Revisionist Revolution in Vygotsky Studies: The State of the Art & New Perspectives

Anton Yasnitsky
(Toronto)
anton.yasnitsky@gmail.com
http://individual.utoronto.ca/yasnitsky/

&

René Van der Veer
(Leiden University, the Netherlands)
The Good News

Vygotsky
is on the peak of his popularity!
Vygotsky (1925): the first appearance in the West
Vygotsky (1925): the first appearance in the West (continued)
Vygotsky (1934). Thought in schizophrenia

Выготский (1930/1932)  Vygotsky (1930/1934)
The pre-history of the “Vygotsky Boom”

- Michael Cole in 2004 about the beginning of the “Vygotsky Boom” in late 1970s:

“I received the Vygotsky manuscripts from Luria in the early 1970s. But even with the expert help of able colleagues and a good translation to work from, I could not convince the publisher, with whom Luria had made arrangements, that the manuscripts were worth publishing.”
The pre-history of the “Vygotsky Boom”

Michael Cole in 2004 about the beginning of the “Vygotsky Boom” in late 1970s (continued):

“All of the problems that I experienced earlier remained in place. The work seemed dated, the polemics either opaque or outdated, and the overall product was certain to produce fiscal disaster, not to say personal embarrassment.”
The pre-history of the “Vygotsky Boom”

- Michael Cole in 2004 about the beginning of the “Vygotsky Boom” in late 1970s (continued):

  “...We were able to produce a reasonable selection of readings from the two manuscripts he [i.e. Luria] had given to me. To these we added several essays of an applied nature so that readers could see how the abstract theoretical argument played out in practice.”
The pre-history of the “Vygotsky Boom”

Michael Cole in 2004 about the beginning of the “Vygotsky Boom” in late 1970s (continued):

“The result, entitled *Mind in Society*, was published in 1978. I heaved a great sigh of relief: I had finally discharged my obligation to Luria and the publisher, thanks in good measure to the hard work of my colleagues.”
The Start of the Boom, Factor 1: Toulmin’s “Mozart”
“Vygotsky Boom”: Major publications of Vygotsky in the West in 1960s-1990s

- Thought and Language, 1962 (trans. Hanfmann & Vakar)
- Thought and Language, 1986 (trans. Kozulin)
- Thinking and Speech, 1987 (trans. Minick), volume 1 of—
- The Vygotsky Reader, 1994 (ed. Van der Veer and Valsiner),
- etc.
The early history of “Vygotsky boom”: book publications (in English) about Vygotsky
Lev Vygotsky Superstar (as of 2002): The “elusive genius” (©Bruner, 1985)

- Haggbloom et al. (2002). *The 100 Most Eminent Psychologists of the 20th Century*. *Review of General Psychology*, 6(2), 139-152:
  - Journal citation list (JCL)
  - Introductory textbook citation list (TCL)
  - Survey list (SL)
  - National Academy of Sciences (NAS)
  - American Psychological Association (APA)

- “83. Vygotsky, Lev Semenovich” is *unique* as the only individual, whose acclaim and high reputation is based on survey *only* (19 on SL)
Lev Vygotsky, the “elusive genius”
(as of 2002, according to Haggbloom et al.)

- Haggbloom et al. (2002). The 100 Most Eminent Psychologists of the 20th Century. Review of General Psychology, 6(2), 139-152:

  - Cf.
    - 82. Edwards, A.L.: 17 on JCL only
    - 84. Rosenthal, Robert: 22 on JCL only
    - 85. Rokeach, Milton: 25 on JCL only
    - 96. Witkin, Herman A.: 31 on JCL only

  - Cf. also (other Russians in top-100):
    - 24. Pavlov, Ivan P.: 22 on TCL & 6.5 on SL
Vygotsky today (as of 2016): Google Scholar, ~86,600 results

- [BOOK] Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes
  LS Vygotsky - 1980 - books.google.com
  The great Russian psychologist LS Vygotsky has long been recognized as a pioneer in developmental psychology. But his theory of development has never been well understood in the West. Mind in Society corrects much of this misunderstanding. Carefully edited by a ...
  Cited by 65028 Related articles All 13 versions Cite Saved More

