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Where is Marx in the work and thought of Vygotsky?

What is it about the apparently clear question of Marx's place in the work and thought of Vygotsky that makes it so enigmatic? How should we understand the fact that the successive attempts to respond to this question over the course of a century have been so contradictory, and remain so to this day? Before attempting to answer the question, must we not firstly ask what makes it such a trap? That is where I will begin.

First, a few words to shed some light on the violent paradoxes that are thrown up when studying the history of the question. To begin with, there is the unambiguous response of Vygotsky himself: having read Marx from his youth, in the revolutionary climate of Russia in 1917 as experienced by a family of considerable culture, he discovered *Capital*, which in many essential ways shaped his view of psychology – and, having become a psychologist, he wrote in 1926 that “psychology needs its own *Capital*” (Vygotsky, 2010, p. 273). Could it be any clearer? As a matter of fact, it's not very clear (I will return to this point later), but, in any case, here exists a major and definitive reference which those who claim that Marx held no real importance for Vygotsky neglect to address seriously. But lo and behold, a few years later, the vanguards of Marxism in the USSR of 1930, which was mid-Stalinisation, denounced Vygotsky's position as “idealistic”, “bourgeois”, “reactionary” and even “anti-Marxist”¹, accusations of lamentable stupidity, which devastated Vygotsky. According to Zeigarnik, he said: “I can't live if the Party believes that I am not a Marxist.”² Nevertheless, the accusations attest to the great ambiguity that arises when we attempt to judge whether a thought is Marxist or not. Already we can begin to discern the kind of trap that might lurk behind the question “Vygotsky and Marx”: to whom does the name Marx belong, precisely? And what is a “Marxist” psychology?

But that's not all. Condemned to the ash heap of history during Stalin's reign, Vygotsky's work began to re-emerge under Khrushchev and garnered interest outside the USSR, as first attested by the American translation of *Thought and Language* published in 1962 by the MIT Press. Yet here again, there is a paradoxical development: not only did the translators Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar truncate the work by two-thirds, they also excised all but one reference to Marxist thought, without a word of explanation on the matter. For Stalinists, Marx was not present enough in Vygotsky's work; for the American translators, on the other hand, he was far too much so. This intellectually indefensible initiative had serious consequences: for a start, the North-American perception of Vygotsky was de-Marxised, and this spread to the various translations of the American digest of his work and, despite all that has been done to remedy this situation in the US since then, one could be forgiven for wondering whether some vestiges of this original underestimation remain. At least, that is what a cross-check of the Francophone literature would suggest.

¹ I gave the references to these grievances in my introduction to *Thought and Language*, Vygotsky, 1997, p. 28.

² Cf. *Vygotsky's Notebooks*, p. 316.

Very belatedly – the dominant anti-Marxist ideology having resulted in radio silence on the subject of Vygotsky in the Francophone arena – the first French translation finally appeared in France and French-speaking Switzerland (Schneuwly-Bronckart, 1985; 1st edition of *Thought and Language*, 1985), followed by many others, as well as the development of a rich Vygotskian wave of psychological research and teaching in Geneva and Paris alike. But, in contrast to Hanfmann and Vakar, the leaders of this wave were formed by an entire tradition of psychological thought in which Marx held an important place in various forms - from Henri Wallon to Jean Piaget, from Ignace Meyerson to Georges Politzer. And, in France, it was the Communist Party's publishing house³ that revealed the full, unabridged text of *Thought and Language* to the psychology community. More than one person who believed they understood Vygotsky based solely on their reading of the slim MIT Press edition of *Thought and Language* have expressed their astonishment to me upon discovering the thick tome released by Editions Sociales. Hence the distinct contrast between the French language Vygotskism that has flourished since the 1980s – with the work carried out at the University of Geneva by Bernard Schneuwly, Jean-Paul Bronckart, Janette Friedrich, Irina Leopoldoff-Martin, Christiane Moro, Frédéric Yvon, and in France by Michel Brossard, Yves Clot, Jean-Yves Rochex, Gérard Vergnaud, to make but a passing mention of their contribution – and an English-language Vygotskism which did not strike me as the most attentive, and in which Vygotsky is seen as everything to everyone – a culturalist, a Gestaltist, even a Spinozist, but certainly not a Marxist.

