

SOVIET MARXISM RECONSIDERED: DIALECTICAL METHOD IN THE THOUGHT OF LEV  
VYGOTSKY

by

Arto Artinian

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2013

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Dr. Jack Jacobs

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Chair of Examining Committee

Dr. Joe Rollins

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Executive Officer

Dr. Alyson Cole

Dr. Patricia Clough

Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York

Abstract

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Adviser: Professor Jack Jacobs

While intellectual engagement with the legacy of the Soviet experiment continues, objective and critical engagement with Soviet Marxist theory remains a barely-studied and marginal area of political theory. A commonly-held view suggests that little of political theoretical substance has been produced in the Soviet Union after the death of Lenin. Marxist theory in this context is often portrayed as dogmatic pseudo-Marxism, burdened by the heavy hand of Stalinist authoritarianism and handicapped by the execution and prosecution of creative Marxists living in the USSR. I will argue that this is an incomplete and distorted picture of Soviet Marxism. I propose that the work of Lev Vygotsky forms an alternative and highly original tradition of Soviet Marxist dialectics. As a thinker writing in the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution, his work is an attempt to apply Marxist dialectical method to the unique challenges of post-1917 Soviet society. Whereas most students of Vygotsky focus on his fundamental contributions to psychology, I argue that Vygotsky's work on dialectical method represents an original and significant contribution to Marxist dialectics, in both continuing the work of Gyorgy

Lukacs and anticipating contemporary theories developed by Bertell Ollman and Roy Bhaskar. I will conclude by briefly engaging with Gilles Deleuze's "Difference and Repetition", which I want to argue can be read as a work of Marxist dialectics, struggling to make sense of the crisis of 1968 in France. Contrary to readings of this work as "moving away from Hegel and Marx and toward Nietzsche and Freud" (as stated on the back cover of 1994 English translation) I will argue that Deleuze was in fact moving beyond, but not outside Marx.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

На майка ми, Варта Артинян, и на баща ми, Бохос (Бебо) Артинян:

Благодаря за всичко, за житейните уроци, за подкрепата през всичките тези години, за това че сте истински родители, в най-дълбокият смисъл на тази дума.

To my mother, Varta Artinian, and to my father, Bohos (Bebo) Artinian: Thanks for everything, the lifelong lessons in how to live one's life, for the steadfast support throughout these years, for being true parents, in the deepest meaning of that word.

To my comrade in life, Bree: you're my soul, my anchor, in every important way. This project would not have finished without your constant support, presence, encouragement, and love. You know...

To my aunt, Nellie Baydian: Thank you for everything, from what you did for me in 1979-1980, to bringing us to the U.S., for the flute you bought, for all the love and support. You always remembered what I told you as we drove by St. John's University. Well, now, I finally finished.

Thank you!

My family: Edmond, Silvana, uncle Gerard, thanks for the lifetime of support and love. I remember those early immigrant days in 1990, when you would drop your own work, and come to help me with my homework, as I was struggling with learning a new language. And, that was just one of the infinite ways, the tip of the iceberg, through which you expressed your love and support.

My grandparents, both in Bulgaria and in the Soviet Union (Dedushka Mgrdich, Baba Vera, Baba Hripsime): thank you for sparking my curiosity, for teaching me the importance of history and memory, with those stories about your lives, the war and after, for teaching me the fundamentals of striving to be a good person. And for Diado Artin: for your incredible presence in my life, for your principled politics during the World War, and the communist partisans you helped with food, medicine, and most importantly, from the fascist secret police. Your efforts went unrecognized afterwards, and you didn't insist otherwise; a sign of a true leftist by heart. You did it for the principle, not the recognition.

Jack, a huge thanks for being my mentor and guiding hand during this arduous process. Your dedication, patience and incredible knowledge, are virtues that epitomize the meaning of a true teacher and an intellectual of the highest order.

Patricia, your classes changed my life, literally. Thank you for being my mentor and friend, for teaching me how to think, how to push beyond boundaries, and how to never give up on creativity!

Alyson, thanks a million for your help, feedback and support, especially for the ways in which I can move forward, after the dissertation.

Ian, many thanks for the innumerable hours of incredible conversations and insight on issues of politics, political theory and everything in between!

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CHAPTER 1  
(OVERVIEW OF SOVIET PSYCHOLOGY AND POLITICAL THEORY DURING THE 1920s)

IMAGINING A BETTER FUTURE

In the summer of 1925, Lev Vygotsky undertook what was to be his only trip abroad. He was a member of a Soviet delegation participating in a London conference on deaf and mute children. The trip included stops in Berlin and London, combining lectures and meetings with leading European and American psychologists (Zavershneva, 2010, 23-24). The experience must have exacted a profound impact on Vygotsky, prompting soul-searching thoughts on life, the purpose of his own work, and the world he lived in, as he remarked:

In another country, in the air (airplane), at sea—you feel a strange detachment from everything. A review of your whole life, an examination of your soul. Suddenly you look at your whole life as a spectator, as though it were the minute before your death.

How agonizing.×

- <.><sup>1</sup> In my life it is a sign of enormous future tribulations. Am I afraid. Of course I am afraid, I feel fear, but I am keeping it under control.

I still have my strength and authority.

Let be. [brief quotation from Hamlet—E.Z.]

< . . > My journey has been amazing and its meaning is much more important and greater than its practical aspect (Zavershneva, 2010, 24).

For someone who was 29 at the time, Vygotsky seemed preoccupied with heavy, morose thoughts. One factor was the ever-present threat of tuberculosis, which would kill him nine years later. By 1925, Vygotsky had already experienced a few close calls with death, having spent extended periods of time in various hospitals and sanatoria (Zavershneva, 2010). Second, he was

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial markings and completions are by Zavershneva (2010), the Russian psychologist who first edited the previously-unavailable journal entries and prepared them for publication. In fact, only a small subset of Vygotsky's notes and journals have been published so far. A new series is expected to appear in English (probably in the "Journal of Russian and Eastern European Psychology") over the next few years.

in the midst of dramatic changes in his life, having recently (in 1924) moved back to Moscow from the provincial Belorussian town of Gomel. The short time since his move to the capital was a time of extremely intense research, teaching, and adjustment to intellectual life in the big city. After all, it was in 1924 that he formally entered the field of psychology as a researcher in the Moscow Institute of Psychology (Vygotsky, 1934b, xvii).

Vygotsky's journey until 1925 had been amazing indeed. Within the span of little more than seven years, the political terrain of what had recently become Soviet Russia was radically transformed, affecting all layers of society. The Civil War finally ended in 1921, but not before completely devastating what was an already thoroughly traumatized society.

There was hope however. The victory of the revolutionary forces over those of reaction and foreign imperialism was not lost on the generation of young intellectuals coming of age in the years of revolution and civil war. This was especially true for young Jewish intellectuals such as Vygotsky. In czarist Russia, Jews were subjected to both discrimination and an educational quota system. Secondary public schools were technically open to Jews, but in reality such schools were often characterized by deep racism, with many teachers openly harboring monarchist and even Black Hundred sympathies<sup>2</sup>. This was the case with the public gymnasias (secondary schools) in Orsha, forcing Vygotsky to enter a private Jewish gymnasium (Kotik-Friedgut and Friedgut, 2008, 21).

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<sup>2</sup> Essentially, a loose terrorist group chiefly responsible for most of the pogroms and anti-socialist violence in pre-revolutionary Russia. The Black Hundreds had the implicit backing of the government and operated with virtual immunity from the law.

Access to higher education was limited and controlled through quotas and lotteries (Yasnitsky and Zavershneva, 2009). No more than three percent of an entering university class was to consist of Jewish students. The only exception to this requirement was for those such as Vygotsky, who graduated gymnasias with a Gold Medal, and were guaranteed a slot in an elite university. Even this “gold lining” was not certain in absolutist Russia, with the Gold Medal rule itself eliminated precisely the year Vygotsky graduated from his Gymnasium. Jewish (and other *inorodtsy*, or “foreign”) university applicants had to place their hopes on a lottery for seats in the available three percent (Vygotsky, 1934b, xii). As luck would have it, Vygotsky’s name was chosen and he entered Moscow University (Kotik-Friedgut and Friedgut, 2008). Additionally, Jews were not permitted to teach in public schools and universities, placing further restrictions for students such as Vygotsky who were interested in pursuing a path in literary criticism and philosophy.

The February and October Revolutions put an end to these restrictions almost immediately. The abolishing of anti-Semitic laws was accompanied by a general overthrow of some of the most oppressive laws of czarism. Homosexuality was decriminalized, and legislation banning leftist political parties was lifted. In addition, the resultant seizure of power by leftist radicals correspondingly empowered the leftist intelligentsia that was hitherto the subject of state repression. As Yasnitsky (2009) puts it:

...[t]he revolutions of 1917 reshuffled the entire construction of pre-revolutionary Russian society, and it was then that leftist intelligentsia gained access to the resources and to a certain extent the mechanisms of power in the country in the early 1920s (36).

Such radical political changes provided young scholars of Vygotsky's generation with new opportunities for intellectual and professional growth. Not only was access to higher education now guaranteed, but the revolutionary government actively encouraged the inflow of "fresh blood" into all parts of academia. This enabled an entire generation of young college graduates to quickly assume academic and research positions of leadership (Yasnitsky, 2009). What would have been unthinkable in 1915 (that a young Jewish graduate from Moscow University would represent his country in an international scientific conference on deaf-mute children) was now very much a reality.

These progressive transformations were obviously not lost on Vygotsky. In another entry made during the same 1925 trip, he is much more optimistic and also very conscious of the Revolution's impact:

There is enormous access to the main underwater currents of life. This journey is "a judgment on myself." It is a life fractionated into instants, but also sub specie aeternitatis.<sup>3</sup>

In essence Russia is the first country in the world. The Revolution [is] our greatest cause. Only 1 person in this room knows the secret of the true education of d.-f. [deaf-mutes—E.Z.], and that person is me. Not because I am more educated than others, but I was sent by Russia and I am speaking for the Revolution (Zavershneva, 2010, 24).

These are notes intended for himself only, providing the most accurate possible barometer of his state of mind at the time. "The Revolution is our greatest cause" he writes, and it is not difficult to understand why. Yet, Vygotsky's optimism was the end result of a dramatic transformation in his own beliefs, both philosophical and political.<sup>4</sup> The young man before the revolution had a different, more moderate political trajectory.

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<sup>3</sup>Under the aspect of eternity (Latin)

<sup>4</sup>Rather temporary, as the gathering clouds of the 1930s were to show.

Vygotsky grew up in a comfortable setting, surrounded by a loving and supportive family. Intellectual labor was encouraged in the household and young Lev had already “mastered the fundamentals of a classical education, Greek and Hebrew language, as well as English, the Bible, and Jewish history and culture” (Kotik-Friedgut and Friedgut, 2008, 20). Vygotsky was tutored by his mother and a young university student, Solomon Markovich Ashpiz, who had been expelled from his university studies for political activism in student demonstrations (Ibid.).

Later in high school, Vygotsky organized and led a two year history seminar, examining the role played by history in the shaping of the Jewish experience, as well as related philosophical questions on the individual and their relationship to history (Kotik-Friedgut and Friedgut, 2008, 21). The seminar cast a wide net from the Bible and Old Testament, to Heinrich Graetz (“History of the Jews”), Tolstoy and Thomas Carlyle.

In addition to his studies in medicine in university, Vygotsky took courses in philosophy, literature and philology (Ibid.). During these formative years (1916-1924) he published over 80 articles in various journals and newspapers. Most significant among these were his publications for Maxim Gorky’s “Chronicle” (*Letopis*) and the liberal Jewish “The New Way” (*Novyi Put*). The young Vygotsky was preoccupied with literary criticism and history centered on a wide range of topics from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, to the 1917 essay “We Were Slaves” commemorating the abolishing of all anti-Semitic laws restricting the lives of Russian Jews (Kotik-Friedgut and Friedgut, 2008, 28) and (Vygotsky, 1934b, xiii-xiv).

After completing his university studies, Vygotsky returned to Gomel, where he lived on and off between 1917 and 1924. Through the difficult times of the German occupation (1918) and the

years of the Civil War (1919-1921), he began teaching at a local high school. This entry into pedagogy was made possible by the elimination of civic restrictions on Jews following the revolution, and Vygotsky took advantage of this opening, teaching philosophy, literature and logic. Most importantly, he also started to teach psychology at the local teachers college, in addition to undertaking his first experiments with psychology (Kotik-Friedgut and Friedgut, 2008, 30). Thus, in the years immediately preceding his formal entry into what became Soviet psychology, Vygotsky was already deeply preoccupied with a multi-pronged engagement with psychology, teaching, and literary criticism.

Revolutionary moments can change presently set beliefs, which seems to have been true for Vygotsky, just as it was for Gyorgy Lukacs. Though data from this period is sparse, we do know that by the time he delivered his lectures at the Second Congress of Neuro-physiologists in Moscow in January 1924, Vygotsky considered himself a Marxist (Kotik-Friedgut and Friedgut, 2008, 33). The move from the liberal-democratic scholar of Shakespeare, nineteenth century literature, and Jewish history to the Marxist tradition must have started at least a few years earlier. It seems to have been complete by the time he was writing his first manuscript, “The Psychology of Art” (Vygotsky, 1971).<sup>5</sup> In this complex work, containing chapters on “Psychology as Knowledge”, “Psychology and Psychoanalysis”, “The Tragedy of Hamlet” and “Psychology as

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<sup>5</sup>The authoritative Russian edition was published very recently, in 2010. The word “authoritative” is a bit ambitious, given the multiple editions, redactions and various other forms of censorship imposed on most of Vygotsky’s works. According to Zavershneva, even well-established works such as “The Historical Meaning of the Crisis of Psychology”, still suffer from errors and omissions in the published versions. This dissertation includes an Appendix containing an illustration of the inaccuracies still present in the translation of his most popular work “Thought and Language.” The story of Vygotsky’s actual work is very much a work in progress today.

Catharsis”, Vygotsky wrestled with the implications of Marx’s dialectical method in the context of his own critique of the inadequacies in the method of the various then-influential schools of psychology. This, combined with his journal entry from above, and his desire “to approach the study of mind having learned the whole of Marx’s method” (Ibid.), attests to a genuine self-identification with Marxism (on a general level) by 1925. Yet, interestingly he seems to have arrived at Marxism less through his engagement with Hegelian dialectics, and much more so through the dialectical thought of Spinoza (Kotik-Friedgut and Friedgut, 2008) and (Vygotsky, 1934b).<sup>6</sup>

At this point it is important to ask: in this time of revolutionary change and upheaval, what happened to the continuity of Marxist thought in Soviet Russia? Over the past sixty years a virtual consensus has emerged among scholars in the West that no serious Marxist theorizing went on in the Soviet Union after the immediate first few years of the revolution. This was the position of many of the most widely read “Sovietologists” such as Joravsky (1961). This was also the position (in a general sense) of the new generation of “Western Marxists” starting with most of the representatives of the Frankfurt School and ending with those writing today.<sup>7</sup> The story of this discourse is complex. Some observers such as Herbert Marcuse (1958) dismissed outright the existence of Marxist thought as such in the Soviet Union. With the Bolshevik-led Revolution, whatever was left of the traditions of this thought was replaced by some deformed shadow of the real thing, tailored to the needs of the State and its ruling party. In many ways Marcuse was

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<sup>6</sup>See Alex Kozulin’s Introduction to “Thought and Language”, pg. xiv.

<sup>7</sup>Not all Marxists in the West had this view. Althusser comes to mind as one such example who had perhaps a more nuanced view of Soviet Marxist thought expressed in text such as “Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays” (2001).

correct. How can the textbooks on “dialectical materialism” used by millions of Soviet students and others around the world be classified as examples of dialectical thinking in the tradition of Marx and Engels? Such texts were the product of Stalin’s Soviet Union, marked by selective editing, outright omissions and distortion of ideas. Clearly, there was (and still is in many respects) a sense of a clear separation between the “Western” currents of “genuine” Marxist thought and its Eastern (Soviet and later Chinese) deviations.

The problem with this analysis is (at least) three-fold. Firstly, it was caused by political differences between those who considered themselves Western Marxists who opposed Bolshevik-style revolutionary politics, and proponents of Lenin and later Trotsky, whose interpretation of Marx’s work on the Paris Commune directly fueled their program in 1917 (and thereafter). A subset of this first difference was the narrow “philosophical” focus of most Western Marxists, when the discovery and publishing of the 1844 Manuscripts<sup>8</sup> led to a different interpretation of Marx: more philosophizing, and less interest in revolutionary politics. In itself, this led to the establishment of an academic Marxist tradition in the West, a broad tradition for a wide range of thinkers with socialist and communist leanings. Interestingly, academic Marxism as a specific discipline received a powerful boost precisely in the first decade of the Soviet Union, where all of the features of what are now expected hallmarks of any Marxist intellectual were already fully present: a broad humanist grounding in philosophy, ability to engage critically with a broad range of the post-Enlightenment ideas and intellectual currents in relation to

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<sup>8</sup>Interestingly, by Ryazanov’s Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow.

materialist dialectics, the use of dialectical method in one's own research,<sup>9</sup> a broad critique of capitalism, an engagement with radical feminism as a parallel struggle against the economic facets of capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

Lastly, much of the story and its participants have been lost starting with the 1930s and the death, imprisonment and censorship that accompanied the Stalinist Thermidorian reaction. Within this turmoil, it is easy to see how various narratives of what happened in Soviet Marxist thought became distorted, hidden and re-contextualized. Even the basic political question of when, how and where did resistance to Stalinism end remains subject to massively different interpretations. Most observers conclude that by the early 1930s, the Stalinist bureaucracy had already acquired absolute control over the state. For example, the XVII Party Congress introduced "proposals for the abolition of the Central Control Committee and the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate" leading to new systems of party centralization and state control (Davis, 2003, 30). These institutions were designed to act as checks on the power of top functionaries within the Bolshevik Party.

As Soviet-Russian historian Vadim Rogovin (Rogovin, 2003) shows, Lenin and other senior party leaders spent a considerable amount of time attempting to devise ways to limit what they

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<sup>9</sup>Though, as we will see, this was and is not a hard and fast rule. It is still common for scholars to label themselves Marxists, without engaging in dialectical thinking.

<sup>10</sup>It must be remembered that the first post-revolutionary governments of Soviet Russia and Ukraine contained a number of famous and extremely influential radical feminists (or, women's liberation fighters as they tended to call themselves). The list includes figures such as: Alexandra Kollontai, Clara Zetkin, Nadejda Krupskaya, Marrisia Reisner and Evgeniia Bosch. Bosch had the additional distinction of being the first head of state of a workers government, when she was elected as the head of State of the Workers Republic of the Ukraine. Her stay in office was short, 1917 to 1918, interrupted by the German occupation following the conclusion of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty.

feared was the possibility of an entrenched bureaucracy emerging from the end of the Civil War, capitalizing on its position of power and establishing itself as a privileged caste, separate and above the party itself as well as worker and peasant oversight. Nikita Khrushchev writes in his memoirs how as a young party bureaucrat he carried his tool-chest with him at all times (Rogovin, 2003). All Bolsheviks in the 1920s were used to the idea of instant recall from important party positions. The point was to prevent an entrenched bureaucracy by implementing mechanisms that could permit party members to vote and instantly recall anyone in a position of supervision in government, or at the work place. This measure of direct democracy was a remnant of Soviet/council democracy introduced in the 1905 Revolution and practiced in the first few (pre-Civil War) years after the 1917 Revolution. The elimination of instant recallability and other institutions of party cadre supervision (such as the Central Control Commission) were primary targets of Stalin's faction, who knew all too well that the road to absolute power depended on their destruction.

The show trials of the mid-to-late 1930s were just icing on the cake. According to Rogovin however, active, widespread, and determined resistance to Stalin was present at least until the start of WW II (2003), (1998)and (2009).<sup>11</sup> This opposition included supporters of Leon Trotsky, but also an eclectic mix of left communists, anarchists, disillusioned Stalinists, and senior military figures. Labor camps for political prisoners in the GULAG<sup>12</sup>, became the arena of mass

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<sup>11</sup>Only three of Rogovin's seven volumes have been translated in English as of 2010. He completed the books between 1990 and 1998.

<sup>12</sup>Though he writes about this in his earlier novels, Solzhenitsyn "Gulag Archipelago" consciously omits the fact that the gulag system was setup for political prisoners of the regime first, and criminal prisoners second. Most importantly, the majority of those who perished in the gulag and in the various mass executions of the Great Purges were communists, anarchists or

uprisings that were only suppressed through mass executions, with prisoners marching to their deaths signing “The International” and chanting anti-Stalin slogans.<sup>13</sup> In other words, there was more to the arrest and execution of top Soviet marshals than a simple paranoia on the part of Stalin and his closest followers.

The uncovering of such political complexities begs related questions about how Soviet Marxist thought developed after 1917. What were the threads of continuity with the Marxist tradition in general, and what emerged as *new* under conditions of post-revolutionary society? Soviet Russia clearly introduced new dimensions and complexities. For decades, socialists and communists across Europe struggled to imagine what society after the overthrow of capitalism would look like. Now that it was here, at least in an initial transitional form, the future looked uncertain, but exciting. The Civil War ended in victory and a general sense of optimism pervaded among the young intellectuals who imagined in Marxism the possibilities not present in the past (Yasnitsky, 2009), (Yasnitsky and Zavershneva, 2009). Vygotsky was not alone. This period experienced new developments, such as the efforts by Soviet economists (Preobrazhensky being the most well know) to construct an industrial planned economy, as well as continuities of the ideas of the Marxist tradition (illustrated by the intense polemical battles between philosophers Lybov Akselrod vs. Avram Deborin discussed below).

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social democrats of some sort. In others words, Stalin’s dictatorship focused its energies against leftists first! This is an important narrative that is often lost in the anti-communist literature dedicated to the Soviet gulag.

<sup>13</sup>In the case of Trotsky, both his first wife Svetlana and youngest son perished in the gulag. We know now from police records and Rogovin’s research that his son was most likely an active participant in such resistance in camps. In fact, he seems to have been radicalized in the camps. Whereas prior to his arrest, he lived a quiet life of an engineer, when arrested (after the exile of his father), he refused to sign a statement denouncing his father and thus sealing his fate.

Parallel to these developments, revolutionaries outside Soviet Russia continued their struggle against capitalism and imperialism. Their efforts were mostly based on the Bolshevik model<sup>14</sup>, especially after the establishment of the Communist International in 1919. This political struggle was based on common theoretical underpinnings: the works of Marx and Engels, the experiences of the German Social Democratic Party as the largest socialist mass party, the techniques and program of the Bolshevik party, as well as new theoretical contributions to the study of class struggle, political economy and psychology. Among the last two, prominent representatives included economist Henryk Grossman (Kuhn, 2006),(Grossman, 1929) whose work developed capitalist economic crisis theory. In psychology, groundbreaking contributions were made by the Hungarian-French communist theorist and revolutionary Georges Politzer.<sup>15</sup> The struggle went on after 1917. Last but not least, Gyorgy Lukacs (Lukacs, 1971)and Karl Korsch (Korsch, 1971) introduced important works developing dialectical materialism as a method of social theory.

In this context of dynamism and creativity, what happened within the Soviet Union is often portrayed as a period of theoretical and practical decay; a perversion of the (Western) Marxist revolutionary tradition. While socialists and communists in the West (and elsewhere) continued their struggle, developments in the Soviet Union are often seen by writers today as something of

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<sup>14</sup>Though by no means all, as illustrated by the final struggle of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in Germany.

<sup>15</sup>Politzer was a fascinating and understudied figure. After moving to Paris, he became an active organizer for the French Communist Party. In this capacity he developed and ran classes for workers focusing on Marxist political economy, party organization and dialectical philosophy. In addition, he wrote pioneering works on the theory of psychology and possibility of integrating Marx's method in the study of psychology; a task mirroring Vygotsky's work of the same period. A limited collection of his work in English is available at: <http://www.Marxists.org/archive/politzer/index.htm> After being tortured by the French police, Politzer was transferred to the German control and executed by the Nazis in 1942.

a “fall from grace”, a deviation from the trajectory of Western Marxism. This deviation is often equated with a simple equation: Lenin and the Bolshevik methods formed a direct link to Stalin and Stalinism in establishing a form of totalitarian regime, which had little in common with the ideals and aspirations of the international socialist movement.<sup>16</sup> I will not argue with this latter formulation.

I argue that this interpretation of Soviet history is very misleading at best, and completely fictitious at worst. Instead, what the 1920s and even 1930s show is that what happened to Marxist thought in the Soviet Union was much more complex. It was a time of intense political and intellectual struggle. This was a time of creative innovations, combined with lines of continuity within the Marxist tradition. It was a period of experimentation, as well as Stalinist degeneration.

In this context, Vygotsky can be used as a marker, illustrating both continuity, and innovation. His thought is characterized by a duality: steeped in Western humanism, but also pointing to future directions in the Marxist tradition. But his is a duality of dialectical wholeness: a self-identified Marxist; a deep and honest interpreter of the fundamental works of Marx, Engels and Plekhanov. At the same time, a thinker deeply influenced by Spinoza, who was also well versed in the latest discourse in psychology, philosophy and literary theory.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Marcuse’s book on Soviet Marxism contains this thesis, as do the various “Sovietologists” such as Joravsky. Marcuse’s (1958) work must be taken seriously given the fact he was one of the most prominent Marxist philosophers of the twentieth century. I dismiss analysis of the Soviet Union by Sovietologists, all of whom were rapid anti-communist Cold Warriors, whose own knowledge of the Marxist tradition was trivial at best.

<sup>17</sup>The influence of Spinoza’s dialectics on Vygotsky is rather organic and non-contradictory, given Marx’s own affinity for Spinoza. In itself, such a “duality” is rather non-controversial for any Marxist. Though Engels minimizes the importance of Spinoza’s thought on the development of dialectics in Hegel and Marx, this is chiefly an interpretive incompleteness (or weakness) on Engels’ part (Engels, 1877). Marx was very clearly aware of Spinoza’s role in preparing the

Vygotsky's Marxism was qualitatively different from the Marxism exhibited by many of his contemporaries in Soviet academia. After the end of the Civil War, as Bolshevik rule became stabilized, a quasi-Marxist (or pseudo-Marxist) discourse emerged in intellectual and academic circles, that was used to legitimize research under the new political regime. In many cases, Marxist language was used as mere rhetoric (Yasnitsky, 2009) and (Yasnitsky and Zavershneva, 2009). Among such opportunists, Marxism became synonymous with "materialism", a differentiator from idealism, vitalism, anti-monism and other metaphysical currents (Ibid.). This "Marxism as simple verbiage" is the object of Vygotsky's critique of those Soviet psychologists who, starting in the early twenties, sought to create a "Marxist" psychology; they used the labels without incorporating the substance. In the 1930s, this pseudo-Marxist practice became the only possible language of scientific expression across every aspect of intellectual life. In the face of this opportunism, Vygotsky remained firmly rooted in the Marxist tradition as a political supporter of the October revolution, and a practitioner of materialist dialectical method in this new society.

What was the vision, then, of this new Soviet society that animated Vygotsky to write so glowingly of the revolution, and its potential for transforming the world? To answer this question

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theoretical terrain for Hegel and himself. The Western Marxist practice of dividing his work into an "early" philosophical/"humanist" period, and a later "political economy" phase, is both misleading and incorrect. What was present in Volume 3 of *Capital* by way of method and theory, was already present in the early manuscripts. In this sense, Vygotsky forms an organic continuation of this intellectual and political tradition. His interest is not merely historical, for Vygotsky is in tune with the most innovative of Soviet Marxists in this period. We have proof of this from the pages of "The Psychology of Art" (1971), where central to his polemics is a sympathetic engagement with Trotsky's critique of the prokult movement's attempt at creating "socialist art", as well as ongoing debates about culture, method and dialectics: Involving thinkers such as Viktor Shklovsky and Georgy Plekhanov.

it is necessary to look at the impact of October on Soviet intellectual life at this time, as well as trace Vygotsky's own intellectual movement towards psychology.

### THE IMPACT OF OCTOBER (THE 1920s: A DECADE OF DYNAMISM, CREATIVITY, AND NEW OPENINGS)

The origins of Soviet psychology are a lens through which the political impact of the 1917 Russian Revolution can be observed. It emerged as a body of scientific knowledge and practice amidst the fervor, excitement, suffering and optimism of those transformative years. Though psychology was just one of several intellectual currents that were decisively impacted by the political events of October, its evolutionary trajectory during the turbulent 1920s and 1930s illustrate the complex dualities of Soviet Marxist thought.

Before 1917, Russian psychology was characterized chiefly by adaptations of Western schools of psychology, the only exceptions being the system of conditioned reflexes developed by Ivan Pavlov and Vladimir Bekhterev. This aside, there were no Russian schools that could rival contemporary Western developments such as psychoanalysis and gestalt psychology (Yasnitsky and Zavershneva, 2009). Psychology followed the practices of other areas of Russian intellectual, scientific and political life.

A pattern of dependency on the West shaped the trajectory of Russia's industrialization in the years leading up to the 1917 Revolution. The development of railroads provides a case in point. Though Russia was one of the first countries to follow Britain's lead in building railroads<sup>18</sup>, it

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<sup>18</sup>With the first operational line opening in 1837.

remained heavily dependent on foreign capital, locomotives, rolling stock, and virtually all related technologies to Western European powers until the early part of the Soviet period (Heywood, 1999). The same story repeats itself across pre-Soviet industry in general, as well as in foreign affairs. Leon Trotsky captures the specific general backwardness and dependency that characterized the Russian Empire in the context of World War I:

India participated in the war both essentially and formally as a colony of England. The participation of China, though in a formal sense “voluntary,” was in reality the interference of a slave in the fight of his masters. The participation of Russia falls somewhere halfway between the participation of France and that of China. Russia paid in this way for her right to be an ally of advanced countries, to import capital and pay interest on it – that is, essentially, for her right to be a privileged colony of her allies – but at the same time for her right to oppress and rob Turkey, Persia, Galicia, and in general the countries weaker and more backward than herself. The twofold imperialism of the Russian bourgeoisie had basically the character of an agency for other mightier world powers (Trotsky, 1930, 13).

The contrast with the ten years after 1917 were dramatic. Just as the French Revolution unleashed an intense period of creativity and change in intellectual life and its institutions of learning (Hobsbawm, 2002), something similar occurred across the new Russian workers and peasants state. Thus, Yasnitsky and Zavershneva (2009) are correct when they write that Soviet science, as an original science of novel methods and theories, could emerge only with the Soviet era, and specifically with the rapid developments of the 1920s. The October Revolution’s impact on Soviet science was twofold during the 1920s:

1. The sciences received “unprecedented privileges, state support, and lavish funding” (Yasnitsky, 2009, 35)
2. This occurred during a period of “relative academic freedom” (Ibid.), in contrast to the 1930s and thereafter.

The Bolsheviks placed enormous emphasis on science as one of the main driving forces of economic and social modernization; an emphasis perhaps most clearly articulated in works such as Lenin's "Better Fewer, But Better" (Yasnitsky and Zavershneva, 2009).

Additionally, scientific achievements were important for increasing the prestige of the new Soviet government abroad, and increasing its legitimacy. An example of this was the treatment of Pavlov, who was permitted to stay in the country and receive active state support even though his negative attitude towards the new regime was well known (Ibid.).

#### INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTIONS AND RESEARCH

The elevated role of science was reflected in the explosion of scientific institutions in the country, from 289 in 1914 to 1263 in 1929, and an astonishing 1908 by 1932 (Yasnitsky, 2009, 37). This dynamic growth was especially visible in the field of psychology. Before 1917, there were two major institutes of psychology. Bekhterev's "Psycho-neurological Institute in Leningrad" (founded 1907) and G. Chelpanov's "Institute of Psychology" (1912). After the Revolution, the change was both quantitative and qualitative as illustrated by the names of the newly-created institutes: *Akademiya Kommunisticheskogo Vospitaniya* (Academy of Communist Upbringing) (founded in 1919 in Moscow), *Eksperimental'nyj Defektologicheskij Institut* (Experimental Defectological Institute; founded in Moscow in 1929), *Ukrainskaya Psikhonevrologicheskaya Akademiya* (Ukrainian Psychoneurological Academy; founded in Kharkov in 1931-2; the Kharkov Pedagogical Institute (Department of Psychology founded in 1933). To put this in perspective, all of this occurred within a decade! In addition, a number of

scientific journals were founded such as, “*Psycho-techniques and the psycho-physiology of work*” (1928) , “Psychology and Pedology”, to name but a few (Yasnitsky and Zavershneva, 2009) and (Yasnitsky, 2009).

### GROWTH IN INFLUENCE ABROAD

Soviet psychology and its sub-fields grew remarkably both in size and influence during the decade, mirroring other areas of Soviet arts and science. This dynamism was not lost to Western observers. In 1929, the Soviet delegation of ten scholars to the Yale University-hosted IX International Congress of Psychology was the third-largest, "after Great Britain's twenty two and Germany's seventeen" (Yasnitsky, 2009, 35). Furthermore,"several international conferences were held in the Soviet Union in the 1930s: the list included such major international scientific forums as the VII International Congress of Applied Psychology (or Psychotechnics) held September 8-13, 1931 in Moscow; the XV International Physiological Congress, August 9-17, 1935 in Leningrad and Moscow; and the VII International Congress of Genetics scheduled for 1937 in the USSR” (Yasnitsky, 2009, 35).

Additionally, an increasing number of works by Soviet psychologists (Luria, Shnirman, Borovsky, Kravkov, Usznazde, Vygotsky, Blonsky, Bogoslovsky, Platonov, Levit, Kanaev) were published in foreign languages towards the late 1920s (mostly in English, but also in French and German) (Yasnitsky and Zavershneva, 2009, 20)and (Yasnitsky, 2009).

### THE WIDER CONTEXT:

The dynamism and creativity present in psychology were mirrored in other areas of Soviet life such as the visual arts. Similar to what happened in psychology and throughout Soviet academia, the revolution created an opening for young and avant-garde artists to assume leadership roles. The number of art exhibits increased dramatically, and so was the commissioning of new works. Radical artists such as Kazimir Malevich assumed important teaching positions, as well as widespread publicity. A founder of the Suprematist school, he remained in Russia after 1917, and actively participated in the artistic life of the new Soviet state, teaching at the Leningrad Academy of the Arts and the Kiev State Art Institute. The famous Red Cavalry painting was produced during the Civil War years:

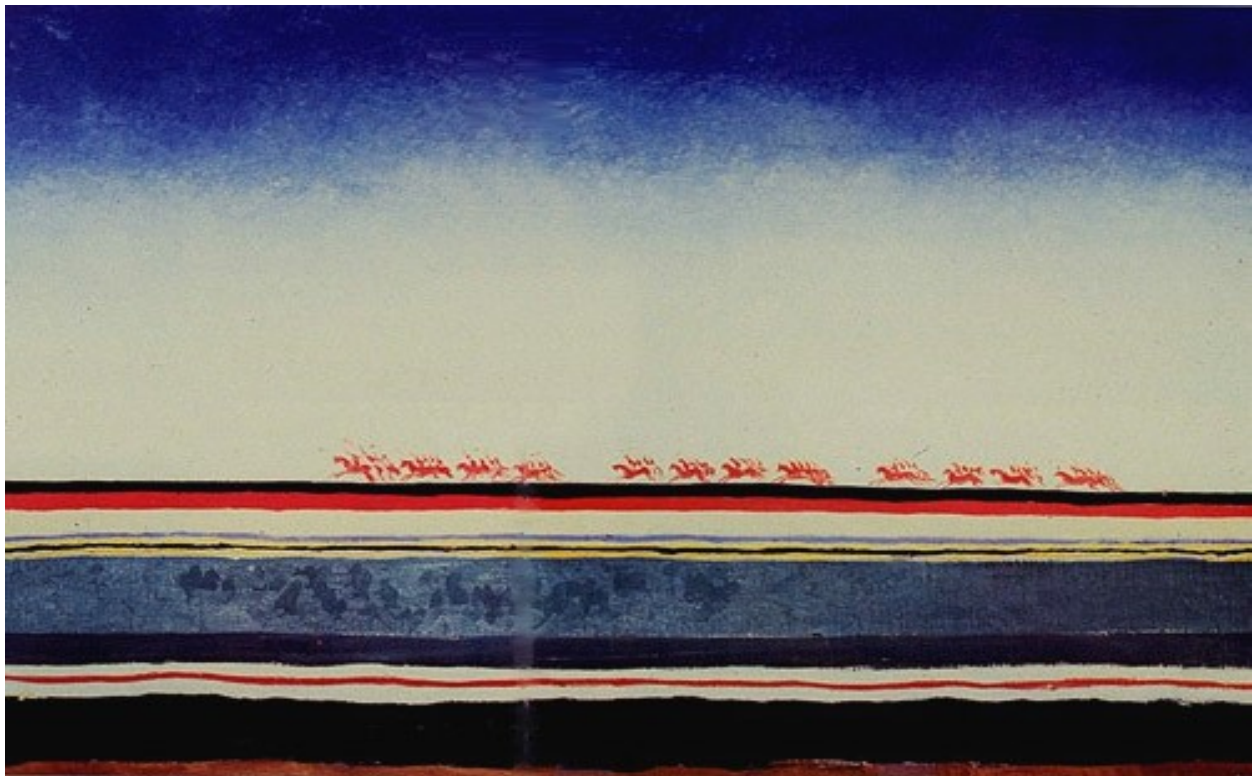


Image 1: Kazimir Malevich. "Red Cavalry" (1928-1932). Source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Malevich\\_cavalry.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Malevich_cavalry.jpg)

Other important artists who defined the new Soviet radical aesthetic, together with political support for the revolution included Lyubov Popova and Elli Lissitzky. Popova taught at the Higher Art and Technical School (Vkhutemas) and also collaborated as a set designer for theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold. Here is Popova's "Spatial Force Construction":



Image 2: Lyubov Popova. "Spatial Force Construction" (1921). Source: <http://myweb.rollins.edu/aboguslawski/Ruspaint/spfor.jpg>

Similarly, El Lissitzky was at the newly created People's Art School in the western city of Vitebsk and also at Vkhutemas. In addition, he created some of the most memorable propaganda posters and designs for Soviet pavilions at various world fairs, including the 1939 New York Fair. Lissitzky also played an important role during the Civil War, producing powerful propaganda in support of the Red Army such as the famous "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge" poster:



Image 3: Elli Lissitzky. "Beat the Whites wit the Red Wedge" (1919). Source: <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/el/pix/beat.jpg>

Architecture too, saw the rise of talented young architects whose creative energy could be harnessed in support of the revolution. Instead of building palaces for the aristocracy, or military

fortifications in far away imperial outposts, the focus shifted to designing of Oil workers' clubs, clubs for film actors and writers, palaces of labor and culture, libraries and bridges. The following sketch is of Arkady Mordovinov's proposed People's Commissariat of Construction and Heavy Industry (1933-34):



Illustration 1: Image 4: Arkady Mordovinov. "People's Commissariat of Construction and Heavy Industry" (1933-1934). Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dc/Nktp\\_mordv.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dc/Nktp_mordv.jpg)

Notice the intentional contrast between the old regime and its structures (a cathedral and aristocratic fortress isolated from the rest of the population via walls) being dwarfed by the modernism and huge scale of the people's structure (and no walls).

This emphasis on creativity and avant-garde thought, with its characteristic openness of ideas, collaboration across styles and national borders, defined the optimism about the future that pervaded the years following the end of the Civil War. With the stifling conservatism of czarism gone, Soviet Russia quickly became a prominent playground for avant-garde ideas across the arts. Alban Berg's modernist opera *Wozzeck*, received an enthusiastic reception in Soviet Russia, a

deep contrast to the hostility and censorship it aroused in the West and the United States(Perle, 1980). Lissitzky and Malevich's trips abroad, together with writer Isaac Babel's trips in Europe were similar in their impact to the active participation of Soviet psychologists at international conferences. Something had clearly changed in Russia and the rest of the world was learning about it.

### SOVIET PSYCHOLOGY IN THE NINETEEN TWENTIES (THE BATTLES IN PSYCHOLOGY BEFORE AND DURING VYGOTSKY'S ENTRY)

Within psychology, the decade started with vibrant and intense intellectual combat, even before Vygotsky's appearance. Prior to 1917, the word "Marxist" was absent in Russian psychology. The field was dominated by subjectivists such as Chelpanov and his "empirical psychology", as well as objectivists. The leading objectivist scholars were Pavlov and his psychology of higher nervous activity, together with Bekhterev's school of reflexology (Yasnitsky, 2009, 39-40). As Yasnitsky shows in his recent survey of this time period, the two dominant currents were locked in intense academic infighting, positioning themselves for the scarce funds and opportunities that were available in the decentralized and underfunded world of pre-revolutionary Russian science. Academics relied on a combination of personal contacts, wealthy donors and limited state sponsorship to do their work. Contact with Western psychologists occurred regularly at conferences, exchanges and through journals. Still, the scale, if not the intensity, of debates was modest.

The revolution settled the academic battle. By 1925, the objectivist school becomes dominant in its influence. Leading objectivists such as Kornilov took control of what was, up to then, the leading institution in the country: The Institute of Psychology. The first years of the twenties also mark the attempts at creating a “Marxist psychology”, the object of Vygotsky’s criticism (Ibid.). In addition, a large number of psychological sub-disciplines also emerged at this time (Yasnitsky, 2009, 40-41):

- zoopsikhologiya (animal, evolutionary and comparative psychology) (Wagner, Severtsov, Borovskii, Ladygina-Kohts, Vojtonis)
- pedologiya (paedology) (Zalkind, Molozhavyi, Blonskii, Vygotsky, Zaluzhnyi)
- defektologiya (defectology, i.e., the psychology of abnormal development and rehabilitation, special education, and corrective pedagogy) (Rau, Danyushevskii, Sokolyanskii, Vygotsky, Azbukin, Zankov, Solov’ev)
- psikhotehnika and research on kinematics (i.e., psychotechnics, or industrial psychology) (I. Spielrein, Gellerstein, Gastev, 41 Bernstein)
- psikhogigiena (i.e., psychohygiene, or mental hygiene) (Zalkind, Rosenstein, Rokhlin)
- psikhoterapiya (i.e., psychotherapy) (Bekhterev, Protopopov, Platonov)

This diversity was a direct reflection of the changes brought by the revolution. The infusion of state funding and official encouragement promoted theoretical and experimental creativity.

## PSYCHOANALYSIS IN THE SOVIET UNION OF THE NINETEEN TWENTIES

Of all the important western schools of psychology claiming to offer a general theory of psychological processes (such as the gestalt psychology that was popular in Germany and the U.S.), the most influential in Soviet Russia was *psychoanalysis*. In a recently published history of Russian psychoanalysis, V. Ovcharenko (2000) outlines several distinct stages in the development

of psychoanalysis in Russia and the Soviet Union. Freud's ideas arrived in the country in 1904. In the years leading up to World War I, psychoanalysis slowly took hold, without acquiring the influence of the three other dominant schools of psychology. Ideas spread, contacts were made with western psychoanalysts, professional circles were established, and psychoanalysis was introduced as therapy (Ovcharenko, 2000, 6). The years between 1914 and the end of the Civil War in 1922 marked the disintegration of Russian psychoanalysis: scholarship was interrupted and the various psychoanalytical groups broke up. At the same time, its clinical use continued, with a number of psychoanalysts offering psychotherapy to soldiers on the front-lines.

By contrast, the ten years after 1922 marked the "institutionalization" of psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union, a process characterized by the establishment of officially sanctioned psychoanalysis organizations, active state-sponsored scholarly work, active deployment of psychotherapy, and the training of teaching and research cadres. These efforts were also supported by the mass publishing of psychoanalytical literature, and active communication with foreign psychoanalytical centers.<sup>19</sup> Important psychoanalysts who emerged in this period included

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<sup>19</sup>Compared to the dynamism and state involvement in the 1920s, the present state of Russian academic life can only be described as a state of utter devastation. Accompanying the "brain drain" out of the country, is the increasingly decrepit physical infrastructure of the post-Soviet education-research institutions. With very few exceptions such as Moscow State University, research in all its forms has been drastically curtailed due to minimized state funding. The point is clear: no modern science of any kind is possible without adequate levels of state support; philanthropic donations and handouts can do nothing in the way of maintaining a world-class intellectual environment. The lesson for the present "reforms" in American education and scientific research are also clear: the replacement of adequate state and federal funding for education and research by the pathetic contributions of the Bill Gates Foundation can lead only to the rapid (ala post-Soviet) destruction of American intellectual and scientific. Neither malaria nor HIV can be controlled through the benevolence of a handful capitalists and their handouts. Serious research and intellectual labor can only thrive in the modern world within the context of appropriate institutional support. This much was illustrated by the Soviet 1920s, when within the

B. Fridman, who attempted to reconcile and synthesize Freud with the Marxist tradition, with a typical example of his efforts being the essay “The fundamental psychological ideas of Freud and the theory of historical materialism”, published in “Psychology and Marxism”, a volume edited by Kornilov, another prominent proponent of “Marxist psychology”.<sup>20</sup>

Similar to virtually every other aspect of Soviet intellectual life, psychoanalysis received a tremendous boost and development. The case of psychoanalysis is especially interesting, since it received support from the highest echelons of the Soviet government. Lev Trotsky was fascinated by Freud’s theories and actively supported the expansion of psychoanalysis in the country. Conversely, his expulsion from the Soviet Union coincided with the rapid decline of psychoanalysis in 1930 (Yasnitsky, 2009, 43), as the conservative ideology of Stalinism took a harsh anti-Freudian position in psychology.

#### VYGOTSKY'S ENTRY

Vygotsky entered this dynamic terrain explosively and completely unexpectedly. On January 6, 1924 he delivered a report on “The Methodology of Reflexological and Psychological Studies” in which he critiqued all schools of psychology for lacking a scientific theory of human consciousness. Whether it was reflexologists, the Wurzburg school, or Gestalt psychologists, or the followers of Pavlov and his theory of conditioned reflexes, all - Vygotsky argued - viewed span of a decade, an impoverished society somehow managed to create the foundations of a world-class educational and scientific system. The political lesson of this historical fact remains relevant today.

<sup>20</sup>Unfortunately, currently not translated in English. This entire tradition is available in English only in an extremely fragmentary form. A lot of work has to be done collecting and translating this body of work, which will enrich our understanding of twentieth century psychology.

consciousness as some form of metaphysical and “idealist superstition or limited its sphere of applicability to descriptive, nonscientific psychology” (Vygotsky, 1934b, xvii).<sup>21</sup> The report made a powerful impression and shortly thereafter the young researcher was offered a position at the Moscow Institute of Psychology (Ibid.). Such rapid change of fortunes would earlier have been simply impossible for a young, unknown, and Jewish scholar from the provinces. But it was 1924, and the times were different. The revolutionary energy of October was still very much in the air, reinforced by the optimism and relief of the successfully concluded Civil War.

Among supporters of the revolution, there was a sense that “now we can move on” and begin construction of a new society. Nowhere was this enthusiasm captured more clearly among pro-Soviet intellectuals than in Trotsky’s “Literature and Revolution” (1925). Written between 1922 and 1923, this collection of essays achieved widespread popularity and provoked a series of wide-ranging public discussions. It wrestled with a crucial set of questions focusing on the connection between the ongoing social transformations of Soviet society, and its effect on the social and individual consciousness of Soviet citizens. It asked fundamental questions: What is the impact of these changes? Given some historical distance, what would social relations and individual social consciousness look like in this new society? In a remarkable passage, Trotsky captured what Vygotsky must have felt when writing his journal entry in 1925:

Tragedy based on detached personal passions is too flat for our days. Why? Because we live in a period of social passions. The tragedy of our period lies in the conflict between the individual and the collectivity, or in the conflict between two hostile collectivities in the same individual. Our age is an age of great aims. This is what stamps it. But the grandeur of these aims lies in man’s effort to free himself from mysticism and from every other intellectual vagueness and in his effort to reconstruct

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<sup>21</sup>The quote is from Alex Kozulin’s introduction to the book.

society and himself in accord with his own plan. This, of course, is much bigger than the child's play of the ancients which was becoming to their childish age, or the medieval ravings of monks, or the arrogance of individualism which tears personality away from the collectivity, and then, draining it to the very bottom, pushes it off into the abyss of pessimism, or sets it on all fours before the remounted bull Apis (Trotsky, 1925, 198-199).