- [BOOK] The collected works of LS Vygotsky: Problems of the theory and history of psychology
  LS Vygotsky - 1997 - books.google.com
  Presents a theoretical work originally written in the 1920s, long believed to be lost, by a Soviet psychologist. He responds to the proliferation of different schools within the field with the formulation of a unified theory based on Marxism. For scholars in psychology and the ...
  Cited by 2692 Related articles All 6 versions Cite Saved

- [CITATION] Vol. 1: Problems of general psychology
  RW Rieber, AS Carton, LS Vygotsky - 1987 - library.wur.nl
  The Wageningen UR Library Catalogue contains bibliographic data on books and periodicals held by the libraries of Wageningen University and Research Centre and some 15 associated libraries. Holding data are added to each record.
  Cited by 3719 Related articles Cite Save More

- [CITATION] The genesis of higher mental functions
  Cited by 2366 Related articles Cite Save

- duq.edu [PDF]
  Play and its role in the mental development of the child
  LS Vygotsky - Soviet psychology, 1967 - Taylor & Francis
  In speaking of play and its role in the preschooler's development, we are concerned with two fundamental questions: first, how play itself arises in development—its origin and genesis; second, the role of this developmental activity, which we call play, as a form of ...
  Cited by 2124 Related articles All 9 versions Cite Saved

- ucsd.edu [PDF]
  Imagination and creativity in childhood

- Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes
  LS Vygotsky - 1980 - books.google.com
  The great Russian psychologist LS Vygotsky has long been recognized as a pioneer in developmental psychology. But his theory of development has never been well understood in the West. Mind in Society corrects much of this misunderstanding. Carefully edited by a ...
Vygotsky's Fame in Citations: The two books “lost in translation”

References to Vygotsky's works

- Mind in Society (1978), 59%
- Thought and Language (1962), 28%
- Collected works, vol. 3 (1997)
- The genesis of higher mental functions
- Play and its role in the mental development of the child
- Interaction between learning and development
- Imagination and creativity in childhood
The **Bad News**

Vygotsky

is at the **peak** of his popularity!
Mind in Society (1978): Citations in Google Scholar
What was done in 2006-2016: Three stages of the “(R)evolution”
The three sources of the Revolution

- Archival research in Russia, Ukraine and in the West—mostly, in the United States (“archival revolution”)
- Research focus shift from Vygotsky as such to the “Vygotsky—Luria Circle”
- The “revisionist historiography” of Russia and Soviet Union as the contemporary research on the historical background & social context
Stage 1, The gold standard of “Vygotskian legacy”: 
*Cambridge handbook of CHP* (CUP, 2014)

- First ever handbook of cultural-historical psychology
- Vygotsky-Luria’s project of integrative bio-social psychological science of mind, brain and culture
- Beyond psychology: interdependencies with pedagogy, linguistics, semiotics, theory of art, psychotherapy, cognitive, dialogic, and “romantic” science
Stage 1, The gold standard of “Vygotskian legacy”: *Cambridge handbook of CHP* (CUP, 2014)

Book reviews:

- **Jerome Bruner**: “What a wide-ranging view of the comprehensive subject of mind-culture-neurology! It serves a real purpose both pedagogically and in the scholarly sense!”

- **Michael Cole**: “Anyone interested in the ideas of Vygotsky and his legacies will find the book a rich source of information and inspiration”
Stage 2, Vygotsky-Luria project as such: *Revisionist Revolution in Vygotsky Studies* (Routledge, 2015/2016)

A series of studies that deal with

- History
- Contexts
- People
- Textology
- Legacy
- Interdependencies of the Vygotsky-Luria project
Stage 2, Vygotsky-Luria project as such: Revisionist Revolution in Vygotsky Studies: Key achievements & discoveries

Part I: Contexts and People

Comment: Vygotsky Studies have been placed in the historical context in

(a) A study of the “Stalinist model” of science/ psychology: historically and in contemporary Russia

(b) A detailed discussion of the “Vygotsky-Luria Circle” of two-three dozen individual researchers, scholars, thinkers, and intellectuals in Russia and abroad

(c) A critical revision of the dogma of the Stalinist “Vygotsky ban” in 1936-1956: the study demonstrates that Vygotsky and his legacy was never banned as such by the Stalinist regime
Stage 2, Vygotsky-Luria project as such:
Revisionist Revolution in Vygotsky Studies: Key achievements & discoveries

- Part II: **Texts and Legacy**

*Comment*: Considerable and in-depth historical, archival and textological work that

(a) Revealed the contents of the personal archives of Vygotsky and his 1930s critique of his theory of 1920s

