

A HISTORY OF MARXIST PSYCHOLOGY

An illuminating and original collection of essays on 20th century Russian psychology, offering unparalleled coverage of the scholarship of Vygotsky and his peers.

Yasnitsky et al. challenge our assumptions about the history of Soviet science and the nature of Soviet Marxism and its influence on psychological thinking. He significantly broadens the discussion around Vygotsky's life and work and its historical context, applying theories of other notable thinkers such as Alexander Luria and the much-neglected philosopher/psychologist Sergei Rubinstein, alongside key movements in history, such as the pedology and psychohygiene. A diverse range of researchers from countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Canada, France, Russian Federation, Switzerland, Ukraine, and the UK, give this book a truly global outlook.

This is an important and insightful text for undergraduate and postgraduate students and scholars interested in the history of psychology and science, social and cultural history of Russia and Eastern Europe, Marxism, and Soviet politics.

Anton Yasnitsky, Ph.D. (University of Toronto), is an independent researcher who specializes in the Vygotsky–Luria Circle. He is the author of *Vygotsky: An Intellectual Biography* (2018). He has also edited *Questioning Vygotsky's Legacy: Scientific Psychology or Heroic Cult* (2018) and *Revisionist Revolution in Vygotsky Studies* (2015).



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A HISTORY OF MARXIST PSYCHOLOGY

The Golden Age of Soviet Science

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Introduction



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A NEW HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY

Soviet, Russian, Marxist

Anton Yasnitsky

No news is good news, they say. Then, here it is: yet another “new history”. It is not clear yet if this is good news, but some clarifications and explanations are definitely needed right now.

Indeed, the news of a “new history” emerges from time to time, the “new” stays for a while in order to become an “old” one in due time, then, another “new history” emerges. This seems to be a natural course of events in historiography, and one should not be too excited by a proclamation of a novelty of the kind. This is a normative rule of the game: history keeps rewriting itself. The rhetoric pronouncements of a novelty come and go. Sometimes it even happens so that something proclaimed as “new” turns out to be not so new, or even entirely not new. Yet, the attribution “new” remains. After all, one is once again reminded of the *Pont Neuf* – allegedly, the New Bridge, according to its French title – which is the oldest standing bridge across the river Seine in Paris, France. The ancient Book of Ecclesiastes seems to be an eternal and ever novel source for inspiration for thinking along these lines.

So, in order to understand the novelty of this proposal and why anyone might be interested in it, we need to get the answers to these two questions: What is this book about? And, then: What is new in this “new history”?

What is this book about?

Time and space have arguably caused most of the problems to humankind so far. Particularly, our interpretation of the time and space juncture – the “chronotope”, for the lack a better genuinely English word – is especially painful and troublesome.

This book is about one of those time-space junctures. The geographic land is the territory of the former Russian Empire, at least most parts of it. Yet, it is not

as simple as it seems first: the land does not exist by itself and is circumscribed by other lands. Then, the period is, roughly, a couple of decades of the 1920s and 1930s. This is not so simple either: the period is also surrounded by other times that in many ways influenced or were influenced by the events that occurred then. Things get even further complicated when we start thinking about those people who lived there and then (and whose lives spanned well beyond this territory and period), but also got caught into the human networks of their predecessors, contemporaries and successors across other times and spaces. Yet another complication is added with our interest of the intellectual sphere – the “noosphere” if one prefers a smart-looking word of seemingly Greek origin – as the world of abstract ideas in their concrete material manifestations travelling across time, space and the people moving within, along or across them.

The primary focus of the book is the world of ideas, specifically, in the field of the “psychology” in its historical development. Therefore, the book seems to qualify as an “intellectual history”. Our interest in psychology as a scientific discipline makes it also a “disciplinary history”. Yet, as all the book’s contributors certainly realize, no scientific discipline exists by itself, but deeply in the social context of its time and place. Thus, this is also a “social history”. Finally, the abstract human networks at the closest zooming-in fall apart into an array of individual persons’ portraits and idiosyncratic faces of the actors (in the sociological sense of the word) or protagonists (if one tends to think about them as of a narrative or theatric drama characters). Therefore, this book can also be construed as a set of “biographies”. The last point is particularly true, given the number of memoir texts and reminiscences the reader will find inside.

So, the book is about psychology, in most general terms. Then, the word demands an attribute attached to it. We have four immediate options. These are: “Russian”, “Soviet”, “Vygotskian” or “Marxist” psychology. Let us discuss them one by one.

First, “Russian psychology”. This might refer to some kind of mystical “Russian soul” or “Russian spirit” (like the one that is presumably represented by the characters of Fiodor Dostoyevsky or Anton Chekhov), but this is not about psychology as a scientific discipline and definitely not what this book is about. Alternatively, this might mean a scientific discipline of psychology as it developed from the earlier times of the Russian Empire throughout the Soviet period and until the contemporary Russian Federation. A shorter version of this story (that for obvious reasons did not include the post-Soviet period) can be found in a thick volume *Russian Psychology: A Critical History* by David Joravsky that covers roughly a century of what can be described as Russian psychological thought (Joravsky, 1989). This kind of story is not ours. Then, a curious blend of the two options is a story about the allegedly “special way” of “Russian science” – particularly, psychology – dramatically distinct from a “non-Russian” one due to its essential “spirituality” and “sacrality”, therefore, superior to the deprived of “spirit” and “eternal values” equally inhuman and godless “Western science” (for a discussion, see Chapter 1, by

Leonid Radzikhovskii). This kind of perspective and worldview can be found in one of the programmatic works of the genre composed by Soviet–Russian author Mikhail Yaroshevskii (Yaroshevskii, 1996) as well as in quite a few contemporary publications of the last couple of decades within the Russian Federation. Yet, this is certainly not “our way” and not what this book has to offer its readers. Finally, “Russian psychology” can be operationalized on purely linguistic grounds as any scholarship that ever existed published in the Russian language. That would also include Russian translations of foreign works. This approach seems to be quite productive for studies of some kind and has recently been explored in a study on a disciplinary history of this field of knowledge in the first half of 20th century (Yasnitsky, 2015). However, this book is of a very different kind and covers a much broader set of topics, problems and perspectives.

