

Notes on the relationship between Vygotsky and Leontiev: The "troika", did it ever exist?¹

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Abstract. *This work aims at presenting a discussion about the relationships that happened between Vygotsky and Leontiev. It's not to disregard the importance of these two authors for the construction of psychology, but bring some elements to understand the theoretical breakout that occurred between them. Based in recent works about the history of Soviet psychology, we focus to three dimensions about this separation: the first concerns the scientific production, which identifies the little production that involves the two authors; another is related to a conjectural and ideological positioning, arising from political changes implemented by Stalin in the persecution of Soviet intellectuals; and the last points to a theoretical break itself, when Vygotsky marks the theoretical departure of Leontiev. Such clarifications are needed especially because we found authors often pointing to theoretical and ideological continuity between these two authors.*

Keywords: *Vygotsky; Leontiev; Social historical psychology; History*

About the Tróika – the “partnerships” in the research developments on psychology

Throughout our studies on Vygotsky's theory is recurring the idea that he shared his intentions to create a new Psychology with two other psychologists – Aleksei Nikolaevitch Leontiev and Alexandr Romanovich Luria – the group that became known in the literature as "troika", whose leadership was exercised by Vygotsky (cfe Luria, 1979).

It is known that the developments of the Revolution in 1917 presented the team who worked in the Institute of Psychology in Moscow multiple problems, such as a high index of illiteracy, lack of support to children with psychological and physical difficulties, etc., and that situation demanded some solutions to issues concerning the own constitution of psychology.

Thus, in addition to the search for solutions concerning practical issues arising from the revolutionary process, Vygotsky also directed its work in the Institute of psychology in Moscow aiming to reshape the psychological theory, taking as its starting point the Marxist propositions (cf. Wertsch, 1988: 28). From that perspective, Luria (1979: 43) comments: "Vygotsky, was also the greatest theorist of Marxism among us (...) in his hands (...) the Marxist method of analysis has played a vital role in shaping our direction. "

In the years that followed his arrival to Moscow, Vygotsky and his group undertook an analysis of psychology with the prospect of creating a new theory. They understood that neither the subjective psychology proposed by Tchelpenov, nor simplified attempts to reduce the complexity of conscious activity in simply reflexes schemes, gave a satisfactory model for human psychology.

These two movements – the give account of social demands created by the revolution and the development of a Marxist approach to psychology – are circumscribed by a moment extremely critical in view of the deployment of the Revolution of 1917. Luria tells us about this situation, as follows:

I arrived in Moscow to find a city that, like Kazan, was enthusiastically engaged in the work of reconstruction. Unlike my working conditions in Kazan, however,

¹ Translated from Portuguese into English by Wagner Luiz Schmit

Moscow's psychologists had well-defined goals and specialized research facilities. I joined a small group of scholars who were charged with reconstructing Russian psychology in order to bring it into accord with the goals of the Revolution (Luria, 1979:28).

With the arrival of Vygotsky, other perspectives were opened to researchers at the Institute of Psychology in Moscow.

When Vygotsky arrived in Moscow, I was still conducting studies by the combined motor method with Leontiev, a former student of Chelpanov with whom I have been associated ever since. Recognizing Vygotsky's uncommon abilities, Leontiev and I were delighted when it became possible to include Vygotsky in our working group, which we called the "troika." With Vygotsky as our acknowledged leader, we undertook a critical review of the history and current status of psychology in Russia and the rest of the world. Our aim, over-ambitious in the manner characteristic of the times, was to create a new, comprehensive approach to human psychological processes. (Luria, 1979:40)

This statement of Luria found the use of the term "tróika", but, after all, what he meant?

To respond to this question we did a bibliographic search and, along the way, we found the book "*Les questions du mode de vie*" (from 1923) of Leon Trotsky, which analyzes the post-revolutionary situation of USSR and acknowledges the difficulties of Soviet people to develop elementary cultural skills. Considering the huge lack of study manuals, books, etc., Trotsky sees in the making of new books the qualification possibilities of the proletariat. As to the writing of these new manuals he explains:

In order to write a handbook it is necessary to form a group, of three persons (troika), consisting of a professional writer, with technical knowledge of the subject and acquainted as much as possible with the state of our industry or able to study it; of a highly skilled workman interested in production and with an inventive turn of mind; and of a Marxist writer with some technical industrial knowledge. (Trotsky, 1923/1979:29)

The term "tróika" used by Trotsky, refers to a cultural reconstruction policy developed by the Communist Party, whose implementation entailed in engaging writers, technicians, scientists, etc. for the purposes of revolution.

