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VYGOTSKY IN PERSPECTIVE

Lev Vygotsky has acquired the status of one of the grand masters in psychology. Following the English translation and publication of his *Collected Works* there has been a new wave of interest in Vygotsky, accompanied by a burgeoning of secondary literature. Ronald Miller argues that Vygotsky is increasingly being 'read' and understood through secondary sources and that scholars have claimed Vygotsky as the foundational figure for their own theories, eliminating his most distinctive contributions and distorting his theories. Miller peels away the accumulated layers of commentary to provide a clearer understanding of how Vygotsky built and developed his arguments. In an in-depth analysis of the last three chapters of Vygotsky's book *Thinking and Speech*, Miller provides a critical interpretation of the core theoretical concepts that constitute Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory, including the development of concepts, mediation, the zone of proximal development, conscious awareness, inner speech, word meaning and consciousness.

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For Saul and Yaron, Reise, Jesse, Zev and Arria

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was not written according to a preconceived plan. Its shape as a book was slow in the making; too slow some may say and for others, not slow enough. The written word, or written speech to use Vygotsky's expression, especially in the form of a book, is one of the strange things that humans do like painting images on flat surfaces, carving and moulding shapes, composing melodies and other activities that seem unrelated to our survival in the way that making fire and tools increases the range of our adaptive abilities. Perhaps these are human ways of releasing the song within so that we can go to our graves less desperate for being heard.¹ Unlike the shared intimacy of face-to-face verbal exchanges, books are addressed to no one in particular and, for the reader, the author's anonymity is protected by a faceless name. A preface to a book is a mediating auxiliary device that allows an author to give a text a face and in so doing allows the reader to glimpse behind the words in much the same way that a visit backstage provides insight into what happens behind the scenes. Vygotsky referred to the place behind our words as the 'motivating sphere of consciousness, a sphere that includes our inclinations and needs, our interests and impulses, and our affect and emotion'.² The primary motive force hidden behind this text is an abiding fascination with the enigmatic phenomenon of human consciousness, that core of our being that makes us thinking–understanding creatures with an insatiable and deep-seated need to find and make meaning in our lives. It is hardly surprising, then, that Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology would loom large in my teaching and research activities.

In retrospect, this book was conceived some twenty-five years ago in embryonic form as an inaugural lecture entitled 'Reflections of mind and culture'. One of the themes of that lecture was that Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories are not alternatives requiring a forced choice between them but are best understood as complementary and mutually supportive approaches to understanding the origins and development of thinking. With the subsequent publication of Vygotsky's *Collected Works*, this view can be better substantiated and it

¹ I am indebted to Henry David Thoreau for *the song still in them* and the *counting of cats*.

² Vygotsky (1987, p. 282).

constitutes one of the sub-themes of this book. Although this book is primarily about Vygotsky, discussion about Piaget is inevitable not because of my particular views about the matter but because Vygotsky's thinking is intertwined with that of Piaget, albeit an early version of the latter's thought. With some notable exceptions, there remains a widespread view in the secondary literature that Vygotsky and Piaget represent competing theories and that acceptance of one implies the rejection of the other. To capture the nature of the relationship between Piaget and Vygotsky's theories, the inaugural lecture ended as follows: 'Mind without culture is empty and culture without mind is – unthinkable.' In many respects, this book is an elaboration of these ideas.³

For all the monumental proportions of Piaget's œuvre tracing the development of transcendental categories of thought, his texts have a leaden quality and demand a degree of plodding fortitude on the part of the reader. In sharp contrast, there is an arresting and enchanting quality to Vygotsky's texts that often evokes a visceral response on the part of the reader; the spine-tingling sensation of a meeting of minds.⁴ Vygotsky's texts seem to resonate with what we understand as our humanity. To understand Piaget, we have to get our heads around the abstraction of an *epistemic subject* that is hidden from our experience of who we are whereas Vygotsky's texts speak to our intuitive sense of being historical and cultural beings immersed in *webs of meaning*.⁵ In Vygotsky's texts we recognize ourselves whereas in Piaget's texts we recognize someone else or, at best, a silent shadow of ourselves.