Second, “Soviet psychology”. This phrase was quite popular and widely used in publications in the previous century, especially after WWII. Many Western scholars would travel “back to the USSR” in order to get familiarized with the great achievements of state-sponsored Soviet science – especially, after the most impressive and even shocking (from the Westerner’s perspective) first launch of an artificial Earth satellite, the Soviet *sputnik* (in 1957) and, then, first ever journey of a human into outer space: Yury Gagarin, a Soviet citizen, in 1961. These two events alone (not to mention the competition in the Cold War nuclear weapons armament) triggered a space race between the two Superpowers and attracted huge investments in Western science and related social practices, including psychology – such as industrial, organizational, developmental and educational psychologies – and, even more importantly, education. Thus, the primary motivation for the Western intellectuals’ construction and construal of the “Soviet science narrative” was the need in support of their domestic research from their local governments, and this goal was successfully achieved. The victorious image and the success story of the “Soviet psychology” developed mainly under the impression of these exciting (and threatening, for some) achievements of the first socialist state and was shaped in a set of article and book publications that came out mostly in 1960s and 1970s. Some examples of this attitude can be found in the Cold War era classics of the genre (Bauer, 1962; Cole & Maltzman, 1969; McLeish, 1975; O’Connor, 1966; Rahmani, 1973; Simon, 1957). Since then, however, the glory of the Soviet social and scientific project has withered and does not appear now as obvious and fascinating as it used to. It is, perhaps, for this very reason the attribute “Soviet” does not quite fit as the main defining characteristic of psychology as it is treated in this book. Interestingly, the Anglophone narratives about “Soviet psychology” that widely proliferated in mid-20th century typically passed by (i.e., merely ignored) the “legacy of Vygotsky the Genius” (and considerably underplayed the proclaimed Marxist philosophical foundations of the Soviet science). This observation immediately leads to the next option to consider.

Third, “Vygotskian psychology”. Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) has long been regarded as the most prominent and the most famous Russian (and Soviet)

psychologist, a “genius” (Yasnitsky, 2018) and the “Mozart of psychology” (Toulmin, 1978), apart from Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936) and, to a much lesser extent, Vladimir Bekhterev (1857–1927): both physiologists rather than psychologists proper, well known for their research on reflexes and the higher nervous system. Another famous Russian scholar is Alexander Luria (1902–1977), nowadays known primarily for his contributions to the study of the human brain and its relation to human behavior and psychological functioning. Yet, outside the specialized field of neuropsychology, Luria’s fame in many ways is closely associated with Vygotsky, with whom he most closely collaborated in the 1920s and early 1930s. Still only the names of Pavlov, Luria and Vygotsky made it to the list of the top 100 most influential psychologists in America, according to a comprehensive study published in early 2000s (Haggblom et al., 2002).

Yet, from mainstream Western psychology’s vantage point, Vygotsky’s (and “Vygotskian”) legacy is Russian/Soviet psychology’s main claim to fame today, in the 21st century. This conclusion is indirectly corroborated by a relatively recent, albeit somewhat dated study of the “coverage of Russian psychological contributions in American psychology textbooks” (Aleksandrova-Howell et al., 2012). Indeed, out of the six Russian scholars’ names that made it to the top of the most well-known Russian celebrities in the field (i.e., alphabetically, Bekhterev, Luria, Pavlov, Sechenov, Vygotsky and Zeigarnik) it is the name of Lev Vygotsky that most occurs in the very text of the article with its 28 appearances as opposed to mere 7, 13, 12, 6 and 4 instances for Bekhterev, Luria, Pavlov, Sechenov and Zeigarnik, respectively. Notably, three persons on the list, Bekhterev, Pavlov and Sechenov, are 19th–early 20th century practitioners and scholars primarily in the fields of medical studies and physiology. They are considered the classics of biomedical sciences, but hardly qualify as psychologists proper. The other three, Vygotsky, Luria and Zeigarnik, were closest associates and belonged to the same “Vygotsky-Luria Circle” (Yasnitsky, 2016b), which is interpreted as yet another confirmation of Vygotsky’s prominence. There is also an array of other reasons to believe that the image of Vygotsky and “Vygotskian psychology” has largely overclouded and surpassed the entire collective “Russian” or “Soviet psychology” in popular opinion by now. In contemporary psychological and, especially, educational discourse “Vygotskian psychology” is typically positioned as the main and the most important contribution a Russian-speaking scholar ever made into the international psychology. At least, it is safe to claim that Russian psychologists and educators other than Vygotsky (apart from those mentioned as the most popular ones in the “coverage of the Russian contributions” overview) are usually hardly known at all internationally. Consider the fact that the overwhelming majority of the top (i.e., most read and most cited) publications in contemporary journal *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* (also well known as *Soviet Psychology*, renamed after the collapse of the Soviet Union) are Vygotsky’s own papers, articles authored by his former direct associates (such as Lidia Bozhovich, Aleksei N. Leontiev or Daniil El’konin) and their colleagues and students (such as Vasili

Davydov, Aleksandr Zaporozhets, Piotr Gal'perin or Piotr Zinchenko), or discuss issues directly related to and stemming from Vygotsky's writings such as the topics of the "zone of proximal development", the "social situation of development" or "involuntary remembering". Thus, "Vygotskian" would until quite recently virtually equate with either "Soviet" or "Russian" as long as psychology is concerned. However, not anymore.

