

*What are the roles of consciousness and of collectivism
in Vygotsky's theory?*

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development: The Hidden Agenda

Jerome Bruner

We must not lose sight of Vygotsky's philosophical commitment to Marxism or, more specifically, of Vygotsky's commitment to a psychology based on Marxist premises. Moreover, he was writing during the 1920s and 1930s, when Russian Marxist theory was orthodox, starchy, and heavy-handed. The lively revisionism of modern Marxist theory as represented by "Western" intellectuals, such as Lukacs, and by those who sought to refresh Marxism with an infusion of European phenomenology was nowhere in sight. The Russian party line was tied around Marxist thinking so tightly that it squeezed out the kinds of inquiry that interested Vygotsky in that early period and that were to preoccupy Marxist intellectuals (particularly outside Russia) in the decades following. So, when we think of Vygotsky's psychological theories, we must remember not only that he was a Marxist but that he was devoted to the intellectual freshening of Marxist doctrine. And, it is well known that his efforts on behalf of such refreshment eventually got him into deep trouble with the Russian ideologues in charge of official doctrine.

I see two strands in his writing that were "revolutionary" from the Marxist perspective of his time and place. His critics would surely have called these strands revisionist. The first has to do with the role of consciousness and of "mental events" in human affairs—a treacherous topic in a climate of historical materialism. For Vygotsky, consciousness loomed large, nowhere more

so than in his discussion of the zone of proximal development. The second strand relates to collectivism in its most generic sense: the manner in which goals are achieved in a socialist society. Recall that Vygotsky had been involved, along with Luria and others of his “friends” (they regarded themselves as students or at least as his juniors), in a study of the impact of collectivism on peasant thought. The principal finding of their study—suppressed for years, and finally appearing not in the form in which Vygotsky wrote it but only in Luria’s book (1976) of many years later—was that participation in an agricultural collective had the effect of promoting growth in the thinking of the peasants involved, which took them from childlike, primitive forms of thinking to adult forms of thought. Collective activity, in a word, led peasants along the way to adult thinking or—better—to socialist adult thinking, which in Vygotsky’s account was a more rational, more “scientific” form of thinking. Such was the dogmatic romanticism among the leading figures in the official Russian establishment of the time that they took Vygotsky’s conclusion as a criticism of peasants for their prescientific thinking—and banned the book.

Reading Luria’s (1976) account of the expedition that Vygotsky led to Uzbekistan and Kirghizia, which was composed many years later from his notes and which was written (so Luria assured me in conversation) in the spirit of Vygotsky’s ideas of the earlier period, I was struck by the degree to which the “modernization” of peasant thought by collectivism was framed in the same language and the same theoretical mode as Vygotsky’s discussion of the growth of the child from prescientific to scientific thinking. Luria most certainly discusses the precollective peasant as if he were a child in need of induction into the grown-up world of the collective farm. Indeed, when I had occasion to review Luria’s book (Bruner, 1977), I commented on that parallel and made some critical remarks about the simplistic assumption that cultural change was like the growth of the child. I think I saw Luria only once again after I wrote that review, which I sent to him in Moscow. He said he had liked it, but he was not prepared to give up the Vygotskian idea of the parallel between modernization of the peasant and the growth of the child.

Let me now return to the main theme—the hidden agenda in Vygotsky’s idea of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). I believe that the idea is a fusion of the idea of collectivism and of the role of consciousness. Indeed, as I see it, the ZPD is a direct expression of the way in which the division of labor expresses itself in a collectivist society. It involves a sharing not only of knowledge but of consciousness, albeit an historically shaped consciousness. Those who “know” more, those who have “higher” consciousness share it with those who know less, who are less developed in consciousness and intellectual control. Each in his or her time comes to have a mind shaped by the historical and economic circumstances of the period (and of history in general by extension), but the transmission of mind across history is effected not by blind material forces but by the form of mental sharing that we now know as the zone of proximal development. In the case of the growing child, it is made possible by

parents and “more expert peers.” In his famous discussion in *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 1962), of the replacement of initial “spontaneous” concepts by later “scientific” ones, this transmission is accomplished by instruction in school. In the case of the Uzbek peasant collective worker, it is brought about by direct participation in the more advanced technical life of the kolkhoz, in whose day-to-day processes of production and planning he participates. In each case, it is a matter of somebody with knowledge and awareness scaffolding a task for somebody without knowledge and awareness until the latter becomes capable of “reaching higher ground”—as in the celebrated discussion in *Thought and Language* of how the child is led from arithmetic to algebraic thinking or as in Luria’s account of how the peasant is led from concrete thinking to a capacity to grasp broader, higher inferential principles.