However, this context is not the same as the one that Luria wrote his book. He named the group of tróika on a book that has a biographical tone, where there is an intention to make a political apology. In other words, the fact of Luria using the word "tróika" does not allow us to affirm a closer engagement with the political issues of Vygotsky and his group within the Communist Party.

Anton Yasnitsky, in his doctoral thesis entitled "Vygotsky Circle during the decade of 1931-1941 – toward an integrative science of mind, brain, and education" shows us another interpretation to the relations established by the group of psychologists who worked at the Institute of Psychology in Moscow. His research is a starting point to the contemporary history of pós-vygotskian psychology which is often told in terms of "school of Luria, Vigotski, Leontiev" or "trojka" (the three) which, together with the "pyaterka" (five) of students of Vigotski (Zaporozhets, Bozhovich, Levina, Morozova and Slavina) constitute the leading names

linked to the construction of the cultural-historical theory proposed by Vigotski (Yasnitsky, 2009: 5).

Yasnitsky (2009: 11) points out that

The idea of “the school of Vygotsky - Leontiev – Luria” did not appear until the end of the 1970s, and a number of researchers questioned its validity now and then, and doubted the legitimacy of the claims of the continuity of Vygotsky’s original framework in the research program of activity-oriented psychological studies.

Prikhozhan and Tolstykh, while examining the works of Lidia Bozhovich, present a position similar to that of Yasnitsky as to the continuity of Vygotsky's work. These authors suggest that Bozhovich identifies a break in the guidelines of work of Soviet psychologists regarding Vigotski propositions. In this sense, the authors clarify:

She [Bozhovich] saw the fundamental difference of her own approach as one that studied the logic of Vygotsky’s thinking without going beyond the framework of the theoretical system he constructed, while others (A.N. Leontiev, P.Ia. Galperin, V.V. Davydov, and A.R. Luria), in her opinion, developed a single aspect (the idea of the leading role played by activity, the significance of the process of interiorization for a child’s psychological development, the notion that education must lead development, etc.), thus disrupting the holistic architectonics of this theoretical conception. (Prikhozhan & Tolstykh, 2004: 9)²

Anton Yasnitsky (2009) proposes a new "version" to the history of tróika. According to the author there is no concrete evidence of its existence during the last decade of Vygotsky's life (1924-1934), and considers it more appropriate to talk the "duo" Vygotsky and Luria in view of its multiple personal and professional connections that can be found between the period from 1925 to 1930. To characterize his assertion the author highlights the volume of scientific papers that were developed during this period by Vygotsky and Luria and those developed by Vygotsky and Leontiev, namely:

- two introductions to the translations of psychology books in 1925 (Vygotsky, Luria, 1925a, 1925b);
- in 1927 were in a team preparing educational materials and books (Vygotsky, Artemov, Bernstein, Dobrynin, Luria, 1927; Vygotsky, Luria, Artemov, Dobrynin, 1927);
- were co-authors of a paper on egocentric speech that Luria performed at IX International Congress of Psychology at Yale University (Vygotsky, Luria, 1929/1930);
- wrote the book chapter *Tool and symbol in child development* that was planned to appear in the *Handbook of Child Psychology* from Murchinson in 1930 (Vygotsky, Luria, 1930/1994);
- wrote the book “*Studies on the history of behavior: apes, primitive man and child*” that was written at the end of 1920s and published in 1930 (Vygotsky, Luria 1930, 1930/1993).

Regarding the partnership between Vygotsky and Leontiev, the author points out:

In contrast, the only paper that came out under the names of both Vygotsky and Leontiev was the introduction to the book on psychology of memory written by

² See the analysis of Koshmanova (2007) that points to the many stories told about the life and work of Vygotsky.

the latter under the supervision of the former (A. N. Leontiev, 1931). (cfe. Yasnitsky, 2009: 54).