It turns out that "Vygotskian psychology" appears to be in a deep crisis these days. If only Google Scholar citation rate is indicative and trustworthy enough, the crisis manifests itself in the number of references to Vygotsky's works that kept steadily growing from the end of 1970s throughout 1980s (Valsiner, 1988) and until most recently. However, as documented by Google, Vygotsky citation rate reached its peak in 2017 and started its rapid and steady decline ever since.¹ Should this conclusion prove ultimately correct in the long run, it would be safe to claim that we are currently observing the "Vygotsky bubble" (Yasnitsky, 2019) in its initial phase of shrinking. The reasons are not entirely clear for this truly tectonic shift in the world of ideas – as reflected in the researchers' and authors' social practices such as citing their scholarly sources, in this particular case. Yet, there are a couple of possible explanations and interpretations of the currently observed phenomenon.

Historically, the social function of the popular conception of "Vygotskiana" was the restoration of North American teachers in their rights as a leading force in the classroom, which were considerably undermined during the concurrent processes of 1960s–1970s of the "cognitive revolution" (Jerome S. Bruner being the most illustrious representative in educational and developmental psychology), the popular proliferation of the ideas of humanistic psychology (exemplified by such figures as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow). These processes and events triggered the advent of the "constructivist" education and "child-centered curriculum" that was introduced in opposition to the "traditional" instruction based on the methods of teacher-controlled drills (and related ones) and the positivist educational philosophy of behaviorism. The notion of the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky's own yet somewhat distorted phrasing of a very vague idea of roughly the last two years of his life, borrowed from the publications in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s made under Vygotsky's name) was instrumentally used as a forceful argument in the educational field and widely spread among the educationists in support of their claim to getting back the control over learning and instruction. This was promoted under the label of "social constructivism" – as opposed to the older notion of "constructivism" associated with the name of Swiss thinker and researcher Jean Piaget and the child – and the learner-centered movement in education. An explication of this sentiment can be found, for instance, in a recently

1 To this effect see, for instance, the link to Vygotsky's Google Scholar profile: <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=L4S0dT0AAAAJ> and compare it with those of, for instance, Albert Bandura: <https://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=en&user=muejNL8AAAAJ> or Sigmund Freud: <https://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=en&user=N80kIiYAAAAJ>.

published book very characteristically titled *The Right to Teach: Creating Spaces for Teacher Agency* (Ostorga, 2018). Now that American teachers have presumably overcome the problems associated with the de facto loss of their status of the leading force in the classroom and Vygotsky's writings have already played their historical role, one might assume that invocation of his name and work is not so much in demand as it used to be a few decades ago. An alternative (or an additional) explanation of this phenomenon is that references to Vygotsky have typically occurred in support of the claim that children develop in their social context, as trivial and self-evident as it might appear to some (Valsiner & Van der Veer, 2000). Perhaps, this claim has eventually become so obvious to everyone nowadays, in the time of the global computer-mediated social networks of the 21st century that reference to the works of a long gone Russian scholar is not needed anymore. For a further substantial discussion to this effect see Yasnitsky (2019).

In addition, there is another plausible explanation of the presumably growing disappointment in and dissatisfaction with Vygotsky in yet another of his manifestations. This is his persona of "Vygotsky the Marxist". The name of Lev Vygotsky and the brand of "Vygotskian" science has also been long used (and abused) as an umbrella term for the leftist, post-Marxist political-scientific agenda by the left-leaning intellectuals in their scientific and social activities in order to promote their social and political stance (Laine-Frigren, 2020). This situation can be equally observed in different forms and under diverse disguises in North America, in the countries of the Western Europe and, more recently, in other regions, such as the Spanish-speaking world and perhaps even more notably in Portuguese-speaking Brazil (Aguilar, 2016; García, 2016; IJzendoorn et al., 1981; Mecacci, 2015; Métraux, 2015; Ratner & Silva, 2017; Stetsenko, 2016; Yasnitsky et al., 2016; Zazzo, 1982, 1989). A discussion can be found in Chapter 5 that presents the situation in Brazil as viewed through the eyes of the insiders.

The interest of the international community in "Vygotsky the Marxist" is not incidental (Ratner & Silva, 2017). It is based on quite a number of Vygotsky's texts in which he on various occasions quotes from Marx and Engels. Moreover, there is a lengthy discussion of the topic of Marxism in its potential application in psychology, education and related scientific disciplines and social practices. This fragment can be found in one of his earlier unfinished manuscripts of his mechanistic "instrumental" period of 1920s titled variably "The (historical) meaning of crisis in psychology" (Zavershneva & Osipov, 2012a, 2012b). It was not published until after Vygotsky's death and is well known (Vygotsky, 1997). Yet, the actual manuscript was abandoned by its author, and there is no evidence he was ever going to publish it or develop it any further. But this is far from the only obstacle to "Vygotsky's Marxism".

In any single Vygotsky work, there is no trace of any sufficiently well-developed distinctly Marxist research methodology deeply grounded in systematic analysis of the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. What we have instead are only bits

and pieces and occasional quotes unsystematically scattered throughout a range of texts. Furthermore, there are even instances when Vygotsky either contradicted his own “Marxist” proclamations and promises (like his call for application of Marx’s method of “reverse analysis” from most developed forms to the less developed ones that he actually never followed in any of his works) or rejected them altogether (like his mechanistic “instrumental method” of the 1920s that he explicitly renounced as erroneous and “reactological” in early 1930s) (Yasnitsky, 2018). Finally, the last argument, Vygotsky’s declaration of his personal “Nicene Creed” (or a “symbol of faith”): a major theoretical work on “psychological materialism” that, by analogy with “historical materialism” for Marxist history and sociology, contemporary psychology direly needs as its methodological foundation. This remained only a slogan, mere proclamation and a statement of intent at best: Vygotsky failed to ever write such a book or create a comparable Marxist methodological legacy of this magnitude and importance. And even that is not all. A surprising discovery has been made in a study of Vygotsky’s and Luria’s experimental research conducted in 1931–1932 in Central Asia. The analysis of correspondence, documents and publications revealed the superficial, reductionist and “vulgar Marxist” essence of Vygotsky’s (and his allies’) understanding of the foundations of Karl Marx’s and Friedrich Engels’s philosophical and social teaching even in the most advanced and mature stages of Vygotsky’s thinking development in 1930s, until virtually right before his death in 1934 (Lamdan & Yasnitsky, 2016; Yasnitsky, 2018). Thus, Vygotsky’s status of a leading Marxist thinker and psychologist has been recently questioned and considerably undermined.

