

## Vygotsky's Marxism: A 21st Century Leftist Bolshevik Critique

*(The June Theses)*

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### Abstract

This presentation starts with the brief overview of the state of the art in global "Vygotskiana". Specifically, I discuss the beginning of the decline of Vygotsky in the last years (as it follows from a longitudinal study of Vygotsky's work citation rate on Google Scholar). This phenomenon is interpreted as the indication of the deep crisis of contemporary Vygotskiana, and the development of the Marxist origin of Vygotsky's work is proposed here as one of the few possible resolutions of this crisis. Further, I discuss the interrelations between Vygotsky's axiomatic basis of the Science of Superman, Marxist philosophy, and the project of creating "new psychology" as theoretical, experimental and applied research. In order to understand the nature of Vygotskian Marxist psychology, we rise to the concrete: the historical case of Vygotsky-Luria "cultural-historical" study in the Central Asia in 1931-1932. The analysis of this study leads us to clear conclusion about vulgar Marxist nature of Vygotsky-Luria "cultural-historical" project. Finally, possible pathways of this line of research further developments in the context of the 21 century are discussed at the end of this presentation.

**Keywords:** Vygotsky, citation rate, crisis, Marxism, Trotsky, Superman, gestalt psychology, 21 century

## 1. Global Vygotskiana: The state of the art in 21 century

Vygotsky's popularity is decreasing these days. This is the finding that has been demonstrated in an over 2.5 years' and ongoing longitudinal study of Google Scholar citation rate of Vygotsky-Cole's "Mind in Society"—the most quoted book that ever came out under the name of Vygotsky). This phenomenon that in parlance of stock exchange might be called a "Vygotsky bubble" demonstrates a deep crisis of the global Vygotskiana and calls for creative solutions if only Vygotsky's legacy is to survive in the context of contemporary 21 century psychology. All raw data and related materials can be found online; see <https://psyanimajournal.livejournal.com/15934.html> for the preliminary conclusions and the links. For illustration purposes of the current state as of June 20, 2018 see Figures 1-3, below:

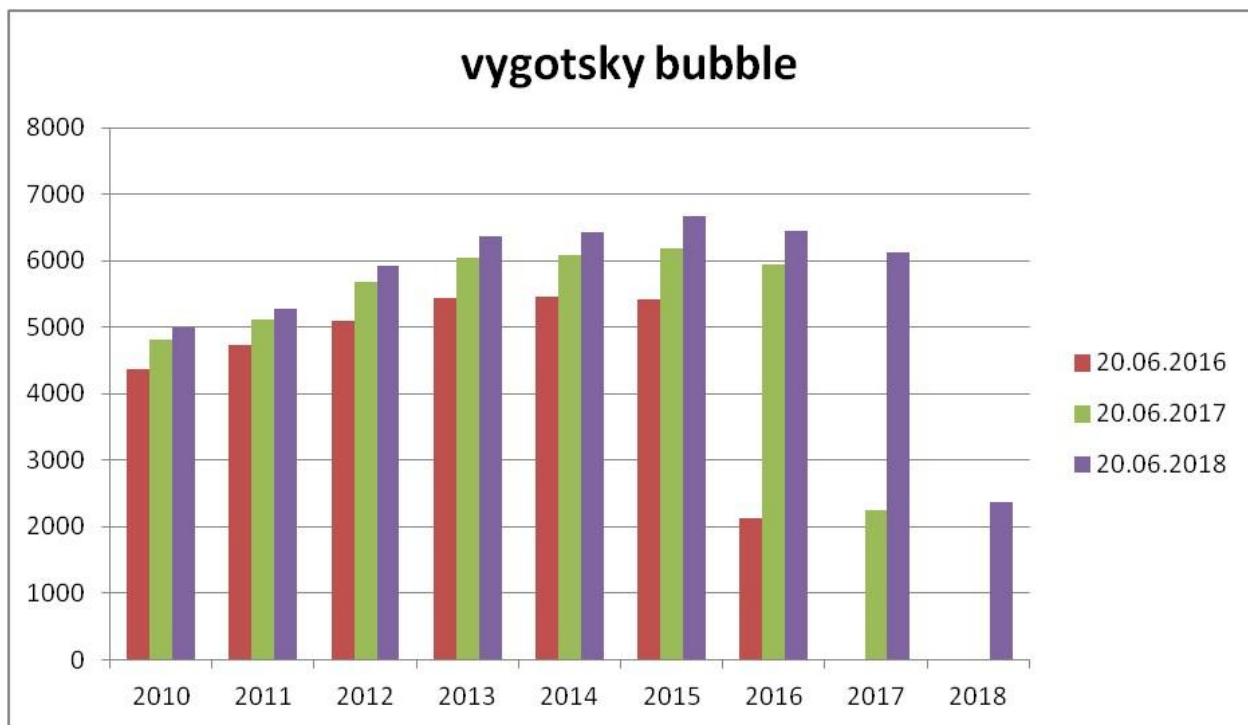


Figure 1. Vygotsky bubble as of June 20, 2018: column chart.

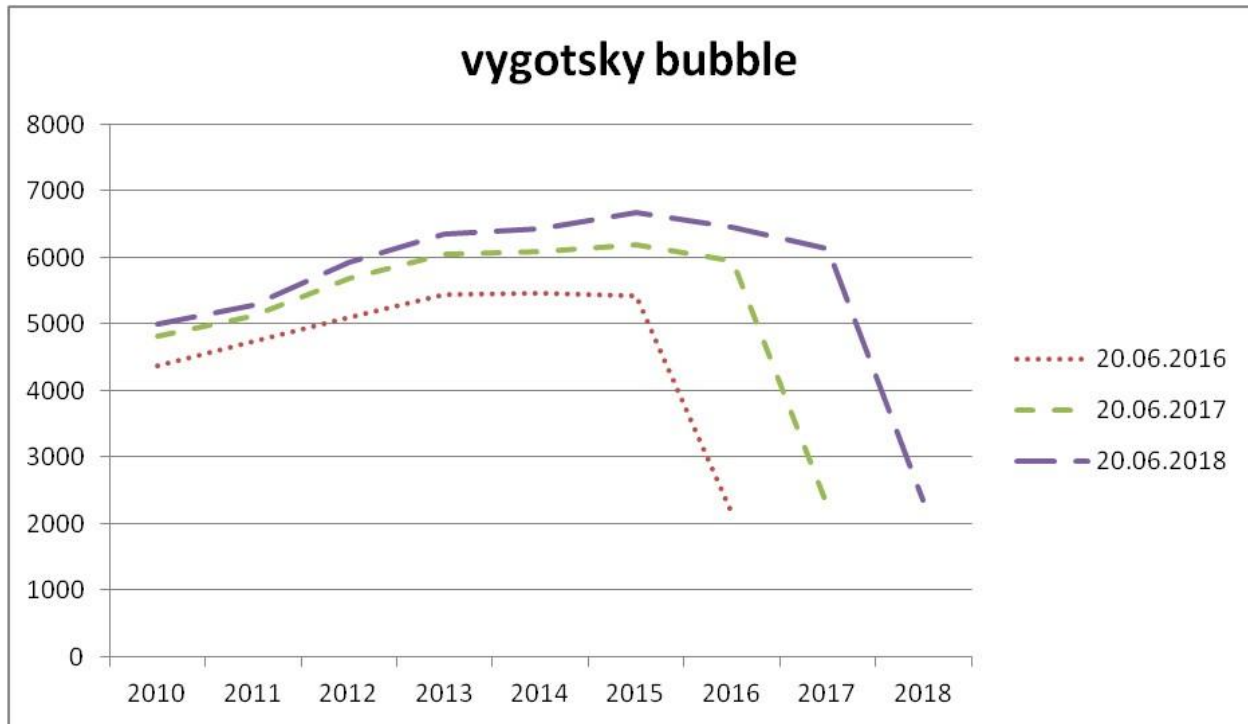


Figure 2. Vygotsky bubble as of June 20, 2018: line chart.

