

Russian psychology and Italian psychology and psychiatry in the second half of 20 century¹

Luciano Mecacci

From the beginning of 1950s until these days the impact of Russian psychology upon foreign psychology and psychiatry has been much stronger in Italy than in any other western country. During the first decades after WWII, in 1950s and 1960s, the leftist intellectuals in Italy played the leading role in the international dissemination of Soviet research, primarily in the institutional and publishing spheres (i.e., printing houses and journals) affiliated with the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI*). This was the institutional channel that brought into Italy not only oeuvre of the classics of Marxism-Leninism and official political publications that were coming out in the Soviet Union, but also Soviet scientific works.

There were no significant ideological, political, or social conflicts in some scientific disciplines such as mathematics, physics and chemistry. In natural and exact sciences new theory or discovery had no immediate and general impact on Italian communists and leftist intellectuals, and was perceived as yet another evidence of scientific progress in the Soviet Union. Still, there was a hot discussion of Lysenko's theory in biology, genetics, and agriculture. Thus, in the summer of 1948 in Moscow was held the Plenary session of the All-Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences (*VASKhNIL*), the administrative and scientific forum discussed Lysenko's Lamarckian theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics and pronounced it the only position officially allowed in Soviet medico-biological sciences. Lysenko's theory sharply contradicted the developments in the mainstream Western biology and genetics and had considerable impact on the development of horticulture and animal husbandry in the USSR. When the news of this decision reached Italy a number of scholars including several members of the Italian Communist Party (*PCI*) objected and openly criticized this theory, but were, in turn, criticized for their allegedly bourgeois and anti-Communist standpoint; as a result, several scholars even had to quit their membership in the party. This was a discussion of scientific issues that did not have direct influence on Italian society [1].

However, the situation in psychology and psychiatry was fairly different. Indeed, for social and political reasons, for Italian leftist intellectuals it was much more important to assimilate and apply in social practice the theories developed within Soviet psychology and psychiatry. In 1950 in Moscow yet another conference was organized by the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, the one dedicated to the discussion of the theory of the physiologist Ivan Pavlov. This conference declared that Pavlov's theory was the only official conception in the Soviet Union in the field of brain research and the studies of psychological—normal and pathological—processes. The discussion of the consequences of the Pavlovization in the Soviet brain research is beyond the scope of this paper. Although Pavlov significantly contributed to the investigation of brain activity, the dogmatization of his the tenets of his theory immediately became an obstacle to further development in this direction: Russian laboratories that were conducting groundbreaking and internationally renowned studies in the end of 19—beginning of the 20 century entered the phase of decline in their research, in many instances irreversible [2].

In Italy, Pavlovian theory was disseminated through journals supported by the Italian

¹ English translation of an original Italian paper: Luciano Mecacci La psicologia russa e le scienze psicologiche e psichiatriche in Italia nella seconda metà del Novecento. *Toronto Slavic Quarterly*, No 17- Summer 2006. For Italian version of the paper see: <http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/17/mecacci17.shtml>

Communist Party that partially or entirely funded these editions: numerous articles by “Pavlovian” authors and countable psychological discussions appeared in journals *Society* (*Società*), *Renaissance* (*Rinascita*), and *Soviet Medicine* (*Medicina Sovietica*). In 1963 Angela Massucco Costa published a book on Soviet psychology. The author was not only a university professor of psychology, but also was the Member of Parliament, a representative of Italian Communist Party. Back then Italy experienced the “Economic Miracle” (*il miracolo economico*), the first notable rise of national economy after WWII in the end of 1950s through 1970s, and the social life of the country was undergoing considering changes that, in turn, caused new problems in such fields as social service, healthcare, and education.