Although each part of the book can be read independently of the others, each having a different focus, they are also interconnected and inevitably so in the making. The initial focus was to acquire a deeper and more thorough understanding of Vygotsky's theory of the development of scientific or mediated concepts and the closely related notion of the zone of proximal development. This is reflected in the first part of the book, entitled 'Vygotsky at home'. Here an effort is made to extract meaning from the texts by carefully following the thread of Vygotsky's arguments rather than attempting to distil

³ In a more down-to-earth idiom, Shweder (1991, p. 97) comments that for a new discipline of cultural psychology 'you cannot take the stuff out of the psyche and you cannot take the psyche out of the stuff'. Essentially the same point was registered way back in Leibniz's celebrated maxim: *there is nothing in the intellect which was not in the senses, except the intellect itself*.

⁴ This perlocutionary effect of Vygotsky's written speech is captured by Bernstein (1993, p. xxiii), who in recalling his first reading of Vygotsky comments that, 'It is difficult to convey the sense of excitement, of thrill, of revelation that this paper aroused. Literally, a new universe opened.' In similar vein, Bruner (1986, p. 72) recalls his 'astonishment' on first reading *Thought and Language* and comments that, 'Vygotsky was clearly a genius. Yet it was an elusive form of genius.'

⁵ 'Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs' (Geertz, 1975, p. 5).

the arguments into a concentrated summary. In many respects, this initial focus persists as the centre of gravity of the book and is elaborated in the last part, entitled 'Vygotsky over the rainbow'. The ideas discussed in this part have been updated and refined over the course of a number of years and they provide an answer to the charge that critique should also contribute creatively to the process of theory construction. Clearly, these ideas have not only been formed by reading Vygotsky's texts but have also influenced the nature of the engagement with these texts and with the secondary literature.

In coming to grips with Vygotsky's ideas and in attempting to work with his concepts, it became increasingly evident that much of the secondary literature about Vygotsky's work, including commentaries purporting to introduce readers to his original texts, does not capture his most distinctive ideas. Instead, the literature emanating from within a broad sociocultural or cultural-historical activity fold projects a diluted version of Vygotsky's theory that is tailored to meet the theoretical dispositions and inclinations of each contemporary commentator. Reading this literature, it is difficult to escape the impression that 'Vygotsky' has been *hijacked* in the interests of creating a new orthodoxy in which the Vygotsky *name* is branded to the detriment of his work. In this process, Vygotsky's purpose is lost and his signature pattern of interlocking concepts is replaced by a clutch of familiar but largely worn-out concepts. We can do better than invoke Vygotsky's name to justify the counting of cats in California. And if not, then, like other geniuses of their time, let us at least leave his work and legacy intact and recognizable, rather than plundered and defaced.

As is evident in Part II of the book, entitled 'Vygotsky in America', there is a secondary motive behind the writing of this book. There is a not-so-thin line between interpretation and misrepresentation and it seems that this line is increasingly being ignored, in some cases being crossed with impunity. It is something of a mystery why commentaries on Vygotsky's texts that display an abject disregard for the very texts under review are included in publications that carry an implicit stamp of quality assurance. Equally mystifying is the reflective blindness of those commentators who, without blinking, refer to Vygotsky as a genius who changed the intellectual landscape of his time while simultaneously embracing the view that the pre-existing landscape is the primary determinant of human action, leaving the concept of genius and, even more significantly, that of change forever suspended in mystery. In another example of the absence of self-reflection, an otherwise perceptive and informed commentator⁶ alerts readers to the ways in which Vygotsky's texts have been dismembered in various English translations of his work while in the course of contributing to one of the best (albeit the worst) examples of the very process he vigorously criticizes: the artificial production of a

⁶ Glick (2004, pp. 353–4).

Vygotsky ‘book’ consisting of a patchwork of unconnected chapters torn from the context of the original texts. As these authors would be the first to suggest, the explanation for these apparent interpretative liberties lies in the arcane ivory corridors of power. But unlike the power of the sword, words are more evenly distributed and given the availability of the means, the impulse to restore a balance and, where necessary, to cry foul (but hopefully also to stay fair) is irresistible.