Yasnitsky also states that many contemporaries, and even critics of cultural-historical theory of propositions, not identified Leontiev, but Vygotsky and Luria as proponents of this theory (Yasnitsky, 2009: 54-55).

Of the split between Vygotsky and Leontiev – An ideological and conjunctural question?

We have seen an intense debate among the commentators of Vygotsky, about his relationship with Marxism. Rivieri (1985) States that the relation of Vygotsky with Marxism was much more related to methodological issues than with an ideological dimension. In this direction, Kozulin (2001) alerts us:

Vygotski took Marx seriously, not as an Idol, but as a thinker of flesh and bone in the European cultural tradition. The Vygotski's Marx was one of the voices of European thought at the same level of Dilthey, Durkheim, the neo-kantians and others. The fact of situating Marx in the context of European thought could not but result surprising for his colleagues, who had grown accustomed to split the culture in "bourgeois" and "Socialist", and for whom the Marxism thought a break with European tradition, and not its consummation (Kozulin, 2001: 230).

Kozulin (2001) and Yasnitsky (2009) remind us that by the end of the Decade of 1920s and the early 30s, Soviet intellectuals and researchers suffered a very strong pressure from Stalin's policy. As regards psychology, it was decided, according to Kozulin, that the founders of Marxism-Leninism were the starting points that should demarcate the scientific fields and those that tried to develop psychological theories supported by Western studies were condemned because it was expected that the theories were derived from the inherited ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin, the Bolshevik experience and the works of Stalin.

The work of Vygotsky did not escape criticism. His theory was stigmatized since they established a dialogue with the French school of sociology of Durkhiem and with the gestalt psychology, indicating that such theoretical articulations reflected his bourgeois inclinations (Kozulin, 2001: 228). For Kozulin the non-acceptance of Vygotsky was related to the complexity and subtlety of his theory and its arguments. In addition

Much of contemporary Vygotski had become accustomed to the intellectual identification system based on the loyalty of the group. Instead of inquiring the ideas of one person, they asked which group the person belonged. In this sense, Vygotski broke all the rules. Its pre-revolutionary history was clean and its acceptance of Marxism seemed sincere, so they expect him to join the ruling Camarilla. On the contrary, it seemed that he respected more the wisdom of the poet fallen into disgrace, Mandelstam, than every work of his contemporaries. To resolve this "cognitive dissonance", the contemporary of Vygotski had to denounce him for a pseud-Marxist or convince him to embrace the common truth and abandon his dangerous deviations. (Kozulin, 2001: 230)

For Yasnitsky, Vygotsky and his associates became the object of criticism that, in most cases, were unfounded scientifically, but politically motivated. However, after the publication of the Decree of the Communist Party Against the perversions in Pedology of July 4, 1936, a public campaign against the theory of Vygotsky began. His already published work was

condemned, as well as his unpublished manuscripts. As a result Vygotsky became persona non grata in the academic scenario, being virtually banned from the Russian psychology scene, a situation that lasted until mid-1950s.

Given this scenario of ideological persecution, the members of the Group of Vygotsky also began to have problems.

There is circumstantial evidence to show that both Leontiev and Luria were forced to quit their jobs around 1936-1937. We can also assume that Luria had to flee from Moscow and found a relative refuge in the Caucasus area. From the publication of Luria's correspondence with Max Wertheimer we know, for example, that his letter to Wertheimer of September, 1936 was sent with the return address in Teberda (Caucasus region) (King & Wertheimer, 2005). Likewise, it was in Tbilisi, Soviet Georgia, under unclear circumstances, that Luria defended his doctoral dissertation, in 1937. (Yasnitsky, 2009: 73)

For Yasnitsky, flee the capital or to resign from positions of professors, were not the only strategies used by Luria and Leontiev to the physical and professional survival of both. It is in this context and under those circumstances – as a survival strategy – that Yasnitsky places the work of Leontiev entitled "Study of the Environment in the Works of L.S. Vygotsky Pedological: A Critical Study" (Leontiev, 2005), where he weaves a series of reviews on Vygotsky, stating his theoretical disruption with the former. According to Yasnitsky (2009: 74) this text

[...] was most likely the basis for an oral presentation that he made some time during the turbulent years of 1936-7. For instance, such presentation could have taken place in 1937 when, after a considerable break, Leontiev returned to the Institute of Psychology. This paper was originally located in the archives of the Institute and was not published until the late 1990s when it was incidentally discovered by the wellknown Russian scholar Irina Ravich-Shcherbo. Leontiev's critique of Vygotsky in this paper might have served the purpose of distancing him from the then outlawed former teacher.