It is hardly possible to tell which of these factors or whether any combination of them (and if any of these) is in play in this situation. In any case, the “Vygotsky crisis” and the related “Vygotsky bubble” are likely to become an intriguing phenomenon in the history of science, to be further explored in the years to come. Yet, in sum, the cumulative scholarship on “Russian psychology”, “Soviet science” and “Vygotskian legacy” has left a considerable gap in our knowledge about the real content and social meaning of the intellectual project as it was developed for a number of decades in the Soviet Union, its political satellite countries and their supporters all around the world. This conclusion virtually inevitably suggests the fourth option.

Fourth and the last: “Marxist psychology”. After all, this is the real gap in our understanding the Soviet psychological project in its historical development. Indeed, we are still unfortunately lacking the knowledge about (a) distinctly Marxist (but decidedly non-Vygotskian), (b) Soviet and Russian (c) psychology (and the range of closely related disciplines) as (d) inseparable unity of philosophy, theory, scientific research methodology and, finally, social practice. This is the answer. As the reader of this book, who had a chance to have a look at its cover, already knows this is the choice we made. This is perhaps the main reason why this book had to be designed, materialized and released to the public. This is the book, and this is what it is about.

What is new in the “new history”?

The new psychology dispenses with the “old demons” and revives a spirit of Marxism not only in the psychology of the Soviet period in the countries of the former Russian Empire (strictly speaking, with the exception of Finland and Poland), but also in the historiography, that is, in the method of exploring the history. In other words, the main novelty is an attempt of telling a history of Marxism in psychology by Marxist means. There are two “variables” (or the “unknowns”) in this formula: the “Marxism in psychology” and the “Marxist means”. Let us see what exactly these are.

Marxism in psychology

There is a long tradition of interpreting the history of psychology in the Soviet Union in terms of triumphant advancement of Marxist teaching in this field of knowledge. This is what can be easily observed in numerous Soviet publications from the 1920s until the early 1990s. Yet, this tradition is very problematic in many ways. The main reason for our considerable distrust of the Soviet sources is their reliability and credibility – even despite the richness in details and loyalty to the facts that some of them definitely present such as, for instance, very interesting early and arguably the first Soviet historiographic monograph (Petrovskii, 1967; for a very informative and helpful review see Payne, 1968). Unfortunately, the Russian book is very rare and, perhaps, better accessible in its later, possibly, considerably revised English translation (Petrovsky, 1990). Yet, one should consider the factor of state control, total censorship and, even worse, the Soviet authors’ self-censorship in the process of composition of their written works. Given the Marxist doctrine as the dominant political ideology in the USSR, it is obvious that an alternative, other than Marxist interpretation of the history of science would not be tolerated. Thus, not surprisingly, in the post-Soviet period, even yet before the very collapse of the Soviet Union, the declaratively Marxist paradigm with all its dogmatisms, rituals, mandatory “nomadic citations” (Krementsov, 1997) of the classics of Marxism, hypocritical confessions in the loyalty to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the ideals of the Communism and the rest of ideology and related phraseology was gone from the psychological publications in that country, seemingly forever. For a great discussion of how all this happened see the opening chapter by Leonid Radzikhovskii, a witness and participant of these truly historical in any sense events. And still, as the very author attests, the case of Marxism in psychology (and even, probably of psychology in Marxism) is far from closed.

For a number of reasons, Lev Vygotsky is hardly the reliable authority on Marxist psychology. True, his writings do not provide the definitive answer on how the proclaimed “psychological materialism” looks and works in reality. Yet, Vygotsky’s texts can be productively used as a collection of suggestions and questions and as a source inspiration for future investigation. Particularly instructive in this respect is

Vygotsky's mentioned manuscript on the crisis in psychology, which is sometimes quoted in defense of the self-evident Vygotsky's declared theoretical and methodological orientation towards Marxism as it frequently occurs, for instance, in a recent book on Vygotsky and Marx (Ratner & Silva, 2017).

In the context of this discussion, it is really hard to resist the temptation to quote Vygotsky's last paragraph of this work as it was restored with the help of the original manuscript:

In the new society our science will become the center of life. "A leap from the kingdom of necessity into the kingdom of freedom" [Friedrich Engels, "Anti-Dühring" (1878)] will inevitably bring to the fore the question of mastering our own essence, of subordinating it to our purposes. In this sense Pavlov was correct when he called our science the last science about man himself. It will indeed be the last science in the historical period of humanity or in the prehistory of humanity. The new society will create a new man [Here follows the rupture in the text caused by the editorial censoring intervention; the omitted text appears to be irreparably lost]. Here we have the only instance where the words of the paradoxical psychologist – who defined psychology as the science of the superman – are justified: in the society of the future, psychology will indeed be the science of the superman. Without this, the perspective of Marxism and the history of science would be incomplete. But this science of the superman will nevertheless be psychology; we now hold in our hands the thread that leads to it.

