

Introduction: Setting the Stage. The Paradox of Continuity versus Change

This book has been written with an acute sense of a radical change in the many facets, expressions, and forms that it takes today – in the social dynamics and political landscapes, in patterns of human development and education, in social sciences and critical theories that endeavor to address, and sometimes shape, these processes. For various reasons discussed throughout this book, social change became the key theme in theorizing human development and mind. This conceptual shift toward social change – as the central category and the leading premise of the evolving approach to human development and mind – was a gradual process that necessitated many changes, transformations, reconsiderations, revisions, and significant expansions in concepts and ideas along the way. As a result, writing has turned into a process of exploration, inquiry, and discovery – rather than a recording, or a re-presentation, of an already established and finalized position. This was indeed a journey (to use a cliché), and a long one at that, of exploring how social change is implicated in human development and what picture results if change and transformation, and human agency in instigating and implementing them – rather than stability and finished orderliness of the world in its status quo to which people passively adapt – are taken as the guiding principles and foundational premises.

The process of writing, therefore, included many unexpected twists and turns in ideas and argumentation arising every step of the way in the changing dynamics of this project. There are still many riddles that remain unsolved and many aspects that demand more consideration – and so the most difficult task is to find a moment to pause and let the journey's incomplete products congeal and become reified in this book. Yet perhaps no timing will ever be perfect because no journey of this kind is likely to ever be completed, instead remaining forever in the making – unless it is “done with” and left behind, as something that needs neither revision nor

continuation. Taking to heart Bakhtin's words that "nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world ... everything is still in the future and will always be in the future" (1984, p. 166), the resulting approach is offered as one of the steps, however incomplete, in a continuing endeavor of discovering *what can be*, as an open-ended quest rather than a final answer set in stone.

WHY THE MIND?

Given the emphasis on change and transformation, the title of the book, *The Transformative Mind*, came about quite naturally. This title admittedly is somewhat narrow because the book is not exclusively about the mind; instead, its focus is on the broader dynamics of human development and social practices of which the mind is an integral part and an inherent dimension. Yet the title is chosen to intentionally challenge those increasingly powerful approaches that understand the mind in starkly internalist, individualist, and reductionist terms – as a strictly individual possession situated inside the brain of an isolated individual floating in a vacuum, or as a computer-like device activated by cognitive or brain modules presumed to be shaped in the course of evolution. Whereas many critical and socio-cultural approaches have abandoned the topic of mind in a shift away from anything that seems to appeal to isolated individuals, the belief here is that it is important to stake a claim to this topic from a position that is explicitly sociocultural, historical, relational-materialist, dynamic, situated, and dialectical. Such a position is focused on social dynamics and cultural matrices of collaborative practices in their historical, ceaseless unfolding through time, yet without neglecting what is traditionally understood as the mind, agency, and human subjectivity more broadly – the processes of thinking, knowing, feeling, remembering, forming identity, making commitments, and so on. That is, the strategy is to *reclaim* the mind – in conjunction with agency and other expressions of human subjectivity – and expand a territory for critical and sociocultural approaches to engage this notion and related problematics in opening up the possibility to take up the dialectics between the social and the individual, the external and the internal, the person and the world, the mind and the shared communal practices.

Though there have been many books published with titles that employ the same descriptive schema of "The X Mind" (cf. Zlatev, Racine, Sinha, and Itkonen, 2008), the leading motivation in most of them, especially in recent years, has been to look ever more deeply into what is presumably the mind's internal workings – the "depths" assumed to be contained

