

# Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind

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**Harvard University Press**  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
and London, England

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**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Wertsch, James V.

Vygotsky and the social formation of mind.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Vygotskiĭ, L.S. (Lev Semenovich), 1896-1934.

2. Cognition—Social aspects. 3. Psycholinguistics—  
Social aspects. 4. Semiotics—Social aspects. I. Title.

BF109.V95W47 1985 153'.092'4 [B] 85-7619

ISBN 0-674-94351-1 (paper)

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To Mary



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## Foreword

It was with great pleasure that we accepted the invitation of our friend James Wertsch to write a foreword to this book on Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, one of the greatest psychologists of the first half of the twentieth century. In examining Vygotsky's cultural-historical approach to the origins and development of higher mental functions and consciousness, Wertsch has not limited his analysis to psychology. Rather, he has correctly viewed this approach as a general theory of culture, an approach that is rooted in Russian culture of the first decades of the twentieth century. This is the context in which the "phenomenon of Vygotsky" must be understood.

Vygotsky stands before us not as an isolated phenomenon or puzzle but as a representative of the most important and, in many respects, most significant period in our society's culture and science. Several points in his approach reflect the atmosphere of creativity in which he lived and worked. For example, his notion of the semiotic or symbolic nature of higher mental functions and consciousness is very closely tied to the theory and practice of Russian symbolism, which appeared most strikingly in poetry, painting, theater, and film during this period. As has been noted by theorists of art and philosophy, such as V. V. Ivanov, A. F. Losev, and B. F. Asmus, symbolism emerged in opposition to naturalism in art. This protest against naturalism is quite apparent in the works and verses of A. Belyi, A. Blok, O. E. Mandel'shtam, B. L. Pasternak, and many other, and in the works and performances of V. E. Meierkhol'd and S. M. Eisenshtein. For Vygotsky, who was a

great connoisseur of art, this opposition took the form of a protest against empiricism in psychology.

A second problem central to the approach outlined by Vygotsky and his followers is that of development. Vygotsky's Russian contemporaries—the evolutionist-biologist V. A. Vagner and A. N. Severtsov—were producing remarkable ideas in this area. Vagner insisted that there must be a significantly tighter connection between psychology and general biology, especially evolutionary theory. He identified the dangers of too close a tie between psychology and physiology, a tie that could lead psychology down the wrong path. We can now say that his fears were not unfounded and that the theory of conditional reflexes was not the best thing for psychology. At that same time, Severtsov appealed to mental reality to explain evolutionary processes, viewing mind as a factor in evolution. Vygotsky stated that “the biological significance of mind is a necessary condition of scientific psychology” (1982, p. 76).

A third influence on Vygotsky was the study of physiology. During the years when he was working, new antihomoeostatic directions in physiology proper were being formulated, above all in the work of A. A. Ukhtomskii and N. A. Bernshtein. These scholars argued that there is a class of functional, as opposed to anatomical-morphological, organs in the human body. This view is now known as the physiology of activation. It is fully consistent with Vygotsky's idea that in the development of psychology a psychological physiology (not to be confused with the classical psychophysiology of sense organs) is more important than a physiological psychology. Vygotsky himself viewed higher mental processes as functional systems or organs. It is worth noting that at present there is an increasingly close rapprochement between the physiology of activation, as developed by Bernshtein's followers, and the psychological theory of activity, as developed by the Vygotskian school.

The problems of thinking and speech and of the origins and functions of consciousness occupied a major place in Vygotsky's scientific quests. Leading Soviet scholars such as G. G. Shpet, N. Ya. Marr, and M. M. Bakhtin worked in these areas. They were all concerned with the origins of language, which they correctly considered the substance of consciousness. Such investigators undoubtedly had an important influence on the development of Vygotsky's ideas about the formation of higher mental functions and consciousness. Specifically, in his works we find the problematics of the external and internal, the idea of the

connection between actions and signs, the notion that the strata of being and signs in consciousness genetically precede its genuinely reflexive strata, and finally an understanding of dialogicality and polyphony in consciousness.

In old Russia psychology, especially experimental psychology, was significantly less developed than in the West. In coming to psychology from the study of literature and art, Vygotsky energetically began to master the various traditions of psychology from all parts of the world. His understanding was transformed in a creative recasting of the theories of behaviorism, Gestalt psychology, functional and descriptive psychology, genetic psychology, the French sociological school, and Freudianism.

Of course, Vygotsky did more than collect facts from all these traditions and disciplines. He considered the information he collected through the prism of his own conceptual scheme, which he never considered complete. In this connection it is important to note that Vygotsky was a staunch advocate of dialectical and historical materialism. He was one of the creators of Marxist psychology. For Vygotsky, Marxist philosophy was not a dogma or a doctrine in which one could find answers to concrete questions in psychology. Rather, in mastering Marxism he assumed that a psychologist could assimilate a general method of scientific research, which could then be applied to concrete problems. In this connection Vygotsky wrote, "I don't want to discover the nature of mind by patching together a lot of quotations. I want to find out how science has to be built, to approach the study of mind having learned the whole of Marx's method" (1982, p. 421).

This book provides a quite complete presentation of Vygotsky's theory and of Vygotsky himself. Wertsch has chosen the most difficult and least developed, as well as the most fascinating, point of Vygotsky's theory as the object of his own experimental research, namely, the mechanism of cultural development of behavior. This mechanism is the transition from interindividual activity to intraindividual activity. This general explanation by Vygotsky has been superbly operationalized by Wertsch and transformed into an instrument of microstructural and microgenetic investigation of the formation of higher mental functions that lie in the child's zone of proximal development.