In early 1960s Italian culture—cinema and literature—begin to explore the new life conditions of the country and the difficulties of the new reality, using the expression of the writer Cesare Pavese, the “diseases of the soul” (*le "malattie dell'anima"*) that emerged in the new Italian society of prosperity, but at the same time marked by anxiety and dissatisfaction. A series of book publications came out during this period such as *Boredom* (*La noia*) by Moravia (1960), *Acquainted with Grief* (*La cognizione del dolore*) by Gadda (1963), *Dark evil* (*Il male oscuro*) by Berto (1964). The kind of psychology implicitly inherent in these works of art is most distant from the one that was at that time popularized by the Italian communists—“Pavlovians”, who employed the notion of the conditioned reflexes in order to explain not only elementary processes of learning (such as in a dog that started salivating at the mere sound of a bell, even before any food was presented), but also the emergence of neuroses, depression and schizophrenia. These novels were based on different kind of thinking and dramatically different image of a human being rooted in West European tradition, primarily, in psychoanalysis. Besides, one needs to remember that psychoanalysis in its more or less orthodox form was an indispensable feature of Italian cinema of the time, as it is apparent in such movies as *Adventure* (*L'avventura*) by Antonioni (1960) and *8½* (*Otto e mezzo*) by Fellini (1963). It was not in the course of technical and professional discussions about the interrelations between psychology and Marxism or what kind of psychological theory better corresponds to Marxist principles—Pavlov’s theory? psychoanalysis?—that Italian “Pavlovianism” was undermined. The influence of Pavlov’s teaching about higher nervous activity was weakened by Italian complex cultural and social context, in which Pavlovian approach appeared too simplistic, reductionist, if not trivial [3].

The end of 1960s is marked by the second phase of the dissemination of Russian psychology in Italy. One should keep in mind the overall context of political and social life in Italy of that time. These were the years of social protest and intense struggle launched by the workers and the unions, but at the same time this was the period when Italian leftists initiated a series of important new social reforms. The most pertinent of these in the context of present discussion is the Law 118 of 1970 (*la legge 118 del 1970*)². According to this legislation, special classes for the disabled and physically or mentally retarded were closed down, and all those children that had been considered as handicapped were to be assigned to regular classes. These innovations in Italian public school took place under the considerable influence of the Russian psychology that was rapidly spreading in Italy back then, which became the foundation for psychological and pedagogical experiments in 1970s. In 1966 the book that is sometimes considered as the most important work in the Russian psychology of the 20th century—Vygotsky’s “Thinking and speech”—was first translated into Italian (although with notable omissions) and published in Italy. Then, in 1969, a reader of collected works of the authors of Soviet historical-cultural tradition was published under the title “Psychology and pedagogy” (*Psicologia e pedagogia*), edited by Marco Cecchini. This volume

² *Translator’s note*: it seems the author is referring to the law of March 30, 1971 (*Legge 30 marzo 1971, n. 118: "Conversione in legge del D.L. 30 gennaio 1971, n. 5 e nuove norme in favore dei mutilati ed invalidi civili"*); see, e.g., <http://sportellodpd.uniroma1.it/index.php?application=ProPages&func=viewpage&pageid=72> or <http://www.handylex.org/stato/1300371.shtml>. —A. Yasnitsky

included the works by L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leontiev, A.R. Luria, and many others. These two books made great influence upon Italian psychologists and pedagogues and became mandatory reading for anyone. Vygotsky were highly critical of Jean Piaget, who was the main source of references for Italian scholars, thus, Vygotsky increasingly got public recognition among the Italian leftist intellectuals for his interest to social and historical factors and repetitive call for the social integration of disabled children and socialization of marginalized children [4].

Despite dissemination of the works of Russian authors, previously unknown to general reader in Italy, among Italian psychologists close to Italian Communist Party or its former members a notable theoretical and ideological conflict was going on. Among Italian scholars of leftist leanings an opinion was spreading that Vygotsky's theory did not quite fit the tenets of Marxism, and even more—the foundations of Ivan Pavlov's theory. There was a need for historical-theoretical explanation of this controversy between two seemingly Marxist teachings, and this need was not satisfied by the works of Western authors including Massucco Costa, who could make a brief trip to the Soviet Union at their best and who relied on written sources such as published books and articles more than on immediate experience of work in Russian laboratories and psychological institutions. Last three decades I dedicated to historical reconstruction of Russian psychology exactly for this reason: the disappointment that I felt when I discovered that many notions that widely circulated in the West and what learned from the “official” books and journals did not adequately reflect the historical development and the contemporary state of the art in Soviet psychology.