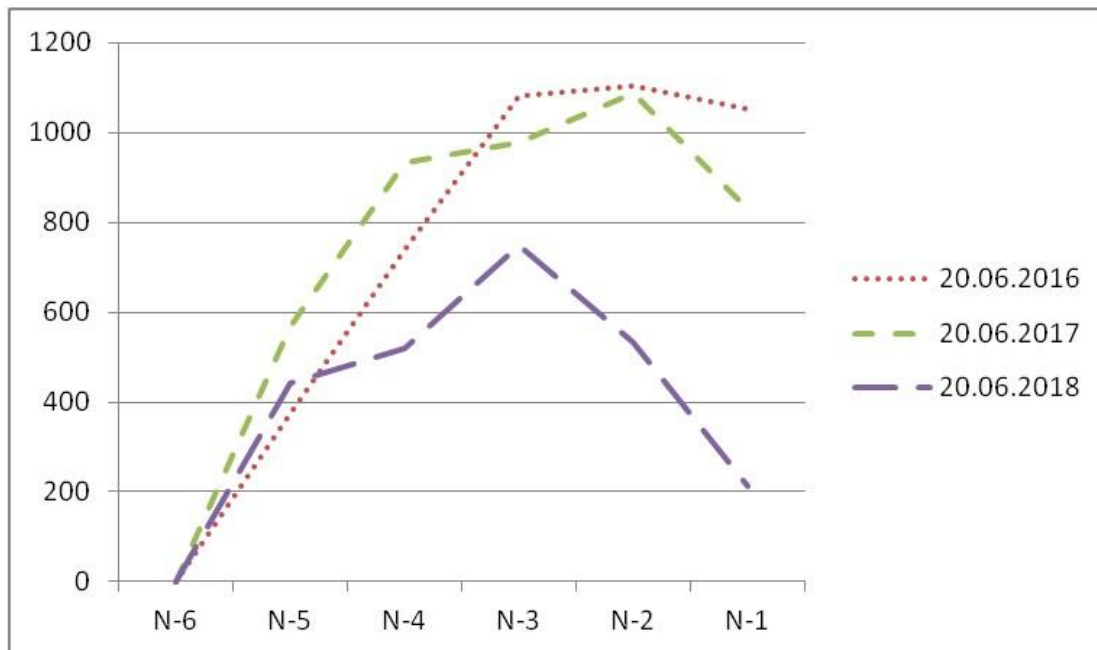


Figure 3. Deltas (differences) between numbers of citations for current year N.

## **2. Vygotsky's Marxism**

Among other options, consistent exploration of the possible implementation of Marxism in Vygotskian psychology is a very promising way of overcoming the crisis in Vygotskiana. Yet, here are a few of important considerations on Vygotsky's Marxism:

- A. Vygotsky was not a philosopher and never wrote a published a single properly philosophical work, he was not read by the Marxist philosophers of his time.
- B. Vygotsky's attitude to Marxism was explicitly critical before 1919 [see Appendix A].
- C. Vygotsky came to Marxism through his Bolshevik social activism (in Gomel in 1919-1923) and, more importantly, his acquaintance with Leon Trotsky's utopia of Superman (first published in late 1923) [see Appendix B], the same year as Ivan Pavlov's seminal volume with the summary of his 30 years' work and Vladimir Bekhterev's former student Viktor Protopopov's seminal study on conditioning human subjects with verbal stimuli—the three major influences on Vygotsky at that time). Vygotsky interpreted Trotsky's utopia of the future Superman as the call for the Science of the Superman that he first publicly announced in early January 1924 at his first scientific conference held in Petrograd, soon thereafter renamed Leningrad.
- D. Only then did Vygotsky start reading Marx and Engels (and other Marxist works such as Nikolai Bukharin's programmatic "Historical materialism"), but his truly systematic engagement with Marxism should be dated no earlier than 1926—that is, at the age of 29-30 and just roughly 8 years before his death in 1934.
- E. His systematic Marxist studies were contextualized in profoundly mechanistic "reflexological" thinking of his "instrumental period" of 1920s, deeply grounded in Pavlovian and Bekhterevian mechanicism and Bukharin-style determinism of his "Historical materialism".