It may be appropriate to make one suggestion; that is, it is worth paying more attention to Vygotsky's position that "meaning is the internal structure of a sign operation" (1982, p. 160). Zaporozhets

expressed this idea much more strongly, calling meaning the crystal of action. The solution to the problem of the external and internal lies in this idea: action and meaning (sense) are two sides of a single coin. This provides the key to explaining why followers of Vygotsky turned to analyses of object-oriented action and only much later returned to the problem of meaning and consciousness. This route gave rise to the psychological theory of activity, a new and quite natural stage in the development of the cultural-historical theory.

In conclusion, we will say a few words about “Vygotskian perspectives” and the “zone of proximal development.” His school is no longer called the cultural-historical school; more frequently one hears of the psychological theory of activity as developed by the Vygotsky-Leont’ev-Luria school. This name is largely adequate, since over the course of many years the representatives of this school have focused more on problems of action and activity than on problems of sign, meaning, symbol, and consciousness, which have remained in the shadows. The elaboration of the structure of activity and of voluntary movements and actions is no doubt a major accomplishment of this group. With the recent publication in Moscow of the sixth volume of Vygotsky’s *Collected Works*, his theory of the cultural-historical development of higher mental functions and of consciousness, as he himself formulated it, has gotten a second wind. Therefore Wertsch is correct in emphasizing Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory.

One can say that in the zone of proximal development of Vygotsky’s school lies the solution to the extremely complex problem of the structure and functions of consciousness and the mechanism of its formation. One hardly needs to point out that successful resolution of this problem will be significant not only for the fate of human culture, but, as the author of this book has demonstrated so well, for the fate of human civilization. It is obvious to us that competition between American and Soviet scholars to resolve problems of the structure and formation of consciousness is a much more worthy pursuit than competition to create the means for destroying human civilization.

Finally, let us say a few words about Vygotsky as a person. According to the testimonials of our teachers, he was a kind person, ardently demanding of others and of himself. In him, one saw mind, feeling, and will all harmonized in such a way as to make him a genuine scholar, whose life and work served as a model for several generations of Soviet psychologists. One can see the consciousness, personality, and activity of a great scholar in this passage:



The very attempt to approach the soul scientifically, the effort of free will to master the mind, to the extent it is not clouded or paralyzed by mythology, contains in itself the entire past and future path of psychology because science is the path to truth, albeit one that passes through periods of error. It is namely this to us, the path of our science: in struggle, in surmounting mistakes, in difficulties, in an inhuman struggle with thousand-year-old prejudices. We do not want to be Ivans who do not remember their relatives. We do not suffer from illusions of grandeur, thinking that history begins with us. We do not want to receive from history a trivial name. We want a name on which the dust of centuries settles. In this we see our historical right, an indication of our historical role, the claim of realizing psychology as a science. (1982, p. 428)

In these words is expressed a respect for the centuries-old science of psychology and for the scholars who created it. It is appropriate that James Wertsch, with similar respect, has recognized the scientific creation of our fellow countryman Lev Semenovich Vygotsky.

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## Preface

This volume grew out of several trips I made to the USSR between 1975 and 1984. I was fortunate to begin these trips at a time when several of Vygotsky's colleagues and students were still alive. My discussions with such outstanding personalities and scholars as A. R. Luria, A. N. Leont'ev, D. B. El'konin, A. V. Zaporozhets, and L. I. Bozhovich provided much of the inspiration and information I needed to undertake this project. It is impossible for me to convey how important these people have been in helping me understand Vygotsky as a person and as the creator of an account of human consciousness.

As these figures passed from the scene, I came to rely more heavily on the next generation of Soviet scholars for much of my information. In this connection V. P. Zinchenko and V. V. Davydov have played an especially important role. They have spent countless hours explaining their interpretation of Vygotsky's ideas.

Many individuals in the West have also been essential in my efforts to complete this work. At the risk of leaving out several who deserve mention, I wish to thank in particular Michael Cole, Patricia Greenfield, Michael Holquist, Maya Hickmann, John Lucy, Ben Lee, Sylvia Scribner, Addison Stone, and Susan Sugarman. They have provided me with the encouragement, as well as the critical commentary, required to present ideas from one scientific tradition to readers from another.

To say that colleagues in the USSR and the United States have assisted me in understanding Vygotsky's ideas does not mean that they agree with everything I have said in this volume. With regard to the

first four chapters, where I have outlined basic themes in Vygotsky's writings, some differ with me at least in the emphasis they would give to various points. In the final four chapters, where I have attempted to extend Vygotsky's ideas, some of my colleagues have gone so far as to raise concrete objections to the idea that my claims are part of Vygotsky's approach. For example, it has been suggested that "Vygotsky and Beyond" would be an appropriate subtitle for chapter 8. Such comments point out that the final responsibility for my interpretations and extensions of Vygotsky's ideas must remain with me.

I also wish to thank the many organizations that have supported me over the past decade. The International Research and Exchanges Board, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Fulbright Commission have made possible my various trips to the USSR. The Institute of Psychology and Institute of Linguistics of the USSR Academy of Sciences, the Pushkin Russian Language Institute, and the Department of Psychology at Moscow State University have provided the hospitality and material support to carry out my research while in the USSR. The Spencer Foundation, Northwestern University, and the Center for Psychosocial Studies have supported the empirical research that I and several of my students have conducted in connection with Vygotsky's ideas, research that is reported here in chapters 3 and 7. The seemingly endless typing and retyping of this manuscript was cheerfully undertaken by Kathleen Pucci and other members of the staff of the Center for Psychosocial Studies.