Now, language serves exceptionally well in a Marxist theory of this kind as the medium both for collective sharing and for transmission of new forms of consciousness across generations and circumstances. In the first place, in Marxist and in other forms of theory, language is a historically conditioned instrument. Here, Vygotsky had in mind not only natural language but also the languages of science and mathematics—and the language or notational system in which economic activity is carried out under socialist and presocialist regimens. It is plain from the first discussion of the ZPD in *Thought and Language* that introduction into a new form of language and a new use of language (which themselves were produced by changed historical circumstances) alters the way in which the mind of the user will work. It is as if new forms of notation and the new distinctions contained within them are temptations to think in a manner concordant with the language—much as in the spirit of Sapir, Whorf, and earlier thinkers like Humboldt. The idea was very widespread among Russian linguists and literary intellectuals of the day, such as Bakhtin, Troubetsky, and the young Roman Jakobson. Indeed, Jakobson has written vividly of the famous young professor of linguistics at Leningrad, the cosmopolitan Pole Baudouin de Courtenay, who by the turn of the twentieth century had already discussed the psychological reality of the phoneme, which had yet to be called that, and the obligatory psychological impact of linguistic distinctions. Vygotsky and Bakhtin knew of each other (Bakhtin most certainly admired Vygotsky), and it is just as unthinkable for an aspiring psycholinguist like Vygotsky not to have heard of the work of Baudouin de Courtenay as it would have been for Roger Brown in his early thirties not to have heard of the ideas of Benjamin Lee Whorf.

Recall, too, that in the decades after the Revolution the emphasis on literacy was so great that the recently literate were enjoined to go out and share their new skills—and new consciousness—with their less tutored brothers as barefoot literacy teachers. This expression of the new collectivism was a far less bureaucratic, far more Kropotkin-like idea than what prevails today in the “mature” socialist state.

Let me add one more point before I conclude. I owe this point to

discussions with many thoughtful contemporary Marxists. Many comment on the fact that first Marx and later his followers were always concerned with a “principle of spontaneity” in Marxist theory. It is a means of conceiving the action of human beings as something not completely dominated by material and historical forces. In the first official revisions of psychological orthodoxy in Russia in the late 1930s, the principle of *gnost* was introduced by Bernstein—a concept like “effortful attention” that allows some responsibility for action to reside in the individual human being. Ushering in what Bauer (1952) considered a new conception of action, it spelled the beginning of “the new Soviet man.” Responsibility no longer resided fully with history: Socialist society was making its own history, and if things went badly for the individual, one could not so simply name the society as the culprit. There is a curious anomaly, however, in placing the responsibility both on history and at the same time on the individual—whether on his *gnost*, his orienting reflexes, or something else.

This is where I think Vygotsky’s brilliance as a Marxist thinker came to the fore. The principle of spontaneity that he was urging was not to be a throwback into individual psychology and noncollectivist ethics. Realization of one’s individual powers through the utilization of knowledge and shared consciousness depended not on the individual child but on society’s capacity to provide the child with the symbolic tools that the child needed in order to grow: on providing opportunity for the child to enter into relationship with somebody wiser or abler than himself who would provide the necessary concepts and consciousness that would enable him to make the epistemic leap forward that Vygotsky saw as the promise of the Revolution. The ZPD was its instrument.

So, while the major developmental thinker of capitalist Western Europe, Jean Piaget, set forth an image of human development as a lone venture for the child, in which others could not help unless the child had already figured things out on his own and in which not even language could provide useful hints about the conceptual matters to be mastered, the major developmentalist of socialist Eastern Europe set forth a view in which growth was a collective responsibility and language one of the major tools of that collectivity. Now, all these years later, Vygotsky’s star is rising in the Western sky as Piaget’s declines, while it is declining in the East (at least officially) where no new one is yet in sight.

I have one remaining conjecture. Vygotsky was a pioneer of “Marxist” psychology. There really are none to speak of before him. Pavlov was adopted by Marxists, although many thoughtful Marxists found his materialist psychology brassy and lacking in the subtlety of dialectical materialism. Curiously, it was a step away from his materialist base—to consideration of an historically based Second Signal System—that endeared Pavlov to the later budding Marxist psychological community that was already rejecting the crude materialism of the early years. An even more materialist predecessor of Pavlov, Bechterev, was even less admired by committed Marxists. His *Reflexology*

(1933) made even the most flagrant materialism of J. B. Watson seem rather mentalistic by comparison. So Vygotsky was very much on his own. He started a tradition that would be true both to the rather idealistic Marxism that he had embraced and to the literary-intellectual-linguistic tradition of Russia—a truly remarkable tradition that produced not only such linguistic greats as Jakobson, Troubetskoy, Propp, and Bakhtin but their poet friends, whose gifts and linguistic awareness we are just now coming to appreciate. The rejection of consciousness and inner language by crude Marxist polemicists was not for Vygotsky. Yet, he was faithful to the Marxist historical ideal in his own way. It is not surprising that discussion of the ZPD and how it manages to shape growing consciousness with the aid of language is at times opaque. In fact, Vygotsky was muddling through as best he could. Reading him today, one cannot escape the feeling that, for a man at the head of a procession that he must at times have doubted would ever form, he did astonishingly well.

References

- Bauer, R. A. *The New Man in Soviet Psychology*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952.
- Bechterev, V. M. *General Principles of Human Reflexology*. New York: International Publishers, 1933.
- Bruner, J. S. "Peasants to Tractor Drivers: Review of A. R. Luria's *Cognitive Psychology*." *Nature*, 1977, 268 (5621), 672.
- Luria, A. R. *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976.
- Vygotsky, L. S. *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1962.

Jerome Bruner is George Herbert Mead Professor at the New School for Social Research, New York.