in the cortical neuronal structures and other processes within the brain. These recent books, with the titles such as *Inside the Brain* or others close in meaning, are typically in the mode of thinking that can be summarized (as one journalist did) by the expression “the amygdala made me do it.” On the best-seller lists today are works that rely on the new tools (especially brain scans and genetic testing) and aim to prove that the mind and processes such as self-determination, intentionality, agency, and consciousness play a much less significant role in our lives than we ever realized. This is the type of approach that the present book is in stark and unequivocal opposition to. Instead, the book falls within a very different tradition of writings on human development and mind. Among works in this tradition, for example, are *Mind in Society* by Lev Vygotsky (though not an original title, it did become associated with the Vygotskian scholarship across the globe), *Voices of the Mind: Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action* by James Wertsch, *Language in Cognitive Development: The Emergence of the Mediated Mind* by Katherine Nelson, and *Naming the Mind: How Psychology Found Its Language* by Kurt Danziger, among others. This is a line of work that challenges the biological reductionism, dichotomous thinking, and other traditional premises that decontextualize and individualize the mind. Instead, these works strive to focus on the social dynamics of context, culture, history, activity, and discourse. This is not to say that the present book replicates these approaches or is in a perfect alignment with them (which is not the case), but rather to indicate a line of work with similar broad intentions and goals.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE VERSUS TRADITION

As will be discussed in the last section of this introduction, *change* was not an abstract notion for the present author, but rather a very tangible aspect in the firsthand experiences of moving through the drastically different, rapidly changing, and not infrequently conflicting and clashing contexts – politically, geographically, academically, and personally. This process made salient the challenge of preserving some degree of stability and continuity amidst changes, movements, and relocations in time and space and across ideological and political ruptures and fault lines. Associated with and directly expressing the paradox of continuity and change is that while being tailored to the notion of transformation, the book is written in continuation of Vygotsky’s tradition yet it also critically reassesses and moves beyond this tradition – in thus striving to straddle the paradox of change and continuity. This relates to a

motivation to continue this project while preserving its legacy and yet, at the same time, to critically interrogate and expand it with the new tools of the radically different cultural, political, and academic contexts and practices.

How can tradition be continued without succumbing to indoctrination and traditionalism that require compliance and inevitably limit innovation and imagination? The grappling with this paradox is intimately connected to the question central to this book. If human power and agency to transform reality in enacting social change are to be made central in theorizing human development and mind, how is this position to be reconciled with the notion that humans are embedded within and shaped by sociocultural contexts and their histories? How can people be understood fundamentally as agentive persons choosing and making “their way” and, at the same time, as constituted at the very core of their being and existence by the social forces and structures seemingly beyond themselves?

The approach in this book, which I chose to term the *transformative activist stance* (TAS) builds off from the dialectical premises of Vygotsky’s project and their broader foundations in Marxist philosophy and does so for many reasons. The main one among them is that this project had pioneered (albeit not in a fully-fledged form) an explicitly dialectical and, more implicitly, ideologically non-neutral perspective on the core questions about human development, mind, and learning. No less importantly, in a clear contrast with the reigning theories of its time – and of today too – this project, at least initially, was not only *not* detached from historical conflicts such as war, imperialism, discrimination, and displacement. Instead, it was directly produced by precisely such a dramatic historical texture in its most vivid and drastic expressions. Even more critically, this project was guided by the effort to overcome injustices wrought by these forces and contradictions. This project was intricately and intimately entangled with the revolutionary struggle that was an epic attempt (its no less epic failures, especially through the later periods, notwithstanding) to overcome conflicts and social ills of its time.

It is this project’s active participation in and contribution to the gigantic historical sociopolitical and ideological transformation of the time that has shaped its major tenets and ideas. In this regard, Vygotsky’s project stands out in the history of psychology in it contrasting with the dominant models described by Edward Said (2000) – as produced by minds “untroubled by and free of the immediate experience of the turbulence of war, ethnic cleansing, forced migration, and unhappy dislocation” (pp.

xxi–xxii). Given the present crisis and turbulences in our societies and the need for new social practices, especially in education, turning to the legacy of Vygotsky's project, albeit in a critical engagement, appears to be justified.