Over the years that I have worked on this volume I have come to view it not only as a project in academic research but as an exercise in intercultural understanding. I have continually been impressed by the differences that separate Western and Soviet views of human mental functioning. The differences I have in mind are not of the sort that characteristically arise in the mutual recriminations of political rhetoric. Rather, they are fundamental differences in assumptions about issues such as the role of social forces in the formation of the individual. Such differences need not be a source of misunderstanding. Instead, they can provide everyone with a challenge to grow. It is my deepest hope that this volume can contribute in some small way to this process.

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### *Note on Russian Names*

Readers of English have become accustomed to spellings such as “Vygotsky” and “Luria” rather than more precise but cumbersome transliterations such as “Vygotskii” or “Vygotskij” and “Luriya” or “Lurija.” Therefore the names of relatively familiar figures will be spelled in their anglicized form. However, for less familiar names—Shchedrovitskii, for example—the more precise transliteration practices used in standard publications, such as *Soviet Psychology*, will be followed.



## CHAPTER 1

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# Vygotsky: The Man and His Theory

Like the humanities and other social sciences, psychology is supposed to tell us something about what it means to be human. However, many critics, including such eminent members of the discipline as J. S. Bruner (1976), have questioned whether academic psychology has succeeded in this endeavor. One of the major stumbling blocks that has diverted psychology from this goal is that psychologists have too often isolated and studied phenomena in such a way that they cannot communicate with one another, let alone with members of other disciplines. They have tended to lose sight of the fact that their ultimate goal is to contribute to some integrated, holistic picture of human nature.

This intellectual isolation is nowhere more evident than in the division that separates studies of individual psychology from studies of the sociocultural environment in which individuals live. In psychology we tend to view culture or society as a variable to be incorporated into models of individual functioning. This represents a kind of reductionism which assumes that sociocultural phenomena can ultimately be explained on the basis of psychological processes. Conversely, sociologists and social theorists often view psychological processes as posing no special problems because they derive straightforwardly from social phenomena. This view may not involve the kind of reductionism found in the work of psychologists, but it is no less naive. Many aspects of

psychological functioning cannot be explained by assuming that they derive solely and simply from the sociocultural milieu.

This disciplinary isolation is not attributable simply to a lack of cooperation among various scholars. Rather, those interested in social phenomena and those interested in psychological phenomena have defined their objects of inquiry in such different ways that they have almost guaranteed the impossibility of mutual understanding. For decades this problem has been of concern to those seeking to construct a unified social science. Critical theorists such as T. Adorno (1967, 1968) and J. Habermas (1979) have struggled with it since the 1940s. According to Adorno, “the separation of sociology and psychology is both correct and false” (1967, p. 78). It is correct because it recognizes different levels of phenomena that exist in reality; that is, it helps us avoid the pitfalls of reductionism. It is false, however, because it too readily “encourages the specialists to relinquish the attempt to know the totality” (p. 78).

Keeping sight of this totality while examining particular levels of phenomena in social science is as elusive a goal today as earlier in the twentieth century. Indeed the more progress we make in studying particular phenomena, the more distant this goal seems to become. My purpose here is to explicate and extend a theoretical approach that tried to avoid this pitfall—the approach of the Soviet psychologist and semiotician Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1896–1934).

Vygotsky, of course, did not make his proposals in order to deal with today’s disciplinary fragmentation, but many of his ideas are relevant to the quandaries we face. To harness these ideas, they must first be interpreted in light of the milieu in which they were developed. Hence I shall explicate the cultural and historical setting in which Vygotsky worked and then extend his ideas in light of theoretical advances made during the half-century since his death.

Vygotsky is usually considered to be a developmental or educational psychologist. Much of what I shall have to say, however, is based on the assumption that it is incorrect to categorize him too readily as a psychologist, at least in today’s restricted sense. It is precisely because he was not *only* a psychologist that he was able to approach this discipline with a fresh eye and make it part of a more unified social science. In fact the Soviet philosopher and psychologist G. P. Shchedrovitskii (October 13, 1981—conversation) has argued that one of the main reasons for Vygotsky’s success in reformulating psychology in the USSR is that he was not trained as a professional psychologist.

Under normal circumstances an outsider is not given the opportunity to reformulate a discipline such as psychology in a major country. Vygotsky, however, did not live in normal circumstances: he entered adulthood just as his country was experiencing one of the greatest social upheavals of the twentieth century—the Russian Revolution of 1917. This event provided two decades or so of what is perhaps the most exciting intellectual and cultural setting of our time. It was largely because of this setting that Vygotsky was able to develop his ingenious ideas and that these ideas could have a significant impact.

### *A Biographical Sketch*

Vygotsky's biography can be divided into two basic periods: the first, from his birth in 1896 until 1924, the year in which he made his initial appearance as a major intellectual figure in the USSR; the second, from 1924 until his death from tuberculosis in 1934.

Information about Vygotsky's early life is sketchy. Other than family records and reminiscences, especially those of his older daughter, Gita L'vovna Vygotskaya,<sup>1</sup> the only major source of information about Vygotsky's early life is K. E. Levitin (1982), who in turn gathered much of his information from one of Vygotsky's childhood friends, Semen Dobkin.<sup>2</sup> Vygotsky was born on November 17, 1896,<sup>3</sup> in Orsha, a town not far from Minsk in Belorussia. When he was about a year old, his family moved to Gomel, a somewhat larger town in Belorussia, where he spent his childhood and youth. His father, who had finished the Commercial Institute in the Ukrainian city of Khar'kov, was a department chief at the United Bank of Gomel and a representative of an insurance society. His mother was trained as a teacher but spent most of her life raising eight children. Together this couple made the Vygotsky family one of the town's most cultured. The rather stern disposition and bitter ironic humor of Vygotsky's father contrasted with the very gentle personality of his mother. It was apparently from her that Lev Semenovich acquired his initial knowledge of German<sup>4</sup> and his love for the poet Heine.