I was greatly surprised when I made my first visit to Moscow in 1972, where I stayed for several months in order to do some work at the local Institute of Psychology, the old and the first national institute of the kind that was founded in 1912. Back then the Institute was located in the old building on Marx Avenue (prospekt Marksa), Mokhovaya Street these days, which was later augmented with another large institution under the aegis of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. This is where I worked during my subsequent visits to Moscow. I chose to work at the laboratory of psychophysiology, in which a modified version of Pavlovian teaching was used as a theoretical framework. This was the laboratory that was well known in Western Europe and the United States since the member of this research group led by V.D. Nebylitsyn published their works in English, and it was due to their novelty that they had certain impact. However, all researchers around including quite probably those who worked in this very lab—the older and the younger alike—were “anti-Pavlovians”. The most interest attracted the theories of L.S. Vygotsky and his students such as A.N. Leontiev and A.R. Luria. Although the works of Leontiev and Luria were regularly published (one needs to remember that Luria's work of 1932 was allowed to publication only in 1974, whereas his English book of 1932 did not come out in Russia until 2002 [5]), the dissemination of Vygotsky's works was limited, implicitly, by the official decree of the Soviet Communist Party of 1936. Among several exceptions were two volumes of collected works of abridged or censored texts that included “Thinking and speech” (*Myshlenie i rech'*) and were published in 1956 and 1960. Nevertheless, Vygotsky was the main topic of our discussions triggered by the release of his unpublished papers in *samizdat*³. Just realize that Vygotsky's work since then was published only in 1982, when these two books became a bibliographic rarity!

Thus, I undertook the task of reconstructing and investigating the history of Russian psychology, grounded in documentary evidence. My guide in the history of Russian psychology was my teacher Alexander R. Luria, although he preferred to avoid discussing certain problematic

³ *Translator's note*: Samizdat—system whereby literature suppressed by the Soviet government was clandestinely written, printed, and distributed; also, the literature itself. Samizdat began appearing in the 1950s, first in Moscow and Leningrad, then throughout the Soviet Union. It typically took the form of carbon copies of typewritten sheets that were passed from reader to reader. See: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/samizdat> .—A. Yasnitsky

episodes in this history. Also, I received considerable assistance from Giuseppe Garritano, who was a director (*direttore editoriale*) of the publishing house of the Italian Communist Party “United Publishers” (*gli Editori Riuniti*). Garritano, who was a great admirer of Russian culture (in particular, he translated Bakhtin’s book on Dostoevsky), supported me unconditionally. I started with the publication of two volumes of collected works of Soviet psychologists: first, “The unconscious in Soviet psychology” (*L'inconscio nella psicologia sovietica*), in 1972, and then, second, “Soviet psychology of 1917-1936” (*La psicologia sovietica 1917-1936*)—in 1974. Then, in 1977 I published my book “Brain and history” (*Cervello e storia*) that treats the history between psychology and neurophysiology in the Soviet Union, prefaced by none else but Luria. The English edition of this book came out in 1979. Besides, I edited the translation of numerous texts authored by Vygotsky, Luria, and other Russian psychologists [6].

This work brought about new insights into historical context of these Soviet psychological works: on the one hand, diversity and richness of theoretical and methodological strands, on the other hand, curious interplay between psychology as theory and psychology as it was used in concrete social and political conditions of the Soviet Union of 1920s and 1930s. This work provided comprehensive explanation of the reasons behind the already mentioned decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that banned certain psychological and pedagogical systems.

In the meantime, interest to Russian psychology in Italy was growing: many more individuals got involved in Russian scholarship, and new translations appeared. Maria Serena Veggetti, who taught in University of Rome and had translated a part of Vygotsky’s “Thinking and speech” in 1966, played a particularly prominent role in this movement [7]. An important landmark of this period was a conference dedicated to Vygotsky and his legacy that I organized in Rome in 1979. I would like to remind that this was the first ever conference of the kind that was then followed by similar events in Moscow, USA, Mexico, etc. that were also specifically dedicated to Vygotsky, who from 1980s became one of the often quoted scholars in various discussions on the actual problems of contemporary psychology.