While fully crediting Vygotsky as a pioneering scholar who charted a truly new chapter in psychology and education, the following commentary is warranted. Focusing, as is the goal herein, on the bidirectional nexus of social practices simultaneously realizing human development, social life, and reality – while at the same time placing emphasis on these practices being realized by people contributing to social change at the intersection of individual and collective agency across the time dimensions (and with a particular emphasis on the sought-after future) – is a shift away from a number of tacit interlocked impasses present in Vygotsky's project and the broader system of canonical Marxism. These impasses are in urgent need of being interrogated and addressed. Vygotsky's project, just as Marxism at large, cannot be mechanically employed to develop novel approaches without expansive critique and creative elaboration – which, of course, is very much in the spirit of this project itself with its celebration of critique as a major indispensable premise and a methodological condition without which it ceases to exist. The expansive elaboration of the worldview-level premises that can be used to ground developments in the spirit of this tradition, therefore, seeks to overcome a number of polarities especially with regards to the status of reality and change in conceptualizing human development, the role of human agency in enacting them, and the notions of contribution and commitment to the sought-after future as central to human ways of being, knowing, and doing.

This approach is also congruent with many recent theories that capitalize on the role of culture, mediation, and social interaction in development, yet it differs in its emphasis on human subjectivity (mind, agency, etc.) as a necessary vehicle of collaborative meaningful practices/activities of people aimed at purposefully transforming the world in view of the sought-after future. The mind in this approach is understood as a facet (or an emergent property) of a simultaneously social and individual process of contributing to the future-oriented dynamics of *transformative* shared social practices of communal life in their world-changing and history-making status. Many critical and sociocultural approaches employ the notion of social practice/activity and transformation – for example, this is the case in the works by Foucault, Bourdieu, the feminist and standpoint theories, some currents of pragmatism, and, quite centrally, critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire,

among others. Within the scholarship inspired by Vygotsky and his school, these ideas can be found, for example, in Engeström (1999), Jones (2009), Lantolf and Thorne (2006), Newman and Holzman (1993), Rogoff (2003), Sawchuk (2003), Wartofsky (1983), among others and I will make an effort to engage these works. Many Russian scholars in Vygotsky's school had also made similar points in earlier works, especially in the late 1970s through the 1980s – most prominently, Alexei N. Leontiev, Evald V. Ilyenkov, Vassily V. Davydov, Alexey A. Leontiev, and Valdimir P. Zinchenko (in his early works) and their followers such as Aleksandr G. Asmolov, Fedor E. Vasilyuk, Elena E. Sokolova, and Dmitry A. Leontiev, to name a few. As I will discuss, the ways to fashion and then proceed from such broad premises, however, can still differ in many respects. The major effort herein is to undertake an expansive and critical commentary on the basic tenets of Vygotsky's philosophy, ontology, and epistemology of human development in order to create a context in which they can be critically advanced to more centrally integrate human transformative agency and mind.

Understandably, this effort does not and cannot do full justice to the decades of creative writings by several generations of Marxist and Vygotskian scholars around the globe – such as, in addition to the ones already mentioned, by the feminist, ecological, and activist scholars; the German-Scandinavian critical tradition (especially Klaus Holzkamp and his colleagues; on this school, see e.g., Langemeyer, 2006; Nissen, 2000; Teo, 2013); earlier works such as by Ernst Bloch, Antonio Gramsci, and the Frankfurt school; and contemporary works by the French-speaking Marxist writers. A continuous critical engagement with this tradition is justified because narrow interpretations continue to persist equating the notion of materiality with “economic structures and exchanges” understood “to stand for the materialist perspective *per se*” (Bennett, 2010, p. xvi). The same author is absolutely correct in asking “why is there not a more robust debate between contending accounts of how materiality matters to politics?” (ibid.), and this relates to some of the discussion in the following chapters.

In a sense, the book is perhaps especially (though not exclusively) oriented to an audience such as the one described by Sarah Leonard (2014) – those who have come of age after the end of the Cold War and are “less wary of Marxism, more willing to be creative in learning from the history of socialist thought, and care less about old labels and memories of sectarian disputes” (p. 31). For this generation, in Leonard's words, it is clear that “in troubled times, utopian impulses flourish because the impossible seems more reasonable than the realistic” (ibid., p. 30). To which I would

add that the seemingly impossible – the imagined future if we commit to creating it – is indeed more reasonable, and even more realistic, than what only appears to be the seemingly frozen and stable structures of a presumably unalterable and immutable status quo.