The picture that emerges from information about Vygotsky's early years is one of a happy, intellectually stimulating life—in spite of the fact that, like other members of his family, he was excluded from several avenues of opportunity because he was Jewish. In tsarist Russia being Jewish meant living in restricted territories, being subject to strict quotas for entering universities, being excluded from certain profes-

sions, and several other forms of discrimination. These circumstances were undoubtedly the source of much of the elder Vygotsky's bitterness. He and his wife, however, seem to have provided a warm and intellectually stimulating atmosphere for their children, which is evident from Dobkin's comment that Vygotsky's

father's study was often at the children's disposal. There, they arranged all sorts of meetings and would go there to be alone for a while or to meet with a small group of friends. The dining room was also a place for communication as there was invariably lively and interesting conversation during the obligatory evening tea at a large table. Talks over the samovar were one of the family traditions which played an important role in the formation of the mentality of all the children, especially the older ones. (Levitin, 1982, pp. 24–25)

Instead of attending public schools, Vygotsky studied with a private tutor for several years and then finished his secondary education in a Jewish gymnasium. He profited enormously from his early years of study with his tutor, Solomon Ashpiz. Ashpiz's pedagogical technique was apparently grounded in a form of ingenious Socratic dialogue, which left his students, especially one as gifted as Lev Semenovich, with well-developed, inquisitive minds.

By the age of fifteen Vygotsky had become known as the "little professor" (Levitin, October 6, 1981—conversation), because he often led student discussions on intellectual matters. For example, he examined the historical context of thought by arranging debates and mock trials in which his peers played the role of figures such as Aristotle and Napoleon. These debates were a manifestation of one of Vygotsky's main interests during that period of his life—philosophy.

While still a child in Gomel, Lev Semenovich also began to show fervent interest in the theater and in literature. Of the former his sister said, "I don't think there was any period in his life when he did not think or write about the theatre" (Levitin, 1982, p. 20). With regard to the latter Dobkin reported, "Literature, especially his favourite poetry, always gave him much solace in life and always engaged his attention" (*ibid.*, p. 20). Dobkin also reports that as a schoolboy Vygotsky "was forever citing favourite verses" (p. 27). Like all Russian children, Lev Semenovich knew a great deal of Pushkin's poetry, but in contrast to most of his schoolmates who usually preferred the lyric verses, he preferred Pushkin's more serious, even tragic, passages. In

addition, he loved the poetry of Blok, especially the “Italian Poems,” which have a tragic air.

When reciting poetry, Vygotsky had the habit of singling out the lines that he felt captured the essence of the poem and skipping the remaining ones. For example, from Pushkin’s “Mozart and Salieri” he recited only the beginning lines: “They say: there is no justice here on earth. But there is more—hereafter. To my mind this truth is elementary as a scale.” This is by no means the end of Salieri’s monologue. While much of the continuation is quite significant, Lev Semenovich recited only these lines, saying they were sufficient to grasp the essence. This notion of the heightened significance of an abbreviated linguistic form was destined to play an essential role in his account of language and mind.

Vygotsky graduated from his gymnasium in 1913 with a gold medal. Though widely recognized as an outstanding student, he had great difficulty entering the university of his choice—largely because he was Jewish. The first problem he encountered was the “deputy’s examinations,” so called because they were attended by a deputy or representative of the province, who had the decisive say. The deputy, usually a teacher from the public gymnasium, was often quite anti-Semitic.

During this period there was a quota on the number of Jews who could enter Moscow and Saint Petersburg universities: no more than 3 percent of the student bodies could be Jewish. As Levitin (1982, pp. 27–29) points out, this meant that all the Jewish gold medalists and about half the silver medalists would be admitted. Since Lev Semenovich had every reason to expect a gold medal, his matriculation to the university of his choice seemed assured.

Midway through Vygotsky’s deputy examinations, however, the tsarist minister of education decreed a change in procedures by which Jews would be chosen for Moscow and Saint Petersburg universities. The 3 percent quota was maintained, but Jewish applicants were now to be selected by casting lots, a change apparently designed to dilute the quality of Jewish students at the best universities. Dobkin remembered Lev Semenovich’s response to this change. Lev

showed me the newspaper with the report about the new circular, which meant a great misfortune for him personally and for his whole family since it dashed his career plans and hopes of getting a university degree.

“There,” said Lev, “now I have no chance.”

The news seemed so monstrous to me that I replied quite

sincerely: "If they don't admit you to the University it will be a terrible injustice. I am sure they'll let you in. Wanna bet?"

Vygotsky, who was a great bettor, smiled and stretched out his hand. We wagered for a good book.

He did not make a single mistake on his final exams and received a gold medal . . .