The following quotes are lengthy, but necessary given their vividness in transmitting what Vygotsky and his milieu were immersed in 1925. Beyond the immediate struggle, Trotsky imagined a future that was radically different and qualitatively "better", a place where ordinary people will have access to, and engage in all aspects of life if they so choose. This was a radical humanist perspective of modernity, of progress without dogma, of creative possibilities and devoid of cynicism, bourgeois intellectual pessimism, and of the conservative, pedestrian visions of Stalinism only a decade or so later:

All forms of life, such as the cultivation of land, the planning of human habitations, the building of theaters, the methods of socially educating children, the solution of scientific problems, the creation of new styles, will vitally engross all and everybody. People will divide into "parties" over the question of a new gigantic canal, or the distribution of oases in the Sahara (such a question will exist too), over the regulation of the weather and the climate, over a new theater, over chemical hypotheses, over two competing tendencies in music, and over a best system of sports. Such parties will not be poisoned by the greed of class or caste. All will be equally interested in the success of the whole. The struggle will have a purely ideological character. It will have no running after profits, it will have nothing mean, no betrayals, no bribery, none of the things that form the soul of "competition" in a society divided into classes. But this will in no way hinder the struggle from being absorbing, dramatic and passionate. And as all problems in a Socialist society – the problems of life which formerly were solved spontaneously and automatically, and the problems of art which were in the custody of special priestly castes – will become the property of all people, one can say with certainty that collective interests and passions and individual competition will have the widest scope and the most unlimited opportunity. Art, therefore, will not suffer the lack of any such explosions of collective, nervous energy, and of such collective psychic impulses which make for the creation of new artistic tendencies and for

changes in style. It will be the aesthetic schools around which “parties” will collect, that is, associations of temperaments, of tastes and of moods. In a struggle so disinterested and tense, which will take place in a culture whose foundations are steadily rising, the human personality, with its invaluable basic trait of continual discontent, will grow and become polished at all its points. In truth, we have no reason to fear that there will be a decline of individuality or an impoverishment of art in a Socialist society. (Ibid., 189)

The publication of Trotsky’s book coincided with the completion of Vygotsky’s first monograph. Written as his dissertation project, “The Psychology of Art” (Vygotsky, 1922) occupied a similar terrain of optimism and creativity. It also shared a concern for the importance of psychology and the psycho-physical domain of social relations. What Trotsky only hinted at in the passage below, became the starting point for Vygotsky’s work:

It is difficult to predict the extent of self-government which the man of the future may reach or the heights to which he may carry his technique. Social construction and psycho-physical self-education will become two aspects of one and the same process. All the arts – literature, drama, painting, music and architecture will lend this process beautiful form. More correctly, the shell in which the cultural construction and self-education of Communist man will be enclosed, will develop all the vital elements of contemporary art to the highest point. Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise (Ibid.).

What were Vygotsky’s “great aims”? For one, there are broad similarities in method between the two thinkers.<sup>22</sup> Trotsky is wrestling with questions of art, social and individual consciousness in periods of revolutionary politics. Vygotsky is interested in the very same. Trotsky arrives at his

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<sup>22</sup>I am introducing Trotsky to deliberately highlight the different nature of Marxist theorizing the Soviet Russia. Whereas such meditations on art and culture were being written in Western Europe by thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Gyorgy Lukacs, they were most definitely not on the radar of political leaders in power.

conclusions by way of a materialist reading of art and literary history from Ancient Greece onward, tracing how each stage of human history (Greek mythology, the impact of religion in feudal Europe on literature, capitalism's atomization of social life as reflected in the 19th century European novel, the move towards emphasizing the "social" in Soviet revolutionary poetry, etc.) is conditioned by the interplay of history and class. As a materialist, Vygotsky too is waging war on idealism in psychology, and its interpretation of human consciousness as reflected in art. What are, he asks, the weaknesses of the various schools of psychology and their interpretations of art and its effect on human consciousness? And more centrally, how is the psyche a "mediating (an enabling) mechanism that helps economic relations and social-political regimes create a particular ideology" (Vygotsky, 1922, 13)? Just as Trotsky imagined the socialist future as a place of elevated human consciousness about itself, about others and the world in general, Vygotsky saw in psychology the science best suited to understanding the inner depths of human consciousness, and its potential unfolding in this new society. How is the psyche socially formed and how is it affected by the changing social conditions of Soviet Russia? This line of questioning marked the starting points for the critique of hitherto-existing schools of psychology.

Inspired by such ideas of restructuring the world, and by the emergence of new social relations, and new types of people (the "New Man" as Trotsky put it) (Yasnitsky and Zavershneva, 2009), Vygotsky started a radical revision of contemporary psychology.<sup>23</sup> Central to this project was the "Manifesto for a new psychology for a New Man" (Yasnitsky and Zavershneva, 2009) and (Yasnitsky, 2009, 38), entitled "Historical Meaning of the Crisis in

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<sup>23</sup>And he really did engage with all of psychology, including psychoanalysis.

Psychology” (Vygotsky 1927/1982, 1927/1997). Zavershneva (2010) and (2009) and Yasnitsky (2009) argue that Vygotsky envisaged a new theory of psychology based on three components:

1. unity of theory and practice<sup>24</sup>
2. new methods of psychological research
3. a unified theory of psychology

In conceptualizing this, he resorted to a wide theoretical palette including:

- Marxist dialectical method and dialectical materialism<sup>25</sup>
- general psychology theory
- “middle-level applied disciplines like paedology or psychotechnics” (Yasnitsky, 2009, 38)
- social practice in medicine, education or industry

The above outline can be streamlined from the point of view of political theory, and argued that Vygotsky’s project focused on conceptualizing and developing a unified theory of psychology, modeled on Marx’s “Capital.”<sup>26</sup>

Marx’s monumental work is, on the most general level, a work of synthesis and innovation. It traversed the entire field of political economy, from its origin in the 18th century, to the very latest developments of the capitalist economy in its imperialist stage. This synthesis, the inclusion of all that was still relevant from preceding theories, together with Marx’s own unique

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<sup>24</sup>This is a constant trope in Vygotsky: theoretical research must be motivated by immediate and concrete application in everyday life. The general context is of course the rebuilding efforts that are preoccupying all parts of the Soviet government and the intellectuals sympathetic to it.

<sup>25</sup>In itself, a complicated formulation in need of further unpacking below.

<sup>26</sup>Psychology “needs its *Capital*” he wrote in “The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology” (1926).

contributions<sup>27</sup>, is what gives the three volumes such an overwhelming sense of theoretical (dialectical) unity and coherence.

“Capital” was also a product of European post-Enlightenment humanist thought, integrating the dialectics of Spinoza and Hegel, with the theories of the early French socialist revolutionaries and the Scottish, English and French political economists. The entire corpus of 18th and 19th century European literature was undoubtedly also very much present in Marx’s thoughts when he penned those striking chapters on “The Working Day”; passages that read like a Dickensian novel.

However, it is also clear that Vygotsky’s own “general theory” was a bit different in its formulation. “Capital” was a work of political economy, a description of the functioning of capitalist society observed primarily through the lens of the division of labor. Vygotsky’s outline<sup>28</sup> of a general psychology had an additional motivation beyond describing - in general terms - the nature of human consciousness. This work was motivated by the reality facing Soviet society at the end of the Civil War in 1921. It thus had a very immediate concern with praxis, with the political moment of the present.

The devastation in 1921 was so staggering, as Yasnitsky and Zavershneva (2009) show, that the Bolshevik state was unable to provide shelter even for orphans<sup>29</sup>, to say nothing of integrating millions of hungry and illiterate people into society. The Civil War concluded the cycle of

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<sup>27</sup>Such as Marx’s definitions of value and surplus value, of capital as a social relation, etc.

<sup>28</sup>His work as not finished due to his premature death in 1934.

<sup>29</sup>According to Thomas Hegarty there were upward of 7 000 000 orphans at the end of 1921. ([http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3763/is\\_199803/ai\\_n8801575/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3763/is_199803/ai_n8801575/), accessed on 2/2/2011).

destruction and death that began with the Russian Empire's entry into World War I in 1914.<sup>30</sup> By the time fighting ended in 1921 however, Soviet Russia's economy was in a devastated state. Coal mines<sup>31</sup> "produced less than one-twentieth and the iron-and-steel works less than one-twentieth of their pre-war output (Deutscher, 1987, 488). Consumer goods were scarce and their production was at a fraction of the pre-WW I levels. The transportation system was also in shambles, with bridges and tracks blown up, or otherwise damaged during the fighting (Ibid.). Most important in this grim picture was the human cost of the war. Though the numbers vary, all officially cited statistics list millions of dead civilians, with even dedicated anti-communists such as Rudy Rummel citing 9 million dead, three million of whom died of typhoid and various other epidemics directly related to the Civil War (Rummel, 1996).

Russian and Ukrainian cities were particularly vulnerable, with many urban areas becoming depopulated (Deutscher, 1987, 490), as millions of urban dwellers escaped to the countryside in a desperate attempt to feed themselves. The countryside was in a relatively less desperate state, since most Russian and Ukrainian farmers and farm workers employed hand tools for production. In other words, while the war definitely took its toll on the peasantry, they could at least grow food to feed themselves, while city residents did not have this all important option.

Vygotsky's work is centered in this time of extreme privation and urgent need. The war was finally over, and the time (the decade of the 1920s) was ripe to begin rapid development and social transformation, establish a universal health care system, rebuild schools, attack mass

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<sup>30</sup>The two revolutions of February and October of 1917 were relatively peaceful, with the number killed in the hundreds, rather than in millions.

<sup>31</sup>Of crucial importance for powering locomotives, factory machinery and production of electricity.

illiteracy, train millions of people in new professions, and create new infrastructure (Yasnitsky and Zavershneva, 2009). This is also the time when Vygotsky was working as a literature high school teacher in Gomel during the Civil War, before transitioning to a local teachers college (Vygotsky, 1934b, xiv). It is not at all surprising then, that the task of his psychology is very much connected to this ongoing Soviet rebuilding project.

### FIRST EFFORTS TOWARDS A NEW, GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY

Vygotsky entered the field of psychology as a researcher, starting with his appointment as a research fellow at the Moscow Institute of Psychology in 1924. His first step was to confront what Alex Kozulin terms the “theoretical crisis in psychology” (Vygotsky, 1934b, xvii), formulated in “The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology: A Methodological Investigation.”<sup>32</sup>

### THE CRISIS IN PSYCHOLOGY

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<sup>32</sup>Interestingly, this work has still not been published in its finalized form. According to contemporary Russian psychology Ekaterina Zavershneva, hither-to published versions of the book suffer from various shortcomings such as incompleteness, dubious editorship and general errors and omissions. She is working on an English translation of her notes outlining some of the most glaring errors in the published versions of the text. The more we dig into Vygotsky’s family archives, the more this state of incompleteness and omission becomes apparent. For example, the most recent Russian edition of his first book, “The Psychology of Art” (1925) contains numerous references and quotes to works by Nikolai Bukharin and Lev Trotsky. Previous Soviet and Western editions omitted all references to both authors, due to their pariah status within Soviet officialdom. This situation is similar to Babel’s “Red Cavalry” collection. We now know that it contained important references to Trotsky as well as critical passages related to Civil War itself. These were edited for over sixty years to accommodate Stalinist politics and revisions of history.

Vygotsky divided psychology into two main groupings: naturalist and idealist, a division based on differences in method. Of the two, he was more partial to the naturalist approach. Vygotsky was interested in psychology as a science, using the scientific method to arrive at insights based on experimentally verifiable general laws of psychology. The focus was on understanding consciousness and the method used to study it. Naturalist psychology was, however, not a scientific psychology. What was missing from both Pavlov's reflexology studies, and behaviorism, was a scientific engagement with social phenomena. Pavlov's (and his school's) insights were of no great practical use in explaining the functioning of social relations, and their relations with individual people. Reflexologists argued that consciousness is not something that can be studied scientifically. It is a construct that is subjective in nature and thus non-scientific as a concept.<sup>33</sup> Instead, human reflexes (reactions) to various stimuli is what determines our actions (and this is what is popularly referred to as consciousness). This interaction of stimulus - response (S → R) is the object of a scientific psychology.

Vygotsky's critique of reflexology then, is interesting first of all, as an illustration of Marxist dialectical method in the discipline of psychology. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he critiques Pavlov from within reflexology:<sup>34</sup>

... the act of thought, the act of consciousness is in our opinion not a reflex, that is, it cannot also be a stimulus, but it is the transmission mechanism between systems of reflexes.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>However, Pavlov accepted the existence of consciousness as something that is an important factor in human development. It simply could not be studied by psychology in a scientific way.

<sup>34</sup>Similar to the way Marx critiques bourgeois political economy starting from its own (bourgeois classical political economy) premises; after all, "Das Kapital" is subtitled: A critique of political economy.

<sup>35</sup>Source: <http://home.mira.net/~andy/works/vygotskys-critique.htm>

In other words, consciousness is a mediating layer. Reflexes, as reflexologists argue, indeed do play an important role in human behavior, but they are first of all, but one layer of human behavior, mediated by another component that exists on a higher (social) plane of importance. Consciousness is, using perhaps the language of cybernetics, a first-order phenomenon in human life, mediating second and third-order phenomena such as conditioned reflexes or acquired behavior. All orders are dialectically related via internal relations<sup>36</sup> and as such must be studied both individually (as concepts and phenomena), and in the totality of their interactions.<sup>37</sup> This is precisely what is inadequate about reflexology: it does not engage with this higher mediating layer of human behavior. It stops at the first, most immediate level (*that* which is immediately experimentally verifiable through observation in individuals).

The other dominant school of psychology, behaviorism, shared the same drawback, albeit expressed in a different form. Andy Blunden in an online essay on Vygotsky, identifies the following four characteristics that defined the behaviorist psychology:

1. Its aim is the prediction and control of people's behavior,
2. It excludes the use of evidence offered by the experimental subject.
3. It excludes the notion of consciousness.
4. As a part of natural science, it deals with human beings without culture, as brutes.

Vygotsky takes issue with #3: no theory of psychology can neglect engagement with consciousness. In fact, no theory or practice of politics (i.e. of Marxism) can neglect engaging

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<sup>36</sup>Bertell Ollman (2003) has written most clearly about the importance and functioning of internal relations in the Marxist tradition.

<sup>37</sup>Lukacs argues something very similar in his critique of bourgeois science and in defense of the Marxist method in the study of social relations.

with human consciousness as a fundamental part of our experience. By rejecting consciousness as a scientific category worthy of research, behaviorists replicate the reductionist approach of reflexologists, but from a different angle. Removing the impact of social relations, of culture on the human psyche results in a reduction that ultimately remains idealistic: the totality of human behavior can be explained and predicted simply through experimental observation and interpretation, in isolation from the actual functioning of social relations.

If psychology was ultimately the study of consciousness, and if consciousness was overwhelmingly conditioned by social relations, then a general scientific psychology must be able to account both for the “naturalistic” aspects of the human psyche and brain, and do so without folding (or reducing) social relations into naturalist explanations. Psychologist Anna Stetsenko sees such reductionism in contemporary psychology “that focus on information processing in an isolated ‘mental realm’ or the brain, and are directly affiliated with positivist, non-dialectical and ultimately conservative approaches in education (Stetsenko and Vianna, 2006, 82)”. Eighty years later, a legion of psychologists continue the search for “finding” consciousness in the brain, as an actual bio-chemical representation, as a model, perhaps of neural networks working in certain ways that enable us to “have” consciousness. No doubt, CT scans of neuronal activity can be connected to certain human actions and thoughts. But such lines of research continue to omit social dimensions, or more precisely: specific social relations, how they emerge, and they are maintained in everyday life.

Vygotsky and Stetsenko do not deny the usefulness of such scientific experimentation in understanding aspects of human behavior. In fact, as a materialist, Vygotsky himself designed

and implemented experiments studying human behavior in controlled settings. The point is, such experimentation in the “naturalist” aspect of the study of human psychology forms only one aspect of the research process. They must be complemented by additional, higher-order frameworks (levels of abstraction) that capture what the CT scans cannot: the dialectical aspect of human life in its totality. Capturing this totality requires in Stetsenko’s words, “...contextualized, dynamical, relational and non-essentialist views of social and psychological processes, including the view of history as a continuous flux of social practices, to which each new generation contributes, while inevitably transforming it (Ibid.).

Vygotsky was not the only psychologist interested in developing such a school of psychology. He lists three other attempts: the *Gestalt* school, the personalism of William Stern, and the newly emerging Marxist school of psychology. He dismisses all three as having failed at this task. Most interesting and relevant for our purposes is his critique (the most severe of the three) of the so-called “Marxist psychologists.” Vygotsky argued it is pointless and simply wrong to copy phrases from Marx, Engels and Plekhanov, and paste them directly in psychology research. Theoretical, epistemological insights from Marx’s *Capital* or Lenin’s *State and Revolution* do not provide correspondingly helpful insights in the study of the psyche when applied directly:

Immediate application of the theory of dialectical materialism to the problems of science, and particularly to biology and psychology, is impossible, as it is impossible to apply it instantly to history and sociology. (Vygotsky, 1926, 419).

The crisis of psychology is a crisis of method and of theory. It is a crisis in the approaches used to study consciousness scientifically, and here is where materialist dialectics from the Marxist

tradition can play a crucial role.<sup>38</sup> Psychology needs its own “Capital”, that traces the laws of motion of the various fields of psychology. And to accomplish this task it also requires a generalized (i.e. scientific) framework.<sup>39</sup> Marx’s method provides a good model, because it studies social relations exclusively, and it does so without abandoning “naturalist” scientific methods.<sup>40</sup> Thus, harnessing Marx’s method offers a way to do scientific psychology, without mutating social relations<sup>41</sup> into the formalized systems of the natural sciences.

The fundamental problem encountering so-called “Marxist psychology” is its lack of method. Instead of dialectical materialist method, this new direction in psychology is characterized by eclectic “borrowing” of phrases from Marx and Engels, and their direct substitution in psychology. In the absence of a materialist dialectical method, “Marxist” psychologists such as Kornilov resort to using grand ideas from Hegelian dialectics to explain psychological phenomena. Thus, in “attempting to find a direct measure for psychological elements” (Vygotsky, 1926, Chapter 13) (reflexive reactions, concept formation in children, etc.), such psychologists resort to *universal* philosophical principles from Hegelian dialectics: “the law of transition of quantity into quality”, for example.

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<sup>38</sup>Conversely, it could be inferred that natural science and its method is also limited in its usefulness to a general psychology. In this case, social relations are not effectively studied by the method used in modern physics and biology. Albert Einstein himself said as much in his essay “Why I am a Socialist” arguing for the realization that the scientific method has limitations when studying social relations.

<sup>39</sup>To avoid the trap of reaching new idealist conclusions about consciousness.

<sup>40</sup>As opposed to the overly deterministic approach of Pavlov and the idealism of phenomenology

<sup>41</sup>Both on the levels of individuals, the social aggregate and the relations between the two.

Such theory introduces *polemics* into the science of psychology. While crucially important in overtly political struggles when demonstrating a “contradiction of a false idea”<sup>42</sup>, it is all but useless when deployed to positively define a scientific concept or a task in psychology.<sup>43</sup> Thus the polemical style so finely refined by the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in their struggles against the czarist regime, falls apart when deployed against scientifically-formulated (dialectical) questions of consciousness. This is an important intervention, for Vygotsky is cautioning practitioners of materialist dialectics: before you study something, make sure you don’t mechanically transpose a dialectical framework that has organically developed in one area of research, into a completely different scientific discipline. What works for Trotsky in his analysis of revolutions, (his theoretical framework and related concepts), should not be automatically deployed to the study of childhood psychology. While Marx and Engels and Plekhanov stated that consciousness arises not within the mind of an individual, but emerges in the context of social relations, this was the extent of their engagement with the study of consciousness. For Vygotsky, such correct, yet general statements are only a starting point of a materialist theory of psychology. What next?

For this initial statement (individual human consciousness is the product of social relations) to become a theory of psychology, it must be generalized. Marx writes about capitalism’s laws of motion in “Capital.” There are various formulas that generalize the fundamental features of capitalist society: C-M-C and M-C-M’ denote more than just the circuits of economic activity of the proletariat and the capitalists. The formulas denote such circulation as generalizations.

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<sup>42</sup>Such as the bourgeois notion of freedom, for example.

<sup>43</sup>Such as concept formation as an actual psychological process that plays an important role in adolescent development.

Generalization in materialist dialectics can be posited as laws, with predictive capacity similar (but not identical) to laws in natural science. It is important to differentiate generalized concepts (laws) in Marxist analysis from generalizations in natural science. Vygotsky is arguing that both types of generalizations have roles to play in a general theory of psychology. It is also important to differentiate materialist dialectical generalizations from metaphysical idealism in psychology: from Pavlov's refusal to study consciousness<sup>44</sup> to Husserl's "descriptive psychology". To the extent that they are idealist, both Pavlov and Husserl treat the mind by perpetuating the non-materialist Cartesian dualities of mind-body, the physical and the spiritual. Such dualities must be overcome and general psychology must arrive at an "integral conception" (Packer, 2006, 10) of the human psyche.

Such line of inquiry introduces a problematic mixture in the level of analysis: a general philosophical concept of highly abstract nature (i.e. applicable to areas outside of psychology) becomes harnessed in attempts at answering very specific scientific questions in psychology. It is as if concepts from Hegelian dialectics are used to diagnose coronary disease in a patient; the method doesn't fit well with the task that it is assigned to. Such mixture of method is very non-dialectical and cannot be assigned to the Marxist tradition of intellectual labor. What is missing by way of method in psychology is an intermediary layer mediating between general, universal principles and the narrowest of scientific empirical experiments. All levels of analysis will be present in such a general psychology, but only when filtered through this intermediary layer.

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<sup>44</sup>Since it cannot be captured by his method and thus, cannot be studied scientifically

In a striking passage reminiscent of Marx's most evocative writing in *Capital*, Vygotsky summarizes his critique:

Here the absence of a measure, scale, an intermediate link between the two, makes itself clearly felt. That is why the dialectical method will fall with fatal inevitability into the same category as the experiment, the comparative method, and the method of tests and surveys. A feeling for hierarchy, the difference between a technical research method and a method by which to know "the nature of history and thinking," is missing. The direct frontal collision of particular factual truths with universal principles; the attempt to decide the matter-of-fact debate about instinct between Vagner and Pavlov by references to quantity-quality; the step from dialectics to the survey; the criticism of irradiation from the epidemiological viewpoint; the use of miles where a tape-measure is needed; the verdicts of Bekhterev and Pavlov from the height of Hegel; these attempts to swat a fly with a sledge-hammer, have led to the false idea of a third way (Vygotsky, 1926, ch. 13).

A scientific discipline is created first and foremost by the application of a method. What Marxism can contribute towards the creation of a general psychology is precisely this: a dialectical method. This statement marks more than a passing resemblance to Gyorgy Lukacs' argument of this period in *History and "Class Consciousness."* Even if all else is deemed incorrect or obsolete by the march of history and human development, Lukacs argued that Marx's method is here to stay. Vygotsky is arguing the same. The innovations in *method* apparent in "Capital" are an important pillar of the Marxist tradition, together with its revolutionary political program. This method can power the creation of such a psychology, but not if mechanically copied and pasted from political economy into psychology:

Any application of Marxism to psychology via other paths or in other points outside this area, will inevitably lead to scholastic, verbal constructions, to the dissolution of dialectics into surveys and tests, to judgment about things according to their external, accidental, secondary features, to the complete loss of any objective criterion and the attempt to deny all historical tendencies of the development of psychology, to a

terminological revolution, in sum to a gross distortion of both Marxism and psychology. This is Chelpanov's way.<sup>45</sup> (Ibid.)

Everything that Vygotsky is warning against here actually transpired in Marxist thought as the Soviet Union transitioned from the open and creative 1920s, to the Stalinist 1930s and beyond! His warning to the dangers of dishonest intellectual work in the name of careerist self-interest was shared by other prominent Soviet Marxists. Lyubov Akselrod, perhaps the leading Marxist philosopher in the Soviet Union (by Lenin's own words)<sup>46</sup>, wrote almost identical critiques of the pseudo-Marxist verbiage that was increasingly appearing in the country, replacing serious and intellectually responsible scholarship.

#### VYGOTSKY'S CRITIQUE IN A WIDER CONTEXT: THE BATTLES AMONG MARXIST THEORISTS OF DIALECTICS (AKSELROD VS. DEBORIN)

Akselrod was appointed to the newly established Institute of Red Professors to teach Marxist philosophy. The Institute was setup by the Bolshevik government as an ideological counterweight to the czarist Academy of Sciences, which, though mostly populated by bourgeois conservatives from the pre-revolutionary days, nonetheless continued functioning after the revolution. Lenin encouraged her candidacy, since she was almost universally respected by old-guard<sup>47</sup> Bolsheviks and Mensheviks alike as a highly accomplished philosopher, and a dedicated socialist revolutionary. Lyubov Akselrod's story is a very compelling one, showing the high points of the

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<sup>45</sup>Chelpanov was one of the two most prominent Russian psychologists who attempted to create such a "Marxist psychology."

<sup>46</sup><http://sovlit.org/lia/Pages/Introduction.html>, accessed on 2/2/2013

<sup>47</sup>In other words, those who were active socialists before the 1917 revolutions.

revolutionary nature of October. A student of Plekhanov and an active participant in revolutionary politics, she received her PhD in philosophy at Bern University<sup>48</sup>. A thinker with profound knowledge of European philosophy, she specialized in the works of both German classical philosophers, and those of Spinoza, Marx and Engels. Though a committed Menshevik and thus a critic of Bolshevism, Akselrod was above all a revolutionary socialist and a deep thinker of dialectics (both Marxist and Hegelian). By the time she assumed a university teaching post after the revolution, she had already spent over forty years as a socialist revolutionary, with activities spanning virtually all facets of revolutionary life.

Having joined the *Narodnik* populists in 1884, she emigrated to France (in 1884) and then Switzerland (1887), where she remained until her return to Russia in 1906.<sup>49</sup> Starting in 1900, she became a close collaborator of pioneering Russian Marxist Georgy Plekhanov, and after the 1903 II Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party, Akselrod joined the Menshevik faction. During this time, Akselrod also engaged in a “sharp criticism” of Lenin’s philosophical work in defense of materialist dialectical philosophy, “Materialism and Empirio-Criticism.” Still, the polemical battle did not prevent her from assuming a leading teaching position after 1917, given her outstanding reputation.

Thus, even after repeated critiques of Lenin and other Bolsheviks, she was tasked with leading the education of a new generation of college students by introducing them to the fundamental works of the Marxist tradition (as well as those of philosophy in general). Yet,

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<sup>48</sup><http://sovlit.org/lia/Pages/Introduction.html>, accessed on 2/2/2013. This website edited by Fred Choate remains the best (and only) source in English on Lybov Akselrod and Avram Deborin.

<sup>49</sup><http://sovlit.org/lia/Pages/Introduction.html>.

despite her wide erudition, revolutionary background and explicit support from Lenin, Akselrod remains a very understudied figure of the early years of Soviet Marxist thought. Though she died in 1948 (thus surviving the great purges), the political thought of this pioneering philosopher-revolutionary marks a key period in the development of Marxist thought in the 20th century. Her intense polemics (spanning the better part of a decade) against another well-known Soviet philosopher, Avram Deborin, traverse over the same arguments in defense of Marxism that Vygotsky undertook in the same time period. Akselrod's polemics in defense of Marxism are powerful examples of the level of theoretical sophistication and political clarity that was common place among some of the leading Soviet Marxists before Stalinism.<sup>50</sup>

Starting in the mid-1920s, Lyubov Akselrod and her students and colleagues were increasingly subjected to a concentrated attack by Deborin and his followers. Deborin was the "star" Marxist academic of the period. He also taught at the Institute of Red Professors and aspired to a position of leadership as the "main dialectician" of Soviet Marxism. Within the context of Vygotsky's work of the same period, it is crucial to note that the attack against Akselrod preceded the attack against Vygotsky, which commenced a few years later. In both cases the attacks were ideological, accusing both thinkers of "infidelity" to the Marxist tradition. This approach of course, became generalized in Soviet intellectual history, when later on any "deviation" from the "dialectical materialism" of official textbooks was suppressed in various ways as not Marxist, bourgeois, etc. It is crucial therefore, to canvas Akselrod's battles against

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<sup>50</sup>Relatedly, her polemics also parallel the polemics between Gyorgy Lukacs and Deborin/Rudas that emerged in the aftermath of the publication of *History and Class Consciousness*. The 1920s seems to have been a time of massive debates over the nature of materialist dialectics as method and politics.

this conservative anti-Marxist movement, and connect it to Vygotsky's own struggles on this front. Both were supporters (in various ways) of the Revolution<sup>51</sup> and both were seriously engaged with the possibility of building a new society, a task in which *ideas and practice* took center stage.

The attack against Akselrod was mounted in the leading Marxist theoretical journal "Under the Banner of Marxism" (*Poz Znamenem Marksizma*) and at scholarly conferences. Akselrod was accused at various times of being an idealist philosopher, a "mechanicist Marxist"<sup>52</sup>, and a "revisionist"<sup>53</sup>. Akselrod responded very forcefully, essentially labeling Deborin to be an anti-Marxist idealist philosopher at worst, and an under-educated hack of Marxist thought at best.

Deborin accused Akselrod of "abandoning Marx's theory of class" (Akselrod-Orthodoks, 1928, 62).<sup>54</sup> Understandably, this was a rather serious attack in the mid-twenties in Soviet Russia,

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<sup>51</sup>Details on Akselrod's political views in the 1920s are scarce. In fact, any details about this important and powerful thinker are of today very scarce. Little beyond Frederick Choate's website exists in English that contains a bibliography of her works. The vast majority of her writings are not available in English, and as far as I know, there are no English language scholarly biographies of her life (nor in Russian for that matter). We do know she was critical of Lenin on a number of occasions and as a student of Plekhanov, she was probably not a supporter of the October insurrection. However, as her writings in the 1920s indicate, she took her pedagogical tasks very seriously, in addition to participating very actively in the literary and theoretical debates across leading Soviet journals such as *Krasnaya Nov'* and "Under the Banner of Marxism". It is safe to say that regardless of her explicit support for the Soviet state, Akselrod was and remained a committed and consistent Marxist, unlike many of the prominent Mensheviks who by this time were drifting closer and closer to bourgeois politics and intellectual discourse.

<sup>52</sup>Implying that she was thinking in terms of cause and effect, rather than dialectics: focusing on change, non-linearity, the acceptance of contradictions and the avoidance of "permanent" trans-historical truths that are beyond reproach.

<sup>53</sup>As in being a supporter of Bernstein or Kautsky after WW I.

<sup>54</sup>With the exception of the documents listed on F. Choate's web site, there are no English translations available of Akselrod's books.

when the echoes of the counterrevolution and Civil War were still very audible in collective memory. Akselrod responded similarly to Vygotsky in parsing through her opponent's logic and identifying places where fundamental Marxist ideas and concepts were taken out of context, and/or misunderstood. Her first counter-critique was with Deborin's understanding of *class*.

Deborin defines class, she wrote, as a living and constantly changing (evolving) collective creature (Akselrod-Orthodoks, 1928, 62). Akselrod is not impressed. Such a definition goes no further than Aristotle's notion of people being social creatures. Not very innovative or profound a statement in the second decade of the twentieth century. One cannot claim to be a "Marxist" by treating social classes as simply collectivities of humans, constantly subjected to a dynamic of struggle and evolution. In fact, Marx's great contribution, she counters, was to actually concretize the concept of class to a specific historical era and mode of production. Deborin's definition is general, and thus not Marxist in the technical sense of the word. What are the features of everyday life in 1921 England that make someone a working class person? What are the ideological configurations of a trade union or a bourgeois political party that denote their class membership? The answers are dynamic and they change from place and time (in a relative sense), but these concrete formulations are core of the Marxist analysis of class.

Deborin argued that a *class* is a "live collective (collectivity)." Again, Akselrod locates an error in this formulation from a Marxist point of view:

This is not a controversial claim, even for bourgeois sociology. But I ask: how is this collectivity different from the collectivity of ants, for example? There would be no difference according to this general definition. This is so, because Deborin has not the slightest clue of what a concrete concept means from a Marxist point of view (Akselrod-Orthodoks, 1928, 65).

Yet again, Deborin's error is caused by his inadequate and erroneous understanding of fundamental concepts and method. What is understood by the Marxist definition of class as concrete concept? The unity of a class is established by its social-productive functions, and these functions also establish its collective identity. Deborin's definition is a very general definition of class, true for *any* social class under any historical era. Marxists have to make it more concrete: different classes under capitalism for example, establish such collectivities (classes) depending on the social-economic frameworks that they are subject to, or immersed in. Akselrod emphasizes this point: classes are not mechanically concentrated collections of people, crowds, but represent a "real, objective unity" (Akselrod-Orthodoks, 1928, 66).

This reality and the concrete meaning of class is found in the objectively-existing relations between individuals and is the result of ongoing class struggle (in other words, the result of politics).<sup>55</sup> In turn, objective relations are defined by productive relations. When Deborin ascribes to Marx the discovery of class as a live collective creature, he is analyzing class through "purely biological features, devoid of any class content" (Akselrod-Orthodoks, 1928, 67). This is similar to Vygotsky's critique of those Marxists who use Marxist verbiage, but without the content of Marxist dialectical analysis, grounded in materialism and concrete historicity.

To Akselrod's critique, Vygotsky adds an important addition: Marxists must know when their conceptual apparatus ceases to make sense, or when it is in need of calibration and development.<sup>56</sup> Akselrod's polemics are based on the terrain of "orthodox" Marxism, the battle

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<sup>55</sup>Deborin's definition does not get into these specifics.

<sup>56</sup>Such a calibration is exactly what I want to argue in a subsequent chapter, motivated Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, a work confronting the failure of 1968, when in the midst of

over political economy and class struggle. Vygotsky's critique is about the need to harness Marxist dialectical methods in developing a new science of social relations. The embryonic statements on the human psyche and the mind made by orthodox Marxists (Marx, Engels and Plekhanov in this case) must now be replaced by a fully scientific and dialectically formulated concrete science of psychology. Vygotsky is seeking the new, by building on the past. Akselrod is fighting for the correct understanding of the past, while living in the present.

Deborin keeps making errors. He claims his ideas and the ideas of Marx come from "historical evolution" Akselrod-Orthodoks (1928, 67). This is incorrect yet again. Herbert Spencer and all the rest of bourgeois sociologists also study classes through the lens of evolutionary history. "The fact that Marx's theory rests on historical evolution", Akselrod counters, "is simply a truism" (Ibid.). Marx is different from bourgeois sociologists and Deborin *precisely* due to the additional steps in his analysis: historically limited analysis, and the absence of totalizing, "great ideas" narratives about "classes that are alive and evolving (Ibid.)."

Lastly, Akselrod attacks the theoretical errors made by the Deborin "school" in their conceptualization of the object of dialectical thought itself. She reminds her opponents that according to Marx, dialectical thought must not ascribe to reality what reality is. It must not ascribe its formal laws to objective reality. On the contrary, its goal is to uncover such formal laws by studying objective reality Akselrod-Orthodoks (1928, 78). Vygotsky argues similarly on

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the French general strike, the Communist Party betrayed the working class and allied intellectuals by putting an end to the strike precisely at the moment when a revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist class in France became a political possibility. The most innovative currents of French philosophy after 1968 can be read as a response to this betrayal. This includes Foucault's move away from Marxism, to Allain Badiou's Maoism and Deleuze-Guattari's post-structuralism. Post-structuralism itself being a reaction to Althusser's structuralist Marxism.

how “Marxist” psychologists simply assign concepts to psychology, rather than using the method to discover the laws of objective reality of the human psyche; omitting the necessary step of studying social relations and their conditioning of individual psychological relations.

Dialectical thought must not mechanically base itself on the truisms of dialectics past: invoking the negation of negation, of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, without arriving at concrete content of whatever that is being studied leads to dialectics in name only (Akselrod-Orthodoks, 1928, 79). Otherwise, mechanically repeating such phrases leads to a new metaphysics. This is precisely what Vygotsky accused other Marxist psychologists of doing to the dialectics of Marxism! Lukacs did the same in turn to Rudas, while Trotsky did the same to Bukharin, Stalin and Zinoviev. Akselrod cautions such attempts at claiming “one correct Marxist” approach in thought in a typically powerful way:

Leibniz said that there are no two absolutely identical tree leaves, since if they were indeed absolutely identical, then there was only one leaf indeed. Parodying this deeply-thought sentence, I’ll say that if all Marxists thought about everything in absolutely identical ways, then in the entire world there would have been only one Marxist (Akselrod-Orthodoks, 1928, 82).

Vygotsky essentially agreed:

I don’t want to know what the psyche is after tailoring a few citations, I want to learn Marx’s entire method, to learn how to build a science, how to approach the study of the psyche...  
What is needed are not random statements, but a method (Dmitriev, 2007).

#### SOVIET “ACADEMI” MARXISM IN THE TWENTIES: (CONTINUATION AND INVENTION)

Contemporary Russian scholar Aleksandr Dmitriev (2007) sees Vygotsky as a typical representative of what he calls the *academic Marxism of the 1920s-1930s*. It is in this context of interdisciplinary work, open and equal engagement with the various Marxist and bourgeois intellectual currents from Western Europe and beyond, that Vygotsky's critique of hither-to existing psychology and his desire for a new general psychology should be situated.

Yet, I'd like to argue that there is more to Vygotsky's project and impact than the trajectory of academic Marxism in the Soviet Union. Vygotsky was preoccupied with tasks larger than intellectual debate and theoretical conversation. His work was primarily motivated by the very concrete need to build a new system of mass public education, within the context of the broader debates on industrialization and economic and social development that were the focus of debates and planning on all levels of Soviet society. Thus, there is clearly a difference in intent and orientation between for example, Vygotsky's synthesis of theoretical work, practical engagement (training teachers, creating graduate programs in psychology, designing and implementing various clinical studies), and general intellectual labor (translating works by Freud, and other leading psychologists), and the work of historian David Ryazanov, which can be defined as more narrowly academic.<sup>57</sup> Vygotsky operated through these boundaries of academic and "practical" scholarship. His was a praxis of the political, joining forces with the theoretical. The theoretical was of course also political. Such is the nature of dialectical thought. The Gyorgy Lukacs of the

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<sup>57</sup>Though perhaps just as important. Ryazanov founded and headed the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, where incredible amount of work was done to preserve, contextualize and translate the collected works of Marx and Engels. The "1844 Manuscripts", for example were first made available through Ryazanov's efforts at the Institute. He was later purged by Stalin and died (most likely shot) in 1938 far away from his Institute.

1919-1925 period did something similar when he engaged actively in revolutionary politics as a left communist in the Hungarian revolution of 1919.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, he also engaged in the most serious re-reading of Marx's dialectical method, and of Lenin's revolutionary theory from the vantage point of such *praxis*. Lukacs was shortly thereafter, with the ascension of Stalinists in the Communist International, forced to abandon his explicitly political work and concentrate pure on the academic side. Vygotsky too was on the receiving side of Stalinist repression in academia, as the following passage attests:

Vygotsky, running around the clinic and yelling: "I don't want to live, they do not consider me a Marxist!"<sup>59</sup> - following the denouncements by the recent follower of Bekhterev, B.G. Ananiev - is an expressive and terrifying illustration of this short period<sup>60</sup> (Dmitriev, 2007).

Yet, in spite of such critiques by various "colleagues" at conferences and through academic publications, remained until his death in 1934 a committed practitioner of this *praxis*, of dialectical method applied to psychology plus active engagement in pedagogical work on a mass scale (teaching large classes of students in various training programs and clinical positions). (Vygotsky, 1934b) and (Vygotsky, 1931).<sup>61</sup>

There is something very interesting in this particular mode of intellectual, living in a revolutionary moment, amidst great privation and suffering, believing in the possibilities opened

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<sup>58</sup>And, as the minister of education of the Hungarian Workers Republic.

<sup>59</sup>Kotik-Friedgut and Friedgut (2008) retell the same story, where Vygotsky is to have exclaimed: "I want to die. They don't consider me a sincere Marxist."

<sup>60</sup>Meaning, the decade spanning the 1920s and the flourishing of academic Marxism in the Soviet Union

<sup>61</sup>Both books provide good examples of the empirical, experimental side of Vygotsky's work.

by the revolution, yet conscious of the incredible odds, constantly seeking the very latest in research from across ideological divides, all in the interest in a certain general search for improvement as part of a new post-capitalist world, a humanism of a socialist kind. At the end of his life, his project remained unfinished and he knew it, but the realization that he lived in revolutionary times offering unique openings for human advancement was not lost in his perhaps last journal entry:

NB! Pro domo suo<sup>62</sup>

This is the final thing I have done in psychology—and I will die at the summit like Moses, having glimpsed the prom[ised] land but without setting foot on it. Farewell, dear creations.

The rest is silence.<sup>63</sup> (Zavershneva, 2010, 58)

Vygotsky's thought forms a new thread in the development of Marxist thought in yet another way. The 1920s saw the extension of Marxism in new areas of intellectual work. Prior to Vygotsky and related thinkers such as Wilhelm Reich, Georges Pollitzer, Marxist theory and method were concentrated primarily in areas such as political economy and revolutionary politics. Important figures included Marx, Engels, Plekhanov, Kautsky, Bernstein, the school of Austrian Marxist economists, Tagan-Baranovsky in Russia, Bukharin, Trotsky and Akselrod, as well as Lukacs and Korsch. The Marxist tradition was highly active in the mass political parties of European workers, as well as the new wave of professional revolutionary parties such as the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. In the halls of academia, Marxist political economy and its critique

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<sup>62</sup>From E. Zavershneva editorial explanations (2010, 59): "Pro domo sua" is not the precise title, but the common title, of Cicero's speech "In defense of my own home," that is, of his professional activity as an orator and lawyer; the precise title is "De domo sua (ad pontifices oratio)."

<sup>63</sup>Hamlet's last words.

of capitalism was also an influential (though isolated) and persistent presence throughout the early years of the twentieth century. The most interesting thinkers succeeded in combining revolutionary politics with academic study. Thus, Marx continued his engagement with revolutionary work, while undertaking his multi-decade efforts on “Capital.” A similar dynamic can be observed with Lenin and Trotsky. Lenin “took advantage” of his various periods of exile to write works of philosophy, political economy and theories of the state.<sup>64</sup> Trotsky did the same, branching out into literary theory, military theory and technical questions of railroad development and transportation (Trotsky, 1925).<sup>65</sup>

In this context, Vygotsky’s work breaks new ground. First, it opens a new field in academic Marxism (I am using the term as defined by Dmitriev (2007)). The deployment of Marx’s dialectical method in the development of a general psychology denotes a new area of scholarly research. In a subsequent chapter, the political and theoretical importance of this will be developed. Lukacs was engaged in a similar battle at this time, when defending Marx’s method in social science against both, bourgeois and pseudo-Marxist (Stalinist) social science. Lukacs was especially critical of those who claimed to further Marxist thought, such as the Stalinist philosophers Eugen Vargas and Deborin.

Similarly, Vygotsky reserved special scorn for those in the Soviet academy who covered their theoretical idealism or intellectual laziness with Marxist theoretical verbiage. This is yet again similar to the critiques written by Akselrod that were discussed in the previous section of this

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<sup>64</sup>With “The State and Revolution” perhaps as the most famous example; the manuscript brakes off as the 1917 Revolution breaks out and the author goes on to join the political battle.

<sup>65</sup>Isaac Deutscher’s three volume biography details this aspect of Trotsky’s life.

chapter. The 1920s, then, were a time of intense political battles in the terrain of Marxist thought. The battles ended in the 1930s, with the triumph of what can be called pseudo-Marxism: the intellectual current associated with the political victory of the Stalinist faction in the Soviet Union and the Communist International.<sup>66</sup> By 1940, the creative energy of the 1920s survived only in a few scattered places: perhaps among some of the thinkers of the Frankfurt School (Marcuse, Reich), lonely and isolated figures such as Korsch, or in the privately kept works of Lukacs and Mikhail Lifschits in the Soviet Union.

While Dmitriev is correct in his analysis of academic Marxism, I would like to argue that Vygotsky was more than an academic Marxist. The praxis defining his work is a continuation of the the tradition of Marx through Lenin, but in a new direction. The entry of the Marxist method in the field of psychology broke new ground in the evolution of this tradition. It brought Marxist thought into what is perhaps the “holy grail” of social science: the scientific<sup>67</sup> study of human consciousness. Vygotsky was not alone in this, but there were very few accompanying him in the 1920s. Wilhelm Reich and Georges Pollitzer were perhaps the most prominent (in retrospect) Marxists in the psychology of those years. Vygotsky was the first one, however, who was writing from within the Soviet Union, and the comprehensive critique of bourgeois pseudo-Marxist psychology was done not in the hope of “proving” mechanically the inherent superiority of Soviet thought<sup>68</sup>, but in hope of furthering the knowledge of the human psyche using the

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<sup>66</sup>And by extension, through the various communist parties around the world.

<sup>67</sup>Again, materialist dialectic scientific study, rather than the positivist approaches of the psychologists Vygotsky criticized.

<sup>68</sup>Unlike many newly minted Soviet “Marxists”, who saw the practical need in proclaiming their Marxist “credentials” as a way of furthering their own academic careers.

synthesis of the best and most organically applicable method.<sup>69</sup> However, as Zavershneva shows, Vygotsky's work was guided by an intensely practical desire: the need to build a new system of education, vast in scale and scope. The new Soviet society was in need of a lot more than just electrification.<sup>70</sup> Virtually every aspect of his polemics and theoretical writing is guided by this desire to achieve conclusions that are immediately applicable or somehow directly connected to this overall task. Consider his lecture topics:

- Consciousness as a problem in the psychology of behavior
- The Socialist Alteration of Man, Adolescent Pedagogy
- Educational Psychology, The Fundamental Problems of Defectology<sup>71</sup>
- The problem of the environment
- Thought in Schizophrenia
- The development of academic concepts in school-aged children
- Fascism and Psycho-neurology.<sup>72</sup>

#### WIDER CONNECTIONS

In addition to breaking new grounds in psychology, the 1920s in Soviet Russia saw the replication of Vygotsky's approach in fields related to psychology. Linguistics was one such area.

In a work that bears more than passing similarities to Vygotsky, V. N. Voloshinov's "Marxism and the Philosophy of Language" (1929) traverses the question of consciousness, albeit framed

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<sup>69</sup>It is not an accident that Vygotsky took keen interest in Freud's work, translated some of the famous Austrian's works, and wrote the introduction to Freud's collected works in Russian. He also accepted elements of Freud's theory, while rejecting others. In other words, being a Marxist in psychology was not a mutually exclusive proposition as far as learning from psychoanalysis was concerned. This openness and critical engagement with bourgeois social science was the hallmark of Soviet academic Marxism in the 1920s. It did not survive the 1930s!

<sup>70</sup>The famous initial slogan developed by Lenin: Soviet power + electrification = the October Revolution.

<sup>71</sup>The study of handicapped children.

<sup>72</sup>This is a partial compilation of Vygotsky's major manuscripts.

through ideology and linguistics.<sup>73</sup> Voloshinov posits “social psychology” as the processes of verbal interaction. In fact without verbal interaction, psychology enters the metaphysical terrain of the “collective soul”, the inner psyche and the “spirit of the people.” Different words, same general line of criticism. Both Voloshinov and Vygotsky define materialism as the starting and ending points of psychological analysis. They both replace “spirits”, souls and phenomena with abstractions extracted directly from the experiences of everyday life: verbal interaction, speech, the various stages of childhood cognitive development.

Even more significantly, both emphasize the need to study consciousness (or the *sign* in Voloshinov) as expressed through a complex “feedback loop”<sup>74</sup> of internal and external communication. Voloshinov begins by focusing on external, verbal communication as the domain of social psychology:

Social psychology in fact is not located anywhere within (in the “souls” of communicating subjects) but entirely and completely *without* - in the word, the gesture, the act. There is nothing left unexpressed in it, nothing “inner” about it - it is wholly on the outside, wholly brought out in exchanges, wholly taken up in material, above all in the material of the word (Voloshinov, 1929, 20).

Here is the place where Vygotsky’s thought takes off. He is dissatisfied with purely “external” formulations of human consciousness. The reality of human communication, of social relations entangling individuals with the “multitude” of the social totality is more complex. To capture it, it is necessary to somehow study the internal-external relations of speech acts. To be fair, Voloshinov understands this as well, perhaps intuitively:

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<sup>73</sup>In fact he explicitly reject studying consciousness: “Ideology may not be divorced from the material reality of sign (i.e. by locating it in the “consciousness” or other vague and elusive regions).

<sup>74</sup>To use once again the seemingly appropriate language of cybernetics.

Social psychology is first and foremost an atmosphere made up of multifarious *speech performances* that engulf and wash over all persistent forms and kinds of ideological creativity: unofficial discussions, exchanges of opinion at the theater or a concert or at various types of social gatherings, purely chance exchanges of words, one's manner of verbal reaction to happenings in one's life and daily existence, one's inner-word manner of identifying oneself and identifying one's position in society... (Voloshinov, 1929, 21).