Whatever else TAS is or can be, its starting premise is that every person matters because the world is evoked, *real-ized*, invented, and created by each and every one of us, in each and every event of our being-knowing-doing – by us *as social actors and agents* of communal practices and collective history, who only come about within the matrices of these practices through realizing and co-authoring them in joint struggles and strivings. This position is a departure from the canonical interpretations of Marxism that traditionally eschew the level of individual processes such as agency, mind, and consciousness. It is also an expanded and critical take on Vygotsky's tradition in which agency was under-theorized for various reasons including the political ones (for details, see Stetsenko, 2005). Whether the resulting product presented in this book is “Vygotskian,” or Marxist for that matter (and I believe it can be cast as such), is a question that has to remain moot – in view of the transformative methodology and epistemology that prizes attempts to move (however imperfectly) beyond the given, including the canons of previous theories, while also anticipating that it, too, will be hopefully critiqued and transcended in the next rounds of efforts and works (by others and myself).

One additional note in the spirit of self-reflection might be needed to conclude this section. The act of naming the TAS as an original approach might be read as immodest, too ambitious, or less preferable than a humble following in the footsteps of those who are typically described as “giants” such as Vygotsky in the all too familiar “Great Men” tradition (for a critique of this tradition, see Stetsenko, 2003, 2004; Stetsenko and Arieivitch, 2004a). Also, the act of naming always carries the risk of essentializing and setting ideas and approaches in place rather than leaving “no-place where everything is possible” (see Sandoval, 2000, p. 141, quoting Roland Barthes). Given the transformative gist paramount in this approach, however, such connotations I believe can be avoided on both counts. With the emphasis on change and transformation, this approach is open-ended and, thus, has been and should continue to be subjected to constant amendments, revisions, transformations, and stringent critique – because it stands for a kind of thinking that never finds itself at the end even though it posits an end point of where it strives to arrive and commits to its realization. The TAS does not and is not meant to provide final answers and,

hopefully, would not be read as an attempt at creating a totalizing narrative. Quite to the contrary, the intention is for this approach to be one of the many ways and steps that might be useful in creating theoretical accounts in support of social changes, specifically at the intersection of development and education, which are urgently needed in light of the unfolding crises we all are presently witnessing. These steps need to be made by collective efforts, and the approach developed herein critically depends and relies on these. In addition, even though naming this approach does carry some risks, it is a conscious act that echoes the central premise of this book that we all, each and every one of us, matter and have the right to co-authoring the world shared with others through our agentive, authentic, and unique contributions.

INTERPRETING VYGOTSKY THROUGH THE NON-NEUTRAL LENS OF ACTIVIST METHODOLOGY

In the foregoing discussion, it transpires that the goal undertaken in this book is to continue and at the same time to critique and critically expand Vygotsky's uniquely revolutionary and activist (in multiple meanings of this term, as discussed later in the book) project. This is consonant with what has been captured by Osip Mandelstam, a poet whose background and predicament shared much in common with those of Vygotsky, in an approach that strives to "not merely repeat the past, to deliver it intact and unaltered into the present" (see Cavanagh, 1995, pp. 7–8). In the words of Mandelstam, cited by Clare Cavanagh in her book with an eloquent title *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition* (note the play of contradictory meanings in this title), "Invention and remembrance go hand in hand ... *To remember means to invent, and the one who remembers is also an inventor*" (ibid., p. 8; emphasis added). As Cavanagh further relates to Mandelstam, yet in strongly resonating with Vygotsky too, he "weaves the upheavals that mark his and his age's histories into the fabric of a resilient tradition that draws from the very sources it is intended to combat" (ibid, p. 11). She further relates Boris Eikhenbaum's comment that Mandelstam's works are fueled by the ongoing "battle with the craft" of other poets. In his words, those who would wish to learn from this great poet must likewise be prepared to do battle – "you must conquer Mandelstam. Not study him" (quoted in Cavanagh, ibid., p. 11).

