

Comments on prior Comments

M. Cole

Anton [Yasnitsky] has asked me to add to these comments related to his archeological project of discovering the true nature of what I once thought to be manuscripts authored by Vygotsky.

I find it interesting reading through them. They seem an accurate expression of my understanding at the time I wrote that Vygotsky is a figure of *contemporary* relevance. It was true then, it is true now. He is not the man conjured up in the often ardent, but muted intellectual interchanges of the Cold War. But his influence has been enormous. There was a Vygotsky boom, with all the wreckage and confusion that booms bring. Less influential than the boom at Hiroshima but a lot more influential than it was in 1961.

In one respect, however, I disagree with the assessment of my former self when I wrote that Vygotsky's "dissatisfactions with psychologists of the early twentieth century applied with at least as great justification at the century's end." Perhaps it seemed so a decade ago, but it does not seem so now.

In a myriad of ways, the lines of thought stimulated by the publications of Vygotsky ("et al") have become part of mainstream developmental psychology, and extend as he would have wanted into many parts of the discipline. That those becoming famous for having discovered the developmental paths of executive control have forgotten the Russian roots of their ideas is a pity that contemporary interest in Vygotsky is helping to erase.

(This is not to say that there is not a huge family squabble going on about what the patriarchs really wrote and really meant!)

It is a great service to have a far better understanding of the social origins of Vygotsky's presumably individual thoughts! The resurgence in a critical appraisal of the history of Soviet psychology must please Lev Semyonovich wherever his wraith is remembered.

From Mind in Society (1978)

Editors' Preface (Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman, 1978)

[p. ix]

Five years ago, at the urging of Vygotsky's student Alexander Luria, we agreed to edit a collection of Vygotsky's essays which would reflect the general theoretical enterprise of which the study of the relation between thought and language was one important aspect. Luria made available to us rough translations of two of Vygotsky's works. The first, "Tool and Symbol in Children's Development" (1930), had never been published. The second was a translation of a monograph entitled *The History of the Development of Higher Psychological Functions*, which appeared in the second volume of Vygotsky's writings published in Moscow in 1960¹. ...

We have constructed the first four chapters of this volume from "Tool and Symbol." The fifth chapter summarizes the major theoretical and methodological points made in "Tool and Symbol" and applies them to a classic problem in cognitive psychology, the nature of choice reaction. This chapter was taken from section 3 of *The History of the Development of Higher Psychological Functions*². Chapters 6 and 8 (learning and development, and the developmental

¹ *Editor's Comment*: see (Vygotskii, 1960).

² *Editor's Comment*: see (Vygotskii, 1960).

precursors of writing) are from a posthumously published collection of essays entitled *Mental Development of Children and the Process of Learning* (1935)³. Chapter 7, [p. x] on play, is based on a lecture delivered at the Leningrad Pedagogical Institute in 1933 and published in *Voprosi Psikhologii* (*Problems of Psychology*) in 1966⁴.

From *The Essential Vygotsky*

Cole, M. Prologue: Reading Vygotsky (pp. vii-xii) (Cole, 2004)

[p. x]

...Luria's unflagging efforts to get more of Vygotsky's work published in English. Appreciative of the efforts he had extended on my behalf while I was a postdoctoral fellow in Moscow, I agreed to help in two intertwined projects. One was the translation and publication of two of Vygotsky's books; *The History of the Development of Higher Psychological Functions* and *Tool and Symbol in Child Development*, the latter perhaps co-authored with Luria, although I did not suspect that at the time. ... The other project was the editing and publication of Luria's autobiography (Luria, 1979), a brief version of which I had translated earlier for the series on the history of psychology in autobiography (Luria, 1974).

Both projects turned out to be extraordinarily difficult. I enlisted the help of my colleagues, Vera John-Steiner and Sylvia Scribner with the translation of the Vygotsky works, and I spent a lot of time becoming familiar with the sources of Luria's ideas by working through the citations in his autobiography. It soon became clear that the two projects were related, because a great number of the "old-fashioned" citations I encountered while reading Vygotsky were the same citations I found in Luria. ...