This was a period when Western researchers were better informed of Vygotskian topics than their Russian peers: at least, this was the impression one could get on the basis of publications and public discussions. I clearly remember how during certain congress on the history of psychology held in 1988 in Budapest⁴, i.e. in relatively proximal past, a symposium on Vygotsky was organized, in which a small delegation of Russian scholars took part. The presentations of Russian colleagues were pretty correct and fairly interesting, but were at the same time based on a limited number of texts and historical documents. These Russian colleagues yet again presented Vygotsky as a harmless, high-brow, and abstract theoretician, but they failed to ever mention that he was occupying a few governmental positions and for his practical applications of psychology was censored and avoided. Here is just an example. In a lively friendly discussion a Western scholar noted that a number of Vygotsky’s works such as “Fascism in psychoneurology” (*Fashizm v psikhonevrologii*) are solidly grounded in ideological and political context. Russian colleagues were ignorant of this work and claimed that Vygotsky never wrote it. Missing the actual text as the proof at the spot, I was unable to convince them in the opposite.

The situation dramatically changed in 1990s. Russian historiography gave birth to a number of very important works so heavily supported by documentary evidence that this level was not accessible to Western scholars. Besides books and articles, the readers got access to the unpublished documents and personal testimonies. Thus, for better understanding of Vygotsky the biography written by his daughter Gita Vygotskaia in collaboration with Tamara Lifanova became a foundational source; Etkind’s book “Eros of the impossible” (*Eros nevozmozhnogo*) made a

⁴ *Translator’s note:* The author refers to Seventh European CHEIRON Conference, Budapest, Hungary, 4-8 September 1988. —A. Yasniitsky

groundbreaking contribution to the history of Russian psychoanalysis; besides, of considerable interest is the book by Irina Sirotkina about the interrelations between psychiatry and Russian literature in 1880-1930s [8].

Nevertheless, an historian—Western or Russian—still has a lot of work to do, especially on the topics concerning the interrelations between psychology, psychiatry, and Russian society of 20 century. Initially, this might be work that is limited by published texts only, raising questions about their new interpretation on the basis on newly discovered historical sources, interference of censorship, etc. Here is just one example from my own experience of my work on Italian translation of 1990 of Vygotsky's "Thinking in speech" [9]. This book was published in Moscow in 1934 several months after Vygotsky's death and was generally avoided after the decree of 1936. Later, this book was republished in 1956 and 1982. I compared the three editions of the book and discovered that in 1956 edition the text of its first edition was considerably censored: lengthy fragments of the text were cut out and, moreover, on numerous occasions words and phrases were changed throughout the entire text of the book. Furthermore, yet later, in 1982 edition, the modified text of the second edition underwent additional editing and censoring. Analysis of the differences between the three editions of the text, particularly, the changes made in 1956 and 1982, sheds light on the ideological and political problems that they hypothetically reveal in the context of the historical development of social and political reality in the Soviet Union in 1950s and 1980s.

In conclusion, I would like to mention two very complex, but most interesting topics from the perspective of a researcher of the history of Russian psychology. The first topic concerns the problem of homeless children (*besprizorniki*) in 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union, the topic that was researched in the recent studies of Italian scholars [10]. The second topic deals with the problem of nationalities, cultural differences, and related issues of social integration, schooling, etc. during the interwar period [11]. These two sets of problems—the abandoned children and intercultural relations—are important and current for Russian and Italian psychologists alike.