This – albeit brief – retrospective lends credence to a double conclusion: short answers such as “Vygotskian psychology owes nothing essential to Marxist thought” and “Vygotsky is one of the major figures in Marxist psychology” run the risk of error unless we thoroughly examine the meaning of “Marxist psychology” and what Vygotsky thought of it. Just because a question can be formed in simple terms does not mean we can respond to it without taking account of its complexity. And yet, at first glance, is there not an elementary means of resolving it? That is to say, by asking what place Marxism has in Vygotsky's work. An apparently fact-based question, which one might hope to resolve by searching his writings for quotes from Marx, Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin – note at this point one significant fact: he makes no reference to Stalin. All that is required is a well-compiled index.

Take for example the theory supported by the erudite Vygotskian Anton Yasnitsky. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Cultural-Historical Psychology* (2014, p.505), he writes that, as adherence to the official ideology was becoming obligatory in Stalin's USSR, Vygotsky's relationship to Marxism was “only polite”, and his quoting of Marx was “mostly for tactical reasons”. If this hypothesis is correct, we might expect these quotes to be especially present in Vygotsky's public writings, and far less so in his private writings. But this is not the case. In *Thought and Language* – the large tome that Vygotsky was determined to have published – there are a total of three references to Marx. Meanwhile, in a note of only about 20 pages written for himself in 1929 – an extremely important note which includes a condensed version of all the fundamental views he held at the time – Marx is quoted *seven times*, not counting the identifiable allusions to Marx.⁴ There can be no doubt: For Vygotsky, Marx is not mere window-dressing but a *bedside thinker* par excellence.

³ Les Editions Sociales, of which I was director from 1970 to 1982, the period during which the publication of *Thought and Language* was prepared.

⁴ In French translation in Vygotsky, 2014, p. 543-564. This note was previously published in Michel Brossard, 2004.

The publication of the *Notebooks* was a major opportunity to verify this. Here we have a vast collection of texts that Vygotsky wrote for himself alone. If the aforementioned hypothesis is accurate, there should be few references to Marxism. Let us refer to the heading “Marx” in the index of names cited. Regrettably this section is, unlike the rest of the index, defective: there are only two noted references to Marx. Let us fill in the gaps: throughout the work, excluding the authors’ introduction, Marx is quoted on page 31, 38, 74, 76, 78, 79, 80, 88, 97, 108, 112, 122, 252, 264, 312, 317, 321, 322, 341, 348, 431, 475 – in total, 22 times. Add to this 24 references to Engels, 20 to Marxism, 20 to Lenin, 9 to Trotsky, 6 to Bukharin, 3 to Politzer...⁵ Impressively, the references to Marxist thought in these private journals number over a hundred. A brutal blow to the hypothesis tested here. The reality of the facts proves to be the very opposite of what the theory implies: it is *especially* in Vygotsky’s private writings that references to Marx and Marxism abound – and we must try to understand why.

The factual data rules out one false impression. But is it enough to give us the correct one? Not at all. Moreover, such as I was led to formulate it, the question is not singular but double: where is Marx in the *work* and *thought* of Vygotsky – two distinct but indivisible things. To find Marx’s place in Vygotsky’s work, we must turn first of all to an inventory of occurrences: Marx occupies a large space throughout the work, and more so in Vygotsky’s private writings than his public writings. But this *factual data*, while it allows or discounts certain responses, is by no means an *indication of meaning* in and of itself. What do the inventoried passages say about Marx? How do they contribute to the formation of psychological thought that might be qualified as Marxist? This question far outweighs the composition of an index that can be easily electronically compiled. We must read, understand what we have read, and grasp its meaning in relation to this cultural attitude which is lumped under the heading of Marxism. Precisely which brand of Marxism does it consist of? That of Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*? Or of Bukharin’s *Historical Materialism*? Or the Marxism of Abram Ioffe aka Deborin, which Deborin attempted to impose in the 1920s? Or perhaps that of the Marxist bolsheviks like Mark Mitin, who burst violently onto the scene in January 1931 with Stalin’s full support? And, with regard to all of this, what does *Marx’s thinking* consist of in the many and varied ways that it is understood and audaciously applied by Lev Vygotsky? It is a truly complex question, but if we do not enter into the complexity in which he had to struggle with ever-increasing sobriety, the question of “Vygotsky and Marx” loses all meaning and any serious interest.