(Vygotsky in Zavershneva & Osipov, 2012a, p. 82)

First, it is a really charming naivety, with which in the same paragraph Vygotsky engages in a virtual dialogue with a set of so much differing and hardly compatible authors and thinkers such as the founders of Marxism Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the incurably mechanist physiologist Ivan Pavlov and – although not mentioned by name and featured as the "paradoxical psychologist" – the quintessentially and profoundly dialectic philosopher, philologist and psychologist indeed, Friedrich Nietzsche. The reference to a "superman" (i.e., Nietzsche's "overman", *Übermensch*) is not incidental in this context. Furthermore, it is necessary and absolutely vital for understanding the Nietzschean roots of the entire "Marxist" project of Vygotsky in his attempt to build a "new psychology" (as a scientific discipline) for a "new man" (alternatively, the "Superman") of the future Communist society of equality, solidarity and unlimited opportunities for anyone. The idea appears very naïve and utopian. Indeed, this was a utopia, but this very utopia defines and solidifies the core of his theoretical thinking and motivation in psychology, including his vantage point on the "new psychology" of a Marxist creed (Yasnitsky, 2019). Furthermore, the notion of utopia is vital for our understanding of virtually the entire Soviet psychology as it was conceived in the 1920s: for the critical discussion of this claim see the sophisticated concluding chapter by Luciano Nicolás García, in the Epilogue of the book.

Now, following the logic of Vygotsky's proposal of the mid-1920s, here is what we have:

The *direct* application of the theory of *dialectical materialism* to the problems of natural science and in particular to the group of biological sciences or psychology is *impossible*, just as *it is impossible to apply it directly* to history and sociology. . . . Like history, sociology is in need of the intermediate *special theory* of historical materialism which explains the *concrete* meaning, for the given group of phenomena, of the abstract laws of dialectical materialism. In exactly the same way we are in need of an as yet undeveloped but inevitable theory of biological materialism and psychological materialism as an intermediate science which explains the concrete application of the abstract theses of dialectical materialism to the given field of phenomena. Dialectics covers nature, thinking, history – it is the most general, maximally universal science. The theory of the psychological materialism or dialectics of psychology is what I call general psychology. In order to create such intermediate theories – methodologies, general sciences – we must reveal the *essence* of the given area of phenomena, the laws of their change, their qualitative and quantitative characteristics, their causality, we must create categories and concepts appropriate to it, in short, we must create our *own Das Kapital*. It suffices to imagine Marx operating with the general principles and categories of dialectics, like quantity-quality, the triad, the universal connection, the knot [of contradictions], leap etc. – without the abstract and historical categories of value, class, commodity, capital, interest, production forces, basis, superstructure etc. – to see the whole monstrous absurdity of the assumption that it is possible to create any Marxist science while bypassing by *Das Kapital*. Psychology is in need of its own *Das Kapital*-its own concepts of class, basis, value etc. – in which it might express, describe and study its object.

(Vygotsky, 1997, p. 330)

Vygotsky's uncharacteristically clear and straightforward prose in this specific paragraph is quite instructional and thought-provoking. Let us analyze what Vygotsky suggests in these programmatic lines. First, he claims that Marxism (i.e., its philosophical part, the dialectical materialism) cannot directly be applied to psychology: an intermediary theory is needed. Second, by analogy with historical materialism as in intermediary theory for history, Vygotsky proposes "psychological materialism" as such a theory, and compares it with its own *The Capital*, but for the discipline of psychology. Third, in order to create such theory, a great deal of interpretative intellectual work is needed that would determine and reconceptualize the entire system of basic psychological concepts strictly in agreement with Marx's intellectual system. Yet, each abstract notion and concept requires a specific word or a phrase in order to express it with concrete verbal means of communication. Therefore, fourth and last, the conceptual change of such magnitude

will apparently require considerable phraseological and terminological revision that would materialize conceptual apparatus of the “new psychology” with the help of a new terminological toolkit.

Now, let us proceed to Vygotsky’s next thesis on Marxism in psychology:

There is a special difficulty in the application of Marxism to new areas. The present concrete state of this theory, the enormous responsibility in using this term, the political and ideological speculation with it – all this prevents good taste from saying “Marxist psychology” *now*. We had better let others say of our psychology that it is Marxist than call it that ourselves. We put it into practice and wait a little with the term. In the final analysis, Marxist psychology *does not yet exist*. It must be understood as a historical goal, not as something already given. And in the contemporary state of affairs it is difficult to get rid of the impression that this name is used in an unserious and irresponsible manner. An argument against its use is also the circumstance that a synthesis between psychology and Marxism is being accomplished by more than one school and that this name can easily give rise to confusion in Europe.

(Vygotsky, 1997, p. 340)

And not only in Europe, as one could remark, given the recent publications on the topic such as Ratner and Silva (2017). In any case, the message is well taken here: no Marxist psychology exists as of the end of 1920s, according to Vygotsky. It seems this conclusion is correct even if applied to the situation in psychology almost 100 years later: the beginning of the 2020s.

The last programmatic fragment is remarkable for its most curious twist of Vygotsky’s thought. On the one hand, he declares the necessity of Marxist psychology as a requirement of any scientific psychology. No psychology other than Marxist can exist. And then, immediately after that, he seemingly relieves the reader from this onerous requirement when he suggests that, in fact, any psychology that is strictly scientific, regardless of its proclaimed goals and philosophical foundations, will inevitably become Marxist. This might appear as a circular or, probably, self-contradicting argument to some, but Vygotsky prefers not to notice that. Quite a few of his devoted followers prefer to do the same:

Our science will become Marxist to the degree that it becomes truthful and scientific. And we will work precisely on making it truthful and to make it agree with Marx’s theory. According to the very meaning of the word and the essence of the matter we cannot use “Marxist psychology” in the sense we use associative, experimental, empirical, or eidetic psychology. Marxist psychology is not a school amidst schools, but the only genuine psychology as a science. A psychology other than this cannot exist. And the other way around: *everything* that was and is genuinely scientific belongs to Marxist

psychology. This concept is broader than the concept of school or even current. It coincides with the concept *scientific* per se, no matter where and by whom it may have been developed.