Voloshinov sets the stage and points to what needs to be done: speech acts must be studied. It is a terrain in need of explication in the Marxist study of human consciousness. Vygotsky takes the next step of attempting to study the inner speech and its relation to external speech acts. This is the body of work that forms the core of his unfinished corpus.<sup>75</sup>

Even more interesting is Vygotsky's short-lived and incomplete collaboration with filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. Vygotsky was introduced to Eisenstein mostly likely by his friend, the psychologist Alexander Luria towards the end of the 1920s. This was a period when Vygotsky was beginning his study of *inner speech*, "rethinking the connection between speech and thought processes, as well as the specific syntax of thought - the outlines of his cultural-historical theory of the evolution of consciousness" (Bogdanova, 2007). Eisenstein was working on theoretical problems connected with the then-newly emerging language of film. In his recently published (in Russian only) theoretical treatise *Method*, he discusses the very close collaborative work between psychologists and filmmaker:

There was a moment when we had to systematically analyze the problems of the emerging language of film (especially when it came to the film "October"). And to do this, we had a team that "wasn't so bad" - Aleksandr Romanovich Luria, Vygotsky, Marr, yes - Nicolai Yakovlevich Marr himself and myself... We even started this

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<sup>75</sup>Discussed in subsequent chapters.

undertaking, but premature death took both of them away. Vygotsky died in 1934, and Marr - in 1935 (Bogdanova, 2007).<sup>76</sup>

What an amazing project and how things would have been different had Vygotsky and Marr lived beyond 1934! Vygotsky's influence on Eisenstein (to the extent that their short collaboration made possible) is perceivable through Eisenstein's development of the concept of inner monologue. This is an interesting claim by Bogdanova, since the time frame coincides with the period of Vygotsky's "Thought and Language" (1934b), his big work on external and internal speech and their relation to consciousness. Eisenstein's "Method" is itself a monumental work, spanning at least two volumes, incorporating passages in at least three different languages, with incredible sections of experimental writing. Prose, poetics, drawings are combined with commentary on a vast scale (spanning centuries and genres) on art, literature, science, philosophy, politics and film-making. As of today, no English translation of this work is available, nor is it easily obtainable in the Russian original.<sup>77</sup> Here is one short passage from his introduction to the second volume ("The Secrets of the Masters"):<sup>78</sup>

It is difficult to write a book... And this is so, because every book - is two-dimensional. I wish this book was differentiated through at least one property, something that totally does not fit into the two-dimensionality of printed words.

This is double (dual) demand. The first consists of the realization that the bouquet of these outlines cannot be approached and comprehended sequentially [in linear fashion].

I wish these writings were to be captured simultaneously [in a simultaneity], since after all, they are all - a number of sectors in different areas surrounding one general and defining point of view - method.

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<sup>76</sup>This remarkable passage, quoted by Bogdanova from one of the many introductions written by Eisenstein to his "Method" manuscript.

<sup>77</sup>Only 3000 copies were printed for each of the two volumes.

<sup>78</sup>Eisenstein was writing these lines in 1929.

On the other hand, I want to be able to establish purely spatially, the possibility of each sketch [? ] mutually relating immediately to every other sketch - transforming from one into another and back. Mutually linking from one to the other(Bogdanova, 2007).

Such beautiful formulations straddling the borders between dialectics in the materialist sense and the post-structuralist future could have occurred only in the political climate of the Soviet 1920s.<sup>79</sup>

### THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Vygotsky's impact as a creative and important thinker in the Marxist tradition cannot be completely traced without taking into account the wider political context surrounding his life. While academic Marxism was flourishing, a most intense life and death battle was being fought in the political arena. The Soviet 1920s marked a titanic struggle over power that brought together virtually the entire gamut of forces that participated in the 1917 Revolution. The defeat of the bourgeois and aristocratic classes in the Civil War, was followed by the successive waves reaching the ranks of the Bolshevik Party itself. The first wave of attacks focused on outlawing the Mensheviks and various anarchist groups. In addition, independent labor unions were abolished and various syndicalist tendencies persecuted. The Kronstadt rebellion by sailors set the stage for the deepening of Bolshevik monopoly over the state.

From a Bolshevik point of view, such repression was justified, given the active anti-Bolshevik role played by a number of high-profile Mensheviks, a role that in some cases

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<sup>79</sup>A very interesting task would be to read Eisenstein's "Method" through the lens of Deleuze's "Difference and Repetition." Both focus on method.

included participation on the side of the reactionary Whites in the civil war. The division between the two wings of the Russian Socialist Democratic Workers' Party intensified during the 1917 Revolution, when the various Menshevik members of the Transition government actively supported the demands of the Russian and international capitalist classes in pursuing the war and furthering Russian imperialist ambitions. The Kerensky<sup>80</sup> government's alliance with the various counter-revolutionary currents in the military and capital at this time are well documented Trotsky (1930) and Serge (1930). Most of the Menshevik leaders (Martov, Akselrod, Dan) resisted and critiqued the establishment of the Soviet regime.

The fact that the Bolsheviks had a political monopoly and state power starting with the end of the Civil War is both accurate and an oversimplification. It is true that no other political party was permitted legal existence at this time. The reasons for this are complex, but chief among them was the intervening experience of the Civil War, a conflict that in its brutality and death toll was exceeded only by the horrors of the Second World War.<sup>81</sup> The radicalization and desperate nature of that struggle did more than any other factor (differences in political ideology for example) to establish the decrees outlawing other political parties and trade unions.

A second factor was the complex composition of the Bolshevik Party. Far from it containing only dedicated Bolsheviks (as it was during the pre-1917 years), by 1921 it had become a mass party, with thousands of members joining from other political currents. Some, such as Vyshinsky, the future chief prosecutor of the Stalin Show Trials, were committed enemies of

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<sup>80</sup>Kerensky himself was not a Menshevik.

<sup>81</sup>The Soviet Union suffered by far the highest number of dead of all combatants in Europe with over 25 million dead, mostly civilians, out of a population of less than 200 million.

Bolshevism. As a Menshevik and a member of the transitional government, Vyshinsky had signed the order for Lenin's arrest during the tense months following Lenin's return to Russia in 1917. How such a person can be permitted to become a high functionary in a government composed mostly of old-guard Bolsheviks is itself an interesting question. The point is, the end of the Civil War did not remove direct threats to the survival of the Soviet Union, it only made the task more complex.

In this time of uncertainty and economic devastation, a new struggle emerged, this time localized mostly within the Bolsheviks themselves, who were now grouped into various factions: Left, centrist and Right (Deutscher, 1987) The defeat of the Left Opposition had direct consequences not only for Vygotsky and psychology per se, but for academic Marxism in general. Trotsky's exile, for example, marked the end of the Freudian current in Soviet psychology. Vygotsky's close friend and collaborator Alexander Luria was forced to "renounce his interest in psychoanalysis" (Vygotsky, 1934b, xliii), a "bourgeois" science in the language of Stalinism. The attack against Luria was particularly strong, given his role in Soviet psychoanalysis: he was the founder of the Kazan Psychoanalytical Society, having "received a welcome letter from none other than Sigmund Freud" himself (Yasnitsky, 2009, 48).<sup>82</sup> Vygotsky himself was increasingly subject to attack (Vygotsky, 1934b), (Yasnitsky, 2009) and (Kotik-Friedgut and Friedgut, 2008).<sup>83</sup> As Frederic Choate shows on his website, influential

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<sup>82</sup>Both Vygotsky and Luria wrote an introduction to a Soviet publication of Freud's work in 1925 (Yasnitsky, 2009).

<sup>83</sup>See discussion in Alex Kozulin's introduction.

literary critics and editors such as Aleksandr Voronin<sup>84</sup>, Vagarshak Ter-Vaganian<sup>85</sup>, Viacheslav Polonsky<sup>86</sup> and Sergei Zorin<sup>87</sup> were critiqued, repressed and shot. And they were not the only ones.

Others such as writer Isaac Babel followed the same path. Babel was executed in 1940. Among the reasons that possibly doomed him was his extended love affair with the wife of NKVD chief Ezhov. Once Ezhov was himself arrested and executed, virtually everyone who was even remotely part of his circle met with the same fate. Actually, in Babel's case, the real reason was probably the sympathies he displayed at various times for Trotsky and other members of the Left Opposition (Sarnov, 2010). But Babel's transgressions went further still. Sarnov cites recently published research in Russian, where the extent of dissatisfaction and criticism towards Stalin's rule on the part of Babel is clearly apparent. In a meeting with filmmaker Eisenstein following one of the show trials, Babel pointedly asks: "Who made the revolution? Who was in the original (1917) Politburo?" The implication was clear. Babel took a sheet of paper, wrote the names of those members and crossed off each individual name that was at that time arrested, exiled or killed (or otherwise dead). After finishing, he tore the paper to pieces (Sarnov, 2010).

The intellectual history of twentieth century Marxism must clearly state that the political repression descending upon Soviet society was first and overwhelmingly directed against leftists: Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, anarchists. Stalin's power-grab was more akin to a counter-revolution, and in more ways than one. Most of the progressive legislation (both *de jure*, and in spirit) was

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<sup>84</sup>Editor of *Krasnaya Nov'*.

<sup>85</sup>Editor of "Under the Banner of Marxism."

<sup>86</sup>Editor of *Novyii Mir* (New World).

<sup>87</sup>A close friend of Voronosky and important member of the Comintern.

slowly replaced by conservative equivalents. Anti-Semitism reared its ugly head starting with Stalin himself. Isaac Deutscher cites Trotsky who details how in private conversations with allies, the Stalin of the late 1920s and early 1930s was not afraid to use innuendos of an anti-Semitic nature against political opponents who happened to be Jewish (such as Trotsky) (Deutscher, 1987).

The radical spirit of 1917, encouraging experimentation in wide areas of Soviet intellectual life, was gradually replaced by the neoclassical, drab, boring conservatism of Stalinism. Thus, in architecture there was a noticeable shift in new building design from the avant-garde visionary work of architects such as Moisei Ginzburg (Workers' Apartment building shown below) and Leonid Vesnin's famed and unrealized design for the People's Commissariat of Construction and Heavy Industry:



Image 5: Moisei Ginzburg. "Workers' Apartment Building". Source: <https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/File:Ginzburg.jpg>

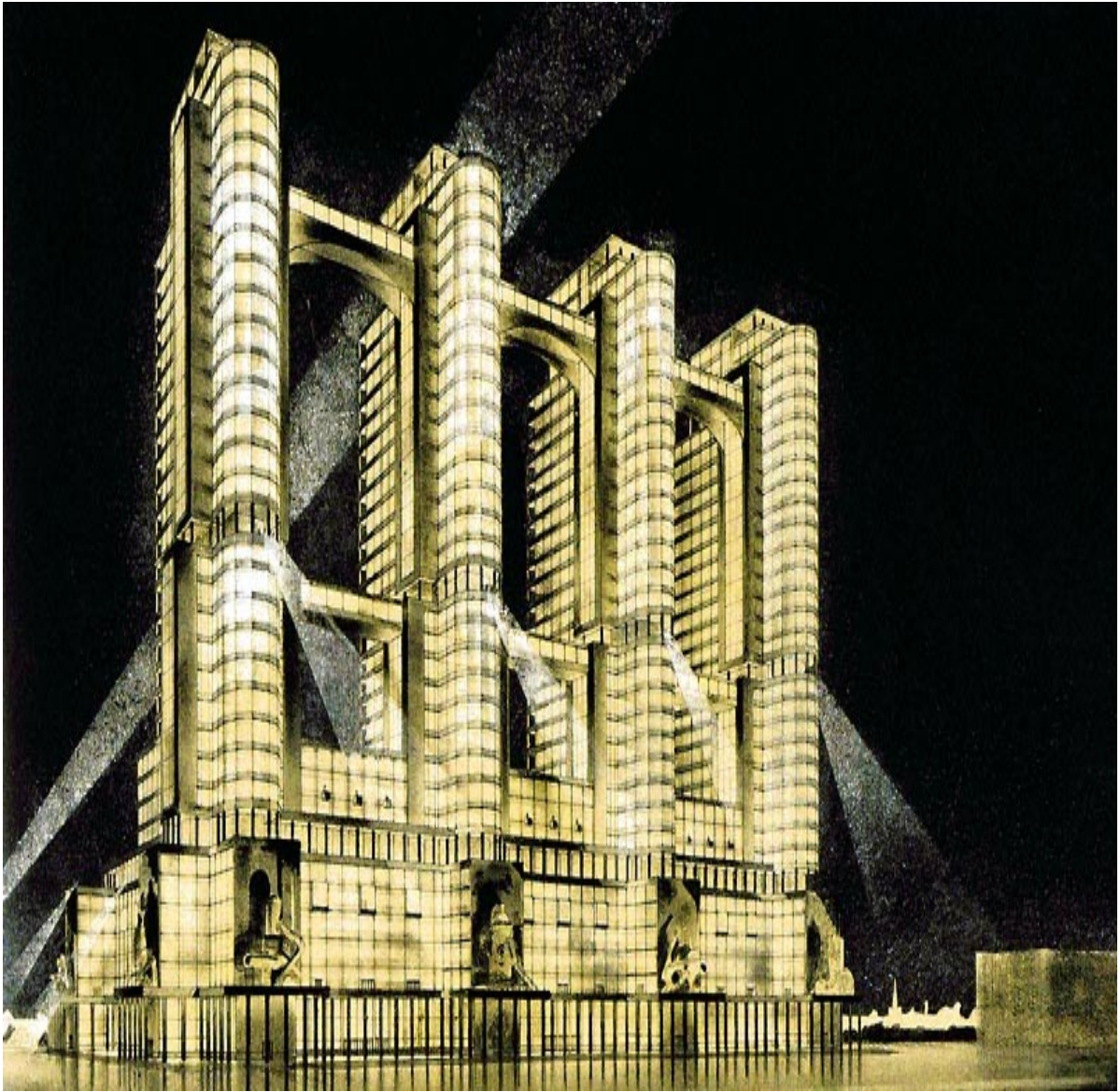


Image 6: Leonid Vesnin. "People's Commissariat of Construction and Heavy Industry".  
Source: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7c/Nktp\\_vesn\\_3.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7c/Nktp_vesn_3.jpg)

to the boring, conservative neoclassical examples of Stalinist architecture such as this proposed skyscraper:



Image 7: Dmitry Chechulin.  
"Zaryadre Skyscraper". Source:  
<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dc/Zaryadye.jpg>

In music, the radicalism of young Dmitri Shostakovich's music (such as his Second and Fourth Symphonies, or the music stage work "The Nose"), complete with harmonic and staging experimentation, was replaced by the conservative, neo-romantic music of official composers such as Tikhon Khrennikov.

In literature, a number of brilliant writers who came of age in the Soviet Union as dedicated supporters of the Revolution sensed the Thermidorian winds. Perhaps no one reflected the impending tragedy of October more than the great novelist Andrei Platonov. A writer completely dedicated to the revolution in the early parts of the 1920s and himself one of the few intellectuals of proletarian background, increasingly turned to pessimistic critiques of the increasing bureaucratization and absurdity of Stalinism. His two novels of the latter part of the decade, "Chevengur" and "The Foundation Pit", illustrate the gathering sense of doom and desperation.

The sciences were not immune either. In genetics, the work of the brilliant and highly innovative geneticist Nikolai Vavilov was suppressed after the concentrated attacks of the Stalinist geneticist Lysenko and his pseudo-science. The outcome of this act of repression was the virtual end of genetics research in the Soviet Union for over twenty years.

Soon, even the symbology and hierarchy of czarism returned, complete with the introduction of various medals and official rewards, together with the regalia of state power, replete with lavish banquets for the top layers of the party, while the vast majority of Soviet workers and farmers lived in near-starvation (Rogovin, 1998), (Rogovin, 2003) and (Rogovin, 2009). It is not surprising that in this time of increasing conservatism and political repression, the battle Vygotsky waged in defense of critical thought, Marxist method, and revolution-infused creativity and optimism, assumes in retrospect even more significance. Together with Babel, Voronsky, Eisenstein, Shostakovitch, Trotsky, Platonov, Vygotsky's struggles are part of this as-of-yet under-appreciated political struggle in defense of the gains of October. In the case of Vygotsky, it could be argued that his struggle was part of the what made the Soviet 1920s a radical new opening in Marxist intellectual thought, a time of creative mixture of continuity and innovation.

There would have been no Vygotsky without the Russian Revolution, just as there would have been no Babel or Eisenstein. The radical creative energies unleashed by the revolution would have remained buried or isolated in the profound conservatism, repressiveness and inferiority complex that characterized most currents of Russian intellectual work during czarism.

## CHAPTER 2 (AN OUTLINE OF VYGOTSKY'S DIALECTICS)

The question of ideology and the role it plays in politics, has always taken center stage in Marxist political thought. By the early 1920s, a new concept, that of hegemony offered an even more powerful insight into the operation of political power in general, and more specifically its exercise under capitalism. Antonio Gramsci's (2003) groundbreaking work sought to fill a void in the Marxist understanding of human consciousness, its relation to political power and revolutionary politics. Gramsci's effort was mirrored by a number of other Marxist thinkers, working in different areas. Gyorgy Lukacs (1971) extended Marx's early work on alienation (albeit without knowing about the early 1844 essays), and the Soviet linguist Valentin Voloshinov (1929), identified signs and speech acts (generally, the study of linguistics) as crucial terrain in the formation of ideology. Language was now understood to operate as a terrain of politics, of class struggle through other means.<sup>88</sup> Though "technically" a psychologist, Vygotsky fits in this narrative in at least two ways. First, he is a thinker whose work develops materialist dialectical method in general, while also introducing a unique strand of dialectical thought.<sup>89</sup> Second, his work can be read as an engagement with fundamental questions of consciousness, ideology, the

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<sup>88</sup>Other means beyond the strike, barricades and other more "conventional" manifestations of class struggle.

<sup>89</sup>Particularly interesting in this context is a comparison between Vygotsky's critique of both bourgeois psychology and so-called Marxist psychologists, and Lukacs' defense of materialist dialectical method in social science, and his critique of bourgeois method in the analysis of politics and social relations.

formation of social relations and of subjectivity. In this way, Vygotsky's thought can be seen as parallel to Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemony (and specifically the Sardinian revolutionary's work on common sense), Valentin Voloshinov's argument that language and everyday communication are themselves crucial terrain of political struggle, and lastly of Gyorgy Lukacs' concepts of alienation and reification.

### POLITICS AND THE TASKS OF PSYCHOLOGY

Vygotsky (1989, 65) argues that the science of psychology is fundamental to our understanding of politics:

Every ideology (social) is matched by a psychological structure of a specific type - but in the sense of subjective perception and vehicle of ideology, in the sense of the construction of strata, layers, and functions of the individual person.<sup>90</sup>

In the contemporary context this means that capitalist societies generate particular psychological structures that affect and condition individual subjective perception, as well social collectivities such as race, class and gender. Such psychological structures are carriers of various ideologies and related circuits of legitimation and social reproduction.<sup>91</sup> Necessarily, this also means that such structures are a crucial political battleground, where ability to project a dominant ideology enable the exercise of political power and hegemony.

The notion of "American individualism," for instance, is a very real result of an ideological framework, replicated into psychological structures, that is subsequently absorbed by individuals

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<sup>90</sup>This manuscript was written in 1929 as a set of rough drafts and research notes.

<sup>91</sup>As well as non-dominant ideologies.

through their “subjective perception”<sup>92</sup> of the idea of American individualism. Thus, it is possible to meaningfully distinguish between a worker, peasant, magician, woman, man and child. These different labels become infused with meaning only on a social scale, albeit with variations. This relation between psychological structures and ideology makes possible, for example, both the gendered division of labor in the family, and the struggles to dismantle it. Vygotsky’s concept of psychological structures fuse and further develop Marx’s concept of alienation, Lukacs’ discussion of reification, Gramsci and Voloshinov’s work on ideology.

Vygotsky recognized that the Marxist tradition lacked a scientific<sup>93</sup> (materialist) understanding of such psychological structures. What actually happens during the processes of alienation on the level of psychological processes? How does language emerge in a specific historical context? What about the details of how ideology emerges and becomes internalized by subjects? And, I could add, how do Voloshinov’s insights about the inner world of the ideological signs compare with Vygotsky’s understanding of signs, language and ideology?

A person’s idea about themselves, society, workplace, or politics, is for Vygotsky (1989), “the relationship of a structure of interests to the social regulation of behavior” (65). How are structures of interests created, and how do they emerge and reproduce? How precisely do they connect and regulate social behavior? These are fundamental questions of agency, of thought, of freedom, of power and politics. But why psychology?

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<sup>92</sup>As Vygotsky would put it.

<sup>93</sup>Understood to mean structures not based on various idealist, ahistorical or mystical formulations.

Writing on thought and language in a 1926 notepad, Vygotsky sees the role of the psychologist in "exposing the fact that behind the visible relations between things lie relations between people... It signifies a unity of reaction of 2 people or 2 reactions, not of two stimuli" (Zavershneva, 2010, 25). Against the overwhelming prioritization of stimuli, of the fetishism of bio-sociology that is dominant in attempts at explaining thought and consciousness at his time (and today), Vygotsky counter poses a Marxist thesis. Paraphrasing the early Marx of "Alienated Labor" (Tucker, 1978, 66-126), he posits that just as in labor, psychological "things" are (largely) in fact social relations. In theoretical terms, the "real opportunity of psychology" is in studying the mind-body relationship. Crediting Spinoza as the first thinker who "liberated all of psychology"<sup>94</sup> from the idea of "the soul's absolute power over the body," Vygotsky focuses on the relative nature of this relationship: the mind-body relation is not absolute or immutable. To study how this relation changes dynamically, means to study "the changes in the proportionate role of the soul in the life of the body, and of the intellect in life" (Zavershneva, 2010, 39).

The quest of Vygotsky's psychology is motivated then, by inadequacies noticed in the answer hitherto provided by the various schools of psychology, and of philosophy on the general nature of human consciousness. He writes in his journal, that it is new facts that "prod me into searching for new and more intricate explanations" (Zavershneva, 2010, 41-42). One such fact is the realization that by focusing too much on understanding the functions of signs and tools, what is lost is the actual operation of the sign—its very functioning in the dynamic sense of the word. After all, Vygotsky is a dialectical thinker, and to overlook the relation between signs—in favor of

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<sup>94</sup>Thus starting the philosophical assault against idealist and metaphysical interpretations of consciousness.

studying the sign itself, leads to a static and unsatisfying study, incapable of capturing the complexities of human communication and consciousness, all occurring dynamically over time and place.

But, studying the various relations present in human actions necessitates a study of the mind-body question, which inevitably leads to a further question: the study of external-internal continuum. Thus, psychology is an obvious ground zero for this line of research. Whether the object of study is the act of tying a knot, or deciphering the contents of a teenager's diary, both of these actions are external. The knot is being tied in front of us. The teenager's diary is read after it was already written. In either case, if we just limit ourselves to the knot and the diary, we capture, at best, only part of the story, that which is accessible externally to the reader/observer. What happened internally, when the diary was being written? What were the signs and thoughts that were left unshared with the reader glancing through the finished pages? Lastly, how and what shapes those thoughts?

The Marxist tradition emphasizes the dialectical interaction of what Lukacs termed subject-object as one of the defining forces in politics (Lukacs, 1971) and (2000). Vygotsky re-emphasizes the importance of this dynamic by arguing that the subject must be grasped on a more detailed level of understanding. What constitutes the subject in the internal-external dimension of her consciousness, language and communication. In this sense, his work develops and amplifies the Marxist analysis of politics, broadly understood. Marx's "Capital" provides an exhaustive understanding of the operation of capitalist political economy. Engels' work on the structure of the family precedes the women's liberation struggles waged by communist feminists

such as Clara Zetkin (Zetkin, 1984), Nadezda Krupskaya and Alexandra Kollontai (Kollontai, 1977, and 1920).<sup>95</sup> Lenin (1943), (1975) and Trotsky (2010) develop a theory of revolutionary praxis, while Gramsci analyzes the fundamental role played by the assemblage of cultural, ideological and political practices he calls hegemony.

Marx's essay on alienated labor together with Lukacs' work on alienation and reification, provide a general view of the psychological impact of capitalist political economy on the subject, the "human cost" of capitalism. Vygotsky, writing from the mid-twenties onward, takes the next step in this understanding of the subject, the "I", the question of Being, of consciousness. What is the difference, he posits, between "I", Being, and the subject-object? In attempting to move beyond Lukacs' discussion of reification, to learn the concrete mechanism and relations through which reification emerges, one arrives at Vygotsky's starting point. That is, his concern with the process from outside-inside and the related method; "how to study internal, latent processes in a mediated manner" that eventually manifest themselves as written words in a diary, or the expression of a political position in a conversation (Zavershneva, 2010, 43).

The pursuit of these ideas leads to some very powerful interventions and re-formulations of fundamental questions. Consider the following two brief examples:

a) Is thinking, Vygotsky asks, a vehicle through which an idea is expressed? Or, "does [thinking] become thinking when it pours out in speech" (Zavershneva, 2010, 43)? Vygotsky's answer is the latter, rather than the former. Thinking is "its own action" (Ibid.), it is a complex

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<sup>95</sup>Women's liberation was the term used by revolutionary socialists at the time of the Russian Revolution to refer to the radical feminist politics the day. Thus, it must be differentiated from the Women's liberation movement of the 1960s American liberal feminist tradition.

process that is objectively real on its own. Its relation to ideas is also a real psychological structure, but it is not simply a vessel through which an idea transmits itself from the mind (internal state) to speech (external). This very brief discussion illustrates one way through which Vygotsky begins to study the inner-external dynamic of psychological structures.

b) The second example shows the process in reverse: the movement from external to internal psychological structures. Early childhood psychology studies ways through which concept formation in children develops. This, for example, was Jean Piaget's area of research. Piaget argued that it was thinking that enable action-activity in children. We think something, which then prompts us to act. A baby's level of cognitive development, then, puts a limit (or, conditions) on the actions that they can take.

Vygotsky reverses this hither-to highly influential theory by arguing that "[t]he phases of development of concepts are phases of transforming the dynamics (of an affect) of real action in to the dynamics of thinking" (Zavershneva, 2010, 48-49). Real (materialist) human activity and affect become transformed and transferred through concepts into thought. The mind-body duality is now conceptualized as a dialectical continuum of action and affect, where concepts of and about the world we live in initiate this continuum of action and affect.

The political implications of being aware of this continuum are not hard to derive. That activity and affective state are dialectically related to thinking sheds additional clarity to the time-worn practices of Marxist<sup>96</sup> revolutionary politics. What is the connection between a union's refusal to consider strike action and the thoughts about union politics among the members of the

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<sup>96</sup>In addition to connecting to recent developments in post-structuralist radical thought: the politics of affect, auto-affection, etc. More on this to follow.

union? Refusing to strike is an affective state and a specific political action. The transformation of this political action into thought is mediated through the development (change) of specific concepts about the meaning of unions in general, the nature of class struggle at that moment, the level of political consciousness of the union in totality, the state of alienation and reification among members, the particular ideological position of the union leadership, and perhaps most importantly, the prevailing common sense<sup>97</sup> of the union majority.

In other words, the political struggle within a union for a particular direction of struggle, is most crucially conditioned in the state of concept formation, where union members become conscious (or not) about being conscious of their struggle. I want to argue that the impact of Vygotsky's project is focused on this crucial question of how social relations shift to "the within" that characterizes our internal state of being. How is ideology internalized and internally legitimated? What does alienation actually mean on the level of individual and social<sup>98</sup> consciousness? There seems to be an organic theoretical thread connecting such analysis to Gramsci's common sense, Voloshinov's approach to ideology and Lukacs' thoughts on consciousness.

#### THE CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURES OF VYGOTSKY'S "PHILOSOPHICAL-COGNITIVE" DIALECTICS

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, 1926).

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<sup>97</sup>In the sense used by Gramsci, discussed further below.

<sup>98</sup>Social in its various class, race and gender groupings.

Consciousness plays a crucial role in Marxist revolutionary thought. Following an overview of the “classical” formulations of consciousness, the remainder of the chapter will focus on the evolution of Vygotsky’s understanding of consciousness, along with related foundational concepts in his thought.

## CONSCIOUSNESS

... there is no *external* difference between natural biologically grounded intelligence and historically developed intelligence (Vygotsky, 1934b, 139).

The fundamental question to be asked here is: How does Vygotsky’s conceptualization of consciousness relate to the formulation of consciousness undertaken by Marx and his followers in the years leading to and including Vygotsky’s lifetime? What does his work add to the Marxist understanding of consciousness?

Marx grounds human consciousness in social relations. This is most clearly expressed in his ‘Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.’ Human consciousness emerges out of social relations, where “the mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life” (Marx, 1977), moreover: “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Ibid.).

A further elaboration is offered in the “*German Ideology*.” consciousness does not arise internally, out of ideas embedded within our minds. On the contrary, it emerges through the actions of people living their lives, conditioned by the “material life-processes” that are “bound

to material premises” (Marx, 1973).<sup>99</sup> Human consciousness develops through the development of “material production” and related “material intercourse,” which along with people’s “real existence”, alters “their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” (Ibid.). Repeating what he wrote in the “Preface to the Critique of Political Economy”, Marx succinctly writes: “The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life” (Ibid.).

Vygotsky’s entry point into consciousness is framed against the dominance of Cartesian mind-body dualities in the psychology of his day, an approach that neglected to engage with the concept of consciousness as a important factor in human life. In his early paper “Consciousness as a problem in the psychology of behavior”, Vygotsky (1925) writes that “the exclusion of consciousness from the domain of scientific psychology to a considerable extent preserves all the dualism and spiritualism of former subjective psychology.” The duality being referred to here is the “psycho-physical problem”, the division between mind and body. By refusing to consider consciousness, the psychology of the 1920s attempts to explain the duality of the soul and “natural” reactions such as the ones studied by Pavlov’s reflexology, and leaves no space for the role played by subjective (or conscious<sup>100</sup> in Vygotsky’s words) phenomena (Ibid.). Ignoring or denying the importance of studying consciousness in psychology, automatically prioritizes

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<sup>99</sup>I am quoting from the online edition of the book at:  
<http://Marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#5a4> : Chapter 1, Section 4: *The Essence of the Materialist Conception of History. Social Being and Social Consciousness.*

<sup>100</sup>This is an important terminological shift: the subjective is the conscious.

“biological” explanations for human behavior along the lines of reflexology (in the 1920s), various forms of behaviorism, or today: the fetishization of CT-scan and MRI-based searches for consciousness in the neuro-biology of the brain (and of related methods of prioritizing “algorithmic” process-based explanations of language and consciousness as shown in the following papers at the Santa Fe Institute by Christiansen and Chater Gao and Holland).<sup>101</sup>

As a result Vygotsky sees two possible routes available to psychology:

...it is impossible to study human behavior and the complex forms of human interrelated activity<sup>102</sup> without reference to the human mind; or it is not the case, and mind is an epiphenomenon, a secondary phenomenon, and everything can be explained without mind, and we shall come to the biological absurd. No third possibility is given (Vygotsky, 1999b).

The approach taken by psychologists in 1925 (Freud excluded) tended to view consciousness as “the transmitting mechanisms of reflexes operating according to general laws” (Ibid.).<sup>103</sup> Consciousness was explained as a function of the various stimuli to which the body was constantly subjected. Or, as an “innate” property/ability of humans to think and reflect.<sup>104</sup>

Vygotsky rejects this formulation and arrives at the one offered by Marx:

We are conscious of ourselves because we are conscious of others; and in an analogous manner, we are conscious of others because in our relationship to ourselves we are the same as others in their relationship to us. I am aware of myself only to the extent that I am as another for myself, i.e., only to the extent that I can perceive anew my own reflexes as new irritants. Between the fact that I can repeat aloud a word

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<sup>101</sup>Basically, what all of these new approaches maintain with their predecessors is either the complete lack, or extreme marginalization of the role played by social relations, hegemony, common sense and various cultural and disciplinary practices at the expense of some innate biological factors.

<sup>102</sup>Vygotsky’s way of referring to social relations.

<sup>103</sup>The various schools of reflexology.

<sup>104</sup>This is perhaps a crude summary of Gestalt psychology.

spoken silently to myself and the fact that I can repeat a word spoken by another there is no essential difference, nor is there any principal difference in their mechanisms: both are reversible reflexes – irritants (Ibid.).

Social and historical experiences are not separate experiences, but fused totalities. Vygotsky even uses “+” to emphasize the togetherness of the two. The impact of history, together with the social experiences of an individual person and a population, are what condition individual (and “social”) consciousness. In fact, consciousness is a “particular case of social experience”. The Cartesian duality of the mind-body experience becomes in Vygotsky’s thought, a unified, “double experience”; life as combined social and historical experience.<sup>105</sup>

While reaffirming the basic tenets of Marx’s understanding of *consciousness*, Vygotsky quickly moves into new terrain. If Consciousness mediates activity, then psychology studies the specific mechanisms through which this mediation proceeds, in a process Vygotsky calls *the problem of internalization*.<sup>106</sup> However, the psychology that can actually study these specific mechanisms does not yet exist in 1926! Specifically to Marxist thought, his starting point is the realization that the materialism of the Marxist tradition lacks a theory of psychology! In other words, Vygotsky (1926) rejects the claims of “Marxist psychologists” such as Chelpanov and Kornilov (along with works on psychology by philosophers such as Plekhanov) due to their inability “to indicate the difference between theirs and an idealistic theory of psychological knowledge” (Vygotsky, 1926).<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup>A doubling, but not a duality.

<sup>106</sup>And here we return to El’konin’s words cited at the start of this chapter: the problem of interiorization

<sup>107</sup>See discussion on Vygotsky’s critique of “Marxist psychology” in chapter 1.

In an argument similar to Lukacs' (2000) critique of Engels' attempt to "generalize" dialectical method, Vygotsky argues that materialist dialectics as a method of inquiry in political economy, history and philosophy cannot be directly applied to psychology. Psychology needs new tools of inquiry that emerge from within psychology; new conceptual frameworks with which to study the mechanisms and processes of mediation and internalization.

Vygotsky's motivation in theorizing a science of general psychology is prompted then, by the need to clearly delineate "the boundary between idealism and materialism" (1926, ch. 13) in the study of psychology. What Marx did in developing his materialist view of history and in the analysis of capitalist political economy, Vygotsky argues needs to be done in the field of psychology and the study of consciousness. In the absence of such a general psychology, the field remains in the domain of idealism, irrespective of its labeling. This is an important intervention in Marxist thought, since the lack of a true, materialist epistemology in psychology leads to a particular form of philosophical idealism in so-called Marxist psychology.<sup>108</sup> Specifically in the discussion of being and consciousness, this points to Husserl and Feurbach; the first was a theorist of metaphysics, and the second was long ago dismissed as an idealist materialist by Marx:

...either the mind is directly given to us in introspection, and then we side with Husserl; or we must distinguish subject and object, being and thinking in it, and then

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<sup>108</sup>Vygotsky terms it: "Machism in psychology". This is a particularly stinging critique within Soviet philosophical circles, given the prominent role played by Lenin's "Materialism and Empirio-Criticism" in the establishment of materialist dialectics of the Bolsheviks. Bogdanov, the preeminent theorist of Machism in the Soviet Union, lost the polemical battle against Lenin. Vygotsky seems to agree with Lenin in treating the Machist approach as one of *idealism*, a current totally foreign to their own materialist dialectics.

we side with Feurbach. But what does this imply? It implies that my joy and my introspection comprehension of this joy are different things Vygotsky (1934b, ch. 13).

Either way, moving forward in psychology (in the sense of developing it as a materialist dialectical science) is impossible while the best that “Marxist” materialist thought in psychology is based on the thought of Husserl and Feurbach. The trouble originates in the division of psychology according to the fundamental categories of matter, and that which is not material. The big debates in the 1920s and 1930s revolved around such dualities, where the non-material is variously referred to as sensations, phenomena, suprasensory, or the mental. This was the approach of subjective psychology, where objective actions are portrayed as the perceptions of those actions. Materialists, in turn, define matter - as Marx, Engels and Lenin did in “Materialism and Empirio-Criticism” (1927)- as an “objective reality” that exists “independently of human consciousness and reflected by it” (Vygotsky, 1926).

In his recently published journals and research notes, Vygotsky offers additional conceptualizations of consciousness that move beyond the classical Marxist formulations locating *consciousness* in social relations. He asks second-order questions such as: How precisely does consciousness emerge out of social relations? <sup>109</sup> What are the relations that condition such consciousness? Such questions lead to the inclusion of additional concepts in a materialist understanding of consciousness. Signs and their meaning, language, concept formation in individuals, and human activity, all introduce new ways of thinking about this fundamental part of the human experience. The question of consciousness becomes in the words of Daniil El’konin, the problem of interiorization. In fact El’konin asserts that the chief focus of

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<sup>109</sup>Beyond explanations offered by Marx and Engels.

Vygotsky's work was on this very problem, formulated in Vygotsky's language as the study of "interpsychological phenomena" (Vygotsky, 2005, 9).

To summarize the discussion so far: the classical arguments of Marx posit that human consciousness is externally formulated through specific social relations. On the most general level, Vygotsky's development of Marx's position argues that consciousness can also be understood as interpsychological phenomena that "emerge" in the form of relations of signs and their meaning,<sup>110</sup> manifested through human activity, and "directed at the level of the individual"(Vygotsky, 2005, 9). The focal point of the Vygotskian intervention is the role played by interpsychological phenomena in the process of consciousness already hinted by Marx. It is this new formulation that replaces in Vygotsky's psychology the old and persistent duality of mind and body: the legacy of Cartesian thought in the study of consciousness.

The main challenge is to study the mechanics of the specific relations of signs, meanings and actions that establish the interpsychological phenomena within a specific historical period. How do the processes of internalization of social-mediated thoughts, signs and events become internalized at the level of the individual? Some of these component elements to be further discussed include: language, word meaning, the will, the notion of concepts (the role played by pseudoconcepts and concepts), thought, speech, freedom and affect.

Towards the end of his last completed work, "Thought and Language", Vygotsky (1934a, 170) defines consciousness as "an awareness of the activity of the mind." This marks an "inward turn" in comparison to his earlier work "On the Meaning of the Historical Crisis in Psychology"

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<sup>110</sup>Thus, through additional layers of mediation such as concept formation.

(1926). The study of consciousness cannot be understood without studying the actions (activity) of the mind. This is a process of self-awareness, “the consciousness of being conscious” (Ibid.). Here, Vygotsky’s entry into the study of the mind, marks his departure from the orthodox Marxist position. Actually, it is less of a departure, and more of a necessary entry. A materialist dialectical study of human psychology cannot refuse to study the activity of the mind and its relation to social relations (the process of interiorization). To refuse means to remain with Chelpanov and Plekhanov in the realm of philosophical idealism.

“Conscious of being conscious” is a process of learning and action. People are not born in such a state of consciousness. A pre-school age child lacks this “self-reflective awareness” (Vygotsky, 1934b): when asked about her name, she responds by providing her name. She knows the name, but yet she is “not conscious of knowing it” (Ibid.) Self-awareness, “the activity of consciousness”, is a complex state, which can illuminate part of our actions and thoughts, or not. I can tie a knot, and be conscious of tying the knot. However, I might be unable to explain how the knot was tied, since “my awareness was centered on the knot, rather than on my own motions, the how of my action” (Vygotsky, 1934b, 170). consciousness in this sense emerges when the *how* of my actions “becomes the object of my awareness” (Ibid.).

The extremely interesting facet of this approach to consciousness is the avoidance of binary logic. Consciousness is not simply the domain of the mind, a spirit or soul, or some other “substance” of transcendental nature. It is not in opposition to the “material” and temporary body, subjected to the wishes of the mind. The mind-body duality (or in Vygotsky: the psycho-physical problem) is overcome by understanding that consciousness is a process and not a

static, unitary object (a thing such as a “soul”, or the “mind”). To be conscious means more than undertaking a particular action: tie shoes, eat a cheesecake, walk down the stairs, read a book. Such actions can be said to be conscious, since I am aware of doing them in the act of doing them. It seems that this narrow understanding of consciousness can be simply explained in terms of our “total mental activity”, i.e. the fact that by being alive, we generate a certain level of mental activity in the act of doing certain actions as part of everyday life. In this sense, everyone alive is of course conscious.

This is a rather trivial argument, however, and Vygotsky’s focus is beyond such biologically/evolutionary given facts. In other words, we cannot be consciously not aware of touching a hot stove, or of tying a knot, or reading a book. The structure of our brain allows us to do these things automatically, through no intervention (conscious or unconscious) on our part. We simply don’t have a choice but to experience a degree of pain when touching a hot plate.

Vygotsky is interested in the second-order question: what happens beyond this physiological “base” level of consciousness. His redefinition of consciousness as self-awareness of one’s conscious actions, locates additional processes and relations that yield this self-awareness. This is precisely the materialist nature of his approach. Self-awareness emerges out of complex social processes and relations, that are interiorized within an individual. The process of interiorization, however, is not one of division between different objects, such as an “inside” and an “outside.” The two bond and change through various relations and processes that must be studied in order to avoid reliance on metaphysical notions such as the soul, or the opposite extreme, searching for consciousness (as some kind of an object to be found) in areas of the brain via increasingly

sophisticated apparatuses. The process of interiorization plays a crucial role in fostering consciousness by “shifting to a new type of inner perception” (Vygotsky, 1934b, 170).

#### UNDERSTANDING CONSCIOUSNESS: IDEOLOGY, THE PSYCHE, AND SIGNS

The focus on internalizing communication with others is also present in Vygotsky’s Soviet contemporary, the linguist Valentin Voloshinov (1929). Though a theorist of linguistics and a member of the Mikhail Bakhtin circle, Voloshinov’s work also navigated through the difficult and largely unstudied terrain denoting the Marxist (materialist dialectical) study of human consciousness. In his main work, “Marxism and the Philosophy of Language” (1929), Voloshinov made broadly similar arguments. His work helps situate the importance of Vygotsky’s thought for political theory. Voloshinov connects consciousness with ideology and in doing so, shows how Marx’s insight about the social roots of human consciousness are also the roots of ideology.

Voloshinov’s discussion of consciousness parallels that of Vygotsky: “Consciousness cannot be directly derived from nature” (Voloshinov, 1929, 13). This is contrary to the various schools of psychology (biological, behaviorism, reflexology) who continue to search for consciousness in “nature” as some type of an innate substance permeating our minds, or locating it in some biological mechanism like Pavlov<sup>111</sup> and other similar positivist approaches. This critique of psychology sounds quite similar to that of Vygotsky’s, and one can only speculate whether

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<sup>111</sup>This is a reference to the Russian scientist’s theory of conditioned reflexes most famously illustrated by his experiments inducing involuntary salivation in dogs responding to food stimuli.

Voloshinov had read Vygotsky's earlier critiques (Vygotsky, 1926).<sup>112</sup> Echoing Vygotsky, Voloshinov also locates consciousness in social relations: "Consciousness takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse" (Voloshinov, 1929, 13).

Voloshinov's signs can be found in Vygotsky's internal and external speech, as well as in his notions of concepts and concept formation. Note the importance of process and dynamism in the formulation of how consciousness arises/forms out of dynamic group communication. Consciousness is socially-derived, even when considering it on the level of an individual: "The individual is a social-ideological fact (Voloshinov, 1929, 12)."<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, consciousness is underpinned by communication, by the exchange of signs in a particular social-semiotic space: "Consciousness takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse" (VOLOSHINOV, 1929, 13). In other words, ideology shapes consciousness: "The logic of consciousness is the logic of ideological communication, of the semiotic interaction of a social group (Ibid.)."

It is in the dynamism of everyday communication, exchange, creation, and abandonment of signs, that consciousness is formed. It is a temporal phenomena, which must be created and upheld over and over for it to remain as consciousness. Without the profoundly pervasive ideological apparatuses of Wall St. or the signs and images that make up the constant stream of

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<sup>112</sup>To the best of my knowledge, Voloshinov does not make any references to Vygotsky in his publicly available work.

<sup>113</sup>Voloshinov defines ideology as a sign grounded in social relations: "The ideological chain stretches from individual consciousness to individual consciousness, connecting them together. Signs emerge, after all, only in the process of interaction between one individual consciousness and another. And the individual consciousness itself is filled with signs (Voloshinov, 1929, 11)."

advertising that is inescapable in American media, the edifice of American imperialism and capitalism would be not nearly as durable, nor compelling. Ideology and an associated state of social and individual consciousness requires continuous hard work to reproduce year after year. In this sense, it is meaningless to talk about consciousness in the abstract as something that exists “inside our heads”, as something that human rational thought can produce out of thin air. Nor can consciousness be found in the CT-scans that are so eagerly used by contemporary students of consciousness looking for the areas that light up in response to some stimuli.<sup>114</sup> Consciousness/ideology exist in the dynamism of social interaction, in the rounds of political struggle in its various forms:

If we deprive consciousness of its semiotic, ideological content, it would have absolutely nothing left. Consciousness can harbor only in the image, the word, the meaningful gesture, and so forth. Outside such material, there remains the sheer physiological act un-illuminated by consciousness, i.e., without having light shed on it, without having meaning given to it, by signs (Voloshinov, 1929, 13).

But, whereas Vygotsky seeks to build a general psychology that studies consciousness, Voloshinov sees ideology as the moving factor of first importance in conditioning particular manifestations of consciousness. This is why psychology has little to contribute in the study of ideology, nor does it have to be based on it (Voloshinov, 1929, 13). In fact, the opposite is true: “objective psychology must be grounded in the study of ideologies. The reality of ideological phenomena is the objective reality of social signs” (Ibid.).

Clearly, the quest to understand ideology motivated both thinkers in the early and optimistic years of Soviet society. Once again (as with Marx), Vygotsky continues where Voloshinov’s

<sup>114</sup>Such stimuli no doubt do light up, but follow-up questions of why one defines oneself as an anarchist, or is willing to question the injustice of poverty remain elusive as ever.

analysis stops. If the linguist is painting with a broader brush, the psychologist attempts to focus on the details, on the mechanisms – both biological and social – that shape consciousness/ideology. The crucial moments in the study of ideology have to do with the moment when it is internalized, when it “succeeds” in shaping a particular consciousness. Voloshinov defines this moment of internalization of ideology as the psyche, the internal world where signs enables us to communicate and to comprehend what is happening in the world in which we live (the social world that is):

The psyche enjoys extraterritorial status in the organism. It is a social entity that penetrates inside the organism of the individual person. Everything ideological is likewise extraterritorial in the socioeconomic sphere, since the ideological sign, whose locus is outside the organism, must enter the inner world in order to implement its meaning as sign (Voloshinov, 1929, 13).

This is dialectical thought in action; there are no binary, cause-and-effect relations here. The social defines the individual, but it does not determine it. The individual retains a crucial role in this relation. The external (the ideological stratum) can only emerge socially (collectivity), but it must make sense and be present on the level of the individual. Vygotsky refers to this moment as the process of interiorization. It connects perception with meaning.<sup>115</sup> And meaning in turn implies the need for certain generalizations in the process of interiorization. Thus, the emergence of a particular form of verbal communication, “verbalized self-observation” marks the start of an interiorization process; a process which occurs through the “generalization of inner forms of activity” (Ibid.).

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<sup>115</sup>This discussion offers a brief example of how Vygotsky attempted to go beyond Voloshinov in developing the concepts through which consciousness can be studied scientifically. My discussion will consider his clinical work in psychology, which organically complements his theoretical studies.

What does it mean to “perceive some of our acts in a generalizing fashion” (Vygotsky, 1934b, 170-171)? Generalization seems to imply a process by which out of various separate concepts, actions, and objects, a *common* thread is identified and then used to *denote* those processes and objects. Vygotsky (1934a, 173) offers the following example “to illustrate the function of varying degrees of generality in the emergence of a system”<sup>116</sup>:

A child learns the word *flower*, and shortly afterwards the word *rose*; for a long time the concept “flower”, though more widely applicable than “rose”, cannot be said to be more general<sup>117</sup> for the child. It does not include and subordinate “rose” - the two are interchangeable and juxtaposed. When “flower” becomes generalized, the relation of “flower” and “rose”, as well as of “flower” and other subordinate concepts, also changes in the child’s mind. A system is taking place (Ibid.).

Generalization, then, is the process through which we *focus* on a particular process in detail<sup>118</sup>, and by doing so, we “enter into a new relation<sup>119</sup> to it” (Vygotsky, 1934b, 171). To generalize means to become self-aware (conscious) of our actions and to view these actions as relations and processes of a certain type.<sup>120</sup>

To generalize according to Vygotsky, is to speak of the psychological processes through which various forms of consciousness (false, self, double) emerge and are reproduced. The processes of generalization are the processes (emergent through social relations and embodied in the individual) of social reproduction (Meszaros, 1995), of hegemony and ideology (Gramsci,

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<sup>116</sup>Note again the concrete nature of his discussion of generality: it occurs within a system, not “in general” as in various idealist formulations.

<sup>117</sup>see preceding paragraph.

<sup>118</sup>This seems counter-intuitive to contemporary understanding of this word, where it has connotations of the very opposite.

<sup>119</sup>Understanding the relation is what counts.

<sup>120</sup>See Appendix 1 at the end of this dissertation, for an outline of relations in materialist dialectics, as argued by Bertell Ollman.