The starting point of Leontiev's criticism were the works developed in field of pedology - target of the Decree of the Communist Party in 1936. Among these works, he refers to a text by Vygotsky published in 1935, entitled "the problem of the environment" (Published in English by Van der Veer in 1994). The criticisms of Leontiev were directed to the concept of environment defended by Vygotsky and the unfoldings of this concept for understanding the process of child development.

So, the environment appears as the vehicle of those forms that determine development. Are these forms ideal only in the sense that they are *final* forms or are they ideal in the sense that they are forms of social *consciousness*? Obviously, they are ideal in the latter sense as well, a word in its capacity as a final form does not have an effect as a sound, but as a sign, as a carrier of meaning, that is, specifically as an "ideal" thing, a product of spiritual culture; in the same way, a child enters into interactions not with quantities as such, but in the words of the author himself, "with developed arithmetical thought." The interaction that takes place here is specifically interaction with forms of social consciousness; so the child, too, enters into this interaction specifically in his capacity as a subject of consciousness. Thus, the theory of environment put forth by Vygotsky, locked in

the circle of consciousness, loses its initial materialistic position and is transformed into an idealistic theory. (Leontiev, 2005: 20)

Further, Leontiev's text continues as follows:

Of everything that Vygotsky developed theoretically, the conception of the environment is the weakest. In that conception, as in a magic trick, collected in a unified, false construction, were all the theoretical mistakes, inconsistencies of thought, and individual idealistic views that we find in his main psychological works. They suffice in it, and therefore specifically in this conception Vygotsky least of all succeeds in overcoming the views of neopositivism that are traditional in contemporary French bourgeois psychology. (Leontiev, 2005: 20)

Understanding these criticisms as a survival strategy, which would mark the distance between Vygotsky and Leontiev, is a way to mitigate a situation that can be characterized by a breakup. It is important to notice that this same critical tone was used by Zinchenko - group member of Karkov – in a work on involuntary memory published in 1939, where some views of Leontiev are repeated, for example:

Indeed, one of the most basic of all problems, the conceptualization of the nature of mind, was incorrectly resolved. The central characteristic of the human mind was thought to be *mastery* of the natural or biological mind through the use of auxiliary psychological means. Vygotsky's fundamental error is contained in this thesis, in which he misconstrued the Marxist conception of the historical and social determination of the human mind. Vygotsky understood the Marxist perspective idealistically. The conditioning of the human mind by social and historical actors was reduced to the influence of human culture on the individual. The source of mental development was thought to be the interaction of the subject's mind with a cultural, ideal reality rather than his actual relationship to reality. (Zinchenko, 1983: 66-67)

Such a situation of widespread disagreement, in the assessment of Kozulin (2001: 68), resulted in a strategy for the study of psychological functions: "the emphasis on psychological tools was replaced by so-called 'activity ' policy", opening the paths to the development of the theory of activity that begins to be consolidated by the Group of Karkov, featuring a detachment from Vygotsky's theory. This is what we will discuss in the next session.

The theoretical split between Vygotsky and Leontiev

Before we begin this topic it is necessary to characterize the process of construction of the cultural-historical theory. Zavershneva (2010a: 27), from his studies on unpublished documents of Vygotsky (notes, notepads, etc.), States that:

In effect we have proof that as early as 1926 Vygotsky formulated the principles of the cultural-historical approach, whose first theses were not put forth for discussion until December 1927–January 1928 in the paper “The Development of the Difficult Child and the Study of Him” [Razvitie trudnogo rebenka i ego izuchenie] (First All-Russian Pedological Congress). The premises of the approach, of course, are contained in all of Vygotsky's early works, but it was only in 1926 that they were brought together and a solid nucleus thereby created for the theory, that is, a series of postulates on which the entire research program

rests, and which were later clarified and given new formulations. In 1930 they were supplemented with the systemic principle, and in 1932, with the principle of the semantic structure of consciousness. We propose precisely this criterion for the beginning of the cultural-historical theory in the strict sense of the word: the synthesis of two ideas, which until 1926 were being elaborated without a clearly defined link between them (the principle of semiotic mediation, which subsequently underwent significant changes and receded to the background of the theory, and the idea of the cultural development of the psyche). It was previously assumed that the critical phase, the transitional year, was 1927; Vygotsky's correspondence with his colleagues suggested that experimental research in the new methodology of dual stimulation was already under way in the summer of 1927, but was not being published. Now we know that the theoretical principles of this research were formulated a year earlier.

It is from these theoretical positions that we can identify the theoretical and methodological breaks between Vygotsky and Leontiev. The roots of this conflict, according to Yasnitsky (2009: 64-65),

[...] may be traced to an episode overlooked by historians of psychology and still waiting further investigation. In 1928 Leontiev's article on remembering in children with pathological mental development came out in the journal *Voprosy defektologii* [...]. Two years later Zankov published a paper with the results of his study on the same topic in a volume that he coedited with D.I. Azbukin and Vygotsky (Zankov, 1930). In this paper Zankov presented the findings of his study and a scorching critique of Leontiev's 1928 study, lambasting his negligence of experimental procedures precision, carelessness with statistics, vague style of reporting findings, and, last but clearly not least, Leontiev's totally distorted account of mnemonic processes in mentally retarded children. Leontiev never responded to this critique. Furthermore, no references to this Zankov's study can be found in the publications of Leontiev's students, for instance, in the monumental and most pedantic book by P.I. Zinchenko on psychology of involuntary remembering that overviewed virtually all literature on the topic to date, including several other of Zankov's 1930-40s publications on memory (P. I. Zinchenko, 1961). In sum, regardless of whether the episode with Zankov's scientific critique of Leontiev's early study was the cause or merely an indicator of the ongoing conflict, there are reasons to believe that the opposition between the "Kharkovite" (Leontiev, etc.) and the "defectological" (Zankov, Solov'ev, etc.) groups of Vygotsky's followers was based on a personal conflict and strong hostility of the key protagonists rather than on purely scientific, theoretical grounds.

Yet Zavershneva (2010b) offers another perspective on the rupture between Vygotsky and Leontiev. In his studies of the documents made available by the family of Vygotsky, the author found a "notebook" that can clarify the fact in question. It is a "notebook" written in 1932 which is divided into three parts:

[...] an outline for the unwritten book *On the Question of Investigating Consciousness* [K voprosu ob issledovanii soznaniia], notes on the mind-body (psychophysical) problem and Vygotsky's notes on reports by I.M. Solov'ev and A.N. Leontiev that were probably delivered at a research meeting ("internal

conference”) for the closest associates (Vygotsky held such “conferences” quite often; not only completed work was discussed at them, but also plans for the future) (Zavershneva, 2010b: 62)

Despite the importance of other issues, let's stick here with the discussion that Zavershneva makes about the notes referring to the works of Solov'ev and Leontiev, observations that mark the rupture between him and Leontiev. Vygotsky, insofar as he was consolidating his systemic vision of the nature of the psyche, in the light of the principle of the unity of the development processes (see the text “*On the psychological systems*”, 1931), makes harsh criticism to the propositions of Leontiev, since the analysis from the later indicated a reduction in the level of theoretical generalization, and does not take fully into account the higher psychological processes. For Zavershneva

Vygotsky criticized Leontiev for losing the center of the inquiry and for taking a spontaneous approach. The sideways step that Leontiev was making was for him not only a deviation from the overall objective—a theory of consciousness—but also a step backward, toward the analysis of psychological functions that was dominant in the Vygotsky Circle between 1928 and 1931.³⁵ Each component of consciousness at the time was investigated separately, without a systemic approach: A.N. Leontiev studied memory; L.S. Sakharov, Iu.V. Kotelova, and E.I. Pashkovskaia studied thought, and so on. Vygotsky may have viewed Leontiev’s inquiry merely as an attempt to study the dynamics of action as just another psychological function. The time had come, however, to bring all of the results together, synthesize them, and reinterpret them. (Zavershneva, 2010b: 83)

Vygotsky's notes written in 1934 and presented by Zavershneva, when he and Leontiev had already breakout, indicate such rupture:

[T]here are 2 unities of dynam[ic] activity: think[ing] and real activity. Both have their dynam[ic] aspect, i.e., there is a dynam[ic] system *sui gen[eris]*,³⁶ of certain type and variety. The 2 kinds of dynamics do not exist *in abstracto* without activity. This is the most important and basic point. . . .