And, finally, the last topic that I would like to address here is the problem of psychiatry and its history, and the role of psychiatry in social and political life of Russia. Under the influence of Italian communists Pavlov's theory started spreading in Italy in 1950s as a theoretical framework borrowed for application not only in brain research and psychological investigations, but also in psychiatry. Indeed, Pavlov is known to have suggested a theory of psychopathological processes, including neuroses and psychoses. However, Italian psychiatrists and psychotherapists were very skeptical about this innovation and resisted the idea of applying this theory in their practice. The influence of classical German psychiatry—particularly contemporary phenomenological and existentialist strands that originated in the work of Jaspers and Binswanger—as well as psychoanalysis was so strong in Italy that local psychiatrists were very much reluctant to endorse Pavlov's physiological reductionism. A critical campaign was launched in 1970s against traditional psychiatry that was based on biological-pharmacological approach and mandatory psychiatric treatment with the use of sedatives. The culmination of this campaign was in 1978 when Law 180 on the reform of psychiatric practice came out (*Legge 180 sulla riforma psichiatrica*): the law mandated that all psychiatric hospitals close down⁵. Following this legislation a major move was made against the official "Pavlovian" policies. Notably, leftist Italian intellectuals did not express their disagreement with the official pro-Pavlovian position of the Italian Communist Party as a whole.

In 1978, Gramsci Institute (*Istituto Gramsci*), an organization that was dealing with the issues of culture in Italian Communist Party, organized a large-scale conference "Periods and

⁵ *Translator's note*: The so-called Basaglia Law (Law 180) (Italian: *Legge Basaglia, Legge 180*) of May 13, 1978. For additional information see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basaglia_Law, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychiatric_reform_in_Italy, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_Psychiatry. — A. Yasnitsky

problems of the history of the USSR” (*Momenti e problemi della storia dell'URSS*). Numerous politicians and intellectuals, communists and those not affiliated with any political party took part in this conference. Prof. Vittorio Strada presented a talk on the topic “Politics and culture in the USSR” (*Politica e cultura nell'URSS*). My presentation was titled “New Soviet man” (*L'uomo nuovo sovietico*), and in this presentation I demonstrated that most apparently not only obvious utopian functions are hidden behind the notion of propaganda, but also that it provides the means of legitimization of psychiatric repressions of those individuals who diverge from the prescribed model of behaviour. This idea and invitation to the discussion of this problem did not find support then for a number of reasons, and not just because it came from a very young speaker. However, we should not be concerned with the fact the Italian politicians silenced the problem of punitive psychiatry in the Soviet Union as the measure against local dissidents and political opponents (after all, on rare occasions there were several criticisms of and protests against the actions and policies in the Soviet Union). What matters is the silence and passivity on part of the Italian psychologists and psychiatrists, in contrast to the activism and criticism of the Soviet course of actions widely spread among their peers in other West European countries. There could have been a discussion of the present situation: when in Italy psychiatric treatment was widely criticized and patients were released from hospitals, in contrast, at the same time in one of the countries that were considered advanced in social and scientific respect the so-called therapeutic functions of hospital-based treatment and marginalization of mental patients were expanded. However, scholarly and medical community of practitioners in Italy never demonstrated such collective initiative to raise these issues, like this happened in other countries [12].

Therefore, for Italian psychology and psychiatry the theories developed in Russia and Soviet Union never were just a model that was to be transferred into Italy on the basis of its novelty and scientific merit. Analysis of the ways how and when these models were imported and spread in Italy reveals similarity of the patterns of their parallel development in Italy, that is how considerably they were influenced by the concerns of ideological and political nature.

References:

1. About the debate within Italian Communist Party on the Lysenko affaire, see N. Ajello, *Intellettuali e PCI 1944-1958* [Intellectuals and PCI 1944-1958], Laterza, Roma-Bari 1972.
2. On Pavlovianism and its consequences for Soviet research on psychology, see L. Mecacci, *Cervello e storia. Ricerche sovietiche di neurofisiologia e psicologia*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1977 (English transl., *Brain and History. The Relationship between Neurophysiology and Psychology in Soviet Research*, Brunner/Mazel, New York 1979). The book had the preface by A. R. Luria. On Luria, who was my mentor in Russia, see my paper: *Luria: A unitary views of human brain and mind*, in *Cortex*, 2005, 41, 816-822.
3. On Italian Pavlovianism and psychology in the years '50 and '60, see L. Mecacci, *Psicologia e psicoanalisi nella cultura italiana del Novecento* [Psychology and psychoanalysis in Italian culture in the XX century], Laterza, Roma-Bari 1998.
4. L.S. Vygotski, *Pensiero e linguaggio* [Thinking and speech], edited by A. Massucco Costa, Giunti, Firenze 1966; L. S. Vygotskij, A. R. Lurija, A. N. Leontjev, *Psicologia e pedagogia* [Psychology and pedagogy] edited by M. Cecchini, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1969.
5. R. Lurija, *The Nature of Human Conflicts*, Liveright, New York 1932 (First Russian edition: *Priroda celoveceskih konfliktov*, Cogito Centre, Moskva 2002).
6. *L'inconscio nella psicologia sovietica* [The unconscious in Soviet psychology], Editori Riuniti, Roma 1972; *La psicologia sovietica 1917-1936* [Soviet psychology 1917-1936], Editori Riuniti, Roma 1974; *Cervello e storia*, see note 2. Moreover I promoted or edited for the publisher Editori Riuniti the translation of several other books (L. S. Vygotsky, A. N.

-
- Leontyev, A. R. Lurija, A. A. Leontyev, etc. included the nice book by Y. Gagarin and V. Lebedev on psychology in the cosmic space).
7. M. S. Veggetti's contributions to the diffusion of Russian psychology in Italy are quoted in her last book *Psicologia storico-culturale e attività* [Historical-cultural psychology and activity], Carocci, Roma 2006.
 8. A. M. Etkind, *Eros nevozmozhnogo*, Gnozis, Moskva 1994 (book translated in English, French and German); G. L. Vygodskaya and T. M. Lifanova, Lev Semenovic Vygotsky, Akademija, Moskva 1996; I. Sirotkina, *Diagnosing literary genius. A cultural history of psychiatry in Russia, 1880-1930*, The Johns Hopkins University Press 2002.
 9. L. S. Vygotsky, *Pensiero e linguaggio* [Thinking and speech], Laterza, Roma-Bari 1990. The comparison between the three editions is now given in L. Mecacci and A. Yasnitsky, *Editorial changes in the three Russian editions of Vygotsky's Thinking and Speech (1935, 1956, 1982). Towards authoritative and ultimate English translation of the book*, in *PsyAnima, Dubna Psychological Journal*, 2011, 4 (4), 159-187.
 10. D. Caroli, *L'enfance abandonnee et delinquante dans la Russie sovietique*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2004; *Autobiografie di bambini e giovani abbandonati in URSS (1927-1936)* [Autobiographies of abandoned children and young people in USSR (1927-1936)], in *Slavia*, 2000, 9 (3), pp. 146-182 e *Ideali, ideologie e modelli formativi. Il movimento dei pionieri in URSS (1922-1939)* [Ideals, ideologies and educational models. Pioneer movements in USSR (1922-1939)], Bologna, Unicopli 2006.
 11. On the influence of Vygotskian theories on current discussion about cultural psychology, see L. Mecacci, *Psicologia moderna e postmoderna* [Modern and postmodern psychology], Laterza, Roma-Bari 1999 e *La cornice storico-metodologica della psicologia culturale* [The historical-methodological frame of cultural psychology], in *Ricerche di psicologia*, 2004, 27 (3), pp. 47-56.
 12. L. Mecacci, *L'uomo nuovo sovietico* [The new Soviet man], in *Momenti e problemi della storia dell'URSS* [Moments and problems of USSR history], edited by S. Bertolissi, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1978, pp. 249-257. On Pavlovian psychiatry in Italy see *Psicologia e psicoanalisi* (see note 3). A first analysis of psychiatry and its political background in Russia was given in my work, *Psicologi, psichiatri e scrittori durante lo stalinismo* [Psychologists, psychiatrists and writers during the Stalinism], in *Figure della follia* [Madness figures], edited by M. Bresciani Califano, Olschki, Firenze 2005, pp. 131-143.