2003) and (Voloshinov, 1929), and of alienation and reification (Lukacs, 1971)). What differentiates generalizations from the rest is the attempt to “look within” the processes of alienation, reification, of hegemony and ideology. Vygotsky’s concepts attempt to move beyond Voloshinov’s analysis of language by attempting to study the sign and the psyche on the level of psychological processes. This includes both biological (neurons, neural networks<sup>121</sup>, chemical interactions) and social structures (study of childhood cognitive development during schooling, the psychology of work, observation of teaching methodologies and practices, etc.)

On a more abstract level, Vygotsky defines generalizations as “the formation of super-ordinate concept that includes the given concepts as a particular case” (Vygotsky, 1934b, 171-172). Generalization then, involves the creation of different levels of relations and processes, linked by meaning. Meaning is crucial, since it enables the creation of “hierarchy of concepts of different levels of generality”(Vygotsky, 1934b, 172). Thus, even in the highly complex world of generalizations, meaning, and hierarchy of concepts, Vygotsky grounds consciousness (understood as self-awareness of one’s thoughts) as systemic thought. Ability to form hierarchies of concepts at different levels of generality is underpinned by exposure to systematic thinking (“systematic reasoning”). Our consciousness develops as the result of learning from others around us. This is the materialist kernel, elaborated through the language of psychology, but nonetheless remaining grounded in the dynamism of social relations. A number of follow-up questions arise here: How are the various relations and processes of thought that generate conceptual hierarchies and levels of generalization formed? What is needed for the process of

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<sup>121</sup>Vygotsky’s student and collaborator Aleksandr Luria was one of the pioneers of what later became known as neuroscience.

interiorization to occur? Consciousness (and thus, systematic thought) “presuppose[s] the existence of rich and relatively mature representations” (Vygotsky, 1934b, 172).

Systematic thought is the mechanism through which the process of internalization transfers/transmits the totality of social relations inwards, changing the “psychological structure from top to bottom” (Vygotsky, 1934b, 173). The notion of “everyday concepts” - the ideas, words, signs and thoughts that form the fabric of ordinary everyday actions - emerges and is conditioned by the prior impact and influence of “scientific”, systematic concepts that “[remodel] from above” the “spontaneous concepts” of everyday life. This process can be described as agency, or subjectivity in action, but Vygotsky’s framework of consciousness better illustrates the subtle and constant processes and relations that exert such influence on everyday thought and action. Better, because it clarifies how “subjectivity” and “agency” are the result of complex ongoing relations between people, the interiorization and exteriorization of these relations. These processes are all subject to conditioning by the systematic thinking that impacts these relations.

This line of thought points clearly towards the role played by ideology, discourse, schooling, and disciplining the body and the population. In other words, once the Vygotskian notion of systematic thought emerges, Marxist dialectics forms a richer connection between Lukacs’ concepts of alienation and reification, Voloshinov and Gramsci’s work on ideology, and extending as far as the seemingly unrelated theoretical frameworks of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze . How else can we interpret striking passages asking us to imagine how systematic concepts directed by someone or group can “remodel from above” the spontaneous, common

sense actions and thoughts of everyday life? Is his not a novel formulation of the ways in which political power on the level of consciousness, with emphasis on the mechanisms through which power infuses human action, compliance and revolt operates? To seek the levers of political power is to understand the operation of the processes and relations that influence everyday thoughts and actions. Again, consciousness emerges as the terrain of this dynamic.

To understand consciousness means to understand “the notion of a conceptual system” (Vygotsky, 1934b, 174). If consciousness is formed through the processes and relations underpinning a movement “from-without” to “from-within” and vice versa (the process of interiorization), these processes and relations manifest themselves through concepts that are systematically organized. To achieve such systematization implies a certain level of generalization “between concepts” (Ibid.). At the same time, such *systems* also suggest that they are grounded in social relations, they are the result of human actions, choices, will and subjectivity: “The conscious use of concepts simultaneously<sup>122</sup> implies that concepts can be controlled voluntarily”(Vygotsky, 1934b, 174).

To summarize: the analysis started with Marx locating consciousness in *social relations*. It proceeded through Vygotsky’s acceptance of that formulation, and his second-order extension through the problem of interiorization, and then to “voluntary control” and its implication for the contested nature of consciousness. The important theoretical kernel that emerges out of this discussion is the affirmation that consciousness is a fundamental battleground in politics, and the battle is waged precisely over the process of interiorization (or “internalization”, in Vygotsky’s

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<sup>122</sup>The world simultaneous is important here in signifying the dialectical nature of these processes. Simultaneity transcends ordering , as in the case of cause-effect relationality.

words) where the mutual interactions between people (the domain of the interpsychological) through language and speech and action, is concentrated “at the level of the individual and the organization of that person’s activities” (Vygotsky, 2005, 9).

In the recently published excerpts from his journals and notes (Zavershneva, 2010), Vygotsky offers additional explication of his concept of consciousness. In a striking passage infused with dialectical thinking he writes, “consciousness determines life..., but it derives itself from life, and forms its component: ergo life determines life [itself] through consciousness” (Zavershneva, 2010, 48-49). Admittedly, this is a terse and rather abstract formulation compared to the passages found in Marx. Keeping in mind the fact that they were extracted from his private sketchbooks, rather than published works, they nonetheless offer an insight into the “laboratory” of Vygotsky’s mind, the raw and minimally filtered take on his most important ideas.

Above all, this passage is an affirmation of a materialist understanding of consciousness. “Consciousness determines life,” taken at its most generalized level<sup>123</sup> is a striking sentence not in its direct formulation,<sup>124</sup> but in what follows: consciousness “derives from life.” Vygotsky is affirming Marx here. Consciousness is not the soul, nor is it a particular emotion/sensation that a person is born with (genetically inherited? ! ). On the contrary, it emerges from life, from the act of living in a particular place, time, and space. It is possible to argue that “genetic” structures, biochemistry and neurology go a long way in explaining our consciousness, and more

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<sup>123</sup>in the sense of the concept outlined in above sections.

<sup>124</sup>This formulation having played an important role going back to at least Aristotle and his discussion of consciousness.

importantly, who can deny that the neural networks in our brain make it possible to even think about such things.

Vygotsky would be the first to accept the biologically (evolutionarily) “given” features of our physiology. But—and here is what makes a materialist approach to this question so profound—in the final analysis, humans do not communicate or form thoughts on the level of neurons and atoms.<sup>125</sup> We seem to be more interested in large scale structures of communication, perception and action. We do not say this particular neural network in my brain is causing me to condemn the invasion of Iraq. We could, however, say that the 2003 invasion of Iraq is one of the most blatant recent examples of imperialism and neo-colonialism. Our consciousness does not develop via a direct connection to our brain; we seem to rely on layers of mediation (social, affective, etc.)<sup>126</sup>. Vygotsky invokes the words of his contemporary, Georges Politzer (1994), who wrote that “it is the person who works, not his muscles” (Vygotsky, 1989, 71). Language, in other words, emerges as a medium of communication of our consciousness, but only due to the special role played by the social milieu: the necessary interaction between people mediated through/by concrete semiotic systems (Zavershneva, 2010).<sup>127</sup>

The challenge, of course, is in discovering the best approach to study this phenomena of human life. How can such complex dialectics be captured in writing? What is required in method to accomplish such analysis? Before turning to the innovative aspects of Vygotsky’s method, it is necessary to first trace the overall theoretical orientation of his answer to these

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<sup>125</sup>Actually, we do, but such communication has no bearing on our conscious view of our life.

<sup>126</sup>More on this later on.

<sup>127</sup>It must be immediately mentioned that Vygotsky enters here a theoretical terrain shared by Soviet contemporaries such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Voloshinov and Roman Jakobson.

questions. In general, he focuses his research of consciousness on the following broad areas: a) the role played by the social milieu (or, social relations in more direct Marxist language); b) the interaction between and within people; and c) the role of semiotic systems in aiding such interactions.<sup>128</sup>

The big theoretical change is in the shift from focusing on the mind-body (in Vygotsky's formulation, the psycho-physical) problem to that of language-thought. The goal of this new science of general psychology (the functional counterpart to Marx's "Capital") is to achieve a unified view of human psychology by abandoning the lingering Cartesian mind-body duality, entrenched in the psychology of his times under the rubric of the human psyche.

This is no doubt an extremely difficult task, a fact recognized by Descartes himself. In psychology, the mind-body duality was formulated as the "emergence of the psychic and the physical"(Zavershneva, 2010, 76). Descartes was aware of a process whereby a "transformation of spiritual energy into corporeal [energy] ... [takes place] ... "every minute in the monstrous piece of equipment, composed of pure spirit and a complex machine" (Ibid.). The French philosopher was acutely aware of the awkward nature of his formulation, calling it "the most obscure, unclear and difficult aspect of his theory" (Ibid.).<sup>129</sup> Citing the psychological theory of

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<sup>128</sup>The emphasis on "semiotic" is a bit unfortunate and not Vygotsky's. It will be minimized in subsequent discussion. Its inclusion here is for the purposes of succinctness in merging signs, language, speech, and meaning into one conceptual term for temporary purposes.

<sup>129</sup>Descartes was not alone in such deference to God. Georg Cantor, one of the developers of set theory, experienced an existential crisis when facing theoretical challenges posed by the concept of infinity. He was also compelled, as a religious person, to defer to God as well Drozdek (1995).

“emergent evolution” put forth by the English Princess Elizabeth as nothing, but a rephrasing of Descartes’ original formulation from three hundred years ago, Vygotsky writes:

Descartes himself, when asked by Princess Elizabeth to explain the union of the soul and the body, said that this union is unknowable. But does emergent evolution<sup>130</sup> not suggest the same thing? Descartes cites an unknowable miracle.<sup>131</sup> The new theory cites inexplicable emergence. In 300 years only the word has changed, but not the idea (Zavershneva, 2010, 76).

Descartes’ answer illuminates the limitations of non-dialectical idealist thought in psychology. When pushed to provide answers to foundational problems and questions, it puts forth its answer: we cannot know the answer. This is similar to the current helplessness of bourgeois economists who, when asked about the ongoing cataclysmic global depression, respond by deferring all explanation to “market forces.” The point is not to claim that answers can be had in every area of human thought, but to affirm that even in a subject as complex and indirect as the study of human consciousness (and of psychology, and politics in general), an attempt at a scientific answer has to be made! Otherwise, there is a regression to the pre-Enlightenment worlds of mysticism, myths, magic and superstition.

Countering Cartesian duality, Vygotsky reformulates the psycho-physical problem as the one of speech/thinking.<sup>132</sup> He attacks this new problematic by offering a very provocative statement: language arises from psychological structures, and not from the physiology of the brain, thus placing psychological structures above those of the brain, as a cognitive layer of greater

<sup>130</sup>I.e. the theory postulated by Princess Elizabeth.

<sup>131</sup>This is easily understood. The great scientist was a product, of course, of his time. He was a religious person, and accepted as fact that certain extremely complex questions (such as the mind-body duality) are knowable only by God.

<sup>132</sup>This reformulation is reflected in the title of his last finished work, *Thought and Language* (1934b), which should be more accurately translated in English as, “Thought and Speech.”

importance for the development of consciousness: “the brain and its functions in naturalistic terms do not and cannot have any structures corresponding to language” (Zavershneva, 2010, 73). Instead, the “above”, where language emerges, is the “historical-cultural milieu” (Ibid.), through which “2 brains” interact. Vygotsky refuses to get trapped by the then (and now) fashionable attempts to “find” consciousness in the individual morphology and physiology of the brain.

An objection can be raised here: why not locate consciousness in the brain’s “naturalistic” functionality? In answering this in the negative, two explanations emerge. First, there is no concrete proof that *consciousness* is an object, or a thing that can be located through a scientific instrument of observation (i.e. the proverbial CT-scan). Second, accepting such a proposition implies nothing about the operation and influence that social relations play in everyday life. If my consciousness develops and emerges solely (or mostly) within my brain, then the ideology of the atomistic individual reigns supreme; I am what my brain is (or, allows me to be)!

Such idealistic and bourgeois lines of thinking are to be avoided best by deepening the notion of social relations (“historical-cultural milieu”) by adding psychological structures to his understanding of social relations. The explication of these structures is the primary challenge in his general psychology. Here, within psychological structures, language plays a dynamic role, in being “the source of new cerebral structures” (Zavershneva, 2010, 73). Language, by being a layer of mediation within social relations, can lead to the formation of new ways of thought. Participating in a strike action can lead to the formation of new ways of thinking about union politics, and the introduction of new ways of talking about union politics. New concepts can be internalized (interiorized) and old ones abandoned. The education process in schooling is another

terrain where new cerebral structures can be imagined to emerge. The emphasis on language as the source of new psychological structures also raises interesting follow up questions about the precise *mechanisms* through which this dynamism manifests itself.

At the same time, there is a complex dialectic at play, since “not all the possibilities of operations with language are embedded in the morphological structure of the brain”(Zavershneva, 2010, 73). Indeed, they are embedded outside of the brain within social relations, but this is not to deny that the presence of language operations also within the brain is affirmed by the morphological structure of the brain. This is another way of formulating more precisely and concretely the problem of interiorization. It leads into yet another layer of dialectical complexity. Having linked language with social relations and the brain, it now exposes the need to confront another historically tough category of inquiry in political theory: the notion of thinking. At the same time, Vygotsky clearly argues for the need for abandoning approaches studying the “relation between the brain and the psyche (whether thought can move a cerebral atom 1 micron without expending energy)”(Zavershneva, 2010, 93-94), and related attempts at focusing on the physiology of the brain to locate consciousness.

The goal here is to “correlate thinking and brain-[functioning]”, to establish the relations and processes of interiorization of the psycho-physical problem. Speech (and language) and thought are connected through relations, where speech is the materialization of thinking, “its objectivization, its embodiment, a continuous transition of the external to the internal and the internal to the external, a real rather than imaginary unity and struggle of opposites”

(Zavershneva, 2010, 93-94). Typical of Vygotsky's writing in general, there is an over-saturation of important ideas, and layers of meaning compressed in a single sentence:

- materialization and objectivization of thinking, : the crucial point, denoting the process of *thought* as it assumes concrete forms in the context of social relations, of actual usage between people in a concrete historical setting.
- a continuous transition: there is no binary logic here, no internal vs. external boundaries, no rigid separation of theoretical categories denoting material objects.
- external and internal: a description of social relations through the filter of the psycho-physical.
- a real rather than imaginary unity and struggle of opposites: an affirmation of Marx's dialectical thought, of the Marxist tradition against all kinds of idealist thought and Hegelian dialectics of idealist materialism;

For political theory, Vygotsky's work introduces a deepening<sup>133</sup>, a development of theories of consciousness in the materialist (Marxist) tradition. It offers a theory that traverses a terrain different from that of classical liberalism (and its debates on human nature and natural rights), as well as that of modern liberal manifestations currently popular in political science (such as the ever-present portrayal of people as rational, self-maximizing actors and the reduction of consciousness to simplistic games of preference maximization). Lastly, this theory of consciousness differs radically from the various fascistic (or proto-fascistic) propositions emphasizing the fundamental irrationality marking the human consciousness.<sup>134</sup>

Drawing on the Marxist tradition, Vygotsky sees in this process the driving force of the historical (materialist) development of consciousness. The connection to Marx is explicit: "the

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<sup>133</sup>By introducing new concepts in the study of consciousness, beyond the already-existing ones.

<sup>134</sup>Such logic was implicitly present in the thinking of authoritarian servants of capitalists such as Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, who always argued that the coup and murderous overthrow of a democratically elected previous government was necessitated by the "instability" caused by Allende's social democracy; as if difference in opinion and politics is some type of an illicit political condition leading to instability and dysfunctionality.

materiality of consciousness in its link to language” (Zavershneva, 2010, 94) is the manifestation of historical materialism in psychology. At the same time, “thinking and speech ... are the *via regia* of all historical psychology” (Ibid.).

Psychology as a science must frame its problems internally, not by reference to external fields of inquiry. Questions in psychology have to be resolved by the science of psychology. Just as Marx opens the “Grundrisse” by stating that the “object before us, to begin with, [is] *material production* (Marx, 1993, 84), Vygotsky states: the object before us is the construction of a materialist view of the human psyche. Attempts at avoiding the psycho-physical problems from becoming “a hollow abstraction, devoid of any content” requires a “materialist understanding of the psyche” (Zavershneva, 2010, 95). This is so because in the various schools of idealist psychology, the psyche remains the core of abstract formulations: it is variously explained as *sense*, conditioned reflexes, or through the language of phenomenology. A good illustration is provided by the fact that virtually all schools of psychology refused to explicitly acknowledge that there is a psycho-physical problem to be tackled by psychology (the continued challenge of the mind-body duality and lack of a theory of a scientific theory of consciousness).

Countering this, a search for a materialist approach to the psyche leads directly to the study of “word and thought”, because how else can it be recast in materialist terms? Freeing the study of the psycho-physical problem of idealist constructions is a high level of concreteness, explicitly showing the mechanisms through which social relations and processes connect with individual actions and thoughts. The problem of interiorization, then, must be approached through the study of language and thought. The two form the contours of the external and internal, and the relations

and processes between them is consciousness. This is what Vygotsky means when he writes that a “materialist principle must be found within psychology rather than beyond its boundaries” (Zavershneva, 2010, 95), since for him psychology studies the intersection of language and thought.

Again, Vygotsky sees parallels to his task (towards establishing a general psychology) and Marx’s work in the analysis of political economy. Marx saw the need for a materialist understanding of history and political economy. Vygotsky is arguing the same for the study of human consciousness and the science of psychology. The startling and most crucial point in building such a science is tackling (explaining) the psycho-physical problem (the mind-body duality) as a totality, a process of dialectical unity, grounded in materialism through the study of the relation between thinking and speech.<sup>135</sup>

In this sense, Vygotsky’s work can be seen as an attempt to make more scientifically explicit, the mechanisms through which double and false consciousness actually develop and reproduce. This is the meaning behind Vygotsky’s problem of internalization (interiorization). Starting from the fact of double consciousness, how does it become internalized and sustained throughout the social? This is Vygotsky’s implicit question? What are the mechanisms through which these relations of domination and dependency are created and maintained? In seeking to answer these questions, Vygotsky is led to the study of language, speech, concept formation, meaning, affect, freedom and other related concepts that part of daily life.

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<sup>135</sup>See Appendix 2 for a note on the debate on consciousness in Vygotsky's time.

## VYGOTSKY AND GRAMSCI'S "COMMON SENSE": A CLOSER LOOK AT CONNECTIONS AND DIFFERENCES

Roughly at the same time, a similar concern about the “problem of interiorization” can be seen in the prison writings of Antonio Gramsci. In studying common sense, Gramsci attempted to understand the nature of human communication (of language and signs) and capture its relation to ideology and political power. In doing so, he entered the terrain of Vygotsky’s psycho-physical<sup>136</sup> domain.

Gramsci’s starting point in this discussion is also rooted in the orthodox Marxist conception of consciousness:

In acquiring one’s conception of the world one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting (Gramsci, 2003, 324).

Individual self-consciousness is grounded in and shaped by social relations. In this context, everyone is susceptible and subject to various currents of ideas, beliefs, superstitions, ideologies that induce conformity of some kind. Contra the liberal notion of the rational individual making sense of the world by themselves, sorting out what is just and not just, Gramsci counterpoises the concept of common sense as the default state of consciousness for the “average person.” common sense, “the philosophy of non-philosophers” (Gramsci, 2003, 419), is a psychological state (to use language closer to Vygotsky’s) that reflects belief systems and ideologies that have been internalized (for whatever reason) by a person, with a specific context of social relations (we could say: of class, gender, religion, cultural spaces, race, etc.). It is “the conception of the world

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<sup>136</sup>Or to use Vygotsky’s most developed formulation: of thought and speech.

which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man is developed (Ibid.).” This world view is not uniform, nor is it “identical in time and space (Ibid.).” In other words, unlike the liberal dogma of “human nature”, or the fantasies prevalent in political science today about “rational actors”, the default everyday state of self-consciousness of the majority of the population is a complex mixture of religion, absorbed cultural practices and beliefs, internalized ideological frameworks, various disciplinary mechanisms and their modification and filtering through one’s own thought:

[Common sense] ... is the “folklore” of philosophy, and, like folklore, it takes countless different forms. Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is (Ibid.)

This class conception of consciousness is invaluable in clarifying what Lukacs terms alienation and reification, the dominant by-products (in addition to exploitation) that subject the working class and the poor to oppression and misery, while preventing effective mobilization and revolutionary organization.

Even today, a number of leftist commentators can be heard lamenting about working class Americans consciously and enthusiastically voting Republican. Why vote against your own economic and political interests? Why support the elimination of welfare, when you actually depend on it? ! Gramsci’s common sense falls between Lukacs’ formulations and Vygotsky’s starting point. Human actions, thoughts, consciousness occupy a psychological space where the processes of interiorization shape our consciousness (or psyche in Voloshinov’s terms). Gramsci

maps the interiorization process as having several stages, from common sense to a “second level of “critical awareness” when more systematic way.

Common sense is a mode of thought where the “realistic, materialist elements which are predominant, the immediate product of crude sensation” (Gramsci, 2003, 420) are present. The daily stream of propaganda, of advertising, of hegemonic structures of discipline and oppression infuse social relations and individual perceptions. This is a “default” state of being; it cannot be avoided or denied. It operates subconsciously and consciously, and is “by no means in contradiction with the religious element (Ibid.).” Gramsci was writing in 1930s Italy and it is easy to see how the effect in establishing common sense by the Catholic Church operated identically to secular forms of social conditioning and internalization.

A movement away from common sense is possible. In fact it begins the moment one enters into the realm of awareness and criticism, a state Gramsci calls “the slightest manifestation of any intellectual activity whatever (Gramsci, 2003, 323) (a state including language). This is when second-order thought begins. This phase of self-reflection is denoted by awareness of common sense and willingness and ability to critique it:

... is it better to “think”, without having critical awareness, in a disjointed and episodic way? In other words, is it better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment, i.e. by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry into the conscious world? ... Or, on the other hand, is it better to work out consciously and critically one’s own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labors of one’s own brain, choose one’s sphere of activity, taken an active part in the creation of the history of the world, be one’s own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from the outside the molding of one’s personality (Gramsci, 2003, 323-324)?

This is broadly similar to Vygotsky's conceptualization of the role played by the movement from complexes to pseudo-concepts and eventually to concept-formation. However, several differences between the two thinkers approach are noticeable. Vygotsky's approach seeks to be as detailed and systematic as possible.

- Vygotsky's goal is to create a general psychology, a "Das Kapital" for the study of psychological (psycho-physical) dimension of human life. Thus, there is an attempt at a systematic methodological investigation
- Gramsci seems to argue that while anyone can develop second-level systematic critical thinking on a subject, the majority of "ordinary" people do not, unless within the context of revolutionary politics. This is precisely why Gramsci places so much emphasis on his concept of the organic intellectual, someone who is already thinking about *xyz* on the this second-level of thought (for whatever reason) and can intervene in shaping common sense towards more specific and narrow, second-level critical thinking.<sup>137</sup> Vygotsky does not make this claim. In mapping out his taxonomy of concept formation it is clear that every adult person forms concepts on a regular basis. The political implications of this process are similar however. Concept formation is the terrain of ideological battle, since it denotes that part of interiorization that shapes our socially-derived actions.<sup>138</sup>

Vygotsky's approach to the problem of interiorization overlaps to an extent with Gramsci's common sense, but on a more methodologically and conceptually detailed level.

We wished to study the inner workings of thought and speech, hidden from direct observation. Meaning and the whole inward aspect of language, the side turned toward the person, not toward the outer world, have been so far an almost unknown territory (Vygotsky, 1934b, 254).

The analysis of the "outward world" of social relations, of class and political economy had already been rather extensively studied by various Marxist scholars. What is understudied and mostly unknown is precisely the "inward" turn, what happens when the process of interiorization

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<sup>137</sup>This also brings to mind the distinction made by American communist leader James Canon between agitation and propaganda.

<sup>138</sup>As opposed to our biological ones such as breathing, hunger, etc., over which we have less than limited control.

is a reflection of social relations. In other words, how do we get to Gramsci's second-level of thinking, but without approaching the process of thought as a discrete division of unsystematic common sense, and systematic critical thought.

Vygotsky approaches human conditioning in the domain of ideology, language and communication, through an analysis of the building blocks of human communication, both external (language, the spoken and written word) and internal (the ensemble of cognitive processes that occur in our minds in relation to external communication).<sup>139</sup> As previously noted, central in this pursuit are the processes of abstraction, generalization and concept formation along with intermediary and secondary processes such as pseudo-concepts and complexes.

Previous sections of this chapter discussed abstraction, relations and generalizations. Taking Gramsci's common sense into account, the next section focuses on the role played by concept formation, a Vygotskian construction that I argue clarifies some of the "behind-the-scenes activity that leads to the formation of common sense, of ideology and critical thinking.

## WORDS OR SIGNS AND THEIR IN CONCEPT FORMATION

Concept formation is the result of:

- the functional use of any sign (or, specifically, a word) "as a means of focusing one's attention, selecting distinctive features [of whatever that is being "studied"] and analyzing and synthesizing them (Vygotsky, 1934b, 106)."
- a complex activity "in which all basic intellectual functions take part (Ibid.)."
- a "specific use of words as functional 'tools'", this is the "generative cause" of concept formation. [1986:107].

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<sup>139</sup>Perhaps most generically labeled as thought.

- as an aside note, Vygotsky notes that real concepts require words, in fact they are impossible without words. Thinking in concepts, itself, “does not exist beyond words (Ibid.) .”
- [is] a function of the social milieu, the “total social and cultural growth, which affects not only the content, but also the method of his thinking (Vygotsky, 1934b, 108).”

Thinking and behavior, including the process of concept formation, are the product of/and are conditioned by the social environment: “[they] are prompted from ... without, by the social milieu.” This is different from instincts, with which we are born with: “[they]... come from within (Vygotsky, 1934b, 108). Human development depends heavily on social conditions:

The tasks with which society confronts an adolescent as he enters the cultural, professional, and civic world of adults undoubtedly become an important factor in the emergence of conceptual thinking. If the milieu presents no such tasks to the adolescent, makes no new demands on him, and does not stimulate his intellect by providing a sequence of new goals, his thinking fails to reach the highest stages, or reaches them with great delay (Vygotsky, 1934b, 108).

The cultural/social dimension is not the only one, however, in explaining human development. It combines dialectically with “the development mechanism itself that results in concept formation.” [Ibid.] And here, to form concepts means to learn “to direct one’s own mental processes with the aid of words or signs (Vygotsky, 1934b, 108).” In a remarkable passage illustrating the dialectical nature of his thought, Vygotsky notes that after birth, no new “elementary functions, essentially different from those already present” appear during adolescence. We develop no new “brain functions”, we use what we already have. However, what changes in our capacity to form concepts has to do with reorganization, resulting in the formation of new structures, new synthesis becoming “parts of a new complex whole. Here is the dialectical core of this argument: “... the laws governing this whole also determine the destiny of

each individual part (Vygotsky, 1934b, 108).” Concept formation is an “activity mediated by signs.”<sup>140</sup> In other words, is not purely internal, but both external-internal (thus the terms from-within and from-without.) (Vygotsky, 1934b, 108).

What exactly is a the heart of such dialectics? Vygotsky’s answers is both unexpected and original: incoherent coherence. This very dialectical concept that can only make sense in a non-binary, no-duality-based reasoning. Vygotsky uses the term in describing the cognitive development of children. Concept formation through grouping of heaps of elements can be a coherent process, but the process the child follows in assembling the heaps into a concept can appear (to the observer mostly) to be haphazard and “incoherent”. Yet, the action is coherent in the sense that it is actually undertaken. The common feature of this stage is assembly of heaps which have acquired certain intrinsic meaning. Vygotsky’s analysis of these processes can be extended to the world of concept formation in politics and see as a continuation of Gramsci’s common sense. This is especially visible in Vygotsky’s discussion of complexes, one of the psychological structures of human communication. In a complex “the bonds between its components are factual and concrete, rather than abstract and logical (Vygotsky, 1934b, 113).” For example, someone’s last name refers to a person, it is not a logically derived connection, but an actually-existing one. This idea is similar to Gramsci’s common sense as a widely-held mode of thought, where belief structures in politics are based on actual, concrete practices, and less so on abstract and logically-based conceptualizations. In complexes, objects are grouped in a diverse way and could be any “factually present connection that exists in the observed reality

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<sup>140</sup>Again, Vygotsky is overlapping with Voloshinov’s world.

(Ibid.).” There is no hierarchical organization of the relations between different traits of a particular object. All attributes are functionally equal.

Such analysis finds particular resonance in discussions of political ideology, or the operation of power in politics. When we talk about complexes denoting psychological (psycho-physical) structures of thought, we are talking about a specific mode of organization of human communication. This is an interesting attempt at capturing the seemingly “chaotic” nature of everyday political struggle on the level of ideas. An overwhelming majority of Americans today seem to support both the end of the wars in Iraq-Afghanistan and the preservation of Social Security and Medicaid/Medicare. Yet, a majority of the population who voted in the last congressional elections had also internalized many of the ideological frameworks of the right wing in American politics. This false consciousness (to use W.E.B. DuBois’ term) is perhaps less “false” than actual/real. It seems more accurate to replace false consciousness, or perhaps alienation, with Gramsci’s common sense and Vygotsky’s thinking in complexes providing the theoretical underpinning of Gramsci’s concept.<sup>141</sup> Thinking in complexes is based overwhelmingly on acquired traditional beliefs, religion, cobbled-together ideas based on modes and practices of thought where logical and systematic thinking is minimized. It is important to note that Vygotsky is not claiming a binary opposition, a duality between thinking in complexes (what I am calling Gramsci’s common sense) and what Gramsci calls “systematic, logical and critical thinking” (or in Vygotsky: thinking in concepts, or concept formation). In fact, both systematic and narrowly-focused thinking in politics, coexists with common sense. The degree to

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<sup>141</sup>In the sense of continuing where Gramsci stops with his development of common sense.

which one predominates among people in a specific political struggle is a reflection and and outcome of political struggle in all of its domains: ideological, disciplinary, class, gender, race, power.

As an aside, the following is an outline of how Vygotsky develops his complexes. The outline is intended to illustrate the lengths to which Vygotsky went to wrestle with a concept as slippery as the various sub-concepts that participate in the concept formation process in thought.

Vygotsky lists five types of complexes, three of the most important of which include:

a) Associative type: any bond that is noticed between a sample object and some other object, grouping occurs here by association: common colors, shapes, size, proximity, etc. any commonality found here is then grouped and assigned a name.

- An associative complex is a complex “based on the similarities, or perceptually-compelling ties between things (Vygotsky, 1934b, 115).”

b) Collections: an association by contrast, rather than similarity, where concepts formed via complementarity of studied objects that become formed into groups.

- complexes that “functionally complement each other (Vygotsky, 1934b, 115).” Examples include: spoons, forks and plates, sets of clothes grouped into complexes...
- Collections are also “relations between objects observed in practical experience.” [Ibid]
- a collection complex is a “grouping of objects on the basis of their participation in the same piratical operation - of their functional cooperation (Vygotsky, 1934b, 115).”

c) Chain Complex: “a dynamic, consecutive joining of individual links into a single chain, with *meaning* carried over from one *link* to the next Vygotsky (1934b, 116).”

For example: “a child starts playing with a yellow triangle, he then adds other triangles of different colors to the yellow (since triangle is the most common basis for grouping); → then he

switches to blue blocks of any shape (meaning transfer via a “chain”); → then, the kid changes yet again the criterion: disregards color (blue) and focuses on rounded blocks only... ‘Each link’ is as important as the rest (Ibid.).

- A chain complex is factually indistinguishable from the group of concrete objects that form it (Vygotsky, 1934b, 117).

The work on consciousness necessitated further explorations in questions of method. As someone who became interested in Marxism by way of Western humanist philosophy, Vygotsky’s entry into the fiery debates on method in the 1920s, and the practical challenges necessitated by his clinical and theoretical work in psychology, teacher training and anthropological case studies, produced an innovative approach to the development of materialist dialectics as a method of research. In this, Vygotsky occupies space similar to that of Lukacs and Gramsci, who also engaged in both the defense, and development of materialist dialectics in the context of their political struggle against various bourgeois (both liberal and fascist) and Stalinist opponents.

In a series of works the most prominent of which is “The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology: A Methodological Investigation” (1926), Vygotsky engages similarly against both bourgeois social science (and its idealist, non-dialectical method), as well as the newly-emerging opportunists in Soviet academic life, who now lose no time in appending “Marxist” in front of whatever they do regardless of the actual substance of their method. By the early 1930s, his critique become muted given the increasing tide of Stalinism in Soviet intellectual circles.

Nonetheless, though the details of his critique changes, his focus on staying true to a materialist dialectical method remains.<sup>142</sup>

## VYGOTSKY AND DIALECTICS

Any concrete phenomenon is completely inexhaustible and infinite in its separate features. (Vygotsky)

### DIALECTICS: ON METHOD AND HISTORY

For Vygotsky history has two meanings. First, history is “the dialectical approach to things” (1989, 54).<sup>143</sup> This is a formulation of dialectics at its most general level. Everything has a history and everything is studied and understood through the study of its history. Even natural science “= the history of nature, natural history” (Ibid.). To study history, is to study a “genetic” evolution through time, to capture developmental stages, to trace a progression (not necessary linear or causal! ).

There is also a history of the particular, the localized and the concrete. Vygotsky calls this human history, “history in the strict sense” (1989, 55) In the human mind, both histories are united. There is a synthesis of the general and the particular, of dialectics as a method on the most *general* level of thought, and of the dialectics of the particularities of human history in a specific concrete reality.

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<sup>142</sup>The third chapter will present his struggles against encroaching Stalinism, and fascism.

<sup>143</sup>The document quoted here consists of unpublished notes by Vygotsky, printed for the first time in the 1980s in the Soviet Union. Chronologically, the notes preceded his last works of the 1930s, though they were written after his initial books from the mid-1920s.

Vygotsky's discussion of history occupies theoretical space similar to that of his contemporary Gyorgy Lukacs. In his 1925-1926 polemic against the Soviet Hegelian philosopher Avram Deborin and the Hungarian theorist and revolutionary Rudas, Lukacs (2000) presents his understanding of materialist dialectics. Lukacs writes that a crucial feature of materialist dialectics is its rejection of trans-historical categories of thought, and their replacement by concepts grounded, interpreted and understood to exist only within and through, historical development. Thus, Lukacs rejects as "bourgeois sociology", declarations of the type: human consciousness in general; the person as a specific individual; history in general; human activity in general. All formulations in the previous sentence share an atomistic and ahistorical formulation. This is incorrect and idealistic on two grounds. First, to treat a "person" as an atomistic entity meshed in a society, is to omit the primacy of relations that determine and condition the two. Second, materialist dialectics studies both relations of objects and the objects, and not the objects outside of the relations that constitute the objects.<sup>144</sup>

In his earlier works, Vygotsky's approach to dialectics is grounded in orthodox Marxist formulations and approaches Lukacs' work explicitly. In the "Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology", he writes about the "dialectical viewpoint in logic" (1926, chapter 5), and the need to deploy an "objective dialectic in studying the subjective dialectic." Though grounded in Engels' "Anti-During" (1877), Vygotsky - even at this relatively early stage - is already pushing and expanding the meaning of materialist dialectics. In arguing for the necessity to create a new science of psychology (a general psychology), he counter-poses the non-dialectical approach

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<sup>144</sup>Again, it has to be emphasized that Lukacs is discussing the study of history and society and not, of natural science.

taken by “general science”, whose foundations are “epidemiological critique and formal logic”, with “the science of the most general forms of movement (in the form of behavior and knowledge of this movement)”. In other words, “the dialectic of psychology is at the same time the dialectic of man as the object of psychology, just as the dialectic of the natural sciences is at the same time the dialectic of nature” (Vygotsky, 1926). Again, there is an emphasis on the relation<sup>145</sup> of the general (as in the general science of psychology encompassing all fields and subfields of psychology) and the localized, the particular (the study of humans being the concrete, specific object of the study of psychology)<sup>146</sup>

The one aspect of Vygotsky’s view on dialectics that re-appears throughout his work is the emphasis on the dynamism of processes, relations and actions. When defining science, for example, he writes that “it [science] commences to be understood dialectically in its movement, i.e., from the perspective of its dynamics, growth, development, evolution. It is from this point of view that we must evaluate and interpret each stage of development” (Vygotsky, 1926, chapter 10). The concept of development plays a key role in dialectical thinking, allowing complex social and internal processes to be conceptualized dynamically, and not necessarily causally and atomistically:

According to one, development is nothing other than realization, modification, and combination of deposits. Nothing new develops here – only a growth, branching, and regrouping of those factors that were already present at the very beginning. According to the second conception, development is a continuous process of self-propulsion characterized primarily by a continuous appearance and formation of the new which

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<sup>145</sup>Here we see another example of the crucial role played by *relations*, that foundational concept in Marxist dialectics, now in the formulation of *method*, in addition to the role they play in Vygotsky’s theory of interiorization discussed in the first half of this chapter.

<sup>146</sup>And not of “life itself!”

did not exist at previous stages. This point of view captures in development something essential to a dialectical understanding of the process (Vygotsky, 1934a).

In his last works, Vygotsky's conceptualization of dialectics entered new terrain. In "Thought and Language" (1934a), he writes of the need to shift from analysis of elements into analysis of units when studying psychology. Such a change is required in order to create a general science of psychology based on dialectical method. Analysis of elements yields an understanding of the psyche, where "properties of the whole are lost" (Vygotsky, 1934a, 3-4) This produces a narrative that is fragmented, atomistic, and focused on linear cause-and-effect chains; an approach that is totally incapable of capturing the complex totality that conditions the human psyche. It is not a surprise then, that the end result of such an approach is to "search out the mechanical interaction of the two elements in the hope of reconstructing, in a purely speculative way, the vanished properties of the whole" (Vygotsky, 1934a, 4).

The analysis of elements fails as a method when studying "complex holistic systems"(Vygotsky, 1934a, 5) such as psychology, or politics. Such analysis breaks down complex totalities ("wholes") into its constitutive elements. In the case of psychology, such an approach "analyzes verbal thought into its components, thought and word, and studies them in isolation from each other" (Vygotsky, 1934a, 4). What is lost as a result are the overall properties (its "original properties") that make up the totality of the phenomena of verbal thought. The result is an analytical dead end, with the scientist engaged in nothing more than the search for "the mechanical interaction of the two elements in the hope of reconstructing, in a purely speculative way, the vanished properties of the whole" (Vygotsky, 1934a, 4).

What the analysis of elements ends up producing is not analysis, but rather a generalization of the studied phenomena. When studying water, it is common to conceptualize it in terms of its constitutive chemical elements: hydrogen and oxygen. Though this is an accurate description of the elements that form what we call water, such an approach fails to explain the contradiction whereby the individual properties of hydrogen and oxygen (when considered individually, elementally) do not exhibit the identical properties of water in its totality.<sup>147</sup> What makes such an analysis of water a generalization, is the fact that it “is equally applicable to the water in a great ocean and to the water in a raindrop” (Vygotsky, 1934a, 4). Analysis of elements cannot capture the “unitary nature of the process”, especially in the case of complex totalities. In the case of psychology, analysis of elements fails most crucially in its inability to provide “adequate basis for the study of the multiform concrete relations between thought and language that arise in the course of the development and functioning of verbal thought in its various aspects” (Vygotsky, 1934a, 5).

Again (an approach completely organic to materialist dialectics), to understand a phenomenon, means to understand the various relations that fold and unfold in time, comprising the totality of the phenomenon. It means an ability to capture specifics, concrete details - what Vygotsky calls concrete regularities - over time, while avoiding general formulations that transcend across time, ignore various foundational relations, specifics, regularities and concrete details. To analyze verbal speech by focusing separately on thought and language, is to ignore the “unitary nature of the process” (Ibid.) through which verbal speech occurs. The totality of “sound

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<sup>147</sup>Firefighters use water to put out fires. However, its elements (hydrogen and oxygen) have the opposite effect. Hydrogen burs, while oxygen fuels a fire.

and meaning” resulting in verbal speech becomes “broken up into two parts, which are assumed to be held together merely by mechanical associative connections” (Ibid.). If the example of water seems a bit strange, then the application of Vygotsky’s critique to psychology and political theory clarifies the significance of his intervention.

In political theory, a materialist dialectical approach holds true for the same reasons discussed above. Only by focusing on the relations and processes as they unfold over time<sup>148</sup> can a complex social phenomena be understood in ways beyond the most surface of generalizations. A non-dialectical approach yielding surface generalizations is offered, as a way of contrast, by contemporary bourgeois economics. In their explanations for the ongoing global economic depression, mainstream economists reduce their arguments ultimately to the nature and operation of the “market.” The global capitalist market operates on a cyclic basis and now we are witnessing a downturn. The implication is that depressions are “fact of life”, a force of nature as it were, something that cannot really be avoided by human intervention, but only minimized and delayed. Others put forth human greed (! ) as the main trigger for this period of increasing poverty, war and oppression. It was Wall St. hedge fund managers currency traders, who followed the inherent greediness of humans, in making selfish and questionable investment decisions.

The net effect of such “explanations” is first of all a state of confusion. What is exactly the connection between the increasing rates of unemployment and the greed-motivated actions of certain traders and bankers? The connection is hardly intuitive, logical or reasonable. Surely there must be other causes for the disaster? Or, such “analytical” approaches yield meaningless

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<sup>148</sup>Or, to use an alternative formulation: events as they unfold historically).

research: volumes have been written since the start of the global recession on the role played by human greed in motivating actions leading to crisis!

Small variations notwithstanding, bourgeois economics will never move beyond such surface generalizations of economic crisis. Unemployment is at 11%. This is nothing but a repetition of a simple fact, empirically verifiable through government unemployment statistics. Housing sales have decreased by 25% nationwide, and this fact is connected to Goldman Sachs announcing a record-breaking quarter of profits. Ok, so what? This “connection” reveals nothing of the internal relations between the absurd profitability of a Wall St. investment bank and the record levels of housing foreclosures across the U.S. What enables Goldman to make such profits in this case concretely? Could it have something to do with redistribution of profits (surplus value) in finance? What about the role played by almost non-existent government regulation of mortgage-backed securities? Why is there virtually no regulation? Could it be explained by the complex dynamic of class conflict in the U.S.?

Questions such as these are elementary starting points for any Marxist analysis of political economy, or of the state. Yet, they are absolutely impossible for the methodological apparatus of bourgeois social science. Vygotsky’s critique of what he calls bourgeois psychology is based on similar grounds. The lack of dialectical method produces results similar to those of the Chicago School of economics. Thus, to understand the process of interiorization, the role played by speech and ideology, one must develop a suitable dialectical method in inquiry that is furthermore grounded in materialism.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>149</sup>Thus, avoiding an ontology and epistemology that is based on idealism in its various manifestations: trans-historical categories, philosophies of morality, appeals to mystical

## A COMPARISON: LUKACS AND VYGOTSKY

Vygotsky's approach to dialectics can be further clarified through a comparison with the approach taken by Gyorgy Lukacs at roughly the same historical period. This is the most direct way to illustrate the gulf separating the stale and unimaginative work done by the "official" school of Soviet Marxist theorists - the theorists of *DIAMAT* - <sup>150</sup>, and the innovative approach of Vygotsky.

Lukacs was perhaps the most creative and influential Marxist theorist of the 1920s, and a comparison can help situate Vygotsky's own creativity and place within the broader Marxist tradition of the twentieth century. There is an added sub-narrative for comparing the two as well. Following the defeat of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 and the subsequent establishment of a right-wing government, Lukacs spent over a decade in the Soviet Union. During this period of exile, he was active in the Marx-Engels Institute, establishing close ties with a number of important Soviet Marxists, who had not capitulated to the demands of "official" Stalinist dogma. One of them, the great Soviet philosopher of aesthetics and literary critic, Mikhail Lifschitz, played a crucial role in forming an intellectual link between Vygotsky and Lukacs, and the best representative of the post-Stalinist period of Soviet Marxist thought, the philosopher Evald Ilyenkov. Lukacs' work is interesting for precisely the same reason as is Vygotsky's: while rooted in a careful and nuanced understanding of the dialectics of Marx and Engels and of Western post-Enlightenment philosophy in general, it moves beyond the conceptualizations of the two originators of materialist dialectics. If materialist dialectics is a living science, it makes sense for

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substances such as the soul.

<sup>150</sup>An acronym for Dialectical Materialism.

its conceptualizations to change and evolve through time. What follows is an overview of some of the main threads in Lukacs' thought from the 1920s.

Bursting on the theoretical scene as the most exciting and innovative thinker in the Marxist tradition at this time, Lukacs' work sets the groundwork. It defines the sharpest and most debated theoretical points of his time; it represents the cutting edge of theoretical development in materialist dialectics. Though in places his writing focuses on the polemics of the mid-1920s Comintern, the underlying narrative is of extreme theoretical importance for the development of Marxist thought beyond its immediate historical period of creation. I propose that engaging with Lukacs sets an appropriate stage for diving into Vygotsky's theories; theories that at first appear more abstract and not directly applicable to politics and political theory. As with anything in dialectics, appearances are but manifestations of deeper and more important structures. In fact, I see a relation between Lukacs and Vygotsky's thought, where understanding Lukacs' passionate appeal in defense of materialist dialectical method provides an organic link in understanding Vygotsky's own struggles in defending materialist dialectical method, as well as deepening our understanding of the nature of his unfinished project: general psychology.<sup>151</sup>

This dynamic provides another motivation to return to the older works of the 1920s, when Lukacs, the most highly regarded Marxist theorist of dialectics was motivated exclusively by demands of revolutionary political struggle. Similarly, Vygotsky primary motivation was to find a way to most effectively use insights from psychology to help develop a new system of public education. The new Soviet state was confronted at the time, with the overwhelming challenge of

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<sup>151</sup> See Appendix 3 for a note on certain dominant formulations of dialectics in contemporary political theory.

rapidly educating millions of illiterate peasants and workers. This was a project of utmost political and social importance. At this time (the 1920s), the field of Soviet education was the most progressive area of education in the world. Thousands of schools on every level were being constructed, millions of new teachers and staff trained. Educational experiments were the norm of the day, all geared towards the project of mass education, that was to be free, comprehensive and open to everyone. In this context of excitement, high tempo, limited resources and overwhelming odds, Vygotsky and his colleagues saw the task of psychology as one of fundamental importance: to provide insight on how people learned, to imagine a new educational system for a new society. And to accomplish this task, it was first necessary to confront the ideas, practices and concepts of bourgeois society, and transcend its previously dominant position in psychology. Writing in the mid-twenties during a trip to the West, Vygotsky's excitement about the Soviet project is clear in the following diary entry:<sup>152</sup>

In essence Russia is the first country in the world. The Revolution [is] our greatest cause. Only 1 person in this room knows the secret of the true education of d.-f. [deaf-mutes—E.Z.], and that person is me. Not because I am more educated than others, but I was sent by Russia and I am speaking for the Revolution (Zavershneva, 2010).

#### DEFINING MATERIALIST DIALECTICS

The essence of Marxism, writes Lukacs in “What is Orthodox Marxism” (Lukacs, 1971), is to be found in its method. According to Engels, in materialist dialectics “the definite contours of

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<sup>152</sup>This tone of optimism will become somber, inwardly-focused and pessimistic by the early 1930s and the onset of Stalinist conservatism and political repression in psychology. Vygotsky's work at that later period faced determined attacks at various conferences. He must have clearly sensed the “winds of change” (and we can only assume (his multiple references to Trotsky's writings would have only accelerated his downfall). Had he not died in 1934, Vygotsky would have certainly been destroyed by the terror of the late thirties.

concepts (and the objects they represent) are dissolved.” Materialist dialectical thought is thought as a “continuous process”, of transition from one concept (Lukacs uses “definition” here) into another. Causality, in other words, is replaced by interaction. Lukacs notes however, that this formulation contains a crucial omission. Engels’ definition misses “the most vital interaction, ... the dialectical relation between subject and object in the historical process” (Lukacs, 1971, 3). The dialectical relation between subject and object can, in turn, be understood as a totality<sup>153</sup> present in the historical process; or unity of the object and subject.

Unlike the Cartesian approach of bourgeois social science, materialist dialectics does not permit a separation between method (or, thought<sup>154</sup>) and reality (or Being) (Lukacs, 1971, 4). Lukacs amplifies Marx’s argument that economic categories are in reality the conditions of existence of people. In other words, the categories of capitalist political economy (and its related methods of scientific inquiry) denote the actual conditions (even if bourgeois political economists refuse to say this explicitly! ) that workers, for example, are living at a specific historical moment of capitalist development.<sup>155</sup>

Lukacs outlines the following key features of materialist dialectics:

- the interaction of subject-object
- the unity of theory and practice (praxis)
- the notion that historical changes in our reality underpin the categories of our perception of this reality.

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<sup>153</sup>A more detailed discussion of totality follows in a subsequent section.

<sup>154</sup>From now on, fundamental concepts will be denoted in CAPS.

<sup>155</sup>The importance of historical specificity in Marxist analysis illustrates the necessity for terms bracketing various historical periods: neo-liberalism, Fordism, imperialism, etc.