In fact, the role of think[ing] in activity consists of introducing new dynam[ic] possibilities to activity. To say that thinking is impaired is tantamount to saying that the subtle and complex dynam[ic] processes in activity are impaired. (Entry “*Sehr wichtig. The Unity of Affect and Intellect*” [*Sehr wichtig. Edinstvo affekta i intellekta*], family archive) (Vygotsky apud Zavershneva 2010b: 83)

Complementing this file entry, the author introduces other two notes:

“NB! A.N.,” Vygotsky writes about Leontiev (the item is marked “!!!!!!”) that he “looks backward and does not take a decisive step forward to a new level of work—semiotic analysis.—What does the meaning of an action mean?” (Zavershneva 2010b: 89 – n. 35)

“How to inspire Comrade Leontiev— with the light of the problem of consciousness!” (Zavershneva 2010b: 89 – n. 37)

We understand that the notes above indicate a rupture between the two authors, both under a methodological dimension and about the object of study of both. However, Zavershneva says:

The arguments against Leontiev do not go beyond the scientific debate. Nowhere—not even in notes to himself—do we find personal attacks on Leontiev, although Vygotsky was definitely already beginning to lose patience.³⁷ “Each person took his step independently after starting off from a common starting position. But where did he put his foot?” (Zavershneva, 2010b: 83 – underline added by the author)

Later on she continues

It is hard not to notice that they were speaking different languages. Vygotsky did not seem to see that, aside from scientific arguments, what lay behind Leontiev’s decision to dissociate himself from the inquiry into consciousness were apparently ideological factors. By focusing on the ideologically more compliant theory of activity, A.N. Leontiev survived in the complex atmosphere of “repressed science” (M.G. Yaroshevskii’s term), and later became not only the originator of a major movement but also the founder of the psychology department at Moscow State University. We should note, however, that psychology was mainly deprived of his works until the 1980s, while Leontiev held leadership positions in Soviet science. (Zavershneva, 2010b: 83-84)

Final considerations

We want to make it clear that this text is not intended to disregard the importance of Leontiev and Vygotsky's psychological sciences. It is to present a different version of the continuity of the work between these two authors.

In this sense, we agree with Bozhovich, and with the other bibliographic information, that Leontiev, as well as other authors, broke with the holistic perspective drawn by Vygotsky, going away from his epistemological and methodological proposals. This is what also indicates the works of Keiler (2010), analyzing a text of Leontiev entitled "Materials About Consciousness", pointing the differences in the concept of conscience of this author with Vygotsky.

We understand that the theoretical propositions of Vygotsky's left us various inquietations, and that those are still to be understood and consolidated – perspectives that do not necessarily fit together with Leontiev activity theory, especially regarding the semiotic dimensions of psychological phenomena. The challenge posed by these concerns still remain and are present in our daily lives, in our doing – be it in the field of academia, or in the professional field. And, to the extent that we consider his ideas inscribed in history, they still remain alive and fruitful and indicate a path in the consolidation of a psychology rooted in assumptions of historical materialism and dialectical materialism.

Also we see as very fruitful the work developed by Anton Yasnitsky and Ekaterina Zavershneva, who have allowed us to follow the research program of Vygotsky's from new perspectives. Anton Yasnitsky, considering the work of Vygotsky as a collective construction, which involved several other researchers, a network that has established a collaborative work schedule (see also, Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004), leads us to the realization of studies that unveil the dynamics of reality of the Soviet psychology in the early 20th century. Such a perspective is complete with the studies carried out by Ekaterina Zavershneva from the unpublished archives of Vygotsky, offering us access to a set of information that helps us to understand more profoundly the theory of Vygotsky and of his contemporaries.

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