One of the advantages of writing at the end of a career is that one is not dependent on the patronage that governs the closed circuits of academic life. While it is the task of younger scholars to break new ground, it is up to their more seasoned colleagues to break old ground and often this entails butting heads with an entrenched establishment of hallowed names. But it is important to emphasize in the context of the critique provided in this book, some of which is admittedly robust, that none of my best academic friends are sociocultural or cultural-historical activity theorists. Because texts have names attached, critique can never be *just business* but this does not mean that it is necessarily *ad hominem*. Of the various Vygotsky commentators discussed in this book, I have a fleeting acquaintance with but one whose work I discuss in some detail. Although bearing the names of their authors, texts also reflect wider and deeper currents within which discourses are embedded. This means that although a particular critique may be directed at the work of a specific person, inevitably it extends beyond a particular author whose name serves as an index to a wider body of thought where the ideas in question enjoy wide currency.

Apart from the matter of tone, a word on the content is also in order. The critique that is provided is detailed and for some the detail may prove tedious and unnecessary. Of course, the solution is to read the text selectively, distributing one’s attention and effort according to one’s need, interest or taste. The alternative of providing a more selective critique is less satisfactory not only because it is unfair to the theorist whose work is being evaluated but also because it is necessary to engage with ideas in the round and not as disconnected and isolated bits of information.

Thanks are due to a number of people who have been generous in their support and help in the writing of this book. In addition to reading revised versions of text, Eleanor Preston-Whyte, whose generous good nature knows no limits, endured copious amounts of indulgent egocentric talk that allowed me to sort out my ideas and probably ruined many evenings and weekends that were intended for relaxation. Her sound judgement and impeccable taste provided a steady and always dependable source to turn to for guidance when in doubt and at a loss for direction. Louise Barrett, Brenda Bell, Grahame Hayes, Peter Henzi, Elizabeth de Kadt and Raphael de Kadt read various chapters and their helpful feedback is much appreciated. Special thanks are due to Jill Bradbury, my friend and colleague of long standing. The thanks go

beyond the long hours spent reading and re-reading every line of my text and providing insightful suggestions and well-deserved criticism, often in the face of strong defensive resistance. They also go beyond the unswerving and unreserved encouragement to complete and publish the work when doubts on both scores surfaced. Over the course of many years, we have engaged with thought and word, thinking and talking through ideas that turned our toil of teaching and research into the kind of academic life that is worth living. For this, for being the good companion through thick and thin – thank you.

Thanks of a different kind are due to an old friend and teacher extraordinaire whose kindness and generosity at a difficult time in my academic life has never been forgotten. Many years ago, Juan Pascual-Leone gave me a recently published book that he thought I should read. The book was by an author whose name sounded vaguely familiar but whose work was not. That same dog-eared copy of *Mind in Society* that introduced me to Vygotsky remains on my shelf. In addition to opening my eyes to a theory that has since consumed much of my intellectual passion, Juan also opened my mind by teaching me how better to understand Piaget and, of course, the intricacies of his own neo-Piagetian theory. He taught me that a psychological theory must always also explain the theorist but not how his theory explained his own prodigious intellect. With hindsight, I suspect that this is why he pressed me to read Vygotsky. I know that I owe to his teaching the concept of functional structure and the significance of the learning paradox, both of which are discussed in this book. For the rest, I am profoundly grateful for the way in which he messed with my head.

Without the generous sabbatical leave conditions granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the writing of this book would not have been possible. For this and for providing me with an academic home for more than twenty-five years, I am truly grateful. I am also indebted to the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Malegapuru Makgoba, for allowing me prematurely to relinquish my role as Corporate Keeper of the Houses of the newly merged University and, thereby, to regain a measure of sanity by immersion back into the invigorating, mad other-world of scholarship.

It has been a pleasure and an honour to work with Cambridge University Press and their most gracious editors, Carrie Parkinson, Hetty Reid and Sarah Roberts. For their invaluable help, my heartfelt thanks. I am especially indebted to the exceptional editing talents of Diane Illott, whose meticulous attention to detail and clarity of expression have enriched this book.

Last and also least, but only in the most unimportant of ways, thanks to a very old friend simply for being and staying one. John Landau is a grand master of the fine art of friendship.

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