Vygotsky adds an even more explicit political differentiation to the motivation behind his dialectical science:

The psychology that we are speaking about does not yet exist; we must still create it—and not just in school. . . . Our science could not and cannot develop in the old society. On the contrary, in the new society our science will be at the center of our life. “A leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom” will inevitably add to the agenda the question of mastering our own essence, of subordinating it to ourselves. . . . The new society will create a new man. When people speak of reshaping man as an indisputable feature of the new mankind, and about the artificial creation of a new biological type, this will be the first and only species in biology that will create itself . . . this psychology will bear as little resemblance to the present version as—to use Spinoza’s words—the Canis constellation bears to a dog, the barking animal (Zavershneva, 2010, 71).

#### ON METHOD: BOURGEOIS SOCIAL SCIENCE VS. MATERIALIST DIALECTICS

A constructive method implies two things: (1) it studies constructions rather than natural structures; (2) it does not analyze, but construes a process (contra a method of grasping unexpectedly, analysis, tachioscope; contra the systemic method of the Wurtzburgians). But a cognitive construction in an experiment corresponds to a real construction of the process itself. This is a basic principle. (Vygotsky)

Central to Lukacs’ thought is the search for an answer to the following two fundamental questions related to the subject: first, “what is to be understood by the term “subject”, and second, “what is the function of the subject in the historical process of development” (2000, 41). As far as the first question goes, the subject cannot be split “inflexibly and mechanistically” from the object. The subjective process is part of the objective process, one is impossible to emerge without the other (Lukacs, 2000, 56).

The focus on the subject is a concern shared by Vygotsky. The problem of interiorization is another way of conceptualizing Lukacs fundamental question of how the subject is to be understood. The relation of the internal and external in human communication, consciousness and action is another way of studying the subject. The conceptual framework is different, but the overall, general goal remains the same. This should not be surprising, given that both Lukacs and Vygotsky are thinkers in the Marxist tradition.

Lukacs' primary target is the "meta-physics" infusing bourgeois social science and the reformist currents of Marxism active at that time. In such idealist ("meta-physical") thought, the Cartesian separation between object and subject (or, the Cartesian mind-body duality) is strictly maintained. The object remains "untouched" by the subject. Thought remains just that, a thought (a state of contemplation) that "fails to become practical" marked by its inability to become a vehicle (together with the subject) for changing reality.<sup>156</sup> The delineating line between Marx's materialism and the idealist philosophers he critiqued is after all his adage that the point of philosophy is to change the world, not to just interpret it. There is agency that Marx sees in the subject. The thoughtful subject, engaging in the life of the mind, observing the world and taking notes about its operation are the height of idealist irrelevance, *if* the process of contemplation ends without affecting actual change in its object of contemplation in some way.<sup>157</sup> For Lukacs, it

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<sup>156</sup>A powerful counterexample is offered by the "thought experiments" of Albert Einstein, where the results of his "state of contemplation" were inseparable from being vehicles of change. In other words, the "Theory of Relativity" was born out of years (Einstein's description of watching trams move, etc.) of thought experiments occurring in Einstein's mind, before the ideas/concepts unfolding out of this thought became actualized/materialized in the mathematics of the theory of relativity.

<sup>157</sup>If, in other words, a conscious attempt is made to stop at the level of thought.

is not enough for thought to identify the paradox in a given concrete historical juncture. This emphasis on isolated contemplation, separated from active engagement with the object, is what makes such “meta-physics” reactionary and counter-revolutionary.

Vygotsky too is critical of Cartesian dualities. The starting point of his critique is rooted in Spinoza’s discussion of the body and mind (soul) duality. In place of the separation between contemplation (of the mind) and action (in nature), Spinoza sees a complex relation between thought and action. They are inseparable processes, whose functioning cannot be comprehended in separation: “the relationship between the soul and the body (life and intellect) are not absolute and immutable, but changeable, relative” (Zavershneva, 2010, 39). Vygotsky’s understanding of dialectics as a Marxist, is itself based on Spinoza’s break with Cartesian causality: “Everything in Spinoza breaks with mechanical causality, with immobility (there is no development), with disconnectedness, with parallelism and demands an escape beyond their boundaries” (Ibid.). Vygotsky is writing here in his private journal, a fact explaining the striking, spontaneous nature of his thoughts. Note his use of words such as “parallelism”, “immobility”, “boundaries”. If these passages read differently than the corresponding sections in Lukacs, that is because they are indicative of the deep development that Vygotsky brings to the very concepts of materialist dialectics. As will become apparent in subsequent sections, Vygotsky’s intervention in the field of psychology produced a deep intervention in the language of materialist dialectics itself. The conceptual world of Hegel, Marx, Engels receives an infusion of new concepts hitherto not present in the world of “classical” dialectics.

In an important parallel showing the importance of the question of method among leading Marxist thinkers at this time, the question of causality was also of interest to Valentin Voloshinov. The Soviet linguist critiqued (Voloshinov, 1929) what he terms the “mechanical causality” that defined non-dialectical science. By mechanical causality Voloshinov understood the causality used in the positivism of natural sciences, though he is careful to note that a number of areas of the natural sciences have moved beyond mechanical causality towards “dialectical materialist” thinking.<sup>158</sup> The problem with such causality is its narrow scope “of application”. By treating facts as isolated chunks of information, meaning becomes lost, and causal relations cease to make sense in relation to the totality of whatever is being studied:

No cognitive value whatever adheres to the establishment of a connection between the basis and some isolated fact torn from the unity and integrity of its ideological context. It is essential above all to determine the *meaning of any given ideological change in the context of ideology appropriate to it*, seeing that every domain of ideology is a unified whole which reacts with its entire constitution to a change in the basis (Voloshinov, 1929, 17-18).

In other words, a causality established by separating facts from a totality, from a framework of a general system of meaning and social relations is essentially meaningless.

Lukacs also focuses on the arguments of what constitutes a scientific fact, and what does not, to carry out his polemic against bourgeois social scientists and pseudo-Marxists. For Lukacs, “facts can only become facts within the framework of a system - which will vary with the

<sup>158</sup>This is most likely a reference to the method and formulations of quantum theory in physics, as well as Einstein’s “General Theory of Relativity.” Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, for example, illustrates the limits of our knowledge when studying matter. The exact position, in space, of an elementary particle can only be obtained at the cost of giving up the precise velocity of that specific particle. Karen Barad provides an exhaustive analysis of modern physics and the application of fundamental insights from quantum theory and the theory of relativity to political theorists’ understanding of matter (Barad, 2007).

knowledge desired...” (1971, 5). Similar to Voloshinov and Vygotsky, Lukacs notes that there are no facts dangling alone “out there” in nature. Gravity can be described only through specific systems: i.e. Newtonian physics, general relativity, etc. Furthermore, facts presuppose an “interpretation”, a theory, a method. This interpretation is political and subject to historical development.<sup>159</sup> Capitalism is itself conducive to the creation of non-dialectical ways of thought. This is done by transposing the “pure facts” of natural science into the study of history and society with results in favor of capital’s class interests.

Vulgar Marxists and revisionists are not immune from such errors. In Lukacs’ polemics against two such lapsed Marxists, Deborin (whom Lukacs describes as a self-identified Menshevik) and Rudas (a Kantian idealist camouflaged in Marxist garb), he finds a similar error in their “materialism”, whereby they “regard as worthy of scientific investigation only that which is free of any participation on the part of the subject” (Lukacs, 2000, 49). The subject must be kept separate from the object, and must not be given an active role. The concrete outcome of such thinking in politics is the replacement of class struggle with a struggle between society and nature! The subject in Deborin (and bourgeois thinkers) is the individual and/or society, while the object is nature. And to do this is simply to deny that “a historical process takes place inside society, which alters the relationship between object and subject”: a “historical materialist” joins Comte and Herbert Spencer! Lukacs’ point is well taken here: there is a thin line between theoretical mediocrity and objective confusion. The distance between genuine materialist

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<sup>159</sup>For Lukacs, nowhere is this more apparent than in Edouard Bernstein’s cynical goal of freeing method “from the “dialectical snares” of Hegelianism” (Lukacs, 1971, 5). In seeking to achieve this, the political nature of Bernstein’s own project (i.e. his anti-socialist opportunism) became only more apparent!

dialectics and bourgeois liberalism can be equal to zero, if attention is not paid to the actual differences between the two theories.

Interesting in this context is Vygotsky discussion of the subject. In his unpublished manuscript “Concrete Human Psychology” (1989), he differentiates his understanding of “man” from that of Hegel and Pavlov. For Hegel, “man” is a logical subject, while for Pavlov it is an organism, a *soma* (Vygotsky, 1989, 66). Vygotsky’s initial formulation is the orthodox Marxist view that “man is a social person = **an aggregate of social relations, embodied in an individual** <sup>160</sup>(psychological functions build according to social structure)” (Ibid.). This is re-articulated by a reference to sociogenesis:

**There is nothing higher if one acknowledges** that organs are created from without, the brain is regulated from without, the personality = an aggregate of social relations ... **sociogenesis is the one true perspective, i.e. mechanisms are created in the environments** (constructions) (Vygotsky, 1989, 68).

Vygotsky quickly enters uncharted waters as he shifts his formulation towards psychology: “there is both a **me** and an **I** in every [psychological] function (Ibid.). The unity of the subject-object, in other words, is the totality of the social relations and the specific individual in question. This unity can be understood through the psychological movement: outside → inside; what Vygotsky calls the movement from-without to from-within. In this relations-process where “the aggregate of social relations [is] transferred inwardly” (Vygotsky, 1989, 69), lies the fundamental totality of the subject-object. Except, Vygotsky drops the subject-object in his search for a new concept denoting this totality, one that is grounded in the science of psychology. Psychology for him is

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<sup>160</sup>Text in **bold** is Vygotsky’s.

the science of how people are affected by the various sets of relations (social, internal-external, regulatory mechanisms, etc. understood as a totality<sup>161</sup> that they are implicated though/in their lives.

Thus, a personality is “the aggregate of social relations transferred inwardly” (Vygotsky, 1989, 69). This process of transference is the crucial object and subject of his psychology. Within this process of transference are contained regulatory functions (“special forms of regulation”), the formation of higher mental functions, and also a particular dynamism of action. To understand a personality (which I am calling a subject) it is best to approach it as a participant in a drama<sup>162</sup>: “What do love, dreams, thinking, art, mean in it” (Vygotsky, 1989, 68)? Within a personality psychological functions “change their role: sleep, thinking, practical intelligence”, depending on what can be called the personality’s mode of existence at that particular moment in the drama. Social relations, the processes through which some aspects of those relations get internalized by the subject, the particular internal relations in that subject form a dynamic and highly complex totality that guide everyday actions, choices, thoughts, words. How rich in possibilities is this formulation of the subject. The following quote neatly summarizes the above:

There is no permanent hierarchy of functions.<sup>163</sup> Thus, there is no permanently **fixed will**. But, there is a natural range of possibilities for each function, determining the sphere of possible roles for that function (Vygotsky, 1989, 68).

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<sup>161</sup>Meaning, in a complex simultaneity to the extent possible by the method used to capture the relations in play.

<sup>162</sup>As in: to do and to act.

<sup>163</sup>But, there is a hierarchy, perhaps a *local* one of psychological functions?

Vygotsky's concern is less directly on the dynamics of waging a revolutionary uprising, but more on the meta-level of human consciousness and action itself, within the context of a revolutionary (or post-revolutionary) society. Where Lukacs starts with the individual, with Being, and concentrates on the totality of the revolutionary political action, Vygotsky focuses on how Being is entangled within the totality in a post-revolutionary setting. In other words, he is most interested in studying the relations constituting social relations.<sup>164</sup> Vygotsky is a Soviet citizen, and the revolution has already happened (at least in its most critical stage of transition from the previous political system to the new order).<sup>165</sup> He is thus primarily focused on participating in the building of a new society, not the overcoming of one, though such a phrasing is perhaps more binary in its logic, than dialectical.<sup>166</sup> The focus is different, Vygotsky is writing from within the new, post-capitalist world, whereas Lukacs is preoccupied with the struggle from within capitalism.

Lukacs illustrates the totality of subject-object by analyzing Lenin's revolutionary politics. Though separated by close to ninety years of historical development, the horrors of Stalinism, and the 1991 historic defeat of the international communist movement, Lukacs' take on revolutionary socialist politics as an example of materialist dialectics in politics seems to retain its theoretical relevance. Thus, this comparison with Vygotsky on the nature of dialectical

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<sup>164</sup>Similar to Gramsci's efforts on common sense and critical thought, except Vygotsky focuses on the relations that enable Gramsci's concepts: the psychological relations.

<sup>165</sup>Or, the old hegemonic classes of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy have been replaced by a government dominated by representatives of workers, peasants and politically-sympathetic intelligentsia.

<sup>166</sup>After all, Vygotsky would probably disagree with formulations that by 1929, the Soviet Union was post-revolutionary society, given the tremendous challenges facing society at the time.

method must go through Lukacs' detour into the revolutionary politics of his time, as an example of dialectical thinking in practice (an example of dialectical praxis).

Lenin understood, Lukacs (2000) writes, the fundamental materialist dialectical insight of the importance relations have together with concrete historical developments. Revolutionary moments emerge through historical development. World War I occurred amidst the general crisis of capitalism in the world, whereby global competition between imperialist powers could not ultimately be resolved without the outbreak of a world war. Regardless of how individual imperial (and non-imperial) powers sought to potentially avert a war, the general tendency - creating all of the preconditions for a war - were immune from the wishes of "peace-seekers." Yet, as Lenin argues, the very outbreak of a world war and its accompanying misery and slaughter, is not by itself enough of a historical condition to lead to a revolutionary change in social relation. The objective conditions must be complemented by a subjective set of actions (and actors) that *through* a relational process with the objective conditions (condition of a world war, hunger, death, insecurity, breakdown of trade, general misery, etc.) have the possibility of affecting revolutionary change. Lenin is very clear about the importance of a social class in such a moment of relational crisis, and the comparative unimportance of struggles on the individual level (for example, as reformists would argue, a particular "good" politician might reform single-handedly a political system to make it more "just", democratic, less exploitative). Again, Lukacs affirms the importance of the dialectical unity of object-subject through the lens of Leninist politics.

The focus on social class is necessary, because political struggle (and as we will see in Vygotsky, thought and human communication in general) is not an isolated series of acts in response to some opposing political actions from independently acting subjects. On the contrary, it is a struggle that is fought as a fusion (or, the totality) of the object-subject of the capitalist system of social metabolic relations (as Lukacs' student Istvan Meszaros (2008) would put it) and the subjective forces fighting for its demise (the revolutionized class and its "fighting troops", a revolutionary communist party):

... it is not the case that out of such a situation [a revolutionary situation] where, in addition to the objective conditions outlined previously, a subjective factor comes along, namely the capability of the revolutionary *class* to carry out revolutionary mass actions that are of sufficient strength to break the old government (or shake it), which never, except in a period of crisis, "collapses" unless one "rattles it (Lukacs, 2000, 50-51).

The revolutionary role played by the working class and its political party becomes true only through the historical development of capitalism. It is a foundational feature of Marxist thought that people "make their own history" (Lukacs, 2000, 51).

The belief that physical reality, the *object* of subjective human actions, can be actually transformed by such subjective action, is fantasy only from the point of view of bourgeois social science (and social democratic reformists).<sup>167</sup> This is what Lukacs means by "unhistorical conception of reality", the denial of "any possibility of influencing reality, even on the part of the proletariat", or - for that matter- any social class and individual. Again, this idealist position is a political one. After all, it is to the advantage of the capitalist class - when faced with multiple

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<sup>167</sup>But capitalists as a class do not make such errors, as any survey of class struggle across the world since the dawn of capitalism will attest!

crisis - to promote a position justifying the eternal nature of the capitalist mode of social metabolic reproduction. Kant and Hegel become harnessed and along with other fantastical mythologies such as the concept of the self-balancing free market, become deployed in the desperate struggle for political survival amidst crisis, war, economic downturn, and generalized oppression.

Casting aside some of his formulations that are a product of 1920s discourse, Lukacs' critique of bourgeois theory retains its relevance today. In the midst of the present depression, the hegemonic discourse transmitted throughout media, and various political structures is very much based on the denial of "any possibility of influencing reality", especially when it comes down to working people. Ongoing tuition increases and impending layoffs at CUNY, are justified as being almost divinely preordained. There are layoffs and tuition increases due to a number of "objective" reason: state budget deficits, low taxes, global economic crisis. The list goes on and on. The end total of such "analysis" is the portrayal of layoffs and tuition increases as facts necessitated by actual, objective social conditions.

The CUNY's PSC union in turn, joins this discourse by taking the most ineffective approach in defense of its staff. The union leadership seeks to fight tuition increases and budget cuts with appeals to lawmakers in Albany (the very same who are voting for the cuts! ) to do "the right thing", or the "fair thing",<sup>168</sup> and thus essentially announcing the total inability on the part of

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<sup>168</sup>See, <http://psc-cuny.org/clarion/april-2011/high-stakes-budget-fight-unfolds-albany>

union members to affect change through their own subjective actions. What is such cynicism, but the naked affirmation and repetition of the cynics in Lukacs' day! <sup>169</sup>

In the realm of mainstream political theory, things are different, but only in the way they are framed in words. Consider two currently dominant strands in political theory: positive political theory and democratic (deliberative) theory. Positive (or, formal) political theory presents the formation and definition of a parliamentary government as follows:

Consider a parliament consisting of  $n \geq 3$  parties and denote the set of these parties by  $N = \{1, \dots, n\}$ . Let  $s_i > 0$  denote the share of seats corresponding to party  $i$  and assume that no party controls a parliamentary majority, that is,  $\sum_{i=1}^n s_i = 1$  and  $s_i \leq \frac{1}{2}$  for every party  $i$ . The formation of a government requires an agreement on a policy  $\mathbf{x} \in X$  and on the allocation of portfolios, which I represent as a vector  $\mathbf{g} = (g_1, g_2, \dots, g_n) \in \mathbb{R}^n$  that satisfies  $g_i \geq 0$  for each party  $i$  and  $\sum_{i=1}^n g_i = G > 0$ . I assume the policy space  $X$  is a convex and compact subset of the  $d$ -dimensional Euclidean space  $\mathbb{R}^d$ ,  $d \geq 1$ , and encompasses all the public policies that can be pursued by any cabinet (Kalandrakis, 2010, 8).

Using less formal language the above can be rendered as follows:

Consider a parliament consisting of at least 3 parties and let these parties be called *parties in Parliament*. Let  $s_1$ ,  $s_2$ , and  $s_3$  denote the share of seats corresponding to each of the 3 parties in Parliament. Assume that no single party controls a parliamentary majority, defined as each party having less than half (1/2) of the total number of seats in parliament. The formation of a government requires (is dependent on) an agreement on specific policies and on the allocation of portfolios, which assumes that each party will have at least **one** portfolio in government. Public policies set by parliament define the full range of public policies that can be pursued by any cabinet.

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<sup>169</sup>Recall the discussion above of contemporary bourgeois economists who ascribe “human greed” as the main explanatory factor for the (capitalist) speculative binge that crashed the global economy in 2008!

I undertook this “translation” to make further analysis easier, given the obvious fact that the inclusion of mathematical formalization in the definition adds nothing to the definition. Both these definitions illustrate Lukacs’ critique (along with that of Andrew Kliman). Bourgeois social science borrows directly from the method of natural science, as it seeks the “pure facts” so prominent in political science and neoclassical economics. Natural science accomplishes this through a process of abstraction where “a phenomenon of the real world is placed (in thought or reality) into an environment where its laws can be inspected without outside interference” (Lukacs, 1971, 6). Studied phenomena are reduced “to their purely quantitative essence, to their expression in numbers and numerical relations” (Ibid.). This is very necessary and organic to the study of atoms, molecular processes, gravitational forces and neurons in the brain. In fact, there is no other way to attempt the deciphering of natural phenomena; the method of natural science evolved as necessitated by its object of study. The process of abstraction that occurs in a physics lab, or in Einstein’s thought experiments, isolates structures, facts and ideas only to gain a hold of the immense complexity of the material world. It abstracts, isolates, but only temporarily and with fully understanding that this process of abstraction is a needed simplification before folding the results back into an interpretation of the complex totality of the material world. It is not surprising in this context then, to find some of the most profound examples of dialectical thought in the work of physicist David Bohm.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup>In the last twenty years of his life, Bohm wrote a number of influential books, engaging with questions of human consciousness, communication and creativity (in addition to his work in quantum mechanics). Some of the best know are “Wholeness and the Implicate Order”, “On Creativity”, “Thought As A System”, “On Dialogue”. Through each of them, he offers profound examples – and an alternative approach – of dialectical method and thought, even if not explicitly located in the Marxist tradition. Another interesting theorist, whose work fuses the boundaries

In non-dialectical political science, the process of abstraction is not folded back into the totality that is social relations. In fact, social relations are totally absent in the analysis, other than in a purely figurative sense. The complex genealogy of historical evolution, the parallelism of various economic processes, the struggle for power, the entire complex set of subjective and objective conditions that form social relations becomes hidden behind the veil in a dark cave. Thus, - to go back to the definition of parliamentary government previously discussed - a parliamentary government can be defined purely instrumentally: there are three parties at minimum (to avoid a two-party system), the guiding operating mechanism is majority voting which can occur only through coalitions between the parties. Not a word is included here about the nature of the parties. Who primarily votes for the various parties? What happens politically before the parties gain access to parliament? Precisely how are classes reflected across the three parties? These very basic political questions do not play a role (if at all!) in such definitions. All of this is expanded by Lukacs in a powerful paragraph showing how capitalism stimulates the growth of non-dialectical social science:

The fetishistic character of economic forms, the reification of all human relations, the constant expansion and extension of the division of labor<sup>171</sup> which subjects the process of production to an abstract, rational analysis, without regard to the human potentialities and abilities of the immediate producers, all these things transform the phenomena of society and with them the way in which they are perceived. In this way arise the “isolated” facts, “isolated” complexes of facts, separate, specialist disciplines (economics, law, etc.) whose very appearance seems to have done much to pave the way for such scientific methods. It thus appears extraordinarily “scientific” to think

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of theoretical physics and social theory, is Karen Barad. Her approach to dialectical method is powerfully and creatively displayed in the recently published “Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning” (2007).

<sup>171</sup>A power amplification of Marx’s key insight about the nature of capitalist organization of social reproduction.

out the tendencies implicit in the facts themselves and to promote this activity to the science of science (Lukacs, 1971, 6).

The secret to the obsessive focus on individual, atomistic actors so overwhelmingly present in the definition above (government as the interplay of three political parties in parliament) unfolds out the logic of capitalist society itself; and specifically, to be more precise and avoid idealist generalizations, out of the logic of the hegemonic classes of capitalist society. Society is transformed into to the myth of the libertarian individual, or the liberal duality of individual-society posited as separately-existing entities. The specific historical development yielding the concrete contours of capitalist class society, the relations binding capitalist and worker together, the very real impact of alienation on everyday life, all is lost in this vulgar borrowing of method from natural science. What works in molecular biology, should also work in the study of economics and politics! This is how the author of the first definition of parliamentary government arrives at the following definition of a government:

**Definition 1.** A government is a pair  $(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{g})$  consisting of a policy  $\mathbf{x}$ , and an allocation of cabinet portfolios  $\mathbf{g}$ .

There we have it! The complexities of politics reduced to a neat formal definition where a government does nothing but enact policies and organize cabinets!

Lukacs sees this appearance of “scientific rigor” to be precisely at the root of the ongoing assault against materialist dialectical thought. The assault is politically motivated. When facing the “systems” of bourgeois social science and its preoccupation with “facts” and mathematical models, dialectics - with its insistence on studying the “concrete unity of the whole” - appears as an “arbitrary construction.” Political struggle is cut out of discourse through the artful

intervention of formal logic and linear algebra. The labor and elegant results of centuries of mathematical thought is cut and pasted into the terrain of the one field of human thought that seems to be most unsuited to such processes of quantitative abstraction: the process of humans studying their own actions as humans.<sup>172</sup> Not surprisingly, no less an authority on natural science than Albert Einstein cautioned students of social relations about the dangers and difficulties of studying social science, through the blind application of natural science:

It might appear that there are no essential methodological differences between astronomy and economics: scientists in both fields attempt to discover laws of general acceptability for a circumscribed group of phenomena in order to make the interconnection of these phenomena as clearly understandable as possible. But in reality such methodological differences do exist. The discovery of general laws in the field of economics is made difficult by the circumstance that observed economic phenomena are often affected by many factors which are very hard to evaluate separately (Einstein, 1949).

Dialectical thinking indeed! The difficulties caused by these “many factors” are ultimately rooted in class struggle, in the biopolitics of race, gender, and class domination. In addition, Einstein notes that there is real difference in the objective goals of science and political struggle (in this case, for the achievement of socialism):

Second, socialism is directed towards a social-ethical end. Science, however, cannot create ends and, even less, instill them in human beings; science, at most, can supply the means by which to attain certain ends. But the ends themselves are conceived by personalities with lofty ethical ideals and—if these ends are not stillborn, but vital and vigorous—are adopted and carried forward by those many human beings who, half unconsciously, determine the slow evolution of society (Ibid).

Scientific methods, then, should not be blindly transplanted into the study of politics:

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<sup>172</sup>This is the crudest general formulation of politics that I could come up with so far, linking the object of Lukacs and Vygotsky’s studies.

For these reasons, we should be on our guard not to overestimate science and scientific methods when it is a question of human problems; and we should not assume that experts are the only ones who have a right to express themselves on questions affecting the organization of society (Ibid).

This is precisely what Vygotsky also argues when he cautions the dangers of mechanistic transposition of method from natural sciences into the study of social relations. Even the insights of Marx from the pages of “Capital” cannot be directly transplanted into the study of consciousness, of the interiorization problem. The problem of doing such a transfer is the importing of the primary abstractions of one science into another. The concept of primary abstractions is of fundamental importance to Vygotsky and it is broadly similar to Lukacs’ notion of “capturing the dialectical unity of the whole” in a specific context.

Primary abstractions can be thought of those concepts which when taken together, generate the epistemological and ontological apparatus of a particular science (or, generally speaking: a line of inquiry). They “determine not only the content, but also predetermine the character of the unity of the different disciplines (Vygotsky, 1926).” Primary abstractions are, then, the most crucial initial (axiomatic? ) entry points, whose definition and method define the contours, explanatory power, and ultimate limits of a particular science. In Marx’s “Capital”, such abstractions include: the commodity (in its various forms of appearance), capital (in its various forms of circulation), money (in its various forms), value (in its various forms), etc. From these abstractions or, fundamental concepts, Marx builds his dialectical science of political economy. The primary abstractions give rise to what could be termed *secondary abstractions*, or

second-order concepts such as: the general law of capitalist accumulation, the struggles over the length of the working day, the concept of primitive accumulation, etc.

In Lukacs, primary abstractions are concepts such as the interaction of subject-object, the unity of theory and practice, and the notion that historical changes in our reality underpin the categories of our perception of this reality. Out of the dialectical (i.e. non-causal, but relational) interplay of these abstractions arise the more general concepts such as alienation and reification. Common sense, is one of the primary abstraction in Gramsci's study of capitalist society that permits him to generalize the operation of hegemony and explain the longevity and stability characterizing western European (and American) bourgeois rule, in contrast to the brittle hold on power exercised by the Russian aristocratic and bourgeois classes in the period leading up to 1917.

In each of the above cases, the follow-up concepts are conditioned and enabled by the specific primary abstractions. Gramsci's theory of hegemony captures an essential dynamic of political power and oppression precisely through its rich and theoretically well-formulated primary abstractions. Similarly, it would be impossible to derive the concept of imperialism and the laws of capitalist accumulation without starting from the commodity form in the age of capitalism. Vygotsky understands this inner logic present in every dialectically-formulated science, when he writes that it is the primary abstraction that "determines the character of the unity of the different disciplines, and through this, the way to explain the facts, i.e., the main explanatory principle of the science (Vygotsky, 1926)."

General Psychology – the theoretical study of human consciousness, language, and communication – has to be constructed as its own dialectical science, grounded in materialist understanding of life, and with its own organic apparatus of inquiry. Similar to Lukacs’ demand for capturing “the dialectical unity of the whole”, Vygotsky’s general psychology aims to do just that in the area of human psychology. Echoing Lukacs’ concern about dialectical method being able to achieve a unity of analysis, Vygotsky formulated his vision of such a “general science” as arising out of the need to create a level of analysis above (or beyond) the many specialized branches that are so characteristic of newly emerging disciplines. As psychology develops, the various “heterogeneous branches of knowledge” that characterize its schools (psychoanalysis, Pavlovian reflexology, behaviorism, etc.) tend to reach for each other, to cross-pollinate, to “develop into a general science and to spread their influence to adjacent branches of knowledge (1926).” This is Vygotsky’s dialectical approach to method.

Bourgeois science, in contrast, tends to do the very opposite. Instead of aiming for cross-disciplinarity, of mutual informing, bourgeois social science builds barriers between, and within its various disciplines. Economics becomes the domain of economists: narrow specialists who possess the inner truth. Political scientists are conditioned to think about politics, without thinking of exchanging ideas with anthropologists, or anyone else for that matter. The end result, is the extreme atomization of modern social science (in its hegemonic mainstream manifestations), which lead to a poverty of theory, and thus, of vastly inaccurate and fragmented perceptions of social reality:

When similar disciplines have gathered sufficient material in areas that are relatively remote from each other, the need arises to unify the heterogeneous material, to

establish and define the relation between the different areas and between each area and the whole of scientific knowledge (Vygotsky, 1926).

The need for unity arises from the realization that such unity of concepts offers a more close approximation to our perceived reality. Borrowing the language of bourgeois social science, only such conceptual unity can provide “models” of sufficient complexity to even begin capturing the nature of political power, or political economy, or the intersectionality of race, class and gender in the U.S. today. The guiding question of method in this instance Vygotsky writes, should be: “How to connect the material from pathology, animal psychology, and social psychology (Vygotsky, 1926)? ” Or in contemporary terms in political science: How can concepts - and the knowledge derived from the application of those concepts - taken from political psychology, be connected to gender studies, political economy, the study of class, critical race theory and discourses of power? There are no shortcuts possible in achieving a general science of politics, just as there are no shortcuts in the study of capitalism, as Marx famously writes in his introduction to Volume 1 of “Capital.”

The concept of unity is itself to be dialectically understood as a unity of concepts in their relations to each other, and to themselves. Vygotsky is not thinking of logical additives forming a unified whole, as in adding concepts  $x + y + z + w$  yielding a new whole, consisting of the mixing together of  $x$ ,  $y$ ,  $z$ , and  $w$ :

... the heterogeneous material is not united merely by adding one kind of material to another, nor via the conjunction “and,” as the Gestalt psychologists say, nor through simply joining or adding parts so that each part preserves its balance and independence while being included into the new whole (Ibid.).

Instead, unity is achieved via transformations, mutations, relations of subordination and dominion, whereby “different disciplines renounce their sovereignty in favor of one single general science” that folds into itself the abstractions of its contributors. This is not quite the thousand plateaus of Deleuze and Guattari, but we’re getting closer. Vygotsky’s general science has hierarchical structures, but not of unitary, and authoritarian nature: “The various disciplines do not simply co-exist within the new whole<sup>173</sup>, but form a hierarchical system, which has primary and secondary centers, like the solar system:

Thus, this unity determines the role, sense, meaning of each separate area, i.e., not only determines the content, but also the way to explain things, the most important generalization, which in the course of the development of the science becomes its explanatory principle (1926, Chapter 2).

This is a good illustration of Marxist dialectical thought, when the internal relations (in Bertell Ollman’s sense of the concept) encompassing different concepts in a particular area of study, condition both each other and the whole; the science of general psychology would achieve its unity by “transcending the borders” of the various individual sub-disciplines in psychology (the collection of primary abstractions)

Achieving unity is also not the end of the process. Each step forward also necessarily involves “at the same time an act of criticizing the concept (Vygotsky, 1926).” There are echoes of Hegelian dialectical negation, but there is also more than that. Vygotsky’s concept moves beyond

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<sup>173</sup>As when political economy, theory and international relations all co-exist as disciplines within political science, yet there is (in general) virtually no mutual informing between them. They exist mostly atomistically, only vaguely coming into contact with their respective primary abstractions - if at all.

the pairings of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, beyond the negation (and the negation of the negation) into more:

Each newly discovered relation between two facts immediately requires a critique of the two corresponding concepts and the establishment of a new relation between them (1926, Chapter 5).

Rather than a new *synthesis* in the Hegelian sense, Vygotsky sees reconfiguration of relations. Relations, and the relation of such relations (relationality) is the moving force of his dialectics.

This is an interesting development in dialectical thought since it can be argued that political ideas, ideologies and struggle rarely take the form of negation. Instead, political ideas seems to function more through the “discovery of a new fact by means of an old concept.” Changes brought forth by political struggle yield new relations between contested political ideas, facts and practices. Thus, the re-appropriation of traditional revolutionary left concepts such as human rights, freedom, democracy, “the people”, self-determination, by reactionary forces and ideologies is but the latest example of this dialectic. Even more striking is the very recent absorption of revolution itself that is taking place in the Libyan civil war. In this case, an internal rebellion by anti-Qaddafi forces, became the conduit of a full-scale imperialist military intervention under the rubric of the “Libyan Revolution.” Thus, revolutionary politics, the ultimate expression of emancipatory action by mass movements of oppressed peoples, has itself been absorbed and equated with the practice of imperialist military interventionism. When NATO’s bombings are mentioned in the same sentence and context as the word “revolution”, what we have is the re-shaping, or reconfiguration of a fundamental political concept and its appropriation by opposite political forces:

Finally, each discovery in science, each step forward in empirical science is always at the same time an act of criticizing the concept. Pavlov discovered the fact of conditional reflexes. But didn't he really create a new concept! at the same time? Did we really call a trained, well-learned movement a reflex before? And it cannot be otherwise: if science would only discover facts without extending the boundaries of its concepts, it would not discover anything new. It would make no headway in finding more and more new specimens of the same concepts. Each tiny new fact is already an extension of the concept. Each newly discovered relation between two facts immediately requires a critique of the two corresponding concepts and the establishment of a new relation between them. The conditional reflex is a discovery of a new fact by means of an old concept (1926, Chapter 5).

This is the difference between dialectical method and bourgeois social science. Even after the ongoing depression exposed the fictitious nature of bourgeois (mainstream) economics and its models, economists refuse to take into account the new relations between economic facts that have emerged in the crisis. As the full-picture of how destructive unregulated finance capital is in its ability to bring the entire global economy to the brink of complete destruction, virtually none of the currently-hegemonic models of bourgeois economics have been abandoned. As the depression is ascribed to "personal greed" and individual incompetence, the inability of such non-dialectical method to change and incorporate new insight is in clear contrast with the possibilities offered by a dialectical method in political economy.

Vygotsky seems to also implicitly understand the limits of Lukacs' method and critique. At some point, Lukacs runs out of explanatory "stream", reaching a threshold beyond which its concepts begin to lose analytical effectiveness. For example, the concept of reification, which can be described as a special case of alienation, offers a powerful critique of a fundamental feature of capitalist society: the objectification of abstract things and ideas and their ascription to human-like features. Thus, corporations in the U.S. are commonly perceived, as well as legally

recognized as individual human beings! This absurd fact is made even more outlandish by the constitutional protections that are assigned to those very same reified entities. Reification thus plays a crucial role in revolutionary politics in exposing the class politics behind the common sense of everyday concepts such as: the market formulated in bourgeois papers as a “thing”, something that exists as a corporeal entity; free trade as an actual practice where sellers and buyers can “go to” and engage in exchange as in some mythical physical market out there somewhere; unions have to be broken in Wisconsin in order to “balance the budget”, the budget being presented not as an abstraction existing on paper and on computer terminals, but as an object of immediacy and corporeality no different than union workers.

In a sense, however, the concept of reification raises new questions about the nature of capitalist societies, pointing to the need for further theoretical development. What else, beyond the effects of the capitalist division of labor, leads to reification? How are highly oppressive ideologies, preaching racism, the oppression of women, and the coercive exploitation at the workplace (a point emphasized in all American states where “right to work”—an explicit anti-union legislation—is enshrined in local constitutions)? How are these political phenomena of political hegemony internalized en masse? Vygotsky’s focus on the internal relations between fundamental social constructs (within the practices of language and everyday communication) and their internalization points the way towards a very pressing contemporary political goal: the ability to affect, interfere, interrupt, and reshape the functioning of hegemonic ideology, a requirement fundamental for potentially successful anti-hegemonic struggles on the left.

## CONCLUSION

With Vygotsky, psychology entered the realm of Marxist materialist dialectics. Writing in the midst of the dual crisis of approaching Stalinist counter-revolution within the Soviet Union (and the international communist movement), and the rise of fascism (within the context of global capitalist depression), Vygotsky's polemics with the major schools and accepted theories in psychology, were directly connected to the broader political and ideological struggle between practitioners of revolutionary communist dialectics and bourgeois social science. In this war of ideas, his work stands next to the efforts of fellow Marxists Gyorgy Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci. This pairing is not accidental; Vygotsky's thought contained the defining features of the Soviet Marxism of the 1920s, combining eclecticism with materialist dialectics, and a thorough engagement with continental philosophy and theoretical innovation arising out of the new Soviet reality.

At the same time, Vygotsky's psychology entered the domain of politics proper. No longer was it the science of individual behavior, nor the subject of mysticism and idealism. While constructing the outlines of his general psychology, Vygotsky connected the need for this new and properly scientific formulation of psychology, to the very real needs and challenges of Soviet society. The study of consciousness, of language, and of human behavior, became the study of social relations, of ideology (forming striking conceptual similarities with the work on common sense by his contemporary Gramsci), and of political power. His experimental efforts in designing school curricula transcended the bourgeois functions of education as training grounds for class society, and entered the terrain of the post-revolutionary transition towards a new world.

The end result was the provoking and original Vygotskian intervention in the Marxist tradition of materialist dialectical thought. Combined with his own revolutionary politics, Vygotsky's method marks a powerful development of the Marxist tradition of the first three decades of the twentieth century. Occupying the period of high tide in revolutionary politics, and preceding the tragic episodes of revolutionary defeat, Vygotsky's intervention remained incomplete at his death. It ended up partially buried under the combined weight of Stalinist repression and Cold War anti-communism.<sup>174</sup> Still, even an initial archeology of its geneology makes clear how organic his work is to the most creative and influential currents of Marxist thought in the 1920s and 1930s.

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<sup>174</sup>My reference is to the rather inaccurate and politically motivated representation of the Soviet Marxist tradition by most Western scholars in the period between 1945 and the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. This charge is levied against both bourgeois students of Soviet intellectual currents, as well as a number of leftist thinkers.

### CHAPTER 3 (THE STALINIST REACTION AND VYGOTSKY'S RESPONSE)

The “Great Break”, announced by Stalin and his cohorts in 1929, marked the start of the transition from the dynamic and relatively open twenties, to the totalitarian Stalinist thirties. This shift was felt across all parts of Soviet society and was the direct result of an intense political struggle within the ranks of the Bolshevik Party. 1929 was the year in which Trotsky was exiled from the Soviet Union, marking the general defeat of the Left Opposition. The Left Opposition was a fluid and diverse group, whose changing membership at various points included most of the original leadership of the October uprising, save for Lenin and Stalin (Rogovin, 2009) and (Deutscher, 1987). Additionally, it counted among its supporters various prominent members of the younger generation of Soviet left intellectuals, along with older thinkers whose had gravitated to socialist politics before 1917.

Stalin’s “New Course” marked the end of Marxist pluralism and the toleration of non-Marxists in Soviet intellectual life. Science continued to be perceived as having an important role in building the new Soviet society, but as Anton Yasnitsky writes (2009, 43):

Thus, the idea of a key and instrumental role for science in social transformation was not removed, but was subordinated to yet another social idea, namely, of power and control of the Party and its social institutes. From the end of 1920s, new mechanisms of state control over the science were introduced, and the centralization of science significantly increased.

From now on, academic scholarship was to be firmly subjugated to Party diktat and the very notion of scholarship outside direct Party control became an impossibility. This new "science" was imposed via:

- State censorship, with the state taking the leading role in the publishing of all forms of intellectual work.
- The imposition of "self-criticism" rituals seen most dramatically in the Moscow Show Trials between 1936 and 1938, as a new manifestation of authoritarian politics representing the Thermidorian phase of the Russian Revolution.<sup>175</sup>
- The creation of a state-science bureaucracy tightly controlling all aspects of knowledge production and research (Yasnitsky, 2009, 43).
- The solidification of a new and privileged Party nomenklatura, as well as outright repression of any intellectual who refused to accept subjugation to the new party line (illustrated by events such as the "Academic Trial" and the removal of the administrative staff of the Academy of Sciences and its replacement by loyal pro-Stalinist faction cadres).<sup>176</sup> Dmitriev (2007) sees in this sequence of subjugation and repression the end of academic Marxism as an actually-existing intellectual current in the Soviet Union.

This process reached its conclusion in 1931 with arrest of the highly respected director of the Moscow Marx-Engels Institute, Dmitri Ryazanov<sup>177</sup>, and the subsequent merger of the institute with the Lenin Institute. Lastly, Soviet science was not immune from the new bureaucratic language of Stalinism, with its absurd mechanistic exultation of Stalin and the Party. This led to a typical Stalinist contradiction, science was proclaimed to play an exceptional role in society, while neglecting to mention the total control over science by the State bureaucratic apparatus (Yasnitsky, 2009, 43)."

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<sup>175</sup>The initial focus of the purges in the 1930s, was overwhelmingly focused on Communists who were important members of the Bolshevik party, and thus potential competitors to Stalin.

<sup>176</sup>Repressive measures included executions following trumped up charges and convictions based on fabricated evidence. To show the reach of the Terror across Soviet intellectual space, it is enough to mention the executions of writers Isaac Babel and Mandelstam, in addition to virtually the entire senior leadership of the Red Army (three years before the Nazi invasion! ).

<sup>177</sup>Ryazanov's work at the Institute was groundbreaking in bringing to light a number of previously lost and unknown works by Marx. Most famous among them being the "1844 Manuscripts." Ryazanov was ultimately shot during the Great Purges of the late thirties.

The end of pluralism in Soviet academia was accompanied by the replacement of creative Marxist thought with the dogmatic and stultified “dialectical materialism”<sup>178</sup> associated with the official Soviet Marxism of the post-1920s. Prior to Ryazanov’s arrest, the *Marx-Engels Institute* had welcomed the collaboration of Marxists and non-Marxists in its activities (Dmitriev, 2007) and (Yasnitsky, 2009).

Now, even scholars who were committed communists, but had the unfortunate luck to have reached intellectual maturity prior to 1917, were increasingly and almost completely replaced by a new generation of careerist hacks, whose understanding of Marxist dialectics and humanist thought in general, was rudimentary at best. Vygotsky (1926) seems to have detected this transition by the mid-twenties as his critique of “Marxist psychologists” shows.<sup>179</sup>

#### THE “PRUNING” OF PSYCHOLOGY

In psychology, the process of Stalinization throughout the 1930s was characterized by the systematic banning of virtually all schools of psychology hitherto influential, and their replacement with a mechanical, pseudo-Marxist assemblage.<sup>180</sup> In the words of one of the new

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<sup>178</sup>Subsequently known by its acronym: DIAMAT, this “school” of Marxist method became the only officially sanctioned way of thinking about virtually anything: from politics, to psychology to music. DIAMAT represented the quintessential manifestation of Stalinist totalitarian dogma and the ultimate perversion and obliteration of Soviet academic Marxism.

<sup>179</sup>This also applied to intellectuals who were not Marxist, or Party-affiliated. See the discussion in previous two chapters.

<sup>180</sup>In practice, this approach was also duplicated in all other fields of study. In biology for example, the creative work of geneticists such as Vavilov, was replaced by the pseudo-theories of Lysenko. In physics, quantum mechanics were dismissed as “bourgeois science”, while in music and the performing arts, the avant-garde works of the 1920s, were increasingly replaced by “socialist realism.”

Stalinist hacks, Ananiev: “in psychology, no schools must be allowed other than the only one, the one based on the works of the classics of Marxism (Yasnitsky, 2009, 44).” This was accomplished first by banning psychoanalysis, followed by the banning of Kornilov’s reactology, and Bekhterev’s reflexology in the early 1930s (Yasnitsky, 2009, 44).<sup>181</sup>

Contra to Vygotsky’s attempts at creating a general psychology, the practical result of Stalinization of psychology was the exact opposite: with increasing restrictions, banning, censorship and outright arrest and execution, the Soviet psychology of the late 1930s was no longer the vibrant and intellectually heterogenuious field of a several different schools of thought,<sup>182</sup> but a monolithic, dogmatic pseudo-science devoid of theoretical richness and persuasive power. This is all too well summarized by Raymond Bauer, (Yasnitsky, 2009, 46-47)who in his 1952 book “The New Man in Soviet psychology” offers a lengthy, but accurate overview of the changes between the 1920s and the 1930s:

From the early days of the Bolshevik regime to the present [i.e. by early 1950s] the discipline of psychology in the USSR has undergone a number of fundamental changes—one might even refer to them as revolutions—which cannot be understood except as a function of social and political conditions in the Soviet Union. Psychology has changed from empirical, relatively independent science, which strove to arrive by investigation at general laws that could be applied to social living, to a relatively unempirical, applied science which is enjoined to make theory follow practice. In range of activity, Soviet psychology has narrowed from an extremely broad discipline which studied animal and human, normal and abnormal, child and adult subjects, to one which focuses most of it attention on the study of normal, human children. In the earlier period the range of application of psychology extended to the full breadth of industrial psychology, medical and abnormal psychology, criminology and delinquency, the study of social attitudes, child and educational psychology, and testing and guidance in the schools. In addition, a wide range of theoretical work was done and a variety of theoretical positions tolerated. Today, virtually all of applied

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<sup>181</sup>Two other major schools of Soviet psychology at the time.

<sup>182</sup>See the discussion of Soviet psychology and its dynamism during the 1920s in chapter 1.

psychology is confined to developing techniques of education and training the New Soviet Man. A limited amount of work is done in such areas of application as medical psychology, vast fields of application are forbidden, and there is, for practical purposes, only one theoretical position allowed.

Logically, Vygotsky's school was also targeted, though most seriously after its founder's death.

### VYGOTSKY UNDER ATTACK

To trace the attacks against Vygotsky is to trace the trajectory of not only Stalinist Soviet Marxism, but also the extent to which pre-Stalinist Soviet Marxist thought was a qualitatively different body of work; a fact that becomes even more obvious when observing the common threads it shared with the currents of Marxism outside the Soviet Union.

Vygotsky did not, and could not escape from this encroaching totalitarianism in academia. By 1931, he was being attacked in increasingly ruthless ways, which by the time of his death in 1934, included virtually the entire apparatus of Stalinist smear campaigns, demagoguery and anti-Marxist falsification. Before taking a look at some of these attacks, it is important to point out that the exact details on Vygotsky's own politics in the turbulent 1920s and 1930s are not available. As far as we know today, he did not formally participate in the various left and right oppositions, nor was he an active participant in the academic bureaucracy. All we know with certainty is his transformation (not unlike that of Gyorgy Lukacs) from a liberal, petty bourgeois young intellectual (in the years immediately before and during the 1917 Revolutions), to someone who at least in his private diary entries was genuinely enthusiastic about the October Revolution. We also know that his movement towards Marxist dialectics during this time was more or less complete.

Presumably, still-secret files of the Soviet secret police archives could shed some clarity on Vygotsky's politics. Until then, as Rene van der Veer (2002) argues, we have to be indirect in our assessment of how he faced the repressive 1930s. There are several known facts, separate from his work, that suggest he had committed several "sins", which would have made him an "enemy of the people" in the language of Stalinist terror. It is safe to assume that had he not died in 1934, Vygotsky would have been arrested by the start of the great purges in 1936.