And then the incredible happened: late in August, the Vygotskys received a cable from their friends in Moscow telling them that Lev had been enrolled at the University by the draw. On the same day, he presented me with a volume of Bunin's poetry inscribed "To Senya in memory of a lost bet." (Levitin, 1982, pp. 28–29)

Lev Semenovich's parents insisted that he go into medicine at the university. At the time this seemed to be a good path, since for Jews medicine guaranteed a modest but secure professional life. Vygotsky was more interested in history or philology, but these departments were devoted primarily to training secondary-school teachers, and as a Jew he was forbidden to be an employee in the tsarist government. Lev Semenovich was also interested in law, but court officials (with the exception of lawyers) could not be Jewish in tsarist Russia. Thus Lev Semenovich entered the university in Moscow in medicine. However, according to Dobkin, "hardly a month passed before he transferred to the law department" (*ibid.*, p. 29). Apparently Lev Semenovich planned to become a lawyer, one of the few professions that would allow him to live beyond the pale.

In 1914, while in Moscow as a student, Vygotsky also began attending the Shanyavskii People's University, an unofficial school that sprang up in 1911 after a minister of education had expelled most of the students and more than a hundred of the faculty from Moscow University in a crackdown on an antitsarist movement. Many of the best professors in Moscow had been the victims of this expulsion. As a result Shanyavskii University was a more interesting institution at that time than Moscow University. Vygotsky's majors there were history and philosophy.

Vygotsky graduated from Moscow University in 1917 with a degree in law. Although he received no official degree from Shanyavskii University, he profited greatly from his studies in psychology, philosophy, and literature. He returned to Gomel after his graduation to teach literature and psychology.

Very little information is available about the impact of the 1917

Revolution on Lev Semenovich. Innumerable personal and historical accounts have documented the massive changes introduced into the lives of everyone involved, and one must assume that Vygotsky was no exception. As A. R. Luria (1979) has documented, the Revolution profoundly changed disciplines such as psychology as well. Whole new realms of inquiry were opened, and opportunities for younger scholars,<sup>5</sup> were greater than had previously been imaginable.

Lev Semenovich continued living in Gomel's relatively peaceful setting for seven years after his return in 1917. With his cousin David Vygotsky he taught literature at a school in Gomel. He also conducted classes on aesthetics and the history of art in a conservatory and gave many lectures on literature and science. Furthermore, he organized a psychology laboratory at the Gomel Teacher's College, where he delivered a series of lectures that provided the groundwork for his 1926 volume, *Pedagogical Psychology*.

Dobkin recalls that he, Lev Semenovich, and David Vygotsky began publishing inexpensive copies of great literary works in 1918. This venture was dubbed "Ages and Days," and its trademark was composed of a sphinx and a butterfly. After existing long enough to produce two volumes, it was closed down because of the paper shortage that was by then affecting Gomel as well as the rest of the country. Lev Semenovich's two partners in this business left Gomel soon afterward; Vygotsky went to Petrograd in search of work, and Dobkin to Moscow to further his studies.

At the time of Dobkin's departure in 1920, Vygotsky was in poor health. The disease that was eventually to kill him, tuberculosis, had begun to take its toll. It was already a serious enough threat to Vygotsky's life in 1920 that he spent a brief period in a sanatorium and asked one of his former professors from Shanyavskii University to publish his collected manuscripts in the event of his death. He recovered from this bout of tuberculosis, however, and continued his projects in Gomel. In 1924 he married Roza Smekhova. They had two daughters.

Between his graduation from the university and his move to Moscow, Lev Semenovich somehow managed to fit a great deal of reading into his hectic schedule of teaching, public lectures, publishing, and writing. Among the authors that figured prominently in Vygotsky's readings were poets such as Tyuchev, Blok, Mandel'shtam, and Pushkin; writers of fiction such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Bely, and Bunin; and philosophers such as James and especially Spinoza. He also read

the writings of Freud, Marx, Engels, Hegel, Pavlov, and the Russian philologist Potebnya.

In retrospect all this work seems to have been preparation for an event in 1924 that was to change Vygotsky's life irrevocably. This turning point, which separates the two major periods of Vygotsky's biography, was his appearance on January 6, 1924, at the Second All-Russian Psychoneurological Congress in Leningrad. There he made a presentation, "Methods of Reflexological and Psychological Investigations."<sup>6</sup> Several of Vygotsky's future students were at the meeting and later fondly recounted the electrifying effect this unknown young man had on the conference. According to Luria,

when Vygotsky got up to deliver his speech, he had no printed text from which to read, not even notes. Yet he spoke fluently, never seeming to stop and search his memory for the next idea. Even had the content of his speech been pedestrian, his performance would have been notable for the persuasiveness of his style. But his speech was by no means pedestrian. Instead of choosing a minor theme, as might befit a young man of twenty-eight [sic] speaking for the first time to a gathering of the graybeards of his profession, Vygotsky chose the difficult theme of the relation between conditioned reflexes and man's conscious behavior . . . Although he failed to convince everyone of the correctness of his view, it was clear that this man from a small provincial town in western Russia was an intellectual force who would have to be listened to. (1979, pp. 38–39)

Vygotsky's brilliant performance so impressed the director of the Psychological Institute in Moscow, K. N. Kornilov, that he immediately invited this "Mozart of psychology" (Toulmin, 1978) to join himself and others in restructuring the institution. Lev Semenovich accepted and later that year left Gomel to begin his new career. Upon his arrival in Moscow, he lived for a period in the basement of the Experimental Psychology Institute. Dobkin recalled that Vygotsky's room contained archives of that institute's philosophical section, including reports on ethnic psychology. Vygotsky plunged into reading these archives, which made up the walls of his new living quarters, thereby continuing his education.

