate a path".

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⁴ "[...] confirmar el carácter de clase [social], la naturaleza de clase y las distinciones de clase, que son las responsables de la formación de los tipos humanos. Las variadas contradicciones internas que se encuentran en los diferentes sistemas sociales encuentran su expresión tanto en el tipo de personalidad como en la estructura de la psicología humana de ese período histórico dado".

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