(Vygotsky, 1997, p. 341)

These quoted fragments seem to fully and best represent everything of value that Vygotsky ever said or wrote on the topic of Marxism in psychology. The rest either repeats itself or does not add much to this. Now that we have finally resolved the issue of Marxism in Vygotsky the psychologist, it is interesting to see how this matter is addressed in this new book.

The whole first section “Theory” that immediately follows this very Introduction is dedicated to the discussion of Marxism in psychology: as it was practiced in the social and cultural realities in the Soviet Union in the 20th century and how it might be manifested and implemented in international psychology in the 21st century. The first chapter is the ideas and the text of Leonid Radzikhovskii that he generated on various occasions from late 1980s until up to now. The chapter is really interesting in many respects. First, it gives the reader a first-hand insider’s account of Soviet Marxism in psychology in its dogmatic and hypocritical forms during the late Soviet Union era until its eventual and eventful collapse in 1991. This narrative is necessarily personal and auto-biographical. Second, the author also shares his ideas on the ways the unfulfilled promise of Marxist psychology could be realized in psychological theory. These lines, originally written in the late 1980s and somewhat revised recently, seem to be of much interest these days and might suggest a few promising avenues for further scholarly exploration in the nearest future.

Then, the second chapter of the book focuses on the truly gigantic figure of a thinker, philosopher and psychologist Sergei Rubinstein. He was the actual founder of the systemic Marxist thinking in Soviet psychology, widely and unquestionably acknowledged as such by the entire scholarly community of psychologists in that country in the 1940s–1950s, but remains virtually unknown to the contemporary international scholarly community worldwide. This is definitely a great shame and major loss. The chapter is based on a close reading of Rubinstein’s programmatic article of 1934 that paved the way to truly Marxist thinking to his peers and played a great role in the disciplinary and institutional establishment of psychology in the Soviet Union in the long run. The analysis of the text is accompanied by an overview of Rubinstein’s life and career, and discussion of the reliable sources on his life and legacy, and sketches the fate of his legacy against the background of the later developments in Soviet psychology after Rubinstein’s death in 1960, particularly in the context of the allegedly Marxist “activity approach” (also known in certain circles as “activity theory”, even worse, “cultural-historical activity theory”). This discussion is focused particularly on a historical episode that took place in 1969 in Moscow within the “inner circle” of top-most researchers of the former “Vygotsky-Luria Circle” such as Aleksandr Luria, Aleksei N. Leontiev, Piotr Gal’perin, Daniil

El'konin, Aleksandr Zaporozhets and, finally, a son of another member of the Circle (Piotr Zinchenko, deceased by then), Vladimir Zinchenko, a noted Soviet and Russian psychologist in his own right. The meeting was fateful, its outcomes are certainly as profound as shocking and sensational from the standpoint of what most of us have known and believed about this Soviet (and international) intellectual movement until now.

Psychology as social practice

In contemporary academic literature, it is not unusual to come across the discussions of the merits of the ideas and theoretical postulates of Russian and Soviet scholarship. Regrettably, though, these discussions have virtually always been alienated from the discussions of the related real world social practices that not only implemented these ideas, but also in many ways shaped and determined the ideas and the course of their development. In other words, the intrinsic unity of theory and social practice is all too often ignored in most of the contemporary publications on the topic of Russian psychology and allied sciences. The standpoint of the “ivory tower” of the pure reason might be appropriate in some, very special contexts, yet it is hardly acceptable in many others. One might argue that there is a wealth of publications on the “social history” of Soviet science, specifically, psychology. Yet, most of these focus on the “social” aspect only, and, which is worse, present the influence of the “social” in the light of the “oppressed science” already discussed above. An increasing volume of recent studies that overcome the age-old biases of the “oppressed science” paradigm and traditional separation of “purely intellectual” and “social” histories bring new light on the idiosyncratic unity of theory and practice of psychology in a Soviet context. A few of these studies are presented in this book.

The whole second section of the book presents the concrete practical applications of psychology in the spheres of medical and educational social practice. These were manifested in the self-proclaimed quasi-disciplines and related practices of “psychohygiene” and “pedology”. Both originated in the West in parallel in America and in Europe, yet their greatest success was in the Soviet Russia, more precisely, in the entire Soviet Union, where they proliferated as all-Union mass movements that spread widely across the entire country. From a methodological standpoint, this is a very important issue: due to their disciplinary attribution other than “psychology” proper, these social phenomena that were promoted under different social labels frequently get ignored and avoided by the historians of this field of knowledge. This is a grave mistake that the authors of Chapters 3 and 4, Grégory Dufaud and Andy Byford, efficiently correct. Their stories about “psychohygiene” and “pedology”, respectively, importantly complement our understanding of Soviet psychological Marxism in its practical application in social practice. It is up to the reader, though, to make a decision as to how notable in this practice was any Marxism whatsoever.

Transnational psychology

Geographically, most of historiographical research on Russian and Soviet psychology deals with Moscow (predominantly) or, to considerably lesser extent, St. Petersburg (historically, also known as Petrograd in 1914–1924 and Leningrad in 1924–1991). The studies of the history of psychological science in other regions and localities of the former Russian Empire – with a few exceptions such as the history of the “Kharkov school of psychology” (Yasnitsky & Ferrari, 2008a, 2008b; Yasnitsky & Ivanova, 2011) – are notably rarer, fragmentary and carry the flavor of “provincialism”, in any sense. In sum, one might argue that the entire history of Russian psychology until quite recently virtually equated with the history of this discipline in the two historical capitals of the State. Furthermore, perhaps due to the Cold War legacy, the “history of national psychology” (as opposed to “foreign psychology”) has long dominated in the historiographic accounts in the works of Soviet and, even now, Russian scholars. The radical separation between the “our” and “their” science is the trademark of both Soviet tradition and the great many of the Cold War period Western narratives on this science in the USSR in the 20th century. In other words, the history of Soviet/Russian psychology has long been considered as virtually immanent and self-contained “noumenon”, or a “Thing-in-itself” (*Ding an sich*), as the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant might have termed it. Not anymore.