## **3. Historical materialism in/for psychological science.**

Vygotsky objected direct application of the teaching of Marx and Engels to psychology and insisted on the creation of psychology's own analogue to historical materialism: a "psychological materialism". This was to serve as the methodology of the "new psychology" [see Appendix C]. In turn, the task equated to creating new conceptual apparatus, i.e. a system of essentially and distinctly psychological categories for the "new psychology". In retrospect, Vygotsky failed this task. Interestingly, Vygotsky argued that a really rigorous psychology will necessarily be Marxist psychology as well as truly Marxist psychology will necessarily be rigorous and the only correct way of doing psychological research. This way, he logically allowed for other psychological theories be truly Marxist, although their advocates that did not necessarily explicitly associate themselves with Marxism [Appendix D]. In retrospect, it turned that the German-American group of Gestalt psychologists such as Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Goldstein, and—last but definitely not the least—Kurt Lewin came closest to the ideal of doing rigorous psychological science of the kind that would allow qualifying it as an example of Marxist psychology without Marxism.

#### **4. Towards “Concrete psychology”.**

Only then, that is, on the basis and with the help of this “psychological materialism” a “concrete psychology” could be possible.

A remark is worthwhile in this respect: one might correctly argue that the task of creating a conceptual, theoretical “psychological materialism” does not necessarily chronologically precede the concrete empirical research and they might possibly coincide and develop simultaneously, through trial and error, dialectically enriching each other. Indeed, this is exactly what Vygotsky (and his closest ally Alexander Luria) did during their mechanistic and reductionist period of “instrumental psychology” within the general framework of Konstantin Kornilov’s “reactology”. Konstantin Kornilov was Vygotsky’s and Luria’s boss at the Institute of Psychology in Moscow in the capacity of the Institute’s director and “reactology” was his label for a variation of what he positioned as a “Marxist psychology”. In turn, Vygotsky and Luria did not publicly denounce and abandon “reactology” until March, 1931, i.e. roughly three years before Vygotsky’s death. Yet, it was exactly around the same time, i.e., the “revisionist period” of 1930-1931, that Vygotsky in effect destroyed—criticized and abandoned—many of (if not most) of his conceptual and theoretical developments of their “instrumental period”. The later years his work, i.e., roughly 1932-1934 were devoted to an effort at creating a “holistic psychology”—an effort that did not yield a single major theoretical work—published book or an unpublished manuscript—and remained only sketched, but unfinished (Yasnitsky, 2018b).

#### **5. The trajectory from Utopia to Concrete psychology: A scheme and intermediate summary.**

1. Axiomatic basis: inspired by Trotsky utopian Science of Superman
2. Philosophy: Marxism, dialectical materialism
3. Methodology: “Psychological materialism”
4. Theory: “new psychology”
5. Concrete psychology: empirical laboratory (*in vitro*) and naturalistic (*in vivo*) [applied] research

#### **6. Rise to the concrete: A case study of Vygotsky and Luria’s expeditions to Central Asia**

In order to better understand the nature of Vygotskian Marxist psychology as it was implemented in social practice of scientific research, we need to rise to the concrete. The historical case of Vygotsky-Luria “cultural-historical” study in the Central Asia in 1931-1932 is a particularly good example.

- A. On the basis of Vygotsky’s earlier writings such as “Socialist alteration of man” (1930) and enchantment with the social project of Stalin’s Great Break and the First Five-Year Plan (collectivization, industrialization and cultural revolution), Vygotsky and Luria designed and carried out their first (and the only) “cultural-historical” study in the naturalist settings of Soviet Central Asia, Uzbekistan.

- B. Their axiomatic assumption was that in conditions of rapid transition from the “lower” socio-economic order of traditional non-industrial Islamic society to the “higher” social order of socialist Soviet Uzbekistan the psychological performance of its population must necessarily undergo rapid change.
- C. The study was conducted in the course of two “psychological expeditions” in the summers of 1931 and 1932, headed by Luria; renowned German-American psychologist Kurt Koffka joined the expedition of 1932. Despite the triumphant Luria’s (and Vygotsky’s) finding of 1931 that “Uzbeks have no illusions”, Koffka’s findings of 1932 revealed that all local people of Uzbekistan did succumb to optical illusions, pretty much the rest of the population of Soviet Russia (the USSR) or that of the countries of Western Europe and North America.
- D. The results of Luria’s expeditions were not immediately published in the Soviet Union for two reasons. First, in 1933, after the NSDAP’s advent to power in Germany, the study was criticized in the Soviet Union for its “racial” bias, i.e., for equating traditional population of Uzbekistan with “primitive people”. Second, in 1934 and later, after the XVII Congress of the Communist party of the Soviet Union, the study was not published for its contemporary irrelevance in the country where socialism was proclaimed to have successfully been built by then.
- E. Overall, this “cultural-historical” research qualifies as a case of a vulgar Marxist study (Lamdan & Yasnitsky, 2016; Yasnitsky, 2018a), from the standpoint of a consistently Marxist methodology and psychology, yet to be established.