The "Vygotsky Boom"

I received the Vygotsky manuscripts from Luria in the early 1970s. But even with the expert help of able colleagues and a good translation to work from, I could not convince the publisher, with whom Luria had made arrangements, that the manuscripts were worth publishing. All of [p. xi] the problems that I had experienced earlier remained in place. The work seemed dated, the polemics either opaque or outdated, and the overall product was certain to produce fiscal disaster, not to say personal embarrassment.

Faced with this seemingly insurmountable barrier and with help from Luria, whom I visited every year or two and with whom I corresponded regularly, we were able to produce a reasonable selection of readings from the two manuscripts he had given me. To these we added several essays of an applied nature so that readers could see how the abstract theoretical arguments played out in practice. The result, entitled *Mind in Society*, was published in 1978. I heaved a great sigh of relief: I had finally discharged my obligation to Luria and the publisher, thanks in good measure to the hard work of my colleagues.

What happened next was totally unexpected. For reasons I have never learned, the philosopher Stephen Toulmin (1978) was assigned the book to review for the *New York Review of Books*. He entitled his article "The Mozart of Psychology." This review argued, as Sylvia Scribner and I had in our introduction, that Vygotsky's work was of great *contemporary* relevance, despite the fact that it had first been published forty years earlier. In effect, and in brief, the shortcomings of psychology against which Vygotsky struggled in the 1920s—in particular, the failure to recognize the centrality of culture and history to human psychological functioning—had not been overcome by his scientific successors. Instead, his dissatisfactions with psychologists of the early twentieth century applied with at least as great justification at the century's end.

³ *Editor's Comment*: see (Vygotskii, 1935).

⁴ *Editor's Comment*: see (Vygotskii, 1933/1966).

From *The Essential Vygotsky*

Preface by Robert W. Rieber and David K. Robinson (pp. xiii-xvii) (Rieber & Robinson, 2004)

[p. xv]

Actually, a note of caution about text is in order. Even using the Russian "original text," *Sobranie sochinenii*[i] (1982—84), we cannot be assured of the purity of Vygotsky's text. The Russian editors, inspired by Luria, and ably chaired by A. V. Zaporozhets, surely did their best, and psychologists and intellectual historians will ever be in their debt for their monumental work. All the same, close work with the manuscript materials, most of them still held by Vygotsky's family, remains to be done (see Vygodskaya & Lifanova, 1996). The Russian editors themselves admit that the "collected works" are not the "complete works"; they particularly draw attention to many reviews and early essays that could not be included.

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Doubts about the text involve even some of the most important ones. ... Elkhonon Goldberg told one of the editors (RWR) the story of another textual problem. When Luria began the project for the collected works, he was of course interested in finding the complete text of "Tool and sign," which had become an important Vygotskian concept in the intervening years. ... However, looking in Vygotsky's papers, they could only locate an *English* version of this famous work. Luria assigned Goldberg the task to produce the Russian version by translating the English one! The Russian original had apparently been lost⁵.

This brings up an interesting line of questions. Why was there an English text, which to that time had never appeared in print? Was there ever a Russian original? As Goldberg recounts, Luria and Vygotsky had both planned to attend a conference at Yale University in 1929. Luria actually did attend and presented his paper, "The new method of expressive motor reactions in studying affective traces" (1930). Vygotsky had apparently planned to attend also, to present "Tool and sign," but probably illness (or perhaps politics or some pressing personal matter) had prevented him from making the trip to the New World. ... Critical studies of the source materials and manuscripts remain to be done. Maybe people who are becoming acquainted with this interesting writer by reading this book will do them someday.

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⁵ *Editor's Comment*: The brief reference to the history of Vygotsky's back-translation from English into Russian was first published by Rieber and Robinson in their Preface to *The Essential Vygotsky* in 2004. Just a year later, a more detailed account of the same history was presented by Elkhonon Goldberg in his book *The Wisdom Paradox: How Your Mind Can Grow Stronger As Your Brain Grows Older* (Goldberg, 2005). See also textual analysis of these multiple translations in (Yasnitsky, 2011a, 2011b).

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