And so is the goal here, too, not to uncover what Vygotsky's theory was "really" about. Rather than pursuing such an antiquarian goal, the intent is to reinvigorate the gist of this project by expansively critiquing and

developing its foundational premises while interrogating its relevance and sorting out its conundrums in the context of challenges stemming from the present historical location and under the angle of our own sociopolitical goals, agendas, and commitments. In this aspect, I solidarize with Hannah Arendt's bold assessment, which is as relevant today, if not more, as it was decades ago when she wrote that "[n]one of the systems, none of the doctrines transmitted to us by the great thinkers may be convincing or even plausible" (1971/1977, p. 12). To be truthful to the legacy of Vygotsky's project, it is imperative to move forward and beyond it in a spirit of critique and expansion, albeit on the foundation it has provided, including through restoring its revolutionary gist and while contesting accounts that have sidestepped its transformative activism and its liberating sociopolitical ethos of empowerment.

This expansive interpretation of Vygotsky's project is not claimed to be the most accurate, or "true" to its "original" intentions and ideas. Moreover, on theoretical and methodological grounds (implicated in the notion of TAS, as discussed throughout the book), an assessment of past theories and their "truthfulness" along these lines is not feasible at all. In my view, it is not desirable either.

Given the fluidity of Vygotsky's thought as shaped and colored by the brisk pace of his life and career embedded within a tumultuous, indeed dramatic, historical and political context and events – coupled with the many permutations that his works went through in appropriations by his immediate followers and, later, within the international scholarship (the latter facing many problems of accessibility and translation), and in light of taking any act of understanding to be an activist endeavor – the interpretation here is not an attempt to discuss what Vygotsky "truly and really had in mind."

Any interpretation or understanding of a theory is much more than an "extraction" of its meaning putatively contained in or implied by the original; instead, it is an endeavor loaded with personal, political, and ethical dimensions, just as any act of knowing and understanding. Unless the intention is to literally re-present a theory (a highly dubious endeavor because in this case, one would be better off reading the original), any interpretation is carried out from a historically, politically, and socioculturally unique place, position, and most critically, commitment. Any interpretation represents an act of authoring and, thus, an original viewpoint, whether this is acknowledged or not. Claiming and debating faithfulness to the original in ways that religious dogmas are claimed and debated are impossible and fruitless from the position that accepts that knowledge is

not produced “from nowhere” and, instead, takes positionality and activism as central to it. Several authors, in surveying modern interpretations of Vygotsky’s works, have argued that most of these are selective and serve to fortify an author’s perspective rather than to delineate Vygotsky’s own ideas based on a careful and extensive reading of his work (e.g., Gredler, 2012; Miller, 2011).

It is certainly true that a careful and extensive reading of Vygotsky is useful and necessary (and I have engaged in such a reading through several decades, in various languages including in the original). The strategy here, however, is self-consciously of an activist type. At stake in it is what can be done on the grounds of Vygotsky’s deep insights (in ways we can make sense of them) for solving problems and addressing issues in *our* world today including contemporary views and debates, and in *our* present projects and endeavors. The naïve position that the truth of the past “as it really was” can somehow be discovered (if only one reads Vygotsky a little bit more carefully and cites him a little bit more extensively) needs to be transcended in view of the situated, contextualized, and activist nature of knowing and understanding. The problem is not with carrying interpretation from one’s own location and in extension of one’s position but in leaving such a grounding unexplicated and obscured in thus obscuring and tainting the resulting products. This is not just a pronouncement of an academic disagreement but an expression of a theoretical position that is central to the whole project undertaken in this book.

This position goes along the lines of Bakhtin’s notion of addressivity as a constitutive dimension of every utterance, implying that to make sense of any utterance, any word – and any theory – requires much more than simply extricating their “original” meaning and ideas. Instead, this process involves the full situation in which an act of understanding takes place and in which it is made available to others. It also requires an actively responsive understanding implying an exchange between the original work, the present interpretation and its location, and, most critically, also the future reader to whom interpretation is addressed. In my take on these ideas, the work of interpretation is unavoidably embedded in meaning making as an activist striving from a position – by authors and readers – in a chain of historically, culturally, and ideologically-politically situated understandings and struggles that represent an amalgamation of meanings, positions, contexts, and, most importantly, activist pursuits and commitments. This position is broadly compatible with the general shift away from the transmission model of language and meaning toward active interpretation and,