In 1925 Lev Semenovich completed his dissertation, "The Psychology of Art." During the fall of that year he received permission to have a public defense, but a renewed and serious bout of tuberculosis made that impossible. Recognizing this fact, the qualifying commission



excused him from a public defense, and he was passed. The origins of Vygotsky's dissertation stemmed from as early as 1916, when he had completed a lengthy manuscript on *Hamlet*. According to Dobkin, Lev Semenovich had actually begun the manuscript as a schoolboy when seeing *Hamlet* had left a great impression on him. The early versions were Vygotsky's "most closely guarded secret" (Levitin, 1982, p. 32) during that period of his life.

The years between 1924 and 1934 were extremely busy and productive for Vygotsky. Soon after his arrival in Moscow, Aleksandr Romanovich Luria (1902–1977) and Aleksei Nikolaevich Leont'ev (1904–1979) joined him as students and colleagues. Together these three became known as the "troika" of the Vygotskian school. Several other students and followers eventually joined the school, but it was Luria and Leont'ev who were destined to be the major developers of Vygotsky's ideas after his death.

Luria's initial encounter with Vygotsky reflected a respect bordering on awe. Such an opinion is not uncommon among those who worked with Vygotsky. He seems to have had a profound impact on the lives of almost all his students and colleagues. Roza Evgenevna Levina (May 3, 1976—conversation) recalled her first contact with Vygotsky as being completely overwhelming. She and four other students who were to become followers of Vygotsky were in their third year at the university in Moscow when they met him. They were between twenty-one and twenty-three years of age at the time, and Vygotsky was thirty. But from an intellectual perspective he seemed "several generations older." Levina recalls taking notes on Vygotsky's ingenious (and often spontaneous) lectures and understanding them only years later. Another of his students, P. Ya. Gal'perin (1984), has recounted how "all of Moscow came running" to hear Vygotsky's clinical diagnoses and how students sometimes listened to his lectures through open windows because the auditorium was completely packed.

The almost messianic impression that Vygotsky made is borne out in many other observations as well. For example, Luria, one of the most prominent neuropsychologists of the twentieth century, said, "All of my work has been no more than the working out of the psychological theory which [Lev Semenovich] constructed" (1978), and of his own professional life Luria said, "I divide my career into two periods: the small and insignificant period before my meeting with Vygotsky and the more important and essential one after the meeting" (Levitin, 1982, p. 159).

The excitement that Vygotsky generated among his students and colleagues is perhaps impossible to appreciate in today's setting. They were totally dedicated to the man and to his ideas. According to Luria, "The entire group gave almost all of its waking hours to our grand plan for the reconstruction of psychology. When Vygotsky went on a trip, the students wrote poems in honor of his journey. When he gave a lecture in Moscow, everyone came to hear him" (1979, p. 52).

What generated such excitement and enthusiasm among Vygotsky's followers? At least two essential factors were involved. First, the genius of Vygotsky. His mind absorbed a huge amount of diverse information and analyzed it in accordance with an evolving set of guiding principles. But the same can be said of many people who have not had Vygotsky's impact; it alone cannot explain his influence. One must also appreciate the importance of a second factor, the social and political environment of the USSR during the two decades between the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the beginning of the Stalinist purges. This period, especially after the end of the Civil War in 1922, was one of upheaval, enthusiasm, and energy unimaginable by today's standards. People such as Vygotsky and his followers devoted every hour of their lives to making certain that the new socialist state, the first grand experiment based on Marxist-Leninist principles, would succeed. When one appreciates the life-giving energy provided by this environment and by the commitment of intellectuals to the creation of a new society, Vygotsky's work and influence become easier to understand.

The last decade of Vygotsky's life was extraordinarily hectic and productive. He joined the Psychological Institute of Moscow University in the modest position of junior staff scientist (or staff scientist, 2nd class, as the rank was then known). The year before his arrival in 1924 the directorship of this institute had passed from G. I Chelpanov to Kornilov. The major reason for the change was that Kornilov was viewed as a "materialist" devoted to developing a Marxist psychology, whereas Chelpanov had been labeled an "idealist." Kornilov's takeover signaled the seriousness and dedication with which scholars were then trying to employ Marxist principles when approaching issues in psychology (as well as in other disciplines).

Vygotsky viewed his task in this new institutional setting as twofold. First, he wanted to reformulate psychological theory along Marxist lines. This theme in Vygotsky's writings is sometimes dismissed by Western readers as mandatory lip service to something he did not really believe. This was absolutely not the case with Vygotsky. Although

Soviet psychology was later to suffer from immersion in a dogmatic political climate (compare Tucker, 1971; Kozulin, 1984), Vygotsky died before this condition became a pervasive fact of life. His belief in Marxist principles was honest and deep. According to Luria, “Vygotsky was . . . the leading Marxist theoretician among us . . . in [his] hands, Marx’s methods of analysis did serve a vital role in shaping our course” (1979, p. 43).

Vygotsky’s second goal after 1924 was to develop concrete ways for dealing with some of the massive practical problems confronting the USSR—above all, the psychology of education and remediation. Typically the USSR has had great faith in scientific solutions to practical problems. At the time Vygotsky was working, the practical problems for psychology included massive illiteracy (which has been almost completely overcome today), cultural differences among the peoples who were all eventually supposed to become Soviet (as opposed to Uzbek, Ukrainian, and so on), and an almost total absence of services for those who were mentally retarded or otherwise unable to participate in the new society. While working at Kornilov’s institute, Vygotsky expanded his horizons in practical issues by examining problems of defectology (*defektologija*).<sup>7</sup> In particular, he was concerned with children who were hearing impaired, mentally retarded, or (in current terminology) learning disabled. In 1925 he began to organize the Laboratory of Psychology for Abnormal Childhood in Moscow. In 1929 this became the Experimental Defectological Institute of Narkompros (People’s Commissariat for Education), and after Vygotsky’s death, the Scientific Research Institute of Defectology of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. Vygotsky was the first director of this institute and continued to be heavily involved in its workings until his death.