In contrast, quite recently the trend has changed. There are two dimensions to this methodological shift that can be expressed by just one word: “transnational” (“transnationalism”). Interestingly, the word has two meanings that reflect the two dimensions of the recent scholarship’s groundbreaking innovation. First (and traditional in the literature), the notion means the focus of research on phenomena, events, processes and entities that equally belong to different national localities, such as international professional unions, scientific congresses, informal networks and cross-border communications of scholars, their joint projects, etc. Typically, the “transnational histories” involve subjects that deal with more than one state (David-Fox, 2012; Heilbron et al., 2008; Kremontsov, 2000; Van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2016; Yasnitsky, 2016a). Yet, as applied to the history of Russia, the world’s largest country with its truly enormous vast space and, importantly, the history of a few territorial gains, losses and collapses (most notably, in 1917–1921 and in 1991), the notion of “transnationalism” acquires another meaning. Thus, the second dimension of the “transnational history of Russia” deals with the larger processes across the entire Euro-Asia that lays under the rule of the current Russian government. The analysis of the interplay between the three – the capital city of Russia, its distant localities and the foreign world outside – presents a truly exciting challenge to a researcher. First few steps in this direction have been made as illustrated by the majority of this book’s chapters.

The reader is reminded about the second meaning of “transnationalism” in the two chapters on the social practices of Soviet psychology in their application in

medicine and education as the All-Union mass movements of “psychohygiene” and “pedology”. Yet, this dimension is underdeveloped in these texts that give a relatively sketchy overview of the history of these quasi-disciplines in the Soviet Union of the interwar period. The multitude of places and the richness of details of the geographical localities of the USSR can be found, though, in other works on Soviet “applied psychologies” in the works of these authors, Grégory Dufaud and Andy Byford, and some other scholars, who work on these and related topics.

Yet, “transnational” dimension in its first sense can be found in many other chapters of the book. Thus, the mentioned “psychohygiene” and “pedology” are not exclusively idiosyncratic Soviet inventions, but much larger, truly global transnational research projects. Particularly, this point is emphasized in Dufaud’s chapter that highlights the cross-border trips, international exchange of ideas and “knowledge circulation” between various geographic and cultural localities. The same is true of Sergei Rubinstein, the eternal traveler – in the geographical and intellectual sense – between different times and places in Ukraine, Germany and Russia, as it is presented in Chapter 2. Apparently, the topic of “transnationalism” is so huge and essential that it deserved a special section within the structure of the book. The reader is invited to help themselves for the intellectual treats of the complexities of the transnational Brazilian reception, accommodation and application of Soviet psychological knowledge, especially, the Vygotskian legacy in Lusophone South America (Chapter 5, authored by Gisele Toassa, Flávia da Silva Ferreira Asbahr and Marilene Proença Rebello de Souza), and the deeply personal story of the transnational virtual dialogue between the Western researcher and the author of Chapter 6, Alexandre Métraux, and his distant Soviet peer Alexander Luria.

The deliberately personal dimension of thinking about psychology and its history is yet another major innovation of the “new history” that needs our discussion and clarification.

Personality: the “Romantic science”

The main problem with both Soviet “Marxist psychology” as we have known it by now and the multiple narratives about its history is that the person was ultimately lost, even in the biographic and, counter-intuitively perhaps, auto-biographical accounts of psychology and its actors in the Soviet era. What we have had instead was a series of rather abstract, dry, depersonalized or, in case of biographies, biased (when the biographers have been the students, followers, relatives, etc. of the scholar, whose life story they narrated) or cautiously self-censored (in case of auto-biographies). Yet, as Chapter 2 reminds us, personality is both the starting point and ultimate goal of any psychology whatsoever. The same holds true of the history of this field of knowledge. It is for this very reason that this book is so rich with personal accounts, in various disguises.

An exciting and thrilling Chapter 1 by Leonid Radzikhovskii can largely be characterized as a memoir. Furthermore, this is clearly declared from the onset

as “reminiscence”. This standpoint is echoed in Alexandre Métraux’s Chapter 6, presented as a “personal account”. The two voices of the authors of the chapters not only involve the reader in personal stories, but seem to engage in a virtual dialogue within the book itself, as its first and last numbered chapters. This personal dimension of these two chapters is complemented with Piotr Gal’perin’s voice as it is expressed in Chapter 2 in his recorded direct speech at one of those “inner circle” meetings of late 1960s with its excitingly revealing disclosures to our contemporaries and painfully disclosing revelations to the contemporaries of the speaker.

The authors of Chapter 5 from the very beginning importantly acknowledge that theirs is “necessarily personal history of psychology and Marxism in Brazil”, by virtue of them being an integral part of the history as insiders and active participants of the described events and the processes. This acknowledgement is very important from the methodological standpoint: in their attempt to present their story as objectively and in a non-partisan manner as possible the authors must inevitably realize and come to terms with their own stance and perspective, their “party-ness” in Soviet Communist parlance. Otherwise, a non-biased account of history of science, even the making of science as such, is hardly possible.