(b) Presented the first ever chronology of composition of Vygotsky’s works and assessed their relative importance for the author and his scholarly legacy

(c) Resulted in the compilation of the first ever rigorous and the most up-to-date bibliography of Vygotsky’s works published during his lifetime
Stage 2, Vygotsky-Luria project as such: *Revisionist Revolution in Vygotsky Studies*: Key achievements & discoveries

- Part III. **Holism and Transnationalism**

*Comment:* The studies of the transnational connections and exchanges of Vygotsky-Luria group that

(a) Presented first outline of the *transnational history of “Vygotskian legacy”* outside the USSR

(b) Critically discussed the classic story of Luria (USSR) and Koffka’s (Germany-USA) expedition to the Central Asia (1932), the Lamarkian and vulgar Marxist bias of Vygotsky and Luria, and the aftermath of the trip

(c) Outlined the historical convergence of Soviet ‘*cultural-historical*’ scholarship of Vygotsky-Luria et al. and German-American holistic ‘gestalt’ psychology of Wolfgang Wertheimer, Kurt Lewin, Kurt Koffka at al.
Stage 2, Vygotsky-Luria project as such: The zone of proximal development


Revisionist Revolution in Vygotsky Studies
A Summary in Five Theoretical Statements

1. Vygotsky (1896-1934) created a mechanistic “instrumental theory” in 1920s.
2. Vygotsky criticized and destroyed this theory in early 1930s and deliberately never published a few of his “foundational works”.
3. Vygotsky was a Lamarkian, vulgar Marxist, often self-contradictory and the beginning holistic ‘gestalt’ scholar.
4. Vygotsky made an effort at reconstructing his theory in the holistic, gestaltist spirit.
5. Vygotsky eventually failed to build such a theory, but stopped at its ‘threshold’: he died in 1934 and, in his own words, died like biblical Moses, who had only a glimpse of the Promised Land of Israel, but was to never set a foot on it.
Stage 3, Global reception and social construction of “Vygotskian legacy”: Transnational histories of Soviet psychology & reception studies (a selection)


- **Woodward**, William (2013). Liebesgrüsse von Unter den Linden (From Unter den Linden, with Love): Eine transnationale Geschichte russischer Psychologie in Ost-Deutschland


- **Métraux**, Alexandre (2015). Lev Vygotsky as seen by someone who acted as a go-between between eastern and western Europe

- **Dafermos**, Manolis (2015). Critical reflection on the reception of Vygotsky's theory in the international academic communities
Stage 3, Global reception and social construction of “Vygotskian legacy”:

Vygotski revisitado: una historia crítica de su contexto y legado (Miño y Dávila Editores, 2016)

- Spanish/castellano translation of “Revisionist revolution” (parts I—III)
- Part IV: the critical history of the creation and dissemination of the “Vygotskianism” in Argentina, Spain and Mexico
Back to the Future: Vygotsky in the 21st century

- Stage 1, The gold standard of “Vygotskian legacy”
- Stage 2, Vygotsky-Luria project as such
- Stage 3, Global reception and social construction of “Vygotskian legacy”
- Stage 4, ...
Vygotsky in the 21st century: Theory: The minimalist program

- “Cultural-historical gestalt psychology”: Integrative bio-social science of mind, brain and culture in the footsteps of Vygotsky, Luria and many others

Example:
Vygotsky in the 21st century: Theory: The maximalist program

- Beyond man as is towards the future new man: Towards the “peak psychology” (Rus.: вершинная психология; cf.: Maslow’s “peak experiences”) of an overman (Rus.: сверхчеловек; Germ.: Übermensch; superman) as the utopian psychological project of Friedrich Nietzsche—Leon Trotsky—Lev Vygotsky
Expanding Kurt Lewin(—Lev Vygotsky)’s method of empirical research in natural/social settings: holistic research as drama, enactment, living—through (Germ.: Erlebnis, Rus.: переживание/ perezhivanie), and sense-making (Rus.: осознание/osoznanie, осмысление/osmyshlenie)
Vygotsky in the 21st century: Practical applications

- Beyond Vygotsky: Common interbellum (i.e., pre-WWII, 1920s-1930s) early Soviet experimental social practices in education, healthcare, medicine, industry, psychophiology and scientific organization of labour (Rus: психотехника/psikhotekhnika), and other Bolshevik transformative social projects.