To see the matter clearly, it is vital to research Vygotsky’s own idea of what in 1920s Moscow was called “Marxist psychology”. To this end, we must carefully read the key text that is Chapter XIII of *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology* – a programmatic text, given that it was written in 1926, and one which predates the majority of Vygotsky’s psychological oeuvre, but already shows great vigour of thought with regard to the nature of the task. First, this text strongly asserts what *cannot be* a valid psychology in a Marxist perspective. There can be no psychology which develops the psychological theories of Marx for the simple reason that *there are no* “psychological theories” in Marx. In Marx’s time, there was not yet a psychological science to speak of. The most that can be found in his work on the matter is the occasional evocative remark, such as this note in Book I of *Capital* – which Vygotsky cites in more than one passage – in which he states that “man first sees and

⁵ The index of names cited also shows 8 occurrences of Stalin’s name. *Not one* refers to a reference to Stalin by Vygostky.

recognises himself in other men”, such that “Peter only establishes his own identity as a man by first comparing himself with Paul as being of like kind.” (Marx, 2016, p.56).⁶

But what is to be created cannot be a more general “Marxist psychology”, as it was called at the Institute of Psychology directed by Kornilov, a psychology which would consist of translating into experimental psychological knowledge the general views of dialectical and historical materialism. It did not take Vygotsky long to grasp the fundamental fallacy of such an undertaking. Though he may have been young – he was 28 in 1924 – he already had an impressive understanding of Marxian thought, an essential fact which is ignored by those who believe that he quoted Marx purely out of politeness. It is also important to note that Vygotsky came to Marx before the Stalinised *Marxism-Leninism* that took shape in 1930-31. Vygotsky was a Marxian of the 1920s, instructed in Marxist thought not by manuals but through the direct reading of Marx in German, and that of Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*, which is to say through living and searching thought, the very antithesis of doctrine. And it was apparent to him that the desire to create a “Marxist” psychology by *applying* preconceived general views to mental reality was an aberration. No science of the real can emerge through deduction based on theoretical generalities. Certainly, one must see clearly in philosophy to have a chance of creating a science, because all science, whether we realise it or not, is philosophical – for example, it is crucial that psychologists not confuse the ontological and gnosiological meanings of the word conscience – but these are prerequisites, far from the realm of scientific knowledge. There is no “science before science”, Vygotsky writes, irrefutably.

In some of the key pages of *Crisis* (Vygotsky, 2010, p. 272-275), Vygotsky lays out an at once masterful and brutal critique of the belief that had become widespread in the USSR at the time that one could create a Marxist science simply by *applying* the general theories of Marxism to the matter in question. “No philosophical system can take possession of psychology directly as a science”; intermediaries are required between one thing and the other, which Vygotsky called a “methodology” and a “general psychology”, together, “categories and concepts” which allow us to view psychological subjects in all their specificity. Let us reflect on what Marx did in *Capital*. Did he merely insert general views of dialectics such as the Hegelian triad and the qualitative leap into economic discourse? Absurd! He had to create and recreate an entire family of specific concepts like those of the forces of and relationships between production, merchandise, work, value, currency, capital, etc. It is precisely in this sense that “psychology needs its own *Capital*”: this does not mean copying *Capital* into psychology – an idiotic task – but creating the *equivalent* of what Marx did in economics. If we do not understand, if we *apply* Marxist generalities to psychology, we will only obtain “scholastic, verbal constructions”, and worse: “a gross distortion of both Marxism and psychology”.