## 7. Vygotskian “psychological materialism” and concrete psychology of the 21st centurya

There are a few important messages and principles that we can borrow from the history and the lesson of Vygotsky’s legacy and his attempt at a Marxist psychology that we can carry into the 21 century. These seem particularly promising in the context of contemporary psychological (and, possibly, educational) research:

- A. A consistently Marxian methodology calls for permanent “reflexivity”, i.e. methodological reflection on one-self, self-observation, and self-assessment.
- B. A “holistic” methodological framework like that of—most appreciated by Vygotsky (Yasnitsky, 2016)—Kurt Lewin of his Berlin period as exemplified in a series of Lewinian studies published in *Psychologische Forschung* in 1920s through early 1930s. Lewinian conceptual apparatus, though, seems in need of further enrichment with the terminology of “attitude”, “set”, “value”, “sense”, self-awareness and meaning as suggested by Koffka (1935), Köhler (1938) and Wertheimer (in his publications of American period) as well as some Vygotsky’s work of his later period of early 1930s.

Interestingly, such conceptual enrichment brings us back to Freud’s preoccupation with the unconscious and openly challenges Freudian *Tiefenpsychologie* like, e.g., Max Wertheimer’s collection of earlier works book title *Drei Abhandlungen zur Gestalttheorie* (1925) mimics and mocks earlier Freud’s book title *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* (1905).

- C. As for the method of concrete empirical research, the Lewinian method of staged and rehearsed studies is required. This method is based on deception of the participants uses a combination of qualitative (i.e., observational, qualitative), quantitative (i.e., measurable and statistical), and self-observational (i.e., participants' and researcher's) data and can be used in either naturalistic (*in vivo*) and laboratory (*in vitro*) settings (Dembo, 1993; Mahler, 1996).

An example of this method application is a few of Solomon Ash's or Stanley Milgram's famous studies influenced—directly or indirectly—by Max Wertheimer's instruction and research supervision in New York from 1930s onwards.

## Appendix A.

Vygotsky on Marx and Marxism before 1919:

“The history of the Jews was not the history of what they did but the history of what was done to them” (Heman). Must politics become our religion? These words of Feuerbach you know. Marx: The philosophers unfettered the world enough; it is time to undertake its reorganization. Your politics is to reorganize the Jewry, to give it a “substitute for a state-like structure,” to politically organize its will. You wish to realize the political Jewry? But you yourself with the words of the poet speak about the dust and ashes of the Jewry. Its impotence and lack of will—this is its entire history. “Without the sword of its power.” Powerlessness. Jewish politics: “Stand ye still and see”... (the Bible). For politics there is nothing to hold on to in Jewry. The Jews are so far from what moves the world and the world is so far from the Jews. But you wish to overcome Jewishness to make it political. The adjectum is so dear to you that you sacrifice the Jewishness. But you should know that political Jewry stops being a *contradictio in adjecto* when it stops being Jewry.

Vygotskii, *The Book of Fragments*. About politicians. *Contradictio in adjecto*  
(in Zavershneva & Van der Veer, 2018, p. 31)



## Appendix B.

Trotsky (1923, republished in 1924 & 1925) on the Superman of the Communist future:

### Literature and Revolution. Chapter 8: Revolutionary and Socialist Art

Man at last will begin to harmonize himself in earnest. He will make it his business to achieve beauty by giving the movement of his own limbs the utmost precision, purposefulness and economy in his work, his walk and his play. He will try to master first the semiconscious and then the subconscious processes in his own organism, such as breathing, the circulation of the blood, digestion, reproduction, and, within necessary limits, he will try to subordinate them to the control of reason and will. Even purely physiologic life will become subject to collective experiments. The human species, the coagulated Homo sapiens, will once more enter into a state of radical transformation, and, in his own hands, will become an object of the most complicated methods of artificial selection and psycho-physical training.