In addition to carrying out the work needed to create a new institute (the difficulty of which was exacerbated by the relative chaos that still existed in the USSR), Vygotsky conducted empirical research. Levina (May 3, 1976—conversation) recalls that she and other students of Vygotsky searched the neighborhood of the institute for children who could serve as subjects in their studies. They temporarily used this method of “subject selection” because it was unclear which bureaucracy had the power to give them permission to enter the kindergartens.

Besides his administrative activities Vygotsky also lectured and wrote. In 1925 he produced the written version of his 1924 presentation at the Second All-Russian Psychoneurology Congress; between November of 1925 and the spring of 1926, while in the hospital with another

attack of tuberculosis, he wrote a major philosophical critique of the theoretical foundations of psychology, "The Historical Significance of the Crisis in Psychology"; and in 1926 he published *Pedagogical Psychology*, which derived from his earlier lectures in Gomel.

Beginning in the late 1920s Vygotsky traveled extensively in the USSR to lecture and help set up research laboratories. In the early spring of 1929 he went to Tashkent (Uzbekistan) for several months to give a course and train teachers and psychologists at the Eastern Department of the First Central Asian State University. In early 1931, at the request of the newly formed psychology sector at the Ukrainian Psychoneurological Institute, Vygotsky and several colleagues moved many of their activities to the city of Khar'kov. Although this move severely disrupted their personal lives, the group readily accepted the invitation to set up a new base of operations. They viewed Khar'kov as providing a supportive atmosphere that would foster the growth of a new approach to psychology. They felt they needed a few years' respite from the hectic environment of Moscow in order to develop their ideas. Among the members of Vygotsky's school who moved to Khar'kov were Luria, Leont'ev, L. I. Bozhovich, and A. V. Zaporozhets. They were joined by such figures as P. Ya. Gal'perin and P. I. Zinchenko, who had already been living there.

Vygotsky himself did not move permanently to Khar'kov but visited this outpost of his followers on a regular basis. In addition to lecturing, writing, and organizing research during these visits, he undertook studies in medicine, especially neurology. He entered medical school and attended lectures in both Moscow and Khar'kov. His interest in medicine seems to have stemmed primarily from his interest in neurological disorders of speaking and thinking, which was manifested as early as 1929 in his writings on aphasia.

Besides his work in Khar'kov during this period, Vygotsky pursued several of his activities in Moscow with colleagues such as Levina, L. S. Slavina, and N. A. Menchinskaya. He gave lectures at the Department of Social Sciences at Moscow State University, the N. K. Krupskaya Academy of Communist Education, the Institute for Child and Adolescent Health, the Pedagogical Department of the Moscow Conservatory, and the K. Libknekht Industrial-Pedagogical Institute. Furthermore, he commuted regularly to Leningrad to work with D. B. El'konin and S. L. Rubinshtein and to lecture at the A. I. Herzen Leningrad Pedagogical Institute. Vygotsky also began to visit Poltova fairly regularly to guide the research of a group headed by Bozhovich,

who had moved there from Khar'kov. He not only gave lectures in all these places but conducted clinical work and organized research activities as well. Anyone familiar with the distances between these cities and the primitive means of Soviet transportation in the 1930s can appreciate the time and energy such travel demanded. Nevertheless, like many of his cohorts, Vygotsky viewed it his duty to help build the new Soviet state.

Between 1931 and 1934 Vygotsky produced manuscripts for reviews, articles, and books at an ever accelerating pace. He edited and wrote a long introduction for the 1932 Russian translation of Piaget's volume *Le langage et la pensée chez l'enfant* (1923). His introduction was later to serve as the second chapter of his posthumous volume *Thinking and Speech* (1934).<sup>8</sup> Vygotsky also wrote many other pieces, including "The Diagnosis of Development and Pedological Clinics for Difficult Children" (1931a), "The History of Development of Higher Mental Functions" (1931b), "Lectures on Psychology" (1932), "The Problem of Instruction and Cognitive Development during the School Years" (1934b), "Thought in Schizophrenia" (1934c), as well as critical reviews and introductions to volumes by Bühler, Köhler, Gesell, Koffka, and Freud.

Among his research activities, Vygotsky attended a seminar in Moscow together with Luria, the linguist N. Ya. Marr, and the cinematographer S. M. Eizenshtein. Eizenshtein subsequently wrote that he loved "this marvelous man with his strange haircut<sup>9</sup> . . . From under this strange haircut peered the eyes of one of the most brilliant psychologists of our time who saw the world with celestial clarity" (Ivanov, 1976, p. 66).

During Vygotsky's last few years of life, he lectured and wrote at an almost frenetic pace. His daughter, Gita L'vovna (October 16, 1981—conversation), recalls his Moscow schedule as one that required him to be at work from early morning until late evening. He often did his writing after 2 A.M., when he had a few quiet hours to himself, and during the last months of his life he dictated his output to a stenographer, which is how the last chapter of *Thinking and Speech* was produced.

Throughout this period Vygotsky's bouts of tuberculosis became increasingly frequent and severe. His protracted, terrifying spells of coughing led to exhaustion for several days, but instead of resting, he tried to reach as many of his goals as possible. In the spring of 1934 his health grew much worse. His doctors insisted that he enter the

hospital, but he refused because of work he needed to complete by the end of the school year. One May 9 he had a very severe attack at work and was brought home. At the end of May his bleeding began again, and on June 2 he was hospitalized in Serebryanii Bor Sanatorium. Shortly after midnight on June 11 he died. He was buried in Novo-devechii Cemetery in Moscow.