In addition to the public political criticism and denunciations he was subjected to in various academic journals and conferences, der Veer lists (2002, 3-5) several other factors that perhaps explain the attacks he faced in the thirties: he came from a bourgeois background with a father who was a "banker" in revolutionary times; he was of the wrong "nationality": a Stalinist euphemism for Jews and other non-Russians<sup>183</sup>; Vygotsky showed interest in the works of Trotsky, Bukharin and the prominent Austrian social democrat Alfred Adler, often quoting from both thinkers in his own works. Trotsky and Adler were, of course, suppressed and erased from Soviet history. Just the same, any references to those two thinkers in Vygotsky's published works were promptly censored. In addition to Adler, Vygotsky's work openly engaged with a number of the most prominent "bourgeois" psychologists from around the world: a "cosmopolitanism" that was

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<sup>183</sup>A particularly insidious example of the counterrevolutionary nationalism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism that accompanied the Stalinist project. This is to be contrasted deeply with the overt anti-racist and anti-xenophobic stance marking the general positions of most left parties participating in the first post-October Soviet government, including the left-Socialist Revolutionaries, the left Menshevik-Internationalists, the various anarchist collectives and groups, and of course the Bolsheviks.

equated with un-Soviet behavior in the 1930. Lastly, Vygotsky never became a member of the Communist Party, thus triggering doubts as to type of leftism he subscribed to.<sup>184</sup>

Vygotsky's death in 1934 interrupted what seems to have been a "natural progression" towards arrest, the GULAG, or worse. As if to reinforce this point, the Soviet secret police searched his house after his death, confiscating books, while his publications disappeared from library shelves. His name virtually disappeared from Soviet psychologists' lexicon until after Stalin's death (van der Veer, 2002, 8). Beyond the indirect hints listed above, the clearest evidence of political suppression of Vygotsky's work is exhibited in a series of critiques of his work, written by various psychologists between 1931 and 1937. All except one were published during Vygotsky's lifetime and offer a compelling window in the process of destruction facing Soviet Marxism.<sup>185</sup> These critiques and the approach taken, mirror what was happening elsewhere in Soviet intellectual space at this time. It illustrates the deliberate dismantling of Soviet Marxism and its replacement with a new intellectual tradition, one that more or less has become associated with Marxist thought originating from the Soviet Union: a school of thought that had very little in common with what existed (broadly defined) during Vygotsky's time and space.

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<sup>184</sup>Lack of Party membership by this time could be interpreted to mean Vygotsky was harboring social democratic, or left communist, or anarchist inclinations: all unacceptable by the 1930s.

<sup>185</sup>I am defining Soviet Marxism to broadly mean the intellectual current present from 1917 to roughly 1930, and including thinkers and disciplines that clearly placed themselves in the international Marxist tradition of scholarship and political orientation, while politically supporting the October Revolution and the new Soviet states. Representative figures would include: Isaac Babel, the economists Preobrazhensky and Rubin; the writer Maksim Gorky and Andrei Platonov, philosopher Lybov Akselrod, the poet Mayakovsky, revolutionaries such as Trotsky, Bukharin.

As the 1930s progressed, so did the intensity of criticism levied at Vygotsky's work. Talankin, writing in a 1931 issue of "Soviet Psychoneurology", offers a brief critique focusing on Vygotsky's understanding of culture, which he paraphrases as a "crude and mechanical" formulation of "the sum total of things, instruments, and symbols (van der Veer, 2002, 10)."

Talankin's critique is a clear example of "soft" Stalinist Marxism. Its theoretical hallmark is that of a simple, crude reductionism of whatever is being studied (the development of mental processes, in this case) to a few concepts, which are believed to contain all that is necessary for analysis. Here, the critic concludes by insisting that "it must be shown that a Marxist approach to the problem of the development of mental processes, on the basis of the history of labor", is the correct (and only method). Since Vygotsky does not use this explicit phraseology, then it must be non-Marxist, and thus unacceptable. In short, even in 1931, the hallmarks of Stalinized Soviet Marxism were already fully formed, reducing it to a handful of stock phrases and empty verbiage.

One of the supreme ironies of such limited thinking is the extent to which it clarifies its deviation from the broader Marxist tradition, while reinforcing how close Vygotsky was to it. His cultural-historical theory is clearly grounded on the notion that human consciousness is based on the complex interactions of the history of labor, of class relations, of the functioning of cultural space and its signifiers. Vygotsky takes full account of "the history of labor" and the role it plays in social relations. Though he does not frame his arguments by using that exact phrase, the very fact that Stalinist critics could not understand this (or refused to do so), shows the theoretical poverty of their own comprehension of Marxist dialectical method in 1931. Still, Talankin was

rather polite in his critique. By 1932, the attacks against Vygotsky had intensified to new levels of absurdity and viciousness.

Talankin does, however, conclude with a warning and a suggestion: Vygotsky and Luria's "conception of cultural psychology must be opposed. It has not yet been subjected to criticism (van der Veer, 2002, 11)." The problem with Vygotsky is his reliance on "Western European psychological theories", combined with a Western European philosophical tradition: positivism. Thus, by implication Vygotsky's thought is not dialectical<sup>186</sup>, and thus not truly Marxist in its method. Lastly, such critique also contains obvious elements of chauvinism, of crude Russian nationalism, tendencies which became hallmarks of mature Stalinism. It is difficult to image Vygotsky, a cosmopolitan thinker, set up such false binaries in his approach to Marxist dialectical thought. After all, wasn't the entire Marxist project underpinned by an explicit internationalism, both on the field of revolutionary praxis, and on the level of intellectual discourse?<sup>187</sup>

By 1932, the clouds have darkened even more. The editors of the journal "Pedologiya" deemed it necessary to state that Vygotsky's theory (of cultural development of the individual) "requires the most severe Marxist-Leninist critique" since such theories combine - in the words of the author of this attack, Feofanov - the worst forms of bourgeois social science: "idealist, subjectivist conceptions intermingled with mechanistic elements from "behaviorist" theory (van der Veer, 2002, 12)."

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<sup>186</sup>Though Talankin does not spell out what he means by "dialectical."

<sup>187</sup>This discussion reminds one of the political differences that split revolutionary Marxists at the start of World War I, when divisions emerged between internationalists (socialists who called for the immediate end of the war, and the defeat of all participating imperialist governments), and those (such as Karl Kautsky) who as social-chauvinists, supported the imperialist aims of their respective national governments.

Feofanov focused his attack on Vygotsky's work in the field of pedology.<sup>188</sup> Vygotsky was considered an important figure in this subfield and published a number of manuscripts throughout his life. Here, he is accused of what was by 1932 becoming *the* cardinal sin in all intellectual endeavors in the Soviet Union: the lack of a "Marxist-Leninist approach" to theories of childhood development, and Vygotsky's failure to offer such an approach.

The content of this critique bears the signature elements of Stalinist Marxism, with the canonical invocation of the need to have everything be based on a Marxist-Leninist theory in psychology, without which "the solid underpinning needed for educating children to be builders of socialism and fighters for this cause" would be impossible (van der Veer, 2002, 12). What a striking and strange formulation, since it is unclear what a Marxist-Leninist approach would mean in psychology in the first place. After all, when Lenin and the Bolsheviks led the October insurrection, they were certainly not armed with such a method!<sup>189</sup>

On the contrary, the invention of Marxism-Leninism as the method of Marxist *anything* (from politics to psychology) was one of the defining features of the assault against Soviet Marxism as it developed in the decade after 1929. This call for a legitimate "Marxist" psychology stands in direct contrast with Vygotsky's argument from 1926 in "The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology" (1926), when he explains precisely why the search for a Marxist psychology—accompanied by the mechanical transfer of concepts from political economy and revolutionary practice to psychology—would produce nothing more than nonsensical verbiage.

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<sup>188</sup>Today known as early childhood psychology.

<sup>189</sup>Instead, they were motivated by a correct reading of the political forces, grounded in class analysis, as well as the determination to avoid the errors of the Paris Commune on the question of the State.

Instead of rehashing concepts from political economy, he writes, what is needed is a new psychology, one that reflects the changed social conditions and political goals of this new society. What must be done in psychology is the type of innovation that was so necessary in political economy, when Marx's wrote "Capital." Contra Stalinist critics, Vygotsky argues for an extension of Marxist method in the field of psychology, in service of the new revolutionary society:

The psychology that we are speaking about does not yet exist; we must still create it—and not just in school. . . . Our science could not and cannot develop in the old society. On the contrary, in the new society our science will be at the center of our life. "A leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom" will inevitably add to the agenda the question of mastering our own essence, of subordinating it to ourselves. . . . The new society will create a new man. When people speak of reshaping man as an indisputable feature of the new mankind, and about the artificial creation of a new biological type, this will be the first and only species in biology that will create itself . . . this psychology will bear as little resemblance to the present version as—to use Spinoza's words—the Canis constellation bears to a dog, the barking animal (Zavershneva, 2010, 71).

A striking contrast indeed. In addition to appeals to some mythical and all-powerful theory of Marxist-Leninist psychology, Feofanov deploys yet another pillar of Stalinized Marxism: the fetishism of reducing *all* explanation in psychology, to questions of class and the social division of labor. This is yet another example of what Vygotsky warned against in 1926. The point is not in denying the importance of class and social relations in determining human consciousness and ideology. However, more than that is needed. Any Marxist analysis restricting itself to only these features, becomes limited and fragmented in its theoretical power. This is true even more so when it comes to the theoretically under-developed areas related to the study of consciousness and ideology. But how could a dogmatic thinker like Feofanov comprehend that the study of the

human psyche, can only effectively proceed by realizing that it is functioning as a mediating mechanism or layer, through which economic relations and political structures generate particular ideologies (Vygotsky, 1999a, Chapter 1). One can't study one without the other.

Feofanov proceeded to accuse Vygotsky of establishing a “metaphysical separation between two phases of development (natural and cultural) in children” (van der Veer, 2002, 24-25). Feofanov denies such stages and goes back to the boilerplate: a child's development proceeds from the child's class position at birth and the nature of class struggle enveloping its life (and family). Childhood development is conditioned precisely by class and class struggle as the children grow. He is firm on this: "there is no so-called "natural" development, and there cannot be. While "heredity" does play a role, priority is clearly placed on social relations and socialization (Ibid.).”

This all sounds like the thought of a good Marxist, but it misses Vygotsky's point. It is not the case that Vygotsky is deaf to the basic point on the role played by social relations. This much is clear from the following passage, in which he outlines his critique of non-Marxist psychology in precisely Feofanov's terms:

We see that non-Marxist social psychology has a primitive empirical approach to the social entity, regarding it as a crowd, a collective, entity, a relation between individuals or persons. Society is taken to be an association of people and is regarded as an accessory activity of one individual. These psychologists do not admit that somewhere, in a remote and intimate corner of his thought, his feelings, etc., the psyche of the individual is social and socially conditioned. It is easy to show that the subject of social psychology is precisely the psyche of the single individual. . . . Indeed, how can we distinguish social psychology from individual psychology if we deny the existence of a popular soul, a popular spirit, and so forth (Vygotsky, 1971, pg. 14-15).

This is where his critic stops in his understanding of Marxist method. What he sees as a metaphysical separation, Vygotsky treats as a dialectical continuum. Natural and cultural phases are joined via relations that are dialectical and internal. Vygotsky however, never makes such “metaphysical separations.” As Zavershneva shows, “he never reduced (the psyche) to any single thing, to the notorious “matter” (or “brain function”) or, conversely, to the pure sense-making dynamics (Zavershneva, 2010, 72).” The cultural aspect of human development cannot be seen separately from the “natural” (biological) state. So-called “artificial acts are equally natural acts”, connected through complex dialectical internal relations Vygotsky (1988).”<sup>190</sup>

There is no "dualism" of separate stages, one leading to another via some Cartesian causality. Vygotsky approaches culture relationally, connecting it to consciousness. By the time of the attacks, he was developing a theory of consciousness as a dynamic, semantic system (Vygotsky, 1934b, pg. 62). In mapping out how consciousness forms in relation to culture, he goes through several analyses of consciousness: as a manifestation of inter-functional (biological) connections; as a semiotic system; and finally, consciousness as a sense-making dynamic system. When asking their first questions, he writes, young children are often concerned about “sense rather than meaning (Vygotsky, 1934b, 63).” In this relational framework of culture-consciousness, Vygotsky makes his most profound Marxist intervention, presenting culture and consciousness as a dynamic semantic system, which can only be comprehended (to the extent possible) dialectically. This is the meeting point where a dialectical understanding of human nature, of social relations, of culture, and of consciousness come together.

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<sup>190</sup>Internal relations as discussed and developed by Bertell Ollman.

Culture, this umbrella concept that includes the complex totalities of individual and social interactions, ideology, history, art, normalization, everything that conditions our lives – in addition to political economy (relations of production, mode of production) and class struggle<sup>191</sup>) – plays a profound role in shaping individual and social consciousness. It functions as a mediating layer in the crucial conduit, where external speech becomes internalized, and vice versa.<sup>192</sup> Culture is locked in an internal relation with consciousness. This is what Vygotsky means when he writes: “Consciousness is a dialogue with oneself (Zavershneva, 2010, 63).” A rather striking sentence encompassing Vygotsky’s approach to dialectics, treating consciousness as a state of constant (to borrow from the post-modern lexicon) feedback loop from-within and from-without. Consciousness - and the cultural spaces that shape it - are regions of drama and tragedy. Here, Vygotsky is reaching into his lifelong engagement as a literary critic. Drama, in the sense of lack of any one unshakable truth, the presence of multiple answers, of vagueness in communication and intent, of lies and misrepresentation of action, of fundamental tension, both in the internal and external dialogues. There is dialectical complexity here that moves beyond the general statements on consciousness, grounded in political economy, uttered by Vygotsky’s Stalinist critics:

Where is the truth: language injects into consciousness not an idyll but drama, even tragedy (an insoluble one). In general, the life of consciousness – unlike the life of the organism – (this is what places consciousness outside organic life) – is not an idyll, not Spinoza’s serenity, but tragedy: *amor fati* (Zavershneva, 2010, 54).

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<sup>191</sup>To which twenty-first century students of Vygotsky should also add: the intersectionalities of class, race and gender.

<sup>192</sup>When a person is compelled through the interaction of these forces, to externalize a particular set of words, beliefs, actions, emotions and connect with others.

All that Feofanov's attack accomplishes in retrospect, is that it clarifies for twenty-first century readers the main features of Stalinized Marxism:

- Vygotsky is accused of importing idealist theories (and related facts derived from those theories), and doing so uncritically. This is peculiar, since it implies that any theory that is accepted from some other source must be first criticized - what if the theory makes sense to begin with, and thus its incorporation?
- Vygotsky is faulted for relying on such theories and facts obtained "mainly from foreign sources." (pg. 29), Marxism, then seems to be only a Soviet method; nothing that comes from abroad can possibly be correct or useful!
- Vygotsky engages in eclecticism, a charge that appears through post-1930s Soviet thought in various guises: cosmopolitanism, revisionism, etc. Absurd quotes from Marx are deployed to show this.
- The authors totally disregard Marx's fundamental position that "The first historical act of these individuals, which distinguishes them from animals, is not that they think, but that they have begun to produce the means of their subsistence (van der Veer, 2002, 29).

By 1934, the attacks intensify even more in tone and dogmatic absurdity. Razmyslov produces a paper as part of a so-called "public discussion" focused on Vygotsky's work (among others). Such public discussions were the primary vehicle used to purge Soviet universities of political undesirables. The method of intellectual repression operated as follows. A conference was announced organized around a specific body of work, and the targeted thinkers invited to present their work. At the conference, a number of scholars proceed to deliver damning speeches and presentations accusing their targets of ideological deviation of one type or another. In essence, the outcome of such forums was a public trial, with the sentence usually manifesting itself in terms of expulsion of the accused scholars, the dismantling of their intellectual circles, as well as the imposition of censorship on publication and further research. By 1934, repressive actions following public discussion could also result in arrest and trial.

Razmyslov proceeds along lines similar to Feofanov by declaring that Vygotsky is not basing his study of consciousness and human behavior on Marxist-Leninist methodology, and instead ends up “naturally” producing idealist, rather than materialist theory (van der Veer, 2002, 47)

Vygotsky and Luria, though discussing the historical development of the human mind and human behavior, have not heeded Lenin’s instructions, and naturally not only were unable to reproduce and resolve correctly the processes of mental development but were not even able to approach them correctly (2000, 47).

What is meant by Marxism is reduced here to what Lenin wrote about materialism and consciousness. The Marxist-Leninist method then, is nothing more than the faithful application of Lenin’s writings to psychology. Refusal to do this, is judged to *automatically* produces non-Marxist texts, idealist, and bourgeois in nature. Razmyslov’s attack illustrates the dogmatic nature of Stalinized Marxism in the most explicit ancient Greek usage of the word: *dogma* → the *opinion* of the author, a tenet of his thinking about psychology is now extrapolated to mean everyone’s opinion on consciousness. This act of generalization by fiat, by faith and declaration stands out as a stark counterpoint to the approach taken by Vygotsky and other Soviet Marxists before the 1930s.

Razmyslov would have found a counter-critique of his own attacks had he referenced Vygotsky’s own engagement with the topic of “Marxist psychology” in 1926 (Vygotsky, 1926). In the “Historical Meaning of the crisis in Psychology” Vygotsky lists two fundamental reasons why such attempts are erroneous:

- Attempts at including Marxist ideas in psychology were wrong first in their method of randomly picking and choosing quotations out of context.
- The dialectical method differs (or varies) greatly when applied in differing areas such as: biology, history and psychology:

Immediate application of the theory of dialectical materialism to the problems of science, and particularly to biology and psychology is impossible, as it is impossible to apply it instantly to history and sociology.

What Marxist thought can contribute most significantly in efforts to build a new psychology is precisely, through its method. Anything else will "inevitably lead to scholastic verbiage (Ibid.)."

Stalinists however, were not deterred by such factual evidence. The attack intensified and entered the realm of pure fabrication. Razmyslov invented a non-existing theory which he called "Marxist-Leninist theory of reflection" and proceeded to accuse Vygotsky of not using it in his studies of human behavior. Instead, Razmyslov wrote, Vygotsky relies on "bourgeois historicism" that disregards class struggle, the state of the productive forces, and the relations of production in his cultural-historical theory. Again, the critic is rehashing Feofanov's arguments from two years before in assuming that the study of consciousness (Vygotsky's main objective: methodologically and experimentally) must be done through the conceptual apparatus of Marx's political economy:

The historicism we find in Vygotsky's and Luria's "cultural-historical theory" is a bourgeois historicism that disregards the aspects of the development of productive forces and the relations of production, the labor processes, and class struggle (2000, 47).

Razmyslov's attack is most interesting in the section analyzing Vygotsky's work on consciousness. Yet again, he repeats the line argued by Feofanov in 1932. The theoretical foundation of any Marxist analysis in psychology is found, he argues, in the well-traveled paths of Marx and Engels' statements on psychology, where "man is a product of social relations" and human consciousness acts to subordinate "elemental forces of nature (van der Veer, 2002, 48)." This consciousness "reflects the interests" of the social class of each particular individual. It is

socially determined and conditioned, with "class ideology" playing a particularly important role. With this, Razmyslov arrives at Vygotsky's starting point (see discussion in chapter 2).<sup>193</sup> And this is where the extent of his analysis stops! He writes nothing about Vygotsky's follow-up questions about the precise "rules of motion" of human consciousness, nothing of consciousness and its relation with culture, of consciousness as a dynamic semantic system, of consciousness as dialogue and sense.

Instead, the reader is reminded once again how Vygotsky fails to base his analysis out of "social, class consciousness". Instead, he commits the sin of proceeding "from the consciousness of some vague, foggy collectives and in this does not go beyond the neo-positivist sociologists, such as Durkheim..." There we have it: Vygotsky is nothing more than a copycat sociologist, and a "bourgeois one."

What Stalinist psychologists are unable to comprehend is the fact that Vygotsky's concept of the "collective" is infinitely more complex as well as "Marxist" in its dialectical and materialist conceptualization. When Vygotsky speaks of consciousness, he is interested in conceptualizing "inter-psychological categories"; a complex concept studying an even more complex phenomena: the internal relations entangling internal and external speech, the processes of internalization (of ideology in a general sense), the relations between thought and speech, etc. In other words,

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<sup>193</sup>In short: Vygotsky accepts these basic premises of Marxism. Consciousness is formed through a person's interactions conditioned by specific historical conditions and social relations. This is only the starting point of his analysis. The entire thrust of his work ask follow-up questions: what exactly happens during these social interactions based on class, the division of labor, gender, age, "culture", schooling and genetics that forms consciousness in actuality?

Vygotsky is far beyond his starting point of grounding human consciousness in social relations and class.

The most vicious political attacks against Vygotsky were launched in 1937, three years after his death, in the midst of the Great Terror. Rudneva based her attacks on the July 4, 1936 resolution of the Party Central Committee titled, “On the pedagogical distortions in the system of the People’s Commissariat of Education.”<sup>194</sup> Rudneva followed the Party line and accused Vygotsky of doing “great harm to the Soviet school (van der Veer, 2002, 75).”<sup>195</sup> Vygotsky is “following his bourgeois teachers”, while also “taking from them their method of investigation (van der Veer, 2002, 76).” Obviously, the explicit absence in his writings of “Lenin’s theory of reflection” is indicative of Vygotsky’s political orientation as a bourgeois thinker. And it is his bourgeois psychology that engages in “a mockery of our Soviet children and amounted to stupid, absurd tests and questionnaire associated with Piaget, Claparede, and others (Ibid.).”<sup>196</sup> She is making references to Vygotsky’s status as the most widely known pedologists of this day, and methodologically, pedologists “encouraged massive intelligence testing of children for the purpose of streaming and screening (van der Veer, 2002, 5).”

Rudneva’s attacks reach a feverish pitch towards the end, when she engages in an outlandish falsification and outright slander. She portrays Vygotsky as a fascist sympathizer, introducing fascist ideas into Soviet psychology! The absurdity of this claim must have been apparent to all

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<sup>194</sup>This resolution marked the start of the terror among Soviet educators and academics.

<sup>195</sup>She means the education system, in general.

<sup>196</sup>Rudneva is referring to two famous developmental psychologists active in Vygotsky’s time.

Soviet psychologists at the time, given the hard-hitting and damning article Vygotsky had written in 1933 on the nature of fascism in German psychology.<sup>197</sup>

Yet Rudneva's portrayal of Vygotsky as a fascist sympathizer, fit perfectly in the methodology of the Great Terror. Accusing well-known anti-fascists of being fascists, was one of the hallmarks of the show trials between 1936 and 1938. There were two cardinal political sins at this moment: one could be accused of being a Trotskyist, or of being a fascist. Often, the two were mixed, with the victim accused of being a fascist sympathizer by the way of being a supporter of Trotsky and the Left Opposition.<sup>198</sup>

There was a good political reason for attacking thinkers like Vygotsky, thinkers who were radicals politically, and could potentially cause trouble in Soviet education, the primary terrain where the inculcation of new, revolutionary social normativity was to take place. The project of Stalinist conservatism and counter-revolution could not co-exist with a creative and genuine Soviet Marxist intellectual tradition. Thus, Vygotsky's thought was "unsuitable" for Stalinist science in at least three dimensions:

- It incorporated theoretical eclecticism, and the free use of multiple different theoretical frameworks, but always, and clearly rooted in materialist dialectical method of analysis (i.e. not in causal-effect Cartesian determinism, though certainly containing elements of it when needed).
- It consistently avoided party cliches, and especially the obligatory references to Stalin's greatness and prophetic wisdom.

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<sup>197</sup>This article by Vygotsky is discussed below.

<sup>198</sup>Historian Vadim Rogovin documents (Rogovin, 2009) the absurdities of these charges, which by 1937 implied that all members of the 1917 Bolshevik party Central Committee (save for Stalin and Lenin) were either agents of German imperialism, or served the intelligence agencies of Britain and France!

- Certain of his research topics discussed in internal research conferences never made it in printed form, and a number of them engaged with taboo topics such as Freud.

## VYGOTSKY'S RESPONSE

Vygotsky's response to the growing terror of Stalinism was both subtle and overt. On one level, we do not have evidence that he took active part in some form of political opposition to the Stalinist faction in the Party. What we do know is that as a committed supporter of the Revolution, Vygotsky made a number of critical (yet indirect) entries in his diary, signaling his deep depression and disagreement with the political trajectory Soviet society was embarking on. At the same time, in his written works (both published and those meant to be published) we have no evidence that he allowed the attacks against him to change the nature of his work. To the very last work he completed, he remains a creative, critical and independent thinker. One could argue that even the posthumous publishing of his "Thought and Language" in 1934, was itself a bold act of political protest, this time done by his editor Kolbanovski.

The suppression of critical thought and intellectual creativity during the 1930s, is perhaps the defining image of the tragedy of Marxism in the Soviet Union as in intellectual current. The only place in the world where revolutionary socialism had acquired state power and overthrown capitalism, was also the place where Marxists were being persecuted for being Marxists.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>199</sup>In addition to being exterminated by 1937, at higher rates than their counterparts in Hitler's Germany. Rogovin (2009) lists a total number of executed political prisoners in 1937-1938 to be around 750,000 people, the vast majority of them identifying with some type of socialist current.

His recently published diary entries from this period (Zavershneva, 2010) testify to what must have been going through his mind in the midst of this growing terror. Zavershneva notes how one prominent change in his notes from this period is the absence of optimistic passages of the possibilities offered by the “New Society” that was the Soviet Union of the 1920s. Instead, the hopeful, excited optimism is replaced by a movement inward:

In the 1930s Vygotsky held forth less and less about a new society and more and more about man; the analogies between the psyche and a technical device vanished, and theses appeared about language with imbued meaning as a microcosm of human consciousness and as its living cell (Zavershneva, 2010, 71).

He seems to have replaced passages about society, about the possibilities of the Revolution, with focus on “man” as the central actor of his studies. The “cellular” level of social relations was not at the foreground, rather than the previous emphasis on the social, the collective. Explicit thoughts on how social relations are revolutionized, changed, and discarded were replaced with pessimistic tones about fate, an almost Nietzschean pessimism engulfing individual struggle. Was this his way of dealing with both the personal tragedies that surrounded him (the arrests of friends, co-workers, thinkers he identified with), and the realization that the revolution was over, that Thermidor had set in, and the counter-revolutionary forces were winning?

The effects of the “public discussions” are also present in his letters to students and colleagues. Writing to his close friend Aleksandr Luria<sup>200</sup> on November 21, 1933, Vygotsky

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<sup>200</sup>Luria, himself the target of attacks due to his stature as a Freudian, was compelled to literally change cities in order to “blend in” and increase his chances of survival. He moved from Moscow to the large provincial town of Kharkov in the Ukraine, where he subsequently founded what became known as the Kharkov School of Psychology. Vygotsky remained in Moscow.

provides a glimpse into the mechanics through which Soviet Marxism was dismantled on the level of academic discourse and dialectical method:

Dear Alexander Romanovich, I received your letter of [November? ], but first about our business in Moscow. I was summoned by Mitin quite unexpectedly. He spoke with me about the situation in psychology and child development. He asked if a history of child intellectual development is being elaborated, and said that I should work with them; he suggested that I submit a major article to *Pod znamenem Marksizma*<sup>201</sup>, and that I put together a philosophical group (roughly thirty people) in order to discuss it. His basic idea is that through dialectics they have arrived at the need to elaborate on historical problems—from the standpoint of the history of science and technology, and from the standpoint of intellectual development (Zavershneva, 2010, 48).

It is clear that the “situation in psychology” refers to the ongoing attempts at forcing Vygotsky and his students to conform to the new status quo in psychology. Mitin was the chief Stalinist hack appointed as one of the gatekeepers of official Stalinized Marxism in philosophy. After the purges of infinitely more talented and creative thinkers such as Lyubov Akselrod, Shtern and Deborin, Mitin’s tasks after 1930 included the purifying of the heterodox nature of Marxist thought in the country, and its “alignment” into a uniform and singular pseudo-Marxist school subsequently known as: DIAMAT (dialectical materialism). Mitin’s call for “the need to elaborate on historical problems” is Vygotsky’s paraphrase of what his attackers accused him later of *not* doing in his work. These are the opening shots of the attack against his thought, camouflaged in the language of pseudo-Marxist dialectics and historical materialism. The implication was clear, theories in psychology must be based in “historical materialism”, as defined by Mitin and pre-approved by Stalin. The very next sentence in Vygotsky’s letter amplifies this point:

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<sup>201</sup>Then, the chief journal of Marxist theory in the Soviet Union.

To have historicism permeate everything, and so forth. I told him about our situation. I do not know whether that will lead to a withdrawal of his proposal. But he asserted, in word, at least, that the situation is intolerable, and so on. Perhaps we will find some support from that quarter. I have no other news to report. When I learn something, I will let you know. People are constantly interrogating me and pestering me. I think that things will work out for you in Kharkov and that a *modus vivendi* will be found for you; beyond that nothing more is needed (Ibid.).

One feels that beneath the cryptic comments lies a deep sense of fear and crisis. Vygotsky seems acutely conscious of how impossible it is to engage in the type of writing about dialectics in psychology he did in 1926.

The organic conclusion of such “requests” was the suggestion made at a 1932 “public discussion” that Vygotsky focus his work on “Soviet citizens... and the patterns of socialist construction (Zavershneva, 2010, 56).” The political phraseology of the Party leadership was now directly transposed in guiding the priorities and formulations of academic research. Vygotsky’s failure to engage in this task, as well as his method of inquiry, were now labeled “creeping empiricism + mechanistic approach (Ibid.)” This was already a thinly veiled threat, since at the same time in philosophy, the hitherto admired Soviet thinkers such as Akselrod and Deborin, were being denounced using exactly the same charges of “mechanistic thinking.” The attacks were not without their humorous moments. At a meeting focusing on the nature of schizophrenia, Vygotsky’s work (a paper he had presented on schizophrenia) is portrayed as anti-Marxist and ideologically harmful. Pushed to the limit by the incessant barrage of idiotic questions and critiques, Vygotsky fired back at his accusers: “My last opponent is a paranoiac (Zavershneva, 2010, 57).”

Yet, despite the increasing pressure and attacks, Vygotsky seems unmoved by the “persuasiveness” of his attackers. His published papers and book (“Thought and Language”) do not show any signs of Stalinization. The obligatory automatic quotes from Lenin, Marx and Engels are nowhere to be found. If these thinkers appear at all, they do so on their own merit, within the context of genuine analysis. Mitin’s “historicism” is completely absent as well. Vygotsky remains true to this method, to his ideas and principles. He refuses to submit to the ideological pressures calling for a simplistic approach to psychology and dialectics, connecting the conceptual apparatus of political economy to psychology. Nor does he denounce bourgeois science in a mechanistic way, submitting to the Stalinist whitewash. Though critical of Freud in several places in his writings, he never stoops to the level of some of his contemporaries, who abruptly changed course from Freudians to anti-Freudians.<sup>202</sup>

The refusal to change his work and accommodate to bureaucratic demands “from above”, was not an approach chosen by many Soviet intellectuals. Facing expulsion, firing, imprisonment and possibly execution, many leading thinkers were forced to submit to the new Stalinist regime and its revision of Marxist thought. The noted linguist Georgy Danilov for example, published a public apology for “errors” committed in his previous work. Writing in 1931 (Danilov, 1931), he admitted that his “Literature and Marxism”, published in 1928, contained a number of “mechanistic” arguments, which combined with other sections suffering from “formalist” and thus non-dialectical writing, deviated from the prescriptions of Marxism-Leninism in linguistics.

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<sup>202</sup>This ideological somersault anticipated the way some highly-ranked members of the Soviet Party bureaucracy in the 1980s, decided suddenly to switch allegiances 180 degrees, and became rapid anti-communist liberals.

His errors, Danilov "admitted", were the result of bourgeois and petty bourgeois influences; errors that must be corrected and aligned to a Leninist linguistic approach. In short, Danilov was attacked using the same methods that were directed at Vygotsky. The accusation and the overall approach were identical. Danilov was subsequently executed in 1937, together with virtually all important and innovative psychologists and linguists of Vygotsky's generation.<sup>203</sup>

One year before his death, Vygotsky published a hard-hitting attack on fascism<sup>204</sup> and its lackeys in German psychology. His paper was itself an expression of resistance to Stalin's politics, who at this time begins his deadly dance of rapprochement with Hitler.<sup>205</sup> At a time when the official Soviet position was one of ambiguity towards Hitler, Vygotsky clearly spelled out his strongest rejection and critique of fascism and - most importantly - of its organic connection to bourgeois politics.

Vygotsky's essay "Fascism in Psychoneurology" (*Vygotsky, 1994*) was published shortly after Hitler's ascension to power. It was part of a collection of essays by Soviet Jewish scientists, and engaged with an attempt at making sense of this cataclysmic event. After all, Germany was the place with deepest roots in leftist mass organizations, with the German Social Democratic Party standing as the largest socialist party in the world. In addition to the SPD, the German Communist Party was also a mass party, with its own para-military component offering a

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<sup>203</sup>With a few notable exceptions such as, Aleksandr Luria and Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work was suppressed for decades.

<sup>204</sup>Joining Wilhem Reich's book of the same year and similar topic.

<sup>205</sup>Most clearly articulated by Stalin's contribution to the defeat of the Spanish Republic, and his 1940 non-aggression pact with Hitler.

counter-force to Nazi brown shirts. Hitler's takeover must have been rather shocking to Vygotsky, precisely due to the seemingly overwhelming strength of the left in that country.

The essay is remarkable in a number of ways. First, it presents a devastating indictment of Nazi ideology. Vygotsky sees the defining ideological feature of fascism as irrational, "medieval" idealism: "Race and blood, blood and race - this is what underpins everything in the world... Where we find a dearth of logic, there begins the philosophy of the imperative." (Vygotsky, 1994, 330) In these absurd formulation steps in German psychology. Through some of its most famous representatives such as Jaensch<sup>206</sup>, there is an attempt at using psychology "to form a scientific basis for ... politics (Vygotsky, 1994, 329)." Efforts by such psychologists to locate the ideal "mental type" of a German, and compare its difference from that of the French, represents the "scientific language of real fascist politics (Ibid.)." What Hitler cannot do in "Mein Kampf", more sophisticated fascists are doing in psychology. Vygotsky's warning is pertinent beyond his historical time: ideological frameworks receive their "polish" through the participation of sympathetic intellectuals. In doing so, these thinkers also acquire political responsibility. The liberal, bourgeois notion of intellectuals performing "apolitical" work is an illusion. In the case of fascism, this process assumes a particularly humiliating (for Jaensch and other psychologists) trajectory:

Oh lucky Germany! For it did not follow Skalozub's advice to send its sergeant major to learn how to become a Voltaire. Instead, the fascist Voltaires themselves voluntarily transformed themselves into sergeant majors of the German nationalist movement (Vygotsky, 1994, 330).

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<sup>206</sup>Who by this time had left Germany, along with many others.

What a remarkably accurate and succinct description of unprincipled opportunism in politics! Vygotsky's sarcasm is well placed. How else can one explain Jaensch's justification of fascist ideology, but in terms of a most total intellectual capitulation? Jaensch sees "mental structures" of particular types as determining the "national character" of a particular society. Thus, the fascist coup was an expression of such a mental structure, one that "strives to transform the general (the state) into an organic whole, built according to the laws of psychological anthropology (Vygotsky, 1994, 330)." These "laws" are themselves derived from unscientific idealist constructions of medieval nature: "the purity of the physical being of the nation, and on the basis of the common formula of blood and mental structure (Ibid.)."

In this context, even more interesting is the possibility that Vygotsky was also critiquing the encroaching Stalinist version of Soviet Marxism, where in place of fascist "mental structures", Stalinists placed their own boilerplate: the Party and soon, its Leader (the General Secretary). Though the Stalinist totalitarian alternative was as absurd in its ideological formulations as the crude biological mysticism of fascism, Vygotsky's critique could be levied against it just the same. Under Stalinism, "blood" and "purity of physical being" are replaced by the will of the working class expressed through the actions and commands of its Party General Secretary; an idealist construction of a different sort.

On these pages, Vygotsky raises two politically fundamental questions. What is the "internal link" between such absurd pseudo-scientific "theories"<sup>207</sup> and "the general crisis which is taking

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<sup>207</sup>Made by formerly world-class psychologists such as Jaensch.

place in bourgeois psychological thinking (Vygotsky, 1994, 334)? ” Second, what contributions has fascist psychology made to the “further development of bourgeois psychology? ”<sup>208</sup>

His answer to the first question is reminiscent of Lukacs’ critique of bourgeois sociology and economics. Jaensch’s fascist psychology is created using the same tool-chest employed in creating the rest of bourgeois psychology. It “represents an integration of idealism and mechanicism, similar to that typological integration which Jaensch would like to see in the unification of the German philosopher with the peasant (Vygotsky, 1994, 334).” The “mechanicism” of his approach is clearly visible in the direct connection it sees from the biological construct “blood”, to the fictitious concept of “race”, and ultimately to the world of ideas, of theory and philosophy.

Fascist psychology also intensifies the defining flaw “of bourgeois psychology, namely the rejection of the social nature of man (Ibid.).” This is a manifestation of its idealism, where blood, race and purity of physical being, replace social relations, class, gender, and the study of power. Human communication, language, culture, all disappear beneath the biological-mechanistic idealism defining bourgeois thought.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup>A similar question can be raised today of those psychologists and anthropologists who have chosen to help U.S. military forces occupying Iraq and Afghanistan. How does their work (such as the infamous *Human Terrain System*) extend and develop the bourgeois psychology and anthropology of today? There is no other way to approach this question, since clearly no honest Marxist would ever voluntarily engage in aiding imperialist adventures abroad. Since everything is political, the lines of demarcation in contemporary social sciences must be similarly approached.

<sup>209</sup>This is an interesting thought even when comparing such a Marxist approach, to serious bourgeois social scientists along the lines of Max Weber.

Vygotsky's indictment also clarifies the lines of demarcation between bourgeois and Marxist political thought. Where Jaensch, Heidegger and Schmidt effortlessly lower their intellectual standards and actively do their part in perpetuating fascist reaction and violence, Marxists such as Vygotsky, Politzer, Lukacs and Korsch maintain their political and intellectual positions.<sup>210</sup> Politzer for example, a brilliant Hungarian-French psychologist and a contemporary of Vygotsky, later played a leading role in the French Resistance as a member of the Communist Party. His commitment to his political principles was so steadfast that even when facing execution, he refused a Nazi offer to become a collaborator and live.

Lastly, this essay indirectly illustrates Vygotsky's politics in 1933<sup>211</sup>. He understood the main political battle of the 1930s. At a time when the Soviet leadership waged a rather ambiguous dance with the Nazis, few were the public figures from within the Soviet Union, who head-on drew the political line in the sand: this was a fight between reactionary imperialist capitalism and its explicit political negation. This was a struggle between two incompatible systems of government, between two differing visions of life. Three years before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Vygotsky's position was indeed far-sighted and Marxist in the most revolutionary objective sense. His concluding paragraph is one of remarkable eloquence, worth citing in its entirety for several reasons. On one level, it can be read as a condemnation of both fascism and Soviet-style bureaucratic authoritarianism. It is inconceivable that he was not aware of the

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<sup>210</sup>To be fair, so do non-Marxists such as Freud and Heidegger's teacher, Husserl.

<sup>211</sup>And as far as we know today, this essay is one of one or two explicit statements, explicitly showing Vygotsky's political frame of mind.

parallels, and his vivid and passionate denunciation sounds like the confession of a deeply troubled person, hoping for a change in his own world.

Even more importantly, it could be read as one of the defining political statements of Soviet Marxism: self-critical, framed through the lens of class struggle, internationalist in outlook, scientific in its method, deeply optimistic about the nature of human nature, and the possibilities offered by the socialist future:

Diplomatic hypocrisy could only do harm at a time of this final and decisive battle, the greatest and the most just which humanity has ever known throughout its history. Two worlds and two ideological systems now stand pitched against one another. Jaensch's book, along with the rest of fascist psychology, cannot fail but to lead to a terrible intensification of the class struggle in science in general and in the field of psychology in particular. This puts an especially heavy burden of responsibility on the shoulders of Soviet psychology. It now has to focus its mind on its international foreign front, to which it has hitherto not paid sufficient attention. In this struggle its allies will include not only German proletarians, but all proletarians of the world. Times are approaching when it will become clear even to a blind man that, whilst the people on one sixth of the earth's surface are fighting for the liberation of all humanity and for the achievement of everything which is truly higher, new and unprecedented in the history of the human personality, when one after another the oppressed and backward nations<sup>212</sup> are joining the vanguard of humanity, in the bourgeois camp people's consciousness continues to be molded among the debris of a resuscitated Middle Ages (Vygotsky, 1994, 335).

Needless to say, his Stalinist critics took no account of the above words when attaching their target. Vygotsky by contrast, saw clearly the dangers of his attackers' approach. His critical stance towards Stalinized "Marxism" can be summarized in the following two quotes. The first is from the beginning of his career as a psychologist, outlining the need for a dialectical theory of psychology:

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<sup>212</sup>A rather unfortunate formulation that illustrates the limitations Marxist thought faced at the time in its reference to pre-capitalist nations and colonies.

Marxist' psychology ... is developing before our eyes, ... it does not yet have its own methodology and attempts to find it ready-made in the haphazard psychological statements of the founders of Marxism, not to mention the fact that to find a ready-made formula of the mind in the writings of others would mean to demand 'science before science itself Vygotsky (1999a).

The second quote, and it is fitting to conclude this chapter with what was probably Vygotsky's last written note:

NB<sup>213</sup>! *Pro domo suo*. This is the final thing I have done in psychology—and I will die at the summit like Moses, having glimpsed the prom[ised] land but without setting foot on it. Farewell, dear creations. The rest is silence.<sup>214</sup>

At the very end, Vygotsky was defending his own work, his own principled stance as an honest thinker unmoved by the obstacles in his path, irrespective of whether it was tuberculosis or Stalinization. What is the “promised land” here? Is it the insight of sensing the contours of a new psychology, or is it the political energy released by October and the Soviet twenties, which so fundamentally changed his life? Could it be both? In seventeen short years, Vygotsky went from a brilliant high school student in a provincial town, to the very center of Soviet intellectual life. As a Jewish student at Moscow University, he could not move beyond what would have surely been his intended career as a school teacher in tsarist Russia. 1917 changed everything and created the conditions for his trajectory as a thinker. He interacted with filmmakers, poets, scientists, revolutionaries, psychologists and most importantly: with thousands of students and patients. Having produced over 100 scholarly articles and books, Vygotsky indeed died too soon.

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<sup>213</sup>NB: *Nota Bene*

<sup>214</sup>From Zavershneva's (2010) commentary: “‘Pro domo sua’ is not the precise title, but the common title, of Cicero's speech ‘In defense of my own home,’ that is, of his professional activity as an orator and lawyer; the precise title is ‘De domo sua (ad pontifices oratio).’”

He did not get the chance to flesh out his “general psychology” in detail. Ironically, he also avoided death on the execution wall or the GULAG. Though never a member of the Communist Party, Vygotsky’s method formed an important strand in the unique Soviet Marxism of the 1920s: a tradition that encountered the totally new political reality of existing in a new type of society, one that had overthrown capitalism, and not as yet arrived at what could be described as socialism. It emerged out of revolutionary turbulence, and a certain extreme dynamism and creativity marked its short life. Such political conditions compelled thinkers such as Vygotsky to extend Marxist thought into areas previously untouched.

The Soviet state’s investment in research and education created the explosion of research in psychology, where Vygotsky (though not the sole important representative) engaged with the most challenging of all questions of human subjectivity: the questions of consciousness itself, as well as the nature of speech, language and human communication. Crucially, and this is another fundamental aspect of this intellectual tradition, his work was deeply political in nature. Even in the midst of the attacks of the 1930s, Vygotsky’s efforts to build a new psychology for a new society were very much alive, precisely at the moment of rising fascism, and Soviet totalitarianism. Political clarity was the key pre-requisite of anti-fascism and anti-Stalinism. Vygotsky’s unwillingness to bow to the demands of Stalinist academics, and his clear anti-fascism, offered a crystal clear reading of the politics of his time from.

Vygotsky lost the battle with tuberculosis in 1934. His works mostly disappeared from Soviet universities for the rest of Stalin’s tenure in power. To a large extent, the current of Soviet Marxism he was part of, ended with the last purges in the late 1930s. Yet, some of the

fundamental theoretical questions raised by him on method and the study of consciousness pointed to the future. The next chapter attempts to locate these threads of Vygotskian influence in the intense post-WW II theoretical debates among Western Marxists. In particular, interesting – perhaps unexpected – threads of commonality emerge with the thought of Gilles Deleuze, and specifically in his attempts to confront the crisis of Marxism exposed by the events of 1968.

CHAPTER 4  
(UNEXPECTED CONNECTIONS: VYGOTSKY AND DELEUZE)

Causal observers and political theorists have commented on how the ongoing Occupy movement seems to be powered by various strands of anarchist theory. This much is clear from anarchist anthropologist David Graeber's recent writings (Graeber, 2011b), where he explicitly states that the Occupy Wall Street movement - with its General Assembly, spokes councils and absolute majority consensus model - are manifestations of anarchist practices that have clearly prevailed over Marxism as the predominant anti-capitalist revolutionary praxis of today. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in turn, deploy their trademark vague and politically dead-ended analysis, arguing that the ongoing Occupy movement is being propelled by the "failures of representation", and the search for an "alternative democratic form of life" (Hardt and Negri, 2011).<sup>215</sup>

Marxist theory thus faces yet another existential challenge.<sup>216</sup> Its record of revolutionary power was unrivaled in the 20th century. Contrary to any anarchist claims, and irrespective of its tragic defeats throughout the last 100 years, it remains perhaps the most powerful anti-capitalist political movement in history. Even overtly non-Marxist revolutionary movements, such as the various national liberation organizations and parties along the lines of Zimbabwe's ZANU, or Syria's Baath Party, found it necessary to assume at least the verbiage of revolutionary Marxism, to harness the energy and latent power of its concepts and historical weight.<sup>217</sup> Today however, the

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<sup>215</sup>In this, they are continuing what they began with the publication of "Empire", namely, Negri's rather sharp movement away from his revolutionary thought of the sixties and seventies of the last century.

<sup>216</sup>The most recent previous crisis occurring in the years immediately following the 1991 demise of the Soviet Union and its satellite states.

<sup>217</sup>The big red star on Zimbabwe's flag attests to this most directly. It is a matter of historical fact that millions of people rallied under the banners of Marxism, in some of the most politically

question must be asked: what can this revolutionary tradition contribute to the burgeoning anti-capitalist movement known as Occupy? Can it once again play a central role in this struggle, or has it reached its historical limits?

At first sight, the answer is *No*. The effects of Stalinism have clearly damaged the very words socialism, and communism. The most potent organizational structures of revolutionary Marxism, the Leninist party, and the mass social democratic party (best represented by the pre-WW II German Social Democratic Party) are now seen as parodies of their former selves in the shape of the various tiny groups claiming direct lineage from these powerful revolutionary parties of the early twentieth century. Or, alternatively, the very notion of a vanguard party or a mass socialist party, with its complex hierarchical bureaucratic structures seem like an outdated anachronism of a past industrial era, and Stalinist authoritarianism. This is where contemporary anarchism seems most powerful in its claims as the sole carrier of the revolutionary tradition today.

In this context, Vygotsky's contribution on method, the analysis of how consciousness forms through social relations, and the nature of interplay among consciousness, language, speech, affect and thought, offers a powerful way of analyzing the ongoing crisis of capitalism, beyond the still-effective critiques put forth by Marxist political economy. At the same time, Vygotsky's approach can also "radicalize" the dominant and most popular strand of post-structuralist thought, the theoretical current associated with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The Deleuzian angle is interesting, because it is widely present among Occupy theorists. It is being incorporated into the various anarchisms that seem to be most prevalent in publications and slogans on the

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significant struggles of the twentieth century.

street today. Deleuze's influence is even felt in cyberspace, where the ongoing successful attacks by the loosely-organized anarchist hacker collective *Anonymous*, often post material containing Deleuzian concepts.<sup>218</sup> In other words, there is potential for a synthesis of some kind. Can Vygotsky's method enrich a Marxist theory of contemporary capitalist ideology?<sup>219</sup> And, additionally, how can such an approach to ideology fuse with the insights of Deleuzian and post-Deleuzian theories of the ideologies of governance, biopolitics, and affect?<sup>220</sup>

#### INTO THE FUTURE: VYGOTSKY'S INFLUENCE TODAY

So, in what ways is Vygotsky relevant to contemporary political theory? How does a self-identified literary critic and psychologist fit in narratives of political theory, especially in the midst of the post-structuralist and post-modern moment. What is still relevant and interesting in his thought, given the crisis of Marxism in both theory and praxis, and the Soviet implosion? At a time of increasing and almost total narrow specialization, is his work in a seemingly very different field, informative for the study of politics today?

Vygotsky's thought remains relevant for contemporary political theory in at least three fundamental dimensions. First, it challenges some foundational assumptions and categories of post-Enlightenment Western political philosophy. Second, it anticipates developments in the latter part of the twentieth century, developments that are today some of the driving currents in

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<sup>218</sup>A search for #anon on [www.pastebin.com](http://www.pastebin.com) returns *Anonymous* hack announcements which often contain references to the Deleuze of "A Thousand Plateaus."

<sup>219</sup>And of capitalism, in general.

<sup>220</sup>See for example, the essays in the recently published volume by Patricia Ticineto Clough and Craig Willse (Clough and Willse, 2011)

political theory and social science. Lastly, it adds fresh elements to Marxist analysis at a time of global capitalist crisis and renewed revolutionary possibilities.

His work can be read as a meta-theory of human behavior and social organization. As such, it spans the entire field of modern social science, from psychology, to sociology, political science, history and anthropology. Though he labeled his work a general theory *of psychology*, it is clear that Vygotsky was an inter-disciplinary thinker, a trait present in his earliest works in psychology. Within this context, Vygotsky's thought anticipates in a number of unexpected ways the work of Gilles Deleuze (and Felix Guattari), another fundamental thinker of inter-disciplinarity.