We must appreciate whom the young Vygotsky had the audacity to criticise here: not only the director of his own Institute, Konstantin Kornilov – which was bold enough in itself – but still more audaciously, Deborin himself (he alludes to him without mentioning him by name, but everyone understands, “what is being done today”), the all-powerful director of the journal *In the Light of Marxism*, for whom producing a Marxist science consisted of inserting

⁶ It has yet to be mentioned, if I am not mistaken, that the choice of the names Peter and Paul appears to be an allusion to propositions XXXIV of the 4th part of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, of its demonstration and its scholia, which deal with the relationship between Peter and Paul.

what he believed to be materialist dialectics into the subject in question.⁷ A psychologist of barely 30 years of age who was not a member of the Party, Vygotsky took the liberty of giving the augurs themselves a lesson in Marxism – “One must know what can and what should be sought in Marxism”; little wonder that the book was not allowed to be published. But one must try to understand the dubiousness of the notion of Marxist psychology. In Vygotsky’s eyes, the best a Marxist can hope for from psychology is to truly make a science of it, to which end the lesson of Marx can be of great use – in this way, psychology would have to do with Marxism. But would that be a *Marxist psychology*? A science is defined not through its ideological position but rather its congruence with fact. In this sense, to present a psychology as Marxist would be to invalidate it rather than give it value. More than a *Marxist psychologist*, Vygotsky is a Marxist who is a psychologist. An important lesson, which remains valid. Which is not to say that Marx’s contribution was secondary to him; it is indirect, but decisive. There are few texts in international psychological literature that evidence this fact as strongly as Chapter XIII of *Crisis*. Vygotsky shows a rare Marxian mastery – his critique of Husserl drawing on Feuerbach is a minor masterpiece. That is also why, although emotionally vulnerable to the brutal Stalinian condemnation he endured, he could not be intellectually intimidated in the name of Marxism, knowing as he did Marx and Lenin better than his censors and certainly possessed of a better understanding of them. If his thwarted work is irresistibly establishing itself in the run up to his centenary, it is because it possesses a profound force of thought, directly anchored in Marx’s ideas, which are also experiencing a resurgence - against all odds - for this same reason. Vygotsky was both a great psychologist and a great thinker, and his shameful treatment at the hands of the Stalinist regime was to be the first – though not the last – *a contrario* recognition of his power: his free thinking was *inconvenient* to the reigning dogmatisms.

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But now, as we can see, the question “Vygotsky and Marx” changes dimension. Beyond the enumeration of references (a useful preliminary), the resolution of the question depends on something else entirely: a focus on the ideas that are likely to bring to psychology not ready-made Marxist views but productive Marxian processes.⁸ We seek here to identify where Marx is in Marxian *thought*. We have begun to discern that it is not simply where his name appears but rather where *unattributed Marxian processes* produce psychological science. Why do these references so often appear without attribution in the texts published by Vygotsky? Precisely due to his constant refusal to perform “Marxist psychology” in the deductive sense that he denounces in *Crisis*, leading to the proscription of any recourse to the argument of authority evoked by the repeated references to the “classics of Marxism”. I maintain, and propose to establish, that the Marxian thought constantly at work in Vygotsky is more often present on the pages from which Marx’s name – and those of other Marxists – is absent. We see here the naivety of Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar, who believed they were de-Marxising *Thought and Language* by excising almost all of the references to Marx, Engels and Lenin, without realising that the text’s fundamental Marxism cannot be removed, as it is etched into its very flesh. But to see it – and here we strike at the heart of the matter - one must know *what fruitful contributions Marxian thought makes to psychological research*.

⁷ Cf. Zapatta, 1983 on this important point.

⁸ “Marxist” has long referred to a dogmatic formatting that itself deforms Marx’s views and remains marked by this; “Marxian” simply evokes an effective relationship of a thought to that of Marx.

This is the root of the persistent underestimation of Marx's place in Vygotskian thought: to date, almost no-one has convincingly shown Marx's potentially huge contribution to a true psychological science. Even more egregiously, and even among self-proclaimed Marxists, Marx is still overwhelmingly perceived as a thinker for whom the individual is to be subsumed into the social, personal and collective, the subjective into the objective, and for whom therefore psychology is inessential to a historical materialism that is supposed to deal only with social structures. Few realise that Marx was also a critical thinker of the *human individual*, when in fact, if you read *Capital* without blinkers and from a broader perspective from *Grundrisse* to Book IV, it is patently obvious. As a result, although there are