A few of Vygotsky's writings were published shortly after his death, but for political reasons a twenty-year period ensued when his work was for all practical purposes banned in the USSR. This resulted partly from the 1936 decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party against pedology, a discipline roughly equivalent to educational psychology, especially as it concerns psychometrics. The decree was aimed at aspects of this discipline that Vygotsky himself had criticized (see Cole and Scribner, 1978), but certain of his works (for example, Vygotsky, 1935) clearly were associated with it, and so all his writings became a target of criticism. Other factors in the demise of Vygotsky's official position were the conflict between some of his claims and those found in Stalin's 1950 essay on linguistics, and the rise in the late 1940s of a form of dogmatic Pavlovianism (Tucker, 1971) that is now referred to in the USSR as "vulgar materialism."

These factors were overcome only after Stalin's death in 1953. The publication of Vygotsky's works resumed in 1956 (Vygotsky, 1956) and continues today in the USSR with the publication of six volumes of his collected works (Vygotsky, 1982a, 1982b, 1983a, 1983b, 1984a, 1984b). In all, Vygotsky produced approximately 180 works. Of these, 135 had been published in one form or another prior to the six volumes of his collected works. Several are appearing in these six volumes for the first time, but some, especially those dealing with pedology, will not appear even then.

### *Vygotsky's Theoretical Approach*

The multiplicity of intellectual roots and research interests that characterized Vygotsky's career may suggest that any attempt to identify a core set of unifying themes in his work would be misguided. However, I would argue that it is only by identifying general themes that one can understand his approach to specific issues. The three themes that form the core of Vygotsky's theoretical framework are (1) a reliance on a genetic or developmental method;<sup>10</sup> (2) the claim that higher mental processes in the individual have their origin in social processes;<sup>11</sup>

and (3) the claim that mental processes can be understood only if we understand the tools and signs that mediate them.

Each of these themes can be fully understood only by taking into account its interrelationships with the others. Thus the very notion of origins in the second theme points toward a genetic analysis, and Vygotsky's account of social interaction and mental processes is heavily dependent on the forms of mediation (such as language) involved. Indeed much of what is unique about this approach is the way the three themes are interdefined.

While recognizing this thoroughgoing interconnection among the themes, my initial presentation of them considers each in relative isolation. Although this approach entails some artificiality, it is useful to abstract each theme from its overall framework for clarity of presentation. By isolating the themes in Vygotsky's approach, one can also gain insight into the "dynamics" that exist among them. I shall argue that they can be ordered in terms of their analytic primacy in his theoretical framework. Specifically I argue that the third theme, concerning tool and sign mediation, is analytically prior to the other two. This is so because Vygotsky's claims about mediation can generally be understood on their own grounds, whereas important aspects of the other two themes can be understood only if the notion of mediation is invoked. Thus Vygotsky defined development in terms of the emergence or transformation of forms of mediation, and his notion of social interaction and its relation to higher mental processes necessarily involves mediational mechanisms.

In addition, I believe that Vygotsky made his most important and unique contribution with the concept of mediation. At the time he was writing, other scholars had already argued for the need to use genetic analysis in the study of mind and had outlined accounts that viewed the mind as originating in social life. It was Vygotsky's contribution to redefine and extend these ideas by introducing the notion of tool and sign mediation.

During the last decade of his life the notion of mediation (*oposredovanie*) became increasingly important and well formulated in Vygotsky's theory of human mental functioning. By 1933 he went so far as to say that "the central fact about our psychology is the fact of mediation" (1982a, p. 166). L. A. Radzikhovskii has noted that this evolution in Vygotsky's thinking was paralleled by a switch from an account of mediational means closely tied to Pavlovian psychophysiology to one emphasizing meaning and the communicative nature of

signs: “The concept ‘stimulus-means,’ which in fact always meant only that the means is not a typical stimulus (in a behavioristic conceptualization), disappears [in Vygotsky’s writings]. In its place the concept *sign* becomes central for Vygotsky’s theory. The term *sign* is used by Vygotsky in the sense of having meaning (1979, p. 182). Vygotsky himself recognized this change in his account of mediation. Thus in 1933 he noted that “in older works we ignored the fact that a sign has meaning” (1982a, p. 158).

It is Vygotsky’s later interpretation of signs and their mediational capacities that will be the primary focus of my presentation. In his writings of this last period of his life one can see the full development of an approach that draws on his earlier studies in semiotics,<sup>12</sup> philology, and literary analysis. His insights into the nature of meaning in sign systems (especially human language) laid the groundwork for interpreting the genetic relationship between social and individual processes. His understanding of this relationship is the core of his approach and leads back to the issue raised at the very beginning of this chapter—the isolation of individual and social phenomena in today’s social sciences. The way Vygotsky proposed to coordinate these areas of inquiry was to argue that semiotic processes are part of both and hence make it possible to build a bridge between them. This involved invoking ideas from disciplines that lie outside the social sciences as they are understood today. Vygotsky was able to do this partly because of his familiarity with a broad range of disciplines. However, his success at bridging disciplines also had much to do with the exciting social and intellectual milieu in which he lived.

Vygotsky managed to tie various strands of inquiry together into a unique approach that does not separate individuals from the socio-cultural setting in which they function. This integrative approach to social, semiotic, and psychological phenomena has substantial relevance today, a half century after his death.