Both <sup>221</sup> were responding to a profound political crisis in their time; a crisis that was also reflected in a crisis of their respective fields of study. In Vygotsky's case, he was responding to a deep crisis in psychology, while Deleuze saw the same in philosophy.

The Russian psychologist Yekaterina Zavershneva offers a concise and insightful summary of Vygotsky's project. His goal, she writes, was to develop:

... a general psychological theory of consciousness in which all previous approaches would be 'sublated' (to use Hegel's term *aufheben*, ... to which Vygotsky himself often resorted), which in turn would result in overcoming the crisis in psychology (2010).

He was preoccupied with the theoretical roadblock that stood in the way of further progress in the understanding of human consciousness. This fundamental question was the gateway to a number of related and no less important questions of agency, the constructing of the self, the role of science in human life, and ultimately, the structures and practices of everyday life. Vygotsky's project was, then, concerned with foundational questions of politics, digging beyond (but not in

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<sup>221</sup>I am leaving Guattari aside in this conversation.

place of) the study of ideology and class, into areas of affect, concept formation, language and communication. And it is precisely this entrance into the world of concepts, affect and communication which points the way forward. Through Vygotsky's unfinished project the most innovative strand of Soviet Marxism looks thirty to forty years into the future, when the crisis of the failure of 1968, led to a critical re-evaluation of the Marxist tradition itself.

Through a particularly interesting twist of history, this newest area of Marxist thought opened by Vygotsky<sup>222</sup>, was picked up not by a new post-Stalinist generation of Soviet thinkers, but by a new cohort of French thinkers rebelling against the failures of the French Communist Party,<sup>223</sup> and the crimes of Stalinism publicized during Khrushchev's "thaw". A deep political crisis was the common background to both.

As discussed in previous chapters, in Vygotsky's case, there was the crisis in psychology, plagued by an obsolete idealism (rooted in classical German philosophy, or Cartesian logic), or a newly emerging positivism (also of an idealist bent). At the same time, he also sensed the emerging crisis in Soviet society and its politics. The Soviet Union of the late 1920s was facing the near-civil war conditions of forced collectivization, and the turn towards extreme authoritarianism, most dramatically illustrated by the internal strife between the Stalinist and various Left Oppositions in (and outside) the Bolshevik party.<sup>224</sup> The crisis (and legitimacy) of

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<sup>222</sup>and his other contemporaries such as: Wilhelm Reich and Georges Politzer.

<sup>223</sup>Failures both theoretical, and practical.

<sup>224</sup>A struggle that manifested itself throughout all parts of Soviet society.

political rule<sup>225</sup>, became the crisis of the ideology of the government itself; a crisis of Soviet Marxism.

Vygotsky's project is one of urgency propelled by the politics of survival, as well as intellectual honesty and courage. As he sensed the clouds gathering around him in the political domain, he sought to imagine a way out. The development of a new, dialectical scientific approach to the study of human consciousness, language and social relations necessitated the formulation of a new theoretical framework, which in many cases moved beyond what Marxist political economy and dialectics had already developed.

Thirty some years later, Gilles Deleuze was also responding to a crisis. The post-war trajectory of the French radical Left culminated in the defeat of 1968, when the French Communist Party fundamentally betrayed the political trust of millions of its supporters. By ending the general strike that had essentially overthrown the De Gaulle regime, it saved the capitalist regime. At the same time, it also signaled the end of revolutionary politics in France. For leftist intellectuals like Deleuze, 1968 became the event that triggered the need for new theory, a new approach to the study of politics, motivated by the seeming bankruptcy of the orthodox Marxist approach. Though the connection between the two thinkers is not direct, it illustrates how dialectical thought has common meeting points, as it develops across space and time in a particular intellectual current.

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<sup>225</sup>At the height of forced collectivization, the Soviet government faced a challenge to its legitimacy, when millions of displaced peasants of all layers became determined opponents of the state, picking up armed resistance in many cases. This development was not lost to a number of most perceptive writers at the time: both Isaac Babel and Andrei Platonov wrote gut-wrenching essays lamenting the tragedy and horror brought by the collectivization process.

THE IMPACT OF VYGOTSKY'S META-THEORY  
(DIALECTICS AND MATERIALISM)

The orthodox Marxist view had always claimed the primacy of matter over mind. Thoughts reflect our perception of matter, expressed via abstractions created by our mind. A specific type of consciousness unique to humans allows us to perceive the world we live in, to “make sense” of our surroundings, and to “discover” properties that were always part of matter, but hitherto unknown to humans.<sup>226</sup> Thus, the emphasis on the primacy of materialism in Marxist thought, over the inventions and creations of the human mind. In Vygotsky’s time, the debate between such approaches to materialism and the influence of German philosopher-scientist Ernest Mach’s philosophy - an approach that sought to provide an alternative materialist interpretation - still reverberated from a series long-running polemics. The most famous involved some theoretical heavyweights, including Lenin and Aleksandr Bogdanov.<sup>227</sup> Lenin’s interpretation in defense of Marx was widely disseminated in the Soviet Union after the revolution. Philosopher Evald Ilyenkov summarized Lenin’s views, a position that Vygotsky was also implicitly arguing in support of:

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<sup>226</sup>Though Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov - writing in the 1960s and 1970s, extends this to include living creatures in general (1982).

<sup>227</sup>Bogdanov lost the debate within the Bolshevik party, and had the distinction of being the only party member to have been expelled during Lenin’s lifetime. This fact also illustrates how different the Bolshevik party was from the later Leninist party of the post-Lenin period. Before Stalinism, the various Marxist parties participating in the Russian Revolution held their debates in public, through the pages of their various publications. This was replaced by a warped interpretation of “democratic centralism” by the Stalinized Bolsheviks, as well as Mao’s Communist Party, whereby the official party media only displayed the party line. Sadly, this seems to be the practice of current-day groups that claim lineage to Lenin’s party.

... for materialism, matter - the objective reality given to us in sensation, is the basis of the theory of knowledge (epistemology) (1982, 28).

The extent of our knowledge of the world is made possible by our physical (sensual, affective) interaction with the matter in which we are subsumed. Yet, a materialist philosophy cannot stop at the step of sensation. It is not that simple:

It is also not true that the world cognizes in our sensations. In sensations the external world is only *given* to us, just as it is given to a dog. It is *cognized* not in sensations, but in the activity of thought, the science of which is logic (1982, 29).

Lenin called this the science of Logic, the epistemology of contemporary materialism.<sup>228</sup> Matter consists of the “whole infinite totality of things, events, and processes which exist in nature and history<sup>229</sup>. This is the totality that exists independently and “outside” of human subjectivities.

Within this framework, Vygotsky introduced concepts that are suggestive of a new direction beyond Hegelian and Marxist concepts. For example, concepts such as substrate of unity and boundaries of science, are suggestive of a Deleuzian direction of hybridization of thought, of mixing and fusing theoretical traditions across disciplinary boundaries, and of conceptual re-definitions. As discussed in previous chapters, this creative act of theoretical hybridization occurred in the midst of a deep theoretical crisis on psychology, facing the obvious limits of its

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<sup>228</sup>Note the distinction between this understanding of *Logic*, and the contemporary, hegemonic definition associated exclusively with positivist, mathematical (formal) logic in philosophy. One studies Saul Kripke’s *logic* when taking a class in Logic at the CUNY Graduate Center. The Marxist materialist approach to logic is completely absent from philosophy and political theory (method) classes.

<sup>229</sup>An interesting addition, history contains echoes and manifestations of the totality of nature.

hither-to idealist conceptual apparatuses, when confronted by the conceptual fields of Marxist materialist dialectical method.<sup>230</sup>

The Deleuzian project of radical reconstruction of philosophy emerged through a similar crisis of theory and politics. It was an attempt to do for philosophy what, in a broadly similar sense, Vygotsky envisioned for psychology. For Deleuze, philosophy is the foundational "general science" of what Vygotsky called concept formation. Philosophy conditions consciousness in the most direct and profound sense, underpinning the field of possibilities of human action. The core of philosophy is the creation of *concepts*. Concepts are structures/acts of human creation; a general descriptor for acts of thought, affect and of doing (of action). This is what philosophers have always done (or at least, those whose ideas have remained influential through time). The crisis in philosophy, then, is the abandonment (or deviation) from this act, in favor of recently (and not so recent) invented fads: from the representational approach taken by modern science, to the radical epistemology of contemporary philosophical logic<sup>231</sup>, and ending with the simulacrum defining the everyday life of modern capitalism. Representation, or rather, objective and subjective idealism, in place of *concept creation* marks the crisis of philosophy:<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>230</sup>This crisis was of course, underpinned by a political one of revolution, counter-revolution, Civil War, victory and the need to rapidly build a new society. This new society was to incorporate the most clearly needed features of capitalist modernity: industrialization, electrification, scientific rationality, while pushing all of these features in new collectivist terrain. The intense ideological battles on the importance of engineers, scientists and mechanists forms an important thread in the works of great contemporary Soviet writers such as Andrei Platonov and Mayakovsky, as well as the whole debates on "proletarian art" initiated by the PROLETCULT movement.

<sup>231</sup>Where philosophy is essentially reduced to mathematical logic (formal logic).

<sup>232</sup>Objective idealism, meaning positivist philosophy or political theory; subjective idealism, meaning the philosophical thought of thinkers like John Rawls. What is idealist at its core in Rawls, is the absurd "mental experiments" that posit minimal conditions for tolerance, while

Close to our time, philosophy has encountered many new rivals. To start with, the human sciences, and especially sociology, wanted to replace it. But because philosophy, ... increasingly misunderstood its vocation for creating concepts, it was no longer clear what was at stake. Was it a matter of giving up the creation of concepts in favor of a rigorous human science, or, alternatively, of transforming the nature of concepts by turning them into the collective representations or worldviews created by the vital, historical, and spiritual forces of different people(Deleuze, 1994b, 10)?

### CONCEPTS AND DIALECTICS

Though arguing for seemingly different ends, Deleuze's critique of philosophy is an appeal for the formulation of a higher, more general level of philosophical thought, similar to Vygotsky's goal of a general psychology. To seek a higher level of *generality* is to seek the foundational aspects of one's thought (or "discipline"). For Vygotsky, the most important terrain of psychology rested on this general level of *concept formation*, the level where ideology, history, religion, culture and political economy, collided and fused in the formation of individual and collective consciousness. Similarly, Deleuze's focus on concept creation (1994b) is the terrain of foundational thought. This is the arena where ideas, activities, and desires that propel and derive other ideas, activities and desires first emerge as consciousness.

### EPISTEMOLOGY

By Vygotsky's time, Marxists such as Gyorgy Lukacs had already started a revision and development of method. The Lukacsian concept of totality (1998), reflected in the unity of subject-object, marked a deepening of conceptualizations of matter, and our interactions with the world we live in. The objective conditions of the Russian Revolution, for example, were

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leaving the door open for such constructs to be actually implemented at some future point. Such mechanistic approaches to social relations are nothing but twentieth century idealist philosophical inventions of a bourgeois political sensibility.

dialectically fused/unified with the subjective *will* and actions of the Bolshevik Party (together with all other participants), forming a totality of an actual political event. Lenin was a product of specific Russian political conditions, yet without his subjective will and intervention, October might not have happened.<sup>233</sup> Yet, the subjective factor cannot be analyzed (or thought of) separately from the objective conditions in the Russia of 1917. After all, the Revolution occurred in 1917, and not in 1914. In his thinking, Lukacs avoided falling into a trap of dualist thought, unlike the typical representatives of the Soviet *DIAMAT* school of Marxist philosophers, whose view of the separateness of nature and society (unfortunately) became the defining viewpoint of orthodox (Stalinist) Soviet Marxism.

Vygotsky too avoids dualities. Though he does not speak about matter in the sense used later by Deleuze, he nonetheless sketches the outlines of a theory, where matter (or physical reality, in his terminology) is that which implicates and enfolds all parts of the human experience. Our existence is deeply implicated in the totality of physical reality. There is no point in imagining dualities of any sort, where “the social” and “the biological” come together (while remaining physically distinct features) for those split moments that define our personalities, or actions. Physical reality is all we have. We interact within it, and we try to make sense of it, but the totality of our experience only makes sense through the partial glimpses we have of that reality in various point of our lives. Vygotsky says this by quoting the eccentric (yet creative) Russian/Soviet Machist philosopher Aleksander Bogdanov<sup>234</sup>:

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<sup>233</sup>Of course, together with the combined will of millions of other participants.

<sup>234</sup>Bogdanov himself engaged in intense polemics with Lenin on the nature of *materialism*, and was the subject of Lenin’s “*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.” The fact that Vygotsky was quoting Bogdanov, a fallen figure in post-Lenin Soviet intellectual space, is rather revealing of

... the objective character of physical reality, as it is present in our experience, is ultimately verified through the social organization of the experiences of others (1934b, 48).<sup>235</sup>

This seemingly cryptic formulation on the nature of *materialism* is a good representation of Vygotsky's dialectical thought. The first part of the quote is clear: physical reality, or *matter*, is an objective fact: it exists everywhere, it has emerged before humans, and will persist after we're gone. There is nothing we can do to change this fact.

We perceive this objective reality through our lived experiences. But how is this objective world "verified" through the way society organizes the collective and individual experiences of others? What does it even mean to say this? It implies an approach to materialist dialectics suggestive of a broader generalization, where matter is really not treated separately from people's lived experiences. There are no subject-object Hegelian dualities here. There is also more in this formulation than is found in Marx's argument on how our reality is a reflection of our social relations. Vygotsky is saying that the experiences of others are socially organized in a relational way. Life can be comprehended only in relation to the experiences of others. Physical reality is a relational phenomenon. Approaching it through a system of binary logic and linear causality is a sure way to miss the point.

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Vygotsky's independence as a thinker.

<sup>235</sup>This is a remarkable quote by Bogdanov, given its almost complete adherence to Lenin's view of materialism. One wonders then, whether Lenin's portrayal of Bogdanov as ultimately an idealist thinker, rather than a materialist, was a bit premature, ignoring the apparent complexity of Bogdanov's views on the question of materialism and the human consciousness. Bogdanov was after all, a Marxist revolutionary - and one of the very early members of the Bolshevik party - and his Machism could not have been devoid of materialist dialectics given such statements.

Such relational “extremism” offers profound insights into the operation of political power, particularly as expressed through related concepts such as hegemony and ideology. Those with power can afford to construct ideologies of empty dualities and simplistic binary logic, to describe the politics of the world they rule. In fact, it is to their advantage to do so. Presenting such pseudo-models of material reality fits perfectly with the politics of those who oppress others. Why would a contemporary American capitalist see society as a complex and ever-changing web of human relations of various kinds? Why would he think of American society as one underpinned by the continuous deployment of violence, parceled in different ways against the various groupings of the majority? Would it be to capitalists’ advantage to publicize how the institution of work is subject to careful regimes of what Michel Foucault called governmentality(1980), and infused with violence, to maintain its obvious and absurd logic: 1% of the population living off the wealth (and through the appropriation of most of that wealth) created by the 99%?

The same can be said of the Stalinist bureaucracy of Vygotsky’s time. The simplification and hacking apart of Marxist dialectical method was a direct response to the need of this new elite to remain in power, at a time when its position was constantly challenged from the left (and the right).<sup>236</sup> A poverty of political philosophy is the privilege of power and oppression. The theory of resistance, of imagining the new, must necessarily start with the most complete “modeling” of the social relations that actualize life, before subsuming this analysis into a generalized

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<sup>236</sup>And to the usual and well-researched history of the left opposition led by Trotsky, we can now add a number of other, lesser know centers of opposition, one prominent example of which was the Riyutin Platform Rogovin (2009).

understanding of how we ourselves are implicated (or enfolded) in the larger material reality. The functioning of biopower and of ideology as common sense, pollute and obfuscate social relations. The more effective such power is, the greater the need for a revolutionary theory to peel the layers of obfuscation and get to the actuality of social relations as modulated by biopower and common sense.<sup>237</sup>

Vygotsky's importance to political theory, then is found first of all in his work on method. As theorist of materialist dialectics, he is a theorist of interdependence and interfunctionality. Or, to use the more vivid and precise language of another thinker of materialist dialectical method - quantum physicist David Bohm (2002) a theorist of *implicate order*. By studying the interdependence (or, mutual implication) of "Thought and Speech", Vygotsky deepens our understanding of the variability of mutually-implicated functions, the building blocks of social relations.

Speaking and thinking are separate processes that are interdependent. This is a trivial argument that cognitive science and philosophy have long established. However, the argument that speech and thought are dynamically subject to political forces is less obvious. As a theorist of social relations, Vygotsky differentiates himself (and the Marxist tradition in general) from those who assume that such relations are characterized by stasis and invariance<sup>238</sup>, claims that

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<sup>237</sup>Among other factors, the effect of contemporary techniques of governance often dismembers coherent counter-hegemonic politics from coalescing into political movements capable of revolutionary change. The rapid and violent destruction of the Black Panther Party is the most striking recent example, and the elevation of state violence against the *Occupy* movement is another.

<sup>238</sup>A property that remains unchanged when subjected to various transformations. In other words, thinking of the mind as being essentially unchanged throughout history, irrespective of the different speech patterns, cultural forms and everyday common sense that obviously varies

even today portray the practices of the capitalist market as the model for markets throughout history.<sup>239</sup>

Going back to variability, Vygotsky emphasizes the importance of capturing *change* through social time. When toddlers develop into children, and then into adults, there are accompanying changes of concept formation and language acquisition, together with development of capacities for abstract thought. This process of human cognitive development clearly shows the dynamism present in all stages of human life. Since thought processes within the individual are enfolded within the broader sociality, the importance of capturing the dynamics of change in social relations is a crucial requirement for understanding politics. Thus the crucial distinction in his approach is the treatment of these developmental stages as inseparable from the social relations (i.e. the terrain of orthodox Marxist analysis) that are also simultaneously affecting the developmental process. The formation of class differences, for example, is not just a function of the mode of production, property rights, and the location in the mode that a graduate student assumes. The cultural and cognitive conditioning that begins immediately after birth is just as important in shaping class consciousness, as are the forces of political economy proper. This approach to method is highly useful today as a general heuristic: without a conceptual framework capturing change in a relational way, a social theory of such ilk is necessarily one of political emptiness (either intentionally, or not).

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through different periods and locales of human history.

<sup>239</sup>A mantra repeated ad infinitum: Markets in general, can only function under capitalist forms of property and law, underpinned by a capitalist state and its violence - even in cases such as Milton Friedman, who argued for markets without state intervention, while failing to see the obvious fact that such market can only develop under capitalist control through the enabling violence of a capitalist-controlled State. See David Graeber's recent book on the history of debt (2011a).

Vygotsky's fundamental theoretical construct is the concept, a fundamental enabler of human communication. Similar to Vygotsky, Deleuze also focuses on concepts when writing about the crisis he saw in philosophy. This focus on the conceptual remained present throughout his life. Even at the end, he begins his last completed work<sup>240</sup> "What Is Philosophy" (1994b), with the discussion of concepts in philosophy. They are of foundational importance, but not - as other philosophers have argued - as vessels of representation, or of human abstractions that possess some type of an ahistorical, permanent Truth (or discovery). Concepts are "not eternal", nor as Simon Choat writes, do they "stabilize identities and create a better picture of the world" (2010, 129). Concepts are the terrain of human invention, the root cause of change, of motion in ideas. Though Deleuze would never say it this way, concepts is where human agency is actualized.

But it is not logical or "rational" thought that prompts the creation of concepts. Instead, it is human necessity, grounded in the material nature of everyday life that results in the act of concept creation: "...new concepts must relate to our problems, to our history, and above all, to our becomings." (Deleuze, 1994b, 27) One can immediately draw a theoretical bridge to the passages by Evald Ilyenkov cited in the sections above. Deleuze was clearly in the general orbit of Marxist materialist dialectics even when writing towards the end of his life. There are no special legitimizing conditions to this process; concept creation is not based on the possession of some Truth. Concepts create their own legitimacy through the processes of their actual emergence. As a concept is introduced, as it evolves, it "always has the truth that falls to it as a function of the conditions of its creation (Ibid.)." We invent concepts, because already-existing

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<sup>240</sup>Co-authored with Felix Guattari.

ones are in need of replacement, due to loss of meaning. As the concept of debt being always subject to repayment (regardless of the cost it incurs on those struggling to pay the debt) in our society is increasingly seen as a deeply problematic assumption - with terrifying human costs - new concepts emerge in relation to this concept of debt, and challenge its validity.<sup>241</sup> Ultimately, this organic and dynamic process of creation and invention, push the previous concept of the moral nature of debt into the background of everyday conversation. As Deleuze writes, this contested concept “loses all meaning, the beginning [of the new concept]<sup>242</sup> loses all necessity, and the presuppositions lose all difference - or take on other (Deleuze, 1994b, 27).”

To think of human actions, of agency, of communication and of language, means to think in terms of the concepts that emerge and enable all of the above. The outcome of political struggle is the result of the disruption of hither-to existing concepts, identities, power relations, gender roles. The production of what Choat terms “new ways of seeing and being (2010, 129)” occurs through this process of concept displacement, replacement and fusion, as contested terrain becomes sublimated into the new, the emergent. This is Deleuze’s reformulation of the classic Marxist argument of changing the world, rather than just observing it. And it should not be surprising, after all Deleuze explicitly considered himself a Marxist (Deleuze, 1995, 171). But what is, to ask yet again, the function of a concept for Deleuze in this process?

Concepts denote action. But they denote more than agency, since the fundamental role is played by the act of thinking, of creating, of acting and sensing. In a way, it is a notion of

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<sup>241</sup>Such as the burgeoning movement against student debt in the U.S., or the extremely timely publication of David Graeber’s book on debt , illustrating how the concept of debt varied widely through different historical periods.

<sup>242</sup>My insertion.

freedom in the most abstract, as well as the most immediately concrete sense. Ultimately, social relations, individuality, and all the complexities that interrelate (or implicate) and connect human life, can find a meaningful starting point in these acts of concept creation. Yet, Deleuze (and Guattari)<sup>243</sup> are not imagining a linear, causal progression of human psychology. This is not a vision of abstract idealist formulations about justice and Truth, and of rational individuals setting out to maximize their conscious desires. Similar to Vygotsky, this is a presentation of the *ways*, of the dynamics through which human consciousness emerges, changes, and matures.

Unlike Vygotsky, however, Deleuze is less interested in the relations between things<sup>244</sup>, and more in how things are generated, or emerge out of the “primordial virtual totality (Deleuze, 1988, 99).”<sup>245</sup> Concepts foreshadow where lines of thought and desire are pointing towards. They mark the explication of what we do, feel and want. Vygotsky often surrounds his discussion of concepts with a discussion of internal and external speech. The process of this movement of thought and affect from-within to from-without (and vice versa) is the non-stop feedback loop that forms our ability to think the way we do. This is one of the principal mechanisms of human action, and as a result, perhaps the primary terrain of political contestation. Gramsci must have felt the same when he wrote about the crucial role played by common sense in the daily functioning of ideology. The process of internalization of ideas, of propaganda, is never-ending precisely because it is constantly propped up, manufactured, forced down our throats. The battle on how to reach and settle into the zones occupied by internal speech, is a crucial one, since this

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<sup>243</sup>It is often easy to forget that many of Deleuze’s works were in fact collaborations with Guattari! )

<sup>244</sup>In the sense of the *internal relations* that play a fundamental role in Marxist dialectics.

<sup>245</sup>Virtual totality being a synonym of sorts for *matter*, the material substrate of life.

is where consciousness (in the specific marxian sense of it being socially-conditioned and generated) emerges.

This is what Deleuze is affirming with his line of thought on concepts. It is precisely due to our functioning through concept-formation<sup>246</sup> that humans have an inherent (and potentially never-ending) ability to overcome repression and strive for liberation:

...the concept is the contour, the configuration, the constellation of an event to come...  
The concept is obviously knowledge - but knowledge of itself (Deleuze, 1994b, 32-33).

Still, there are traits of materialist thinking throughout these passages. Deleuze's concepts emerge out of concrete situations of everyday life, and not out of theoretical abstractions, or logic games:

... in the analysis of concepts, it is always better to begin with the extremely simple, concrete situations, not with the philosophical antecedents, not even with problems as such (Deleuze, 2006, 362-363).

The net-effect of this thinking is the affirmation of the centrality of human subjectivity through action.<sup>247</sup> As a reaction to Stalinist Communist Parties and their rigid authoritarianism<sup>248</sup>, Deleuze can be read as making an appeal to a return "forward" towards a re-capturing of the core part of radical, revolutionary politics: the person, the subject-object, the class-conscious, the affective materialism of a political Event, the spark that propels people in the radical act. All of the above

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<sup>246</sup>To once again, use Vygotsky's formulation.

<sup>247</sup>Rather ironic, when some have written about the abandonment of human subjectivity in post-structuralist theory. In Deleuze, a thinker implicated in the Marxist tradition, human subjectivity is developed and presented in ways that were simply not present in Marxist theoretical orthodoxy. This is the whole point in emphasizing the importance of Deleuze for contemporary Marxists.

<sup>248</sup>Theoretical as well as political.

mean essentially the same thing: the reformulation of a Marxist revolutionary subjectivity through the language of Deleuze's rejection of Stalinist politics, as well the rejection of anti-communist liberal pseudo-radicalism.<sup>249</sup>

Vygotsky can be read similarly, as someone writing in the early Stalinist period. In his case, it is a foreshadowing, a return "forward" to the possibilities opened by the revolution in its most radical sense. When denying the notion of a "Marxist psychology" (Vygotsky, 1926), he is also rejecting the counter-revolutionary impulse of the bureaucratization of the revolution; the imposition of the politics of the few, for the politics of the many. Marxist thought and politics cannot be chiseled bureaucratically and then transmitted to the people. The same applies for theory; it requires the labor of human creativity that is unbound and free, with all its contradictions and theoretical imperfections. The radical act is found in the social emergent, but also individually-manifested, acts of concept creation; the series of personal and social discoveries that guide ones life (often at the same time). And learning within such dialectically manifested webs of social relations is the ground zero of politics. This is where the *substrate of unity* - as Vygotsky liked to write - of a general theory of human consciousness and communication is located, a task that necessitates appropriate *concepts*, capturing the substrate of social relations as they evolve both historically and in real time.

It is interesting then, to note that among Deleuze's concepts, perhaps the one most central to his engagement with core Marxist concepts is the one of the social machine: his attempt at

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<sup>249</sup>Irrespective of their appearance: New Left politics of French 1968 students, the liberal-conservative strand of the New Philosophes, or the upcoming neo-liberal turn in global capital and its state enablers.

capturing the substrate of unity. It supersedes the Marxist concept of base-superstructure, as well as Althusser's structuralist development. Social machines are assemblages, concepts of crucial importance in Deleuze's thought since they:

... make[s] it possible to go beyond the separation between material infrastructure and ideal superstructure, by demonstrating the imbrication of the material and the ideal (Choat, 2010, 136).

Assemblages are Deleuze's equivalent to Vygotsky's process of concept formation, the process through which, I am arguing, ideological frameworks enter and condition our consciousness. Analytically, the concept of assemblages rejects what is structuralist and discrete in Marx's original formulation of the base-superstructure of capitalist society. Instead, it denotes a seamless, infusive system where the sphere of production, the ideological frameworks (the ideal superstructure) of those exercising hegemony, and the totality of cultural space are understood as a continuum of wholeness and mutual implication.<sup>250</sup> The material and the ideal need not be counterposed. It is clear that they are internally related.<sup>251</sup>

Deleuze sees a continuum of relations spanning across and through the material world. These condition the relations of production, political institutions and social practices, as well as the "ideal" world of ideological constructions, and specific modes of consciousness (individual and collective). All this social "substrate of unity" is molded by what Deleuze calls, the "synthesis-in-application" of the material substrate with the

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<sup>250</sup>Or, to use Lukacs: a totality of subject-object.

<sup>251</sup>They cannot exist separately on their own, they are related dialectically, as one conditions and enables the other, and vice versa. I am using Bertell Ollman's definition throughout the chapter (2003).

ideal-cognitive-internalized-communicative component of everyday life. Again, this is not a relation of causality as in the base determining the superstructure. It is a dialectical internal relation signifying a feedback mechanism, where the nature of value-creation is paralleled by corresponding conceptual frameworks of ideological legitimation and reproduction of the value-creation processes.

Social machines, then, are Deleuze's concept suggestive of Vygotsky's *substrate of unity*, where a machine is:

that which interrupts flows, and each particular social formation has its own way of selecting, connecting, and combining different elements, of interrupting and arranging flows - flows of people, of wealth, beliefs, desire, and so on (Choat, 2010, 136).

This is the terrain of Vygotsky's cryptic, but extraordinary commentary on consciousness as theater, as drama:

... the basic principle of the functioning of higher functions (personality) is social, entailing interaction [autostimulation, "to enter into control of one's own body," control ...] of functions, in place of interaction between people. They can be most fully developed in the form of drama (Vygotsky, 1989, 59).

Human personality, the psyche is like a dramatic play: the contradictions contained within a "character", the lover, who is also a ruthless judge, a fan of poetry. Human consciousness as drama plays on these dialectical contradictions of human personalities, it is a clash of systems of social relations that have been internalized. It denotes a mode of existence, a Macbeth, a Moscow worker, a peasant woman in medieval Japan. There is a blurring of analytical categories, anticipating Deleuze in the need to break down "... any division between the production of material things and the production of modes of existence and subjectivity. (Jameson, 1997, 403)"

There is a connection here with Deleuze's central theory of capitalism as desire. The entire thrust of Vygotsky's work was to show the importance of psychological structures in everyday life. In addition to the organization of labor and class structures, everyday life is to a very significant degree conditioned by patterns of communication; the outward-inward-outward loops of language and speech, both *inner* and *outer* (Vygotsky, 1934b). But life as drama is also a life of *affect*, of emotive connections, actions and desires. It is not at all surprising that his last work, left unfinished at his death, was a book-length manuscript of the study of emotions, of affect (Vygotsky, 1988)

Deleuze extends this line of thought in his critique of capitalism. *Desire* is a fundamental part of capitalism. It does not just exist as a part of "human nature" (Choat, 2010, 137). It must be invented, enforced and reproduced. Thus, it is a terrain of politics, and as such it enfolds everything that is political: ideology, common sense, gender, class, race, division of labor. It actually *is* a form of political power (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009, 24). Ultimately, it is thus also a battleground of consciousness-formation, or to arrive at the link with Vygotsky: of *concept formation*.<sup>252</sup> One must internalize various objects of desire. This can only happen through various machines of desire production, subsumed within the general social machines of capitalism.

Deleuze further argues that desire is a form of production (Choat, 2010, 137). There are elements of the psychological in his analysis here, most explicitly through making connections to

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<sup>252</sup>It seems impossible to reduce Vygotsky's core contribution to his development of the notion of concept formation, as an all-encompassing term that folds into itself a number of key Marxist theoretical concepts: ideology, power, hegemony, social relations.

Freud in *Anti-Oedipus*, in "recognizing desire as production, as an abstract subjective essence without source or object (Ibid.) Freud localized this within the bourgeois family (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009, 24) rather than generalizing it across all and any social relations under capitalism. Deleuze's extension and association of desire with production, however, represent a powerful development of Marxist political economy into the terrain of consciousness, of the Vygotskian spaces of "inner speech"; places where classical (and orthodox) Marxist political economy had previously avoided (or not seriously, systematically, entertained).

There is "an identity of labor and desire" (Choat, 2010, 138) Deleuze writes. There is no separation between "the real", material object (a job, a class position, etc.) and the objects of desire. In fact, "desire-production" and social production are identical (Ibid.). In other words, what we have here is the fusion of the psychological and political economy. This is a striking development (non-linear! ) of Vygotsky's much-earlier arguments of the inseparability of consciousness from the material objective world.

In describing coding and desire, then, Deleuze is describing consciousness. The timing of his theoretical intervention was apt given the changing theoretical winds of the times.

By 1968, Marxist thought had already come under increasingly sustained attack from several directions, for what termed its rigid economic determinism Harvey (2007). Thirty years before, during Vygotsky's time, a similar debate raged among Marxists theorists on the tensions between economic determinism and reductionism, coupled with questions on what constitutes dialectical method. As previously discussed, the impact of Lukacs' critique was precisely on the crucial

question of what constitutes the Marxist *method* and how it differs from bourgeois analysis of social relations.

Deleuze responded to the critics with a theoretical invention. The concept of *social machine* encloses class, mode of production, and relations of production in a meta-concept on a higher level of abstraction. This fits with the increased complexity of capitalism in 1968. Modernism was at its high point, with the Pompidou Center in Paris emerging from the planning stages as perhaps the parting shot of what Le Corbusier had started decades before, but politics and capitalist relations were already transitioning to the future. Deleuze was perhaps the first Western thinker who detected this transition through his theory. Social machines are a full degree of complexity beyond the orthodox Marxist concepts of political economy. Analysis of capitalism through the lens of political economy had retained its explanatory richness. But contrary to predictions made in the first half of the century, capitalism was not defeated globally after World War II.

Though utterly discredited by the genocidal violence of the war, it managed to defeat the socialist revolutionary threat. Few places around the world saw the Marxist revolutionary project emerge victorious. Other than China, Eastern Europe, Vietnam and Cuba, most challenges to capitalist-imperialist hegemony were defeated. Furthermore, by 1968 it was clear that certain organizational measures (the Marshall Plan and Keynesian economic policies in particular) had enabled the most advanced capitalist economies to out-develop their (provisionally) socialist alternatives. Clearly, there was more to capitalist hegemony than just ownership of the means of production, and a repressive state apparatus.

On the level of ideology and hegemony, capitalists leveraged state and economic power to win the battle of consciousness formation, or to use Vygotsky's terminology, the battle over control of concept formation, related to the reproduction of the capitalist system. This necessitated the invention and introduction of concepts targeting the psychological dimension of life: the manipulation of affect and libidinal desires through increasingly sophisticated advertising techniques, and the introduction of new regimes of population control. As Michel Foucault has shown (Foucault, 2010), biopower almost completely superseded previous modes of power such as disciplinary and carceral modes, except in places where there was overt threat to capitalist hegemony.<sup>253</sup>

At the same time, the search for new sources of surplus value extraction and the constant threat of declining rates of profit, led to innovations which extended the reach of capitalist exchange firmly into the domain of consciousness and the psyche. In 2012, concepts such as network society Thacker and Galloway (2007) and Clough and Willse (2011), where information itself is the domain of capitalist regimes of power-knowledge, are clearly part of everyday life. Google, Apple and other Internet capitalist powerhouses form the core of the most dynamic areas of the economy (Wall Street finance corporations aside). Yet, what is it that Google and Facebook sell? How do they extract surplus value from their workers? They do so through advertising and data mining of web browsing and real-life habits. In other words, Google and Facebook are in the business of affect production and knowledge generation. Their customers *are*

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<sup>253</sup>Such as in places of open rebellion against imperialism, or among populations that were deemed to be of surplus economic value (such as the people living the ghettos of America's big cities).

the product, a clear fact since everything that both companies offer as products to mass consumers are given away for free.<sup>254</sup>

Deleuze's social machine is an apt concept foreshadowing such developments, where the political economy of work and surplus extraction through work, is fused with the politics of affect, and various conceptualizations of political power that go beyond the Weberian and Leninist models of the state.<sup>255</sup>

It is a hybrid concept, where social relations and structures are "defined by *machinic processes* and not by modes of production (these on the contrary depend on the processes) (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 435)." These social machines are inter-related, they coexist within "social topologies." The mathematical reference here is both striking in its literary vividness and, the theoretical doors it opens in contemporary attempts at capturing the evolving complexity and dynamism of capitalism.

Topology is the study of continuous surfaces and the preservation of their shapes, irrespective of the application of force upon them. This is a useful metaphor for the hither-to ability of capitalist elites and associated state structures to withstand revolutionary challenges, intra-capitalist competition, and the inherent contradictions of capitalism itself. The mechanism of the State is characterized by modes of governmentality and "capture", while urbanized societies such as the U.S. are characterized by mechanisms of "polarization." These are most

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<sup>254</sup>Google makes money by data mining the content of the emails of its Gmail customers, then serving custom generated ads to its Gmail customers. As millions of customers view and occasionally click those ads, Google gets paid.

<sup>255</sup>The classic Marxist argument being: the state is an institutional arrangement overwhelmingly serving the interests of the capitalist class.

clearly visible in the actual geographies of segregated physical spaces: the ghetto vs. the bohemian hipster enclave of Williamsburg, two polarized spaces enforced in subtle and direct ways through regimes of governmentality and Weberian power (as necessary).<sup>256</sup> Still, both spaces are part of the social topology of the larger, encompassing, social machine of New York City in 2012, further managed by the social machines of neoliberal politics.

#### DRAWING A CONNECTION: FROM GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY TO POWER

Another interesting dimension of Vygotsky's thought for contemporary political theory is his implicit re-conceptualization of ways to think about political power, as well as its constitutive institutions and structures.

In the concluding pages of "Thought and Language", Vygotsky (1934b) notes the critical role of affect in social relations. Human thought does not emerge out of thought itself, he writes, and the ability to formulate thoughts is not some ideal, evolutionary "hard wired" ability that generates itself for some abstract reason. More than a critique of his contemporaries who treated thought and consciousness as a *tabula rasa*, as a concept for itself, Vygotsky denies that thought is the "superior authority" (1934b, 252) in the complex processes of communication and

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<sup>256</sup>Many examples of this differential treatment can be found. One, and the most obvious, is the predominance of disciplinary measures in the city ghettos, with police mobile towers, stop and frisk policies, as well as the visible presence police on the streets. Another example is found in geographical differences. Whereas Williamsburg is enjoying increasing number of public and private green spaces, swimming pools, and running tracks, the South Bronx continues to be the neighborhood with the least amount of public green space in the city. These differences are the result of conscious political decisions, within a regime of capitalist power.

language. Instead, thought emerges out of various affective states, it is shaped by “motivation, i.e. by our desires and needs, our interests and emotions” (Ibid.).<sup>257</sup>

At the same time, his discussion of the affective is not a rehashing of affect as some romanticized and idealized set of “emotions”, understood in the 19th century sense of European philosophical thought and literature.<sup>258</sup> Vygotsky is searching for a new *concept* of affect:

Behind every thought there is an affective-volitional tendency, which holds the answer to the last “why” in the analysis of thinking. A true and full understanding of another’s thought is possible only when we understand its affective-volitional basis (1934b, 252).

He then proceeds to quote theater director Stanislavsky and his approach of annotating plays in an attempt to capture the meaning behind the words, the implied and embedded collection of affect, meaning, common sense, *and* social relations that come together every time we speak and communicate through written language. The passage ends abruptly shortly thereafter, and Vygotsky leaves his discussion of affect incomplete.

Though unfinished, the theoretical opening is very much present, hinting at Deleuze’s hybridization of Marxist thought and his transition to the politics of affect, where affect and desire are recast as a form of production (Choat, 2010, 137) in contemporary capitalism. Labor, its extraction and exploitation, are now complemented (and supplemented) by psychological structures of the body itself; a new locale subject to capitalist manipulation and modulation. As if continuing Vygotsky’s unfinished thoughts, Deleuze writes of the need in “recognizing desire as

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<sup>257</sup>Note, how this formulation moves beyond the orthodox Marxist view that thoughts are formulated externally through social relations. Vygotsky takes this as but a starting point.

<sup>258</sup>As it was present for example in the Victorian novel.

production, as an abstract subjective essence without source or object (Choat, 2010, 137). Marxists would have to engage seriously and systematically with the libidinal, the affective, the psychological dimensions of politics. In this sense, Vygotsky's "motivation" and "affective-volition" can be interpreted as umbrella terms, an abstraction enfolding history (historical materialism), ideology (Gramsci's *common sense*), and power. This inward-outward turn in studying thought and consciousness is a theoretical complement to the explosion of psychoanalysis in Marxist thought at the time Deleuze was writing "Difference and Repetition."<sup>259</sup>

The focus on affect is also fundamentally intertwined with the study of consciousness and language. And the study of consciousness within the Marxist tradition was in need of a full systematic treatment by the early parts of the twentieth century. It was on Vygotsky's radar. "We attempted", he wrote, "to study experimentally the dialectics of transition from perception to thinking (Vygotsky, 1934b, 255)."

Through this unique dialectical lens, words (and language in general) are "generalized reflection of reality" (Ibid.), and this generalization is a terrain of politics, a battleground of ideology and power. Words are all we have when we communicate, and they are the primary vehicle enabling social relations of particular types. By being one of the primary vehicles through which consciousness is conditioned, words play a fundamental role in affecting perceptions of reality. Vygotsky's differentiation of perceptive and intellectual consciousness is

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<sup>259</sup>I am thinking of the influence exerted by Lacan's lectures in France at this time.

important in highlighting the dynamic and ideological nature of perceived reality But why the *affective* turn in politics, in the study of everyday life?

The idea of humans as rational animals has deep roots in political theory, but for Vygotsky there is more to us than the ability to form rational (abstract) thoughts. The domains of emotions, reflexes, affect and desire are even more crucial, than the ability to form certain patterns of thinking. Thought is itself “mediated by signs externally (Vygotsky, 1934b, 252).” Rather than abstract thoughts propelling our subjectivities, it is external affective constructions (and structures) that lead to thoughts. Affect mediates thought externally and (even more crucially) internally, via “word meanings” (Ibid.). Communication is impossible directly between people, not even psychologically.<sup>260</sup> It is only possible indirectly, filtered, enabled and created through meaning, and affect. Ultimately it is expressed for others through words, a complex process of indirectness, where everything is mediated through layers of meaning and further mediation: meanings resolving ultimately through words:

Thoughts must first pass through meaning and only then through words. (Vygotsky, 1934b, 252).

But, to ask again: why the turn to consciousness understood through affect and meaning? What is gained by Vygotsky’s turn to psychology? Vygotsky’s turn to consciousness, affect and meaning did not occur in a vacuum. There were parallel efforts made by some of the theorists of the Frankfurt School during the same time period. Prior to Deleuze in 1968, there are at least two

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<sup>260</sup>Thomas Hobbes implied something similar in *The Leviathan* on the inherent difficulties in human communication, where it is practically impossible to accurately know what someone else is thinking based on what they said or wrote. Vygotsky’s approach is less cynical and focuses more on how we communicate, rather than posit the impossibility of rationally precise (logical?) communication.

examples of Marxist thinkers showing the need to enter the terrain of psychology to better capture seeming contradictions in Marxist analysis.

Writing in 1932, Erich Fromm posited the question of how can the insights of Freudian psychoanalysis be fused with historical materialism. Echoing Vygotsky, Fromm argued that Marxist analysis could be enriched if it incorporated insights about human nature from psychology. Though Marxists argued that ideology had a clear economic basis for its formation, the fact remained that “(l)acking a satisfactory psychology, Marx and Engels could not explain *how* the material basis was reflected in man’s head and heart (1970, 127).” Political economic analysis was not enough to explain capitalist society, since such of it could not penetrate to the level of consciousness. There had to be a way to integrate Freudian insights, such as the role played by libidinal forces and the rest of the “instinctual apparatus”, into discussions about the base and superstructure of society. At the same time, psychoanalysis (or psychology in general) would also be limited if it excluded Marxist political economy, because the “human psyche - or the libidinal forces at its root - are part of the substructure; but they are not the whole substructure, as a psychologistic interpretation would have it (Ibid.).” Clearly, Fromm was very close to Vygotsky in seeing the need for a new type of Marxist synthesis, making sense of the internal dimension of thought and speech, within the broader analysis of class, political economy and power.

What is consciousness asked Wilhelm Reich in an essay from 1934 (1934). He was critiquing the German Communist Party’s mechanistic explanations of class workers consciousness. Reich observed a contradiction in the promises of Marxist analysis of capitalism, and the actual results

of revolutionary politics. Writing in the aftermath of the Nazi victory in 1933 - a victory that didn't seem likely in the country with the largest socialist party in the world - he asked how was it possible that after all this talk about the contradictions of capitalism, and the impending end of imperialist regimes at the hands of the revolutionary working class masses, so many of those very same workers ended up voting for Hitler?

The answer was to be found in the battle for consciousness:

While we presented the masses with superb historical analyses and economic treatises on the contradictions of imperialism, Hitler stirred the deepest roots of their emotional being Reich (1934).

Marxist theory can make all kinds of accurate predictions about the nature of class politics. It does not mean, however, that such an accurate theory, internalized by its authors, and having entered the common sense of the revolutionaries writing those articles, is necessarily also part of working class common sense. The battle for revolutionary consciousness is not automatically won by a correct dialectical analysis in theory! This is a crucial clarification and a warning against dogmatic, mechanistic socialists, who believe that the correct ideas are all that is needed to infuse working class consciousness with revolutionary vigor.

Reich's critique echoes Vygotsky's argument about the centrality of external-internal speech loops conditioning consciousness. Language that misreads the prevailing common sense of the moment can be made irrelevant by an opposing ideology, that skilfully deploys ideological speech patterns speaking true with the wishes of the working class - irrespective of its demagogic roots, and theoretical falsehood. Working class consciousness in 1933 in Germany was:

... made up of concern about food, clothing family relationships, the possibilities of sexual satisfaction in the narrowest sense, sexual pleasure and amusements in a broader sense, such as the cinema, theatre, fairground entertainments and dancing". ... the difficulties of bringing up children, with furnishing the house, with the length and utilization of free time, etc. (Ibid.)

Revolutionary politics "must find the connection with the petty, banal, primitive, simple everyday life and wishes of the broadest mass of the people, in all the specificity of their situation in society (Ibid.)."<sup>261</sup> Ideology and consciousness-formation were clearly crucial political battlegrounds, where Marxist thought was under-developed.

In addition to affect and desire, Vygotsky's "inward turn" towards the study of the psyche and consciousness, points to the future in amplifying another influential aspect of Deleuzian theory: micropolitics, and the politics of the molar and molecular. The concepts of micropolitics and the molar/molecular differentiate Deleuze's thought from Foucault's. Foucault focused on the molar level of politics, of power and its functioning through the countless networks and structures of modern life, from the panopticons of the state, to the embedding of various regimes of power in populations, and in the body of individuals (Foucault, 2010) and (Foucault 1995).

The molar is also the domain of Althusser's structuralism, then influential on the French Left and in Western Marxism, in general. Deleuze did not ignore the molar and its associated structures of politics, institutions and other large-scale systemic manifestations of power. Instead, he focused on the molecular level of politics, while dialectically incorporating the molar. Structuralism and the basic concepts of orthodox Marxism were not ignored, but rather

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<sup>261</sup> See Appendix 4 for a similar argument made by African-American writer Richard Wright.

re-conceptualized (or as Deleuze might have put it: re-territorialized). In other words, Deleuze engaged in a theoretical synthesis.

Micropolitics is Deleuze's concept for dialectical method applied to the study of politics. It is the study of social relations, their formation, reproduction, and actualization. Specifically, micropolitics focuses on the divisions and differentiators in social relations, what Choat calls "the lines that segment us into clearly defined, rigid oppositions - between our job and our family, work and leisure, public and private, between sexes, ages, classes and races (2010, 144)." Moving beyond the binary pairings of modern capitalist societies (a formulation still very much indebted to the Cartesian roots of liberalism), micropolitics also meshes with the molecular level of everyday political life: the relations that glue together the binary pairings (dualities) of micropolitics. This is the heart of politics, the social relations that are both fleeting and permanent (or semi-permanent), the locales of power.

Still, within the micropolitics of the molecular level of politics, are contained the possibilities of transcending, confronting and overthrowing various locales of power. These lines of flight are the locales of political emancipatory possibilities, dependent on *actions*, "as if something carried us away, across our [molar, rigid] segments, but also across our [molecular, supple] thresholds, towards a destination which is unknown, not foreseeable, not pre-existent" (Choat, 2010, 144). Such lines of flight of political possibilities replace Marxist class analysis in Deleuzian theory.

Desire and affect are crucial in such an understanding of politics, since they are front and center in the molecular politics of lines of flight. Similar to Vygotsky's argument that affective-volitional "tendencies" precede and condition conscious thoughts, Deleuze sees in

affect and desire, the primary carriers of consciousness and communication. The ability to do and to think through doing is a fundamental pre-requisite for politics on the both the molecular and molar level of politics. Conversely, inability to do so signify repression, the acts of blocking someone (or a population) from entering particular lines of flight. Materialist dialectics in Deleuze continue Vygotsky's (and Marx's) emphasis on studying change and motion. Thus, repression too can best be understood through the lens of change. Under capitalism today, "if we're so oppressed, it's because our movements are being restricted, not because our eternal values are being violated" (Choat, 2010, 145). Being fixed in space and time is a long-standing practice of political oppression. In the American South, slave owners explicitly created structures restricting slave mobility as their primary mechanism of exerting control. The slave pass system, together with slave patrols and appropriate legislation proscribing severe penalties to anyone who aids runaways, went a long way to enable the successful operation of plantation slavery(Parenti, 2004).