The genre of a memoir is definitely not a novelty, including the historiography of science, and numerous “oral histories” only prove that. Yet, we are dealing with something different in this case, it seems. For psychology (and the related field of human science) from the times of “introspectionism” (discussed by Sergei Rubinstein in Chapter 2) this is also a powerful instrument for getting insight about the “inner side” of the soul, its depths and hidden recesses. This is so much true of the Sigmund Freud, his clinical method and intellectual legacy, and proves to be his main claim to fame as a psychologist of all times. Yet, the acute interest in personality is characteristic of many others, including the protagonist of Chapter 6, Alexander Luria. His famous clinical studies on his patients Shereshevskii and Zasetkii were published in Russian, translated into dozens of languages and made it to the lists of best-sellers, ultimately serving as very promising models of psychological story-telling for future generations of authors, such as Oliver Sacks, a renowned neurologist, whose books can be found now in virtually every book store on the specialized “Psychology” book shelves. In turn, Sacks was not only an ardent admirer of Luria, but also his active correspondent for a number of years during mid-1970s. He described his life experiences and exchanges with Luria on many occasions, for instance, in one of his last publications, his book chapter that came out a couple of years before his death in 2016 (Sacks, 2014). It is there that Sacks reflects on Luria’s (and his own) distinct approach to the craft of an intellectual and practitioner in human sciences that he, following Luria, refers to it as “Romantic science”. So, let us once again witness direct speech:

To write true stories, to construct true lives, to present the essence and sense of a whole human life – in all its living fullness and richness and complexity – this must be the final goal of any human science or psychology. William James saw this, in the 1890s, but could only dream of its accomplishment. . . .

We ourselves are very privileged, because we have seen, in our own century, with the profound “unimagined portraits” constructed for us by Freud and Luria, at least the beginnings of this ultimate achievement. “This is only the beginning,” Luria would always say, and, at other times, “I am only a beginner.” Luria devoted the whole of a long life to reaching this beginning. “It has been my life’s wish,” he once wrote, “to found or refound a Romantic Science” (personal communication, letter dated July 1973). Luria, surely, accomplished his life’s wish, and indeed founded or refounded a totally new science – the newest science in the world, in a way, and yet the first, and perhaps the oldest of all.

(Sacks, 2014, p. 527)

We are standing on the shoulders of giants. It is our solemn duty to keep it this way. The show must go on!

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- 1 http://observatoriodaimprensa.com.br/armazem-literario/_ed825_sou_brasileiro_democrata_e_editor/
- 2 Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) e a United States Agency for International Development (USAID), in Carvalho (2014).
- 3 It is also worth remembering that UFRN will host the ISCAR / 2021 meeting, headed by professors linked to the Yamamoto group, and with the participation of several research groups throughout Brazil.
- 4 In presenting such a process, Freitas considers Rubinstein as closer to Leontiev and Luria's "mechanistic materialism" than to Vygotsky. The author notes that the former had studied in a UNICAMP group in the 1980s; we do not know, however, any evidence that Rubinstein had ever become popular in Brazil.
- 5 Generally speaking, studies about Luria's theory persist in neurology and related fields to this day.
- 6 To learn more about the Santa Catarina Curriculum Proposal, see Coan and Almeida (2015) and Hentz and Herter (2001).
- 7 See Noda and Galuch (2018) for details on Parana's educational policies.
- 8 They are: Carlos Chagas Foundation Research Notebooks, Education & Society, Psychology in Study, Psychology: Theory and Research (Sarmiento, 2006, p. 49).
- 9 This is the year of the first edition of this work, which in 2015 was already in its fourth edition.
- 10 Prior to these works, Duarte's doctoral thesis (1993) focused on the foundations of a Marxist theory of individuality, based on Marx & Engels, Agnes Heller, and A. N. Leontiev, showing alignment with the contributions of this latter author.
- 11 Cunha (2005) describes the "New School of Education" in Brazil, in many ways inspired by Dewey's ideas.
- 12 This is the research entitled "Historical-Cultural Psychology in Brazilian research: survey of research groups registered in the CNPq directory", whose general objective is to investigate the insertion of Historical-Cultural Psychology or Historical-Cultural Theory within the scope of scientific research in Brazil. The research is funded by the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa de São Paulo (Fapesp) and coordinated by Flávia da Silva Ferreira Asbahr (UNESP-Bauru), Marilene Proença Rebello de Souza (IPUSP) and Sonia Mari Shima Barroco (UEM). Grant number: FAPESP: 2017/219365.
- 13 The keywords used to locate the groups were: Historical-Cultural Theory; Historical-Cultural Psychology; Socio-Historical Psychology (o); Vygotsky School; Vygotsky School; Vygotski School; Activity theory; Soviet psychology; Socio-Cultural Theory; Socio-Historical Theory (o); historical-cultural approach; historical-cultural perspective; psychology and Marxism; subjectivity theory; socio-historical approach. The election of these keywords is justified by their use by the Soviet authors themselves or by the current consensual use of Brazilian researchers in the field.
- 14 The table with CNPq's knowledge areas can be found at www.cnpq.br/documents/10157/186158/TabeladeAreasdoConhecimento.pdf, accessed on March 9, 2019.
- 15 This is the Thought and Language Research Group, mentioned earlier, at the Faculty of Education of UNICAMP, initially by teachers Ana Luiza Bustamante Smolka, Angel Pino Sirgado, Luci Banks-Leite, Maria Cecília Rafael de Góes and Afira Vianna Ripper. Information at: www.gppl.fe.unicamp.br/, accessed on March 25, 2019.
- 16 The groups mentioned are: Pedagogical Implications of the Historical-Cultural Theory, coordinated by Sueli Guadalupe de Lima Mendonça and Suelly Amaral Melo, from UNESP-Marília (1997); Historical-Cultural Theory and Mathematical Education (1997), Psychological Aspects of the Socio-Historical Theoretical Focus/GEPAPET- Socio-Historical (1999), -Group for Studies and Research in Social Psychology, Education and Health: contributions of Marxism (NEPPEM - 1999),

- Childhood, Family and Society (1999) and Theories of Education and Pedagogical Processes (1999).
- 17 It is striking to us that this important field of psychology has little repercussion among the groups that are linked to historical-cultural theory, and how the linkage of the theoretical approach with education has been predominant.
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