This is entirely in accord with evolution. Man first drove the dark elements out of industry and ideology, by displacing barbarian routine by scientific technique, and religion by science. Afterwards he drove the unconscious out of politics, by overthrowing monarchy and class with democracy and rationalist parliamentarianism and then with the clear and open Soviet dictatorship. The blind elements have settled most heavily in economic relations, but man is driving them out from there also, by means of the Socialist organization of economic life. This makes it possible to reconstruct fundamentally the traditional family life. Finally, the nature of man himself is hidden in the deepest and darkest corner of the unconscious, of the elemental, of the sub-soil. Is it not self-evident that the greatest efforts of investigative thought and of creative initiative will be in that direction? The human race will not have ceased to crawl on all fours before God, kings and capital, in order later to submit humbly before the dark laws of heredity and a blind sexual selection! Emancipated man will want to attain a greater equilibrium in the work of his organs and a more proportional developing and wearing out of his tissues, in order to reduce the fear of death to a

### Littérature et Révolution, Chapitre 8: Art révolutionnaire et art socialiste

Enfin, l'homme commencera sérieusement à harmoniser son propre être. Il visera à obtenir une précision, un discernement, une économie plus grands, et par suite, de la beauté dans les mouvements de son propre corps, au travail, dans la marche, au jeu. Il voudra maîtriser les processus semi-conscients et inconscients de son propre organisme : la respiration, la circulation du sang, la digestion, la reproduction. Et, dans les limites inévitables, il cherchera à les subordonner au contrôle de la raison et de la volonté. L'homme sapiens, maintenant figé, se traitera lui-même comme objet des méthodes les plus complexes de la sélection artificielle et des exercices psycho-physiques.

Ces perspectives découlent de toute l'évolution de l'homme. Il a commencé par chasser les ténèbres de la production et de l'idéologie, par briser, au moyen de la technologie, la routine barbare de son travail, et par triompher de la religion au moyen de la science. Il a expulsé l'inconscient de la politique en renversant les monarchies auxquelles il a substitué les démocraties et parlementarismes rationalistes, puis la dictature sans ambiguïté des soviets. Au moyen de l'organisation socialiste, il élimine la spontanéité aveugle, élémentaire des rapports économiques. Ce qui permet de reconstruire sur de tout autres bases la traditionnelle vie de famille. Finalement, si la nature de l'homme se trouve tapie dans les recoins les plus obscurs de l'inconscient, ne va-t-il pas de soi que, dans ce sens, doivent se diriger les plus grands efforts de la pensée qui cherche et qui crée ? Le genre humain, qui a cessé de ramper devant Dieu, le Tsar et le Capital, devrait-il capituler devant les lois obscures de l'hérédité et de la sélection sexuelle aveugle ? L'homme devenu libre cherchera à atteindre un meilleur équilibre dans le fonctionnement de ses organes et un développement plus harmonieux de ses tissus ; il tiendra ainsi la peur de la mort dans les limites d'une réaction rationnelle de l'organisme devant le danger. Il n'y a pas de doute, en effet, que le

rational reaction of the organism towards danger. There can be no doubt that man's extreme anatomical and physiological disharmony, that is, the extreme disproportion in the growth and wearing out of organs and tissues, give the life instinct the form of a pinched, morbid and hysterical fear of death, which darkens reason and which feeds the stupid and humiliating fantasies about life after death.

Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman.

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.

manque d'harmonie anatomique et physiologique, l'extrême disproportion dans le développement de ses organes ou l'utilisation de ses tissus, donnent à son instinct de vie cette crainte morbide, hystérique, de la mort, laquelle crainte nourrit à son tour les humiliantes et stupides fantaisies sur l'au-delà.

L'homme s'efforcera de commander à ses propres sentiments, d'élever ses instincts à la hauteur du conscient et de les rendre transparents, de diriger sa volonté dans les ténèbres de l'inconscient. Par là, il se haussera à un niveau plus élevé et créera un type biologique et social supérieur, un surhomme, si vous voulez.