This is a particularly useful formulation since it extends Lukacs and Vygotsky's critique of bourgeois social science and its idealist foundation; a base intimately connected to the social function of such social sciences as apologists for capitalist hegemony. Today, a liberal political scientist studies how the Patriot Act violates the natural rights of American citizens - or at least, the formulation of those rights as expressed through the Constitution. But such analysis escapes the deeper reason for concern: the impact of the Patriot Act on the willingness and ability of people to engage in particular forms of revolutionary politics, which might subject them to the harsh gaze of the capitalist State. Isn't the mobility restricted for those participants in the London

Occupy movement, who are now official labeled “terrorists” by the British State, opening the possibility of facing a much more repressive carceral mode of governmentality being deployed against them from now on?

The ongoing foreclosure crisis offers another example. For millions of Americans, losing their

homes is a process of fixation: for the foreseeable future, they are in a position of extreme financial vulnerability and increased poverty. In terms of class, millions of people are solidifying their stay in poverty. For those who are still barely holding on to their houses, the overwhelming priority is to keep paying those mortgage bills. Life becomes a basic quest for a paycheck. There is no time and space left for political activism, vacations, or anything unrelated to earning enough wages to pay the bank.<sup>262</sup>

## THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT AND REVOLUTIONARY MARXISM: CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY (AGAINST INVARIANCE)

The concept of invariance offers a powerful way of thinking about power in capitalist regimes.<sup>263</sup>

In a general sense, it denotes processes that remain relatively unchanged, even when subjected to various forces.

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<sup>262</sup>The critical nature of their dilemma is even more obvious, considering how uninterested the State is in helping out these vulnerable home owners. A cynic might comment: how can someone expect more working class Americans to be involved in politics (in ways other than voting in elections), when the almost total lack of any leverage against capitalists makes survival the only game in town.

<sup>263</sup>Though originally a mathematical concept, a number of political theorists and philosophers - from Foucault and Deleuze, to Roy Bhaskar, Brian Massumi and Patricia Clough - have developed its use in social theory.

The deployment and reproduction of desired patterns of power relations is fundamental to any regime of power. While capitalism's dynamism often reshapes the political terrain, the permanence of certain patterns remain fundamental for the survival of its ruling class. Hegemonic capitalist class ideologies, for example, emphasize the importance of invariance in a number of crucial arenas of contemporary politics. In the U.S., regimes of governance and biopolitics deployed against working class Americans, focus on making this most numerous class appear totally invisible in mainstream politics. This is clear from the near total absence of any references to the poor and the working class in Presidential debates. Election after election, all bourgeois politicians operating on the highest levels of power, continuously omit such references from their lexicon. Even in the midst of the "Great Recession", Barack Obama still cannot bring himself to show explicit concern for working people.<sup>264</sup> The ideological frameworks which underpin such modes of governmentality are carefully written and reproduced to achieve desired modes of invisibility for targeted populations.

Thus, the New York Times writes about "people of low net-worth", while TV commentators refer to the working class by calling them the middle class. More refined apologists of capital even go as far as denying the very relevance of the category of *class*. On the left, many Occupy anarchists join forces (perhaps out of ignorance? ) in avoiding any conversation about class, continuing to rely on Hardt and Negri's famous replacement: the multitude (2001).

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<sup>264</sup>Thirty second sound bites on 2012 election ads notwithstanding. The Democrats continue to address the middle class, a strategy that makes perfect sense for a party of the American bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. The allegiance of the working class majority is necessary only at certain narrow time intervals (such as wartime, or during depressions and recessions), to either provide a veneer of legitimacy around election time, or channel pre-revolutionary potentialities towards the safe harbors of liberal politics.

Politically, the net effect is the same. The absence of class consciousness, and of class-based politics, results in a semi-permanent re-definition of class struggle into an amorphous, and confusing *language* of politics. Working class people and the poor become the “middle class” and the “less fortunate”, while class struggle expressed by the dramatic decline of union wages, generates innocent New York Times commentary about “the necessity to be competitive in the global economy (Uchitelle, 2011).”<sup>265</sup> The working majority is thus made politically invisible on the level of everyday ideology and Gramscian common sense.

Contemporary capitalists (and associated servants and enforcers) depend absolutely on the invariance which characterizes the actual nature of social relations, underpinned by various interlocking forms of oppression, exploitation and war. New ideas, critiques and alternatives are unwelcome on the level of ideology. This is one way of saying that capitalist power pays very careful attention to language, to words, and to speech patterns within social relations, especially when concerning the application of power. Thought, language and speech are *the* terrain of most intense political war, where regimes of governmentality, biopolitics and capitalist exploitation are pre-configured, implemented and reproduced. Revolutions, social movements and revolts occur much less often than the evening news. In this sense, the body of work developed by Vygotsky, Voloshinov, Lukacs and others, focusing on the connections between language and politics, anticipated contemporary work on the intersectionality of language, communication, and political power.

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<sup>265</sup>In other words, American workers should get accustomed to workers’ wages in Brazil, and vice versa: the Brazilian working class should not harbor illusions about earning as much as American workers earned ten years ago. In short: the international working class should be conditioned to expect nothing more than working for the lowest wage possible.

## THE LANGUAGE OF CAPITALIST HEGEMONY: A SHORT CASE STUDY

A brief look at the current language, speech patterns, and other utterings that predominate in mass media, the workplace, the school, and in the common sense of everyday life, illustrates the importance of language and affect in conditioning consciousness politically. To a large extent, the speech patterns that infuse the language of work and politics are manufactured in the elite business schools, where the bourgeoisie trains the next level of capitalist managers through MBA programs. Consider the following excerpt where Yale School of Management graduates sound off on the need for synchronization and unification of employees in the workplace, largely through workers self-policing:

Leadership is the ability to understand the passions of people and to **integrate**<sup>266</sup> these passions in a collective goal. Leadership is to understand when to lead and when to be guided in order to achieve a **desire**.<sup>267</sup>

The emphasis on affect as a target of ideological control is explicit throughout a number of business school management theory. Consider the following quotes:

- “A leader must keep the organization focused on its service mission. Every job at the [...] - and every job across the [...] - should be focused on the provision of services to our "customers" - students, parents, alumni, legislators, taxpayers, patients, business and professional communities, component institutions, and each other.”<sup>268</sup>
- “Thanks to information technology, we now can have the best of both worlds – the economic and scale efficiencies of large organizations, and the human benefits of small ones: freedom, motivation, creativity, and flexibility”<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>266</sup>In this and in following quotes, I emphasize words in bold, that signify ideological and affective keywords that channel language into desired modes of political discourse.

<sup>267</sup>Yale Students on Leadership, Yale School of Management, (<http://mba.yale.edu/why/purpose/leadership.shtml>).

<sup>268</sup>Chancellor Yudin from the University of Texas, On Leadership, (<http://www.utsystem.edu/cha/speechesArticles/Leadership11-5-02.htm>)

- “A rigorous and fair accountability system measures student growth, rewards schools that accelerate student achievement, and identifies and rewards outstanding teachers and leaders. NCLB says that fifth-grade teacher who helps a student reading at a second-grade level reach a fourth-grade level, within one year, has this missed their goal. In fact, that teacher is an excellent teacher and should be applauded.”<sup>270</sup>
- “Accountability is achieved by measuring college’s annual progress towards key performance targets – many tied directly to student outcomes – and rewarding performance by Presidents and their leadership teams commensurate with those results.” (CUNY 2004-2008 Master Plan)

The most important point of emphasis here is the fetishization of leadership. The entire language of the workplace, politics and ethics seems to be pre-occupied with who is fit to lead, and who is not. Identifying leaders is also the goal of the education system. Being a good leader is the highest virtue of a presidential candidate. Underneath it all lurks the obvious authoritarian and hierarchical nature of capitalist (liberal) ideology. There is no space for followers, or those who can imagine social structures in terms different from hierarchies of rule-makers and rule-followers. Such is the deep-rooted binary logic of inequality that is pervasive through the minds of contemporary bourgeois ideologues.

What these quotes taken from seemingly different areas of social life also reveal is the amount of effort, and the degree to which bourgeois ideology is harmonized across ideology to:

- a) mark starting points for decision-making, defining the set of seemingly possible and desirable actions, thoughts and desires.<sup>271</sup>

<sup>269</sup>Obtained from statements by Yale School of Management students listed on <http://mba.yale.edu/why/purpose/leadership.shtml>.

<sup>270</sup>Speech by Obama Education Secretary Arne Duncan. Obtained from <http://www.google.com/search?q=obama+speech+%22accountability,+leadership,+outcomes%22&hl=en&gbv=1&prmd=ivns&ei=IPYIT6zeKuru0gG74LySBw&start=10&sa=N>, visited on 1/12/2012.

<sup>271</sup>Consider the total absence from the quotes of anything that hints at egalitarianism, cooperation between equals, sharing, or of basic human empathy. Generalized across public education

b) delineate borders containing self-allowable sets of action, modulating the various affective modes of everyday life.<sup>272</sup>

Contemporary capitalism is characterized, then, by an extremely rigid set of core axioms of speech patterns and language, which furnish assumptions that enable desired (from bourgeois class perspective) human actions. One of the most overlooked facets of this system is how highly refined and fine-tuned these axioms are. cursory analysis of top CEO<sup>273</sup> speeches reveal a small core of principles, which are assumed to be teleologically true and impossible to do without. They provide the starting point for all actions in the field of management, and their presence is enabled by agent internalization and endless looping of axiomatic repetition down the hierarchical stations of the workplace. These principles are not subject to debate, since they operate on the level of religious-like faith. And precisely because of their faith-based origins, such axioms have to be carefully taught to both future managers and workers (or more accurately, lower-level managers). Thus, the goal of management education and practice is to internalize these sets of axioms, and engineer a high level of self-policing, as the starting point of good management ideology and workplace discipline and control. The high degree of harmonization and similarity shown in the words of corporate CEOs, politicians (but also among public university presidents/trustees) indicate the common ideological origins of these managers. A

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systems, mass media and workplaces, such omissions essentially “hide” the very possibility and desirability of anti-capitalist sentiment. Whatever is not mentioned does not exist. Totalitarianism at its most refined, invariant liberal formulation.

<sup>272</sup>Extending from self-perception (am I beautiful or not, am I successful or not, am I happy, etc. and if not: what can I purchase or do to achieve what I signaled to achieve.

<sup>273</sup>I am focusing on Fortune 100 CEOs, since they are actual capitalists who are in leadership positions, at the forefront of ideological and common sense battles (with each other, and classes that they exploit).

closer study of their text and speech patterns follows to illustrate how this ideology of common sense is constructed today. These are the locales where what Vygotsky termed “concept creation” occurs in the domain of work.<sup>274</sup>

According to MIT’s Sloan School of Management theorist Deborah Ancona, there are two core requirements for effective leadership: a) Trust and Relationship building, and b) a set of Key Competencies (Vision, Analysis and Inventing).<sup>275</sup> The Yale School of Management on the other hand, emphasizes Purpose, Passion and Accountability.<sup>276</sup> A study of a corpus of such texts reveals a limited number of keywords that appear often and thus, play an important role in establishing contemporary capitalist ideology and regime of common sense. The list includes:

- Words grouped and associated around notions of leadership in politics, education and the workplace: CHANGE, VISION, INVENT, CREATE, UNDERSTAND, MOTIVATE, LEAD, COMMUNICATE, FEEDBACK, ORGANIZE, PASSION, ACCOUNTABILITY.<sup>277</sup>
- Words grouped and associated around notions of trust and relationship building:<sup>278</sup> CONNECT, ADVOCACY, INQUIRY, RESPONSIBILITY.

Attempts to invent a new ideology of affect that is focused only on the extraction of surplus value leads to tortured and absurd formulation, a type of Orwellian New Speak that requires constant

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<sup>274</sup>The area of life where most Americans spend the majority of their time most of the week.

<sup>275</sup>Deborah Ancona, Highlighting Leadership in an Age of Uncertainty, <http://sloanleadership.mit.edu/pdf/LeadershipinanAgeofUncertainty-researchbrief.pdf>. Accessed on

<sup>276</sup><http://mba.yale.edu/why/purpose/index.shtml>.

<sup>277</sup>This list is generated by extracting the most frequently occurring keywords in MIT Sloan School of Management leadership theory documents. The same patterns of keywords is found when analyzing documents from ideologically identical institutions such as the New York University’s Stern School of Business, or Harvard Business School.

<sup>278</sup>A particularly sore point of bourgeois common sense, since the only thing that is of supreme importance is an abstraction itself: the creation of surplus value and its eventual and necessarily conversion into the money as a universal commodity.

unending streams of propaganda to penetrate the external-internal speech loop, and lodge itself as deeply as possible into the internal speech of the population. Once working people start using keywords such as accountability in casual conversation, the mission is largely accomplished.<sup>279</sup>

Here is an example illustrating such absurdities:<sup>280</sup>

Every leader has his or her distinct way of using these capabilities to make **change** happen. This unique pattern is called a **change signature**.<sup>281</sup>

The emphasis here is on enabling a leader to affect change. Furthermore, the focus on uniqueness fits with the techniques advocated by new management. A leader's ability to affect change is one part of these foundational axioms of business management. And the distance from management theory texts to presidential politics seems to be very short indeed. Change is thus the mantra, not only for the Obama re-election campaign, but also for the fundamental driving forces of a capitalist economy. Everything that is solid must indeed melt, and presently-constituted social relations and practices must constantly be re-evaluated as the need for surplus value extraction changes over time. Except of course, those elements that are deemed to be invariant (for the benefit of capitalists): the sanctity of the market, or private property.

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<sup>279</sup>Of course, the "old" capitalist forms of control must also remain: such as forcing workers to sell their labor power in exchange for limited quantities of money, corresponding to a fraction of their sold labor power.

<sup>280</sup>Eugene Karmazin, a quantitative analysis consultant working in the advertising analytics business noticed how children of Microsoft employees studying in a school located at the company headquarters town of Redmond, Washington state, habitually used words such as, accountability, deliverables, actionable intelligence - in other words, concepts designed by management theorists - in their elementary school classrooms. The common sense of finance capital has already settled into their young minds, and speech patterns.

<sup>281</sup>"Leadership in an Age of Anxiety", MIT Sloan School of Management, emphasis added.

Another core axiom calls for self-policing and management on part of the worker, since the exploited classes form the population majority, and self-policing is the most efficient form of political control under regimes of governmentality, biopower and what Deleuze called “societies of control” (1995). Here, leadership vision is recast in a new role, focusing on worker indoctrination:

Visions are important because they provide the motivation for people to give up their current views and ways of working in order to change.<sup>282</sup>

Manager visions thus function to reduce the need for manager supervisory intervention (which tends to generate employee resistance) and create an appearance of flattening hierarchies:

Perhaps most importantly, visioning provides people with a sense of meaning about their work. It answers the question “why am I doing this?” (Ibid.)

Another element in the construction of this affective language of control are the concepts of responsibility and passion. Notice how newly-hatched corporate managers from the Yale School of Management display their thorough internalization of these concepts:

Leadership is not a right, but a privilege. Leadership should necessitate responsibility - **responsibility** to make the best, ethical choice and responsibility to all those who have a stake in one’s leadership role.<sup>283</sup>

Given the specifics of class in contemporary capitalism in the U.S., it is not surprising that corporate management language and speech patterns subsequently infused other important areas of governmentality and biopower.

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<sup>282</sup> “Leadership in an Age of Anxiety”, MIT Sloan School of Management.

<sup>283</sup> Yale Students on Leadership, Yale School of Management, <http://mba.yale.edu/why/purpose/leadership.shtml>.

The keywords emphasized in these texts are basically indistinguishable from the logic of “new management”, the bureaucratic term for Deleuze’s social machines, and control society. It is interesting how Deleuze captured this new development in capitalist hegemonic ideology precisely during the time when it was being developed. His analysis resulted in the formulation of “societies control”, a late Deleuzian concept that coincided with the establishment of the neoliberal regimes of capital accumulation (Deleuze, 1995), indicating the shift towards a new form of repressive disciplinarian regime, where social relations are controlled through a new generation of technological apparatuses. These apparatuses and locales exercise control over target population in a continuous manner. This is the vision of pervasive surveillance and securitization. Anticipating the post-9/11 world of “If you see something, say something”, and the absurd color terror warning scale, control society is an intensification of post-WW II capitalism in the imperialist core of the global economy. State surveillance did not pervade across all aspects of life under the disciplinary regimes prior to 9/11, and World Wide Web. The gaze of the police did not routinely intrude in one’s everyday communication patterns.<sup>284</sup> Today, under regimes of control, everyone’s email is indiscriminately data mined and stored by the NSA, while the over-saturated security camera landscape of any major city, continuously captures the

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<sup>284</sup>It is hard to even imagine today that drivers licenses in the U.S. in the fifties and sixties did not even contain photos.

most mundane acts of anyone who walks on the streets.<sup>285</sup> The point is not that everyone's actions are being studied, but the fact that they can be, if those with power choose to do so.

All of the above keywords encourage horizontal thinking, flattened hierarchies, creativity and teamwork, while at the same time fulfilling the requirements for projecting and maintaining power, as Deleuze outlines, over targeted populations/classes. Terms such as vision and creativity condition future managers to think as team leaders, whose compelling vision, at the same time, prompts their employees to follow their lead, minimizing the need for explicit (violent) coercion in the corporate environment. The implied lack of authoritarian hierarchy is of course purely fictitious. But the "appearance" of non-hierarchy depends on how deeply it is internalized, believed in, and felt by the targeted population. The Vygotskian focus on the psyche, the importance of the external-internal speech loop now comes to the foreground, to the very surface of capitalist power in its everyday application. No longer is class power enforced through overt Weberian or Foucauldian disciplinary mechanisms of naked state power, and corporate violence, the battle for power is waged primarily (or at least initially) in the sphere of internal and external speech, in and through language.

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<sup>285</sup>Perhaps less obviously, but no less significantly, the end of the factory shift no longer denotes a time free from employer interference. The end of the work day simple means the continuation of the work day through other means. The widespread of wireless communication and cellular phones, for example, was immediately deployed as a means of extending the length of the working day. Similarly, shopping online from the comforts of one's home, means continuous surveillance and control by the banks owning the credit cards. Thus, a Chase customer might receive a late night call from the bank's "customer support" staff inquiring about a "suspicious purchase."

Ideally, the complete ensemble of such measures leads to the establishment and reproduction of hegemonic consensus.<sup>286</sup> Unemployment, for example, is normalized to be perceived and talked about as the work of inefficient government and the “natural” fluctuations of the free market. It’ll all get better soon.<sup>287</sup> This is the language of the 1970s, a common sense that is only now - in the midst of its deepest post-1945 crisis - starting to make less and less sense for the targeted populations of the working class and the poor surplus population.

Thus, the focused attempts to induce populations to use a certain language and speech patterns designed by bourgeois ideologues, is part of the core political struggle to maintain continuity, reproduction, replication and general invariance, as the defining feature of contemporary biopolitics, in regimes of capitalist (neoliberal) governance and ideology. In “Difference and Repetition” (1994a), Deleuze writes about “repetition” as the logic of capitalist reproduction. The social reproduction of the mode of production, the ideological frameworks, and the modes of governance and repression are cyclical in nature (as is every aspect of human life), but their reproduction, these acts of repetition are not automatic.

Politics manifests itself at the point of repetition, and successful survival of the system depends on the political acts that perpetuate these acts of repetition. So far, capitalist pressure has ensured the repetition of structural, libidinal and governmental patterns in the midst of the ongoing global depression. As the financial system collapsed, influential capitalists and State

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<sup>286</sup>Disciplinary regimes and state violence are of course always available in the background as illustrated by events in Oakland in 2011, and by the daily display of police brutality in America’s ghettos.

<sup>287</sup>Especially, if the proportion of the lazy poor is punished for its laziness, inducing immediate political compliance, or in the absence of it, immediate incarceration.

mechanisms have successfully managed to absorb anti-capitalist movements and - through the financial bailout - have been able to effect a repetition of virtually all structures of governmentality; affective and otherwise. On the molar level, the Federal Reserve system continues to function, in spite of the deep resentment towards it by the majority of politically-critical Americans, and in spite of its well-publicized failures to even prevent the depression in the first place.<sup>288</sup> Furthermore, the election campaigning for 2012 proceeded as if the Occupy movement never happened.<sup>289</sup>

On the molecular level, the discourse of politics is being contested. But so far, the hegemonic narrative of liberalism remains politically most visible.<sup>290</sup> In other words, the landscape of American politics remains generally invariant. Structural, ideological, governmental and related regimes of power remain mostly as they were for the last thirty years, with the strong exception for the budding Occupy social movement. And to struggle against such invariance, Deleuze sees the need for a politics of difference, since “[p]ractical struggle never proceeds by way of the negative but by way of difference and its power of affirmation” (Deleuze, 1994a, 208).

The politics of invariance must be replaced with a politics of difference, or in Vygotsky’s language: the critique of capitalism needs to once again harness materialist dialectical analysis of

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<sup>288</sup>Alan Greenspan, the former Fed Chairman to this day, refuses to admit structural failures under his watch, a position clearly debunked by many analysts of which Doug Henwood offers perhaps the most colorful critique. See for example his speech titled “Anti-market forces”, available at his website: <http://www.leftbusinessobserver.com/Anti-market-forces.html>

<sup>289</sup>Explicit references to the movement are basically purged from the language of the Democratic and Republican campaigns.

<sup>290</sup>As in most talked-about, most written-about in the various media outlets that command the largest audience. After all, the reproduction of hegemony requires a mass scale of distribution and operation, or to use Marxist terminology, a quantity, along with quality.

social relations. This is necessary to capture the dynamism of how capitalism reproduces, especially in language, speech patterns, and thought: or to go back to Gramsci: of common sense. Change in politics automatically requires - and this is repeatedly the implicit under-current of Vygotsky's work - corresponding change in language (external and internal speech), and in consciousness. Change, then, occurs through the dialectics of communication, production of anti-capitalist common sense, and the gradual shift in the thought, speech and language of everyday life. The words we use are deeply political, since their internalization and role in our inner speech fundamentally affect our perception of the world (self-consciousness, in particular). How is this internalization process subject to politics, is the key question that can be derived from Vygotsky's intervention in Marxist thought.<sup>291</sup>

Of course, to ask this question means to also ask a question of method, and here is where Vygotsky's dialectical method opens possibilities for re-energizing a Marxist (socialist) revolutionary politics today. A key challenge in this question of method is locating the fundamental unit of analysis of language and speech. What are the generic concepts enabling a dialectical analysis of ideology, as expressed through the common sense of American politics today? Certainly some of the keywords underpinning parts of such common sense are widely known: the language of Christian fundamentalism, the lasting effects of the Protestant work ethic, the mythology of individualism, and unlimited upward social mobility for all, the toxic effects of racist discourse, heteronormative modes of language, and the language of the politics of gender. Still, a renewed socialist revolutionary *common sense* has to find ways to break

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<sup>291</sup>There are interesting possible connectives to the concept of dual power in Marxist politics, an important theoretical and practical consideration from Marx to Lenin.

through these ideologies of reaction; structures that are currently still hegemonic. How to do this, remains a relevant question.

When is a point reached, Vygotsky asks, when a *concept* cannot be further analyzed, when the concept itself stops being useful in illuminating whatever is being studied (1934b)? What is the equivalent to Marx's commodity in *Capital*? Vygotsky sees *units* of analysis as the basic, elementary level of materialist dialectical analysis. Units are the "cells", the starting point of Marxist method. Early in "Thought and Language", he calls for a shift from analysis of elements, to analysis of units (1934b, 5). In terms of contemporary political theory, analysis of units sounds very much like a return to the old Marxist notion of studying relations, rather than the objects enmeshed in those relations. Instead of focusing on "actors" the way political science teaches today, analysis must focus on the *properties* (Vygotsky's term for relations) to capture the totality (matter in Vygotsky's terminology) of what is being studied. This focus on the complex totality of social relations cannot be overemphasized, since its complete absence from mainstream political theory today, is also its defining feature. More importantly however is its absence from most mainstream Marxist analyses. What Vygotsky suggests by units and totality has to do with capturing aspects of political economy, ideology, and the psychological dimensions in a simultaneous theoretical framework that understands the inter-related nature of these aspects and treats them as such. This, in contrast to typical leftist parties and groups today, who continue to emphasize concepts of political economy as the fundamental part of their analysis, leaving the

much more difficult questions of consciousness, the psyche, language and ideology as little more than an afterthought.<sup>292</sup>

Other influential Marxists such as Frederic Jameson, continue to deploy literary criticism, which enters Vygotsky's terrain of mapping out the psyche and the nature of communication. But Jameson's approach does so using the method of literary criticism, which faces obvious barriers preventing it from achieving insights made possible by using a Vygotskian lens.<sup>293</sup>

Deleuze is also concerned about this elementary level of analysis and the need to be conscious of fundamental levels of theory. This is not in order to argue for some Cartesian causal analysis starting from "first premises" and leading to some ultimate Truth, but to ground method in the best (in the cognitive sense) possible starting point. And the starting point is also located in the sphere of the psyche.<sup>294</sup> He is certainly thinking about the world of consciousness, the domain of thought as expressed through language, speech and affect. Concepts are not "representation" of reality, subject to interpretation by rational beings (Deleuze, 1994b, 11). They are acts of human creation, of creativity, action and affect. They are mental constructions, and objects of psychological modes of being, conditioned by the networks of social relations inhabited by the person(s) creating the concepts. Not everyone engages in political concept-creation. This is precisely the point. Those who can and *do* initiate concepts, play a correspondingly important

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<sup>292</sup>Any cursory glance at various Marxist non-academic publications today, from the newspaper of the ISO, to Trotskyist organizations such as Socialist Alternative clearly illustrate this dynamic.

<sup>293</sup>One such barrier is the tendency for such writing to become enmeshed into textual analysis, where second order commentary of a body of work, quickly leaves the confines of class struggle, and become the object of the analysis itself.

<sup>294</sup>After all, it is in our psyche, in our mind and its thoughts that we spend most of our time; it is the one inescapable aspect of the human condition.

role in politics. Generalized across populations, such an inability to create concepts (for whatever reason) can be interpreted as a condition of political disadvantage, oppression, or impotence.

As an example, the current conceptual lexicon of American unions is a manifestation of the complete political impotence of the organized labor movement vis-a-vis the capitalist class. When Governor Scott Walker successfully implemented his union-busting politics in Wisconsin, the best that the AFL-CIO leadership could do was promise legal action, in addition to effectively ending the mass worker mobilization across the state by refusing to consider a general strike. In a moment of grave political crisis, union bureaucrats were completely unable to formulate politically effective concepts, which could underpin their actions. This poverty of theory immediately translated into a poverty of political action, and ultimately, defeat.

The Occupy Wall Street movement faces a similar challenge. The initial and highly effective “We are the 99%” has reached its political limits, and successor slogans have not been formulated as of yet. In November, 2011, its appearance was a powerful illustration of the vital role played by concepts in politics, and the psychological frameworks that underpin ideology and everyday common sense.<sup>295</sup> Deleuze defines concepts as multiplicities, objects of human creativity and thought that exhibit multiple facets, collections of similar and not-so similar ideas grouped in particular ways:

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<sup>295</sup>Especially given the fact that it is the 90, 80% of the population that is exploited for the benefit of the top 20%. A recent post on the blog *The Current Moment*, entitled “Expropriating the expropriated (1983-2009), or, Why It’s the Top 20 not Top 1% That Matter”, offers empirical evidence on how the top 20% are really what the *Occupy* movement refers to as the 1%. (source: <http://thecurrentmoment.wordpress.com/2012/01/19/expropriating-the-expropriated-1983-2009-or-why-its-the-top-20-not-top-1-that-matter/> , accessed on 7/2/2012).

Every concept has components and is defined by them. It therefore has a combination. It is a multiplicity, although not every multiplicity is conceptual. There is no concept with only one component. Even the first concept, the one with which a philosophy “begins”, has several components, because it is not obvious that philosophy must have a beginning, and if it does determine one, it must combine it with a point of view or a ground (1994b, 15).

“We are the 99%” is indeed a concept, containing a multiplicity of leftist ideas:

- The concept of class struggle and the notion of the working class majority that is an empirical fact in any capitalist society.
- The profoundly anti-democratic nature of capitalist liberal democracies, where the 1% exert overwhelming control over all levels of politics and ideology, while permitting the 99% a token role in validating bourgeois rule via regularly-held elections of a highly controlled nature.
- It offers a powerful example of both revolutionary and reformist ideology appealing to the Gramscian common sense of the average American: the vast majority should hold political power, or alternatively, the political system is corrupt in excluding the wishes of the vast majority, who should take control of the system and reform it. Both revolutionary and reformist conclusions are possible.
- It makes an appeal to morality and the amoral and ethically corrupt nature of capitalism, which condemns the majority to increasingly marginal existence.
- At the same time, it is clearly a reformist, anti-revolutionary and non-Marxist, populist concept, whitewashing over the vast political differences between the poor and invisible sectors of society (the excluded and economically superfluous part of the working class that is now permanently criminalized), the working class majority, and the very different politics followed by the middle class petty bourgeoisie.

Yet, by January of 2012, it is also clear that new concepts are desperately necessary to continue the struggle. So far, this is proving a challenge, and no clear new conceptual suggestions have taken hold in the movement. This is indicative of a need for theoretical deepening of the struggle, where hitherto difficult questions of power, class, gender, race, reform and revolution have to be asked openly and debated. While this is certainly happening, the dominant form of lifestyle and

individualist anarchism that is most active in the movement has explicitly refused to engage in such “old fashioned” conceptual battles.<sup>296</sup>

Method, as the Marxist tradition repeatedly emphasizes, remains crucial in this political battle. Blaming the economic depression on “greed” and “corruption” or other moral fallings is a clear symptom of methodological emptiness. Where is Vygotsky’s analysis of units, whereby the global capitalist crisis of declining rates of profit, imperialist competition, and working class resistance, come together with the latest look at the functioning of various ideological frameworks, modes of governance (goernmentality) and techniques of oppression and violence? The need for an all-inclusive, “organic” and implicate theoretical analysis is badly needed to point the way out of moral explanations for capitalist politics.

In this search for such method, Vygotsky’s causal-genetic analysis is suggestive of what Bertell Ollman has been relentlessly seeking to emphasize is the power of Marxist dialectics to shed continued light on the nature of political struggles under capitalism. Writing in the introduction of a recently edited volume entitled *Dialectics for a New Century*, he asks :

Why now? The current stage of capitalism is characterized by far greater complexity and much faster change and interaction than existed earlier. But if society has never been so imbued with dialectics, the efforts to keep us from grasping what is taking place have never been so systematic or so effective – all of which makes a dialectical understanding more indispensable now than ever before (2008, 11).

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<sup>296</sup>See articles by OWS organizer and anthropologist David Graeber (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/sep/25/occupy-wall-street-protest?fb=optOut>), vs. an article on the popular *Lenin’s Tomb* blog offering a critical look at the refusal of some OWS activists to enter the terrain of revolutionary anti-capitalist politics (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/sep/25/occupy-wall-street-protest?fb=optOut>).

This is where the challenge rests for a political theory informing revolutionary Marxism today. Almost one hundred years after Vygotsky sought out ways to develop an area where Marxist theoretical thought had not systematically entered, the challenge remains. Revolutionary political theory today, even more so than in Vygotsky's time, depends on the establishment of a revolutionary common sense, as the ideological bond underpinning a mass transformative political movement. As the Occupy movement is showing, the crisis of global capitalism has pushed the patience of working people to the brink.

To imagine a better world against the wishes and efforts of those with hegemony, however, would first require the conscious ability to interrupt the flows of control mechanisms, and demolish the common sense speech-language patterns of bourgeois power. Before the general strike, and the formation of democratic self-governing bodies, the battle has to be fought over what Vygotsky sought to define as the fundamental tools of human consciousness: language, thought and speech.

## EPILOGUE: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS, UNFISHED THREADS

Four goals have motivated me in this project. First, is to show how Marxist thought in the Soviet Union was more than just a domain of talentless, Stalinist hacks, whose work was of no theoretical interest or links to the broader Marxist tradition. Second, to show that Vygotsky, as a representative Soviet Marxist, contributed in important ways to the development of dialectical thought in the crucial area of the study of consciousness, language and speech. Thirdly, to illustrate that Vygotsky's focus on the study of consciousness and language became an important area of theoretical work after World War II, and was (indirectly) continued by thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze. Lastly, I conclude by arguing that Vygotsky's insights about the nature of consciousness and language, have direct political relevance today, especially in the study of ideology and the functioning of power. They offer a rich theoretical lens on how a resurgent leftist politics might go about in winning the battle of what Gramsci called "common sense"; the ability to project revolutionary narratives that are internalized by all who are subject to oppression under modern capitalist networks of biopolitics, and regimes of governmentality.

One of the challenges in contextualizing Vygotsky as a political theorist was to present how his ideas (mostly studied by psychologists today) are directly relevant for political theory. Though he considered himself formally a psychologist and a literary critic, Vygotsky's work was comprehensively inter-disciplinary. To show this, it was necessary to write a brief intellectual history of the Soviet Twenties, and show how this was a new intellectual moment, a continuation of the ideas of Western Marxism, but under the new context of post-revolutionary Russia. In fact, what I am calling Soviet Marxism (the works of the twenties, before Stalinism took hold),

represented an interesting development of the Marxist tradition, since the Soviet Union was the first non-capitalist state where revolutionary socialists held political (state) power, and could think and write without the oppression (both direct and implied) they faced in capitalist states.

In this all-too brief period of time, Vygotsky was able to synthesize different intellectual currents, from Marxist thought, to psychoanalysis, structural psychology, literary criticism, philosophy, history, and linguistics. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of his synthesis was the fact that it opened up new areas of thought: Marxist theory now went beyond political economy and revolutionary theory (as expressed, for example, in Lenin's "The State and Revolution"). The study of consciousness and language marked a new period in the development of such dialectical thought. Along with Wilhelm Reich, Gyorgy Lukacs, and Voloshinov, Vygotsky's work introduced new layers in the study of the human condition focusing on the poorly understood terrain of human communication - both internal and external; in the individual, and the multitude.

An important subtext here is the differentiation of what I am calling Soviet Marxism (a genuine intellectual tradition, an extension of Western Marxism) and the official Stalinist version, which is now commonly thought of as the only "form" of Marxist thought that was practiced in the Soviet Union. Thus, part of this work is an effort to reject such simplistic views, and show that the Marxist tradition in the Soviet Union became Stalinized only after the purges were completed. The crisis of Soviet Marxism came in the aftermath of a political counter-revolution, complete with its Thermidorian stage.

Still, an enormous amount of work needs to be done to unearth the large number of suppressed works, and to reclaim this nearly lost intellectual tradition. Some initial efforts have been done by scholars such as Yehoshua Yakhot and his 1981 book “The Suppression of Philosophy in the USSR (The 1920s and 1930s) (2012), which has finally been translated into English this past June, and David Bakhurst’s “Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy: From the Bolsheviks to Evald Ilyenkov” (1991). A more recent volume edited by Vesa Oittinen (2000) in Finland, included a number of essays engaging with the thought of perhaps the most influential Marxist theorist of the post-WW II Soviet Marxism, Evald Ilyenkov.

In Russia, a number of books and scholarly conferences have produced a body of historiography that introduced the most interesting of this genuine Marxist Soviet tradition. Over the last ten to fifteen years, works by post-WW II philosophers Evald Ilyenkov, Vladimir Bibler, L. Naumenko, A. Potemkin, as well pre-WW II theorists such as V. Asmus and M. Lifshits have been published in Russia.<sup>297</sup> A number of edited volumes, containing essays by contemporary Russian Marxists engaging with this tradition have also been published.<sup>298</sup> In addition, a number of online zines such as “Skepsis.ru” regularly publish pieces examining the intellectual richness of suppressed thinkers. Clearly, the interest is there, but more needs to be done in languages other than Russian, to assemble a fuller picture of what was there.

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<sup>297</sup>A translation of an article written by a colleague of Ilyenkov’s, outlining his thought and contextualizing this submerged, muffled Marxist tradition in the USSR, is available here: <http://Marxistupdate.blogspot.ch/2010/10/evald-ilyenkov.html>

<sup>298</sup>The following Russian website dedicated to Ilyenkov’s work, lists a number of books available as pdf downloads, all focusing on Ilyenkov and related thinkers from the Soviet period: <http://caute.ru/ilyenkov/schola.html>

In terms of future directions and threads for exploration of questions raised by this project, I believe the analysis of Vygotsky's innovations in the study of consciousness and language can be expanded in a number of ways. Most students of his work continue to read it only via the lens of psychology proper.<sup>299</sup> But, a strong case can also be made that his thought organically complements Gramsci's work on ideology and hegemony, while it also anticipates in a number of ways Deleuze's philosophy of control societies, of abstract machines, and the concepts of difference and repetition.

Additionally, Vygotsky also hints at some of the most recent and dynamic areas in post-structuralist thought (which I am arguing is an organic development - in the case of Deleuze - of Marxist thought in a new direction) such as the politics of affect (a body of work that has been developed by theorists such as Patricia Clough, Brian Massumi, and Luciana Parisi). Fusing concepts such as biopower and societies of control, affect, with Marxist analysis of alienation, ideology, and the state, suggests new forms of hybridization of radical political thought. Such new theory avoids the political liabilities of other strands of recent "post-Marxist" theory, as advocated by thinkers such as Negri and Hardt. There is no need to replace class struggle with notions of the "multitude", or other such idealized readings of contemporary politics. A renewed political theory of revolutionary praxis would make irrelevant the other manifestations of currently-fashionable anti-Marxist theories such as the school of post-hegemony thinkers.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>299</sup>Though a number of the recent works by psychologists such as Alex Kozulin, Anna Stetsenko, Anton Yasnitsky, Yekaterian Zavershneva engage in offering a broad historical and intellectual contextualization of Vygotsky's work, without entering the terrain of political theory proper.

<sup>300</sup>Theorists of the post-hegemony school such as Jon Beasley-Murray, who write that hegemony has never existed as a factor in political struggle, thus rejecting the entire body of Marxist analysis of power, and the state.

When John Holloway (2010) urges us change the world without taking power, the only possible outcome of such “revolutionary” politics is utter and complete political defeat (and worse). The fetish of negating the revolutionary socialist project’s core theoretical concepts (seize state power, transform property relations, redistribute wealth, fight and defeat the inevitable counter-revolutionary violence, reject defeatist notions of non-violence, recognize the reality of class struggle, and the function of hegemony) can only be interpreted at best, as a misguided attempt at doing anti-capitalist politics after the crisis of post-WW II socialist politics. The threads of affinity between Vygotsky’s emphasis on language/consciousness, and Deleuze’s (and Foucault’s) point that power in contemporary capitalism exists in locales in addition to the extraction of surplus labor— in the domain of affect, of consciousness formation, of political control being exerted on the bodies of people, of their psychological structures of self-perception—point to an alternative to Holloway’s erroneous meditations on the virtues of doing politics without doing politics.<sup>301</sup> However, in order for Marxist thought to incorporate insights that emerged “from-without” (in the sense of Foucault and Deleuze’s post-WW II interventions), it must engage in synthesizing a fresh conceptual apparatus. Vygotsky himself continuously engaged in such synthesis. At the end of his life, he was strongly influenced by ideas of a non-Marxist, Kurt Lewin, one of the founders of social, organization psychology. Yet, a clear bifurcation is still very much present between post-structuralist and Marxist thought (broadly defined).

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<sup>301</sup>How else can one describe the very notion of advocating avoidance of taking power, as the goal of an anti-capitalist movement?

It is in the last, fourth chapter, that the possibility for future development is most obvious. One question that could serve as a point of departure into further investigations is how the study of consciousness and language informs theories of control society, biopolitics and affect. At the same time, as the section on analyzing the ongoing Occupy movement suggests, a follow-up to this dissertation could dive into developing Vygotsky's extension of Marxist thought into the nature of consciousness, communication and affect, and investigate how such insights could be harnessed in a counter-hegemonic struggle against the contemporary capitalists classes. If the 1% exercise their hegemony through what Patricia Ticineto Clough and Craig Willse have called "technical systems of compliance and efficiency that underwrite the relationship of the state and the economy with a biopolitics of war, terror and surveillance" (2011, 1), as well as through the maintenance of common sense, reinforced by a skillful deployment of biopower across the domain of life itself, then a rejuvenated revolutionary socialist theory must be able to engage with more than just a critique of political economy, and the need to capture state power. The battles over consciousness-formation, common sense, and affect, form the prerequisite on which the struggle for state power and revolutionary anti-capitalist politics can be built. Vygotsky's thought points to what has to be done next in revolutionary Marxist theory, if it is to remain politically vital in twenty-first century struggles.

## APPENDIX 1

### BERTELL OLLMAN ON RELATIONS IN MATERIALIST DIALECTICS

Relations are a core concept in the Marxist dialectical tradition. Bertell Ollman (1971, 15) defines relations as “the irreducible minimum for all units in Marx’s conception of social reality”. Essentially what this means is that such dialectics treat the connectives between studied objects as carrying part of the meaning of the objects themselves. Instead of studying “things” (inflation, unemployment, gender) as stand-alone concepts with inherent ontology and epistemological frameworks that generate connectives (relations) to other objects (for example, inflation is on the rise in the U.S. today, due to the relative slowdown of economic activity), Marxist dialectics studies the relations themselves, together with the objects. It is understood that relations constitute the objects, while the objects themselves also condition the relations between the objects. This is the meaning of dialectics in this context. Complex mutually-dependent networks/forces condition both the objects and the relations (connectives) between the objects. Thus:

if wage-labor disappeared, ... if workers’ connection to capital radically changed, capital would no longer exist. The opposite is ... also true: ... ’there can be no longer be wage-labor when there is no longer any capital (Ollman, 1971, 15).

Ollman (Ibid.) clarifies this when he notes that Marx distinguishes relations in two ways: first, “relations refer to the factor itself” as in capital is a relation. Second, a relation can also be referring to a connection between factors. The classic example here is the concept of mode of

production understood as “the mode of production itself as the relation in which the productive forces are developed (Ollman, 1971, 16).”

## APPENDIX 2

### A NOTE ON THE DEBATES ON CONSCIOUSNESS IN VYGOTSKY'S TIME

Interesting counterpoint on the debate over the nature of consciousness is provided by two of Vygotsky's contemporaries, Georges Politzer and W.E.B. DuBois. Politzer also attacks the dominant formulations of consciousness as an "internal" facet of life. Explanations in terms of "phenomena", "sensations", spirit and "inner life" are a necessary part of bourgeois ideology. Making a parallel to religion, Politzer notes how "the ideology of bourgeoisie would not have been complete if it had not found its own mystique. After several tries it seems now to have found it in the inner life of psychology" (Politzer, 1994, Introduction.). Phenomenology, along with are nothing but twentieth century attempts at mystification of social relations. When facing the naked reality of capitalist society, psychology responds to the needs of the bourgeoisie, offering a powerful screen, behind which consciousness is recast as an individual, internal matter of sensations, conditioned behavior and experience of various phenomena.

Politzer's critique of formalism (of Wundt and Ribet, for example), behaviorism, experimental psychology in many ways anticipates Vygotsky's work. Unfortunately it remained even more incomplete than the work of his Soviet contemporary. Having become an active member of the French Communist Party, Politzer's attention moved away towards educational tasks such as the authoring of a booklet designed to be used in courses introducing workers to the basic concepts of Marxism-Leninism. With the start of WWII and the Nazi occupation of France, Politzer became an important underground fighter in Paris. He was captured, tortured and after

refusing to agree to forsake his resistance and become a collaborator in exchange for his life, Politzer was shot to death by the Nazis.

W.E.B. DuBois, in turn, offers the concepts of false consciousness and double consciousness. Consciousness is discussed here purely in terms of social relations. The challenge facing all black people in the U.S. is the challenge of double consciousness, the need to internalize not one, but two forms of consciousness. Again, the focus on relations between things, rather than the things themselves; a clear distinguishing feature of dialectical thinking. The first deriving from life in segregated black neighborhoods, and the second, from the interactions with white society and its expectations and demands vis-a-vis African Americans. Double consciousness then, is the process through which a black person develops a consciousness in relation to a white person's consciousness. In this process, a world emerges:

which yields him no true consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world... a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (DuBois, 1989, 2).

Poor blacks (along with poor Americans in general) face an additional form of consciousness requiring them to have aspirations and expectations of attaining wealth and well-being that are a myth, a practical impossibility. The myth of the American Dream is the quintessential manifestation of false consciousness. The two forms are dialectically related, with African-Americans saddled with the worst of both worlds.

DuBois' discussion, published in 1903, is extremely significant both, as an application and illustration of Marx's understanding of consciousness, as well as marking a development through the introduction of the concept of double consciousness.

In addition, DuBois' formulation is further developed by radical feminist thinkers such Simone de Beauvoir. Her formulation of double consciousness (de Beauvoir, 2011) related to the oppression of women that is rooted first in the psychological structures, whereby women are forced to define themselves constantly (irrespective of their class or race) through the eyes of men .

## APPENDIX 3

### A NOTE ON DIALECTICS IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL THEORY

Frederic Jameson has recently published his magisterial “Valences of the Dialectic” (Jameson, 2009). While reading the book, I noticed that it was unclear what he understood or meant by dialectical thought. By the end, Jameson’s erudition is overwhelming in its totality, but it offers no help in clarifying the concepts of materialist dialectics. In many ways, Jameson’s is the latest example of a particular problematic feature of post-WW II Western Marxist thought: in its course of theoretical development, it has entered new terrains of exploration; terrains that are exciting and new, yet at the same time perilously far from the project of Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Plekhanov, Luxemburg, Korsch, Lenin, Trotsky, Lukacs and Vygotsky. Whereas the latter dedicated their theoretical formulation to the overarching goal of actual political change, Jameson along with earlier predecessors in the canon of materialist dialectics after 1945: Althusser, Adorno and (the Negri of *Empire*) seem more focused on materialist dialectics as a mode of philosophical thought, an interesting but very different project. This turn “inward”, towards self-contained systems of abstractions and generalizations - though fascinating - approach the the space occupied by Wittgenstein’s thought: in either case, a special form of idealist thought.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>302</sup>This is not meant in the negative, but to highlight how far materialist dialectics has gone from its intimate connection and to use David Bohm’s term, “wholeness” with actually-existing political struggles. Roy Bhaskar’s work on dialectics can be thought of retracing the opposite path: quite comfortable in the spaces of formal logic and philosophy proper, Bhaskar thinks of his dialectics, as an organic development and continuation of the dialectics of Marx (if not explicitly, then in general sympathy).

#### APPENDIX 4

Writer Richard Wright, similarly, points to the need to study the “dark and hidden places of the human personality” when writing his great novel on race and class in American, *Native Son* (Robinson, 2000, 296). The Communist Party at the time echoed the orthodox Marxist argument that it is precisely the working class that is going to be the vehicle for revolutionary politics and the overthrow of capitalism in the United States. Irrespective of race and gender, it was working people - as a class - who were inherently in possession of this revolutionary power. Even more, the explosion of this revolutionary consciousness and action, was just a matter of time.

Wright disputed both the inevitability of the workers-led revolution, and the inherently revolutionary consciousness of the working class itself. Things were much more complicated, especially in the U.S., with the powerful and long-lasting effects of racism on workers consciousness. Echoing (and mirroring) Vygotsky, Wright turned to the psychological dimensions of consciousness-formation in order to understand the continued inability and unwillingness of big portions of American workers to abandon their own deeply-rooted racism, and resistance to revolutionary socialist politics. It is not enough to repeat the classic passages from the *Communist Manifesto* on the inevitability of the working class coalescing as the leading anti-capitalist revolutionary force. It is also not enough to denounce racism and expect its effects of consciousness to disappear once a black person enters the Communist Party.

In fact, the persistence of racism within the Party was an obvious clue to the “psychological consequence of a historical condition of which the leadership in the Communist movement was only vaguely aware (Robinson, 2000, 297).” The working class could in move either left, or right,

similar to what happened (to a large extent) in Germany with the ascension of the Nazis. Such a position was in direct opposition to the conventional line argued by the general secretary of the Party, Earl Browder, who wrote that the “growth of the Communist Party is the greatest guarantee against reaction and fascism (Robinson, 2000, 296).” Writing about his main character in the novel, *Bigger Thomas*, Wright points precisely to the danger of oversimplification and non-dialectical thinking in ignoring the role of the psychological dimension on the question of class consciousness:

I felt that Bigger, an American product, a native son of this land, carried with him the potentialities of either Communism or Fascism... Whether he'll follow some gaudy, hysterical leader who'll promise rashly to fill the void in him, or whether he'll come to an understanding with the millions of his kindered fellow workers under trade-unions or revolutionary guidance depends upon the future drift of events in America. But ...Bigger Thomas, *conditioned as his organism is* [emphasis mine], will not become an ardent, or even a Luke-warm, supporter of the status quo (Robinson, 2000, 297).

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