Il est tout aussi difficile de prédire quelles seront les limites de la maîtrise de soi susceptible d'être ainsi atteinte que de prévoir jusqu'où pourra se développer la maîtrise technique de l'homme sur la nature. L'esprit de construction sociale et l'auto-éducation psycho-physique deviendront les aspects jumeaux d'un seul processus. Tous les arts – la littérature, le théâtre, la peinture, la sculpture, la musique et l'architecture – donneront à ce processus une forme sublime. Plus exactement, la forme que revêtira le processus d'édification culturelle et d'auto-éducation de l'homme communiste développera au plus haut point les éléments vivants de l'art contemporain. L'homme deviendra incomparablement plus fort, plus sage et plus subtil. Son corps deviendra plus harmonieux, ses mouvements mieux rythmés, sa voix plus mélodieuse. Les formes de son existence acquerront une qualité puissamment dramatique. L'homme moyen atteindra la taille d'un Aristote, d'un Goethe, d'un Marx. Et, au-dessus de ces hauteurs, s'élèveront de nouveaux sommets.

## Appendix C.

Vygotsky (~1926) on “Psychological materialism”:

The direct application of the theory of *dialectical materialism* to the problems of natural science and in particular to the group of biological sciences or psychology is *impossible*, just as *it is impossible* to apply it *directly* to history and sociology. It is thought that the problem of “psychology and Marxism” can be reduced to creating a psychology which is up to Marxism, but in reality it is far more complex. Like history, sociology is in need of the intermediate *special theory* of historical materialism which explains the *concrete* meaning, for the given group of phenomena, of the abstract laws of dialectical materialism. In exactly the same way we are in need of an as yet undeveloped but inevitable theory of biological materialism and psychological materialism as an intermediate science which explains the concrete application of the abstract theses of dialectical materialism to the given field of phenomena

(Vygotsky, 1997, p. 330).

## Appendix D.

Vygotsky on the truly Marxist psychology and the possibility of Marxist psychology without Marxism:

This not only illustrates the entire complexity of the current situation in psychology, where the most unexpected and paradoxical combinations are possible, but also the danger of this epithet (incidentally, talking about paradoxes: this very psychology contests Russian reflexology's right to a theory of relativity). When the eclectic and unprincipled, superficial and semi-scientific theory of Jameson is called Marxist psychology, when also the majority of the influential Gestalt psychologists regard themselves as Marxists in their scientific work, then this name loses precision with respect to the beginning psychological schools which have not yet won the right to "Marxism." I remember how extremely amazed I was when I realized this during an informal conversation. I had the following conversation with one of the most educated psychologists:

What kind of psychology do you have in Russia? That you are Marxists does not yet tell what kind of psychologists you are. Knowing of Freud's popularity in Russia, I at first thought of the Adlerians [i.e., the followers of Alfred Adler]. After all, these are also Marxists. But you have a totally different psychology. We are also social-democrats and Marxists, but at the same time we are Darwinists and followers of Copernicus as well.

I am convinced that he was right because of one, in my view decisive, consideration. After all, we would indeed not call our biology "Darwinian." This is included in the concept of *science* itself. It implies the acceptance of all great conceptions. A Marxist historian would never use the title "Marxist History of Russia." He would regard this as self-evident. "Marxist" is for him synonymous with "truthful" and "scientific." Another *history* than a Marxist one he does not acknowledge. And for us it should be the same. Our science will become Marxist to the degree that it becomes truthful and scientific. And we will work precisely on making it truthful and to make it agree with Marx's theory. According to the very meaning of the word and the essence of the matter we cannot use "Marxist psychology" in the sense we use associative, experimental, empirical, or eidetic psychology. Marxist psychology is not a school amidst schools, but the only genuine psychology as a science. A psychology other than this cannot exist. And the other way around: *everything* that was and is genuinely scientific belongs to Marxist psychology. This concept is broader than the concept of school or even current. It coincides with the concept *scientific* per se, no matter where and by whom it may have been developed

(Vygotsky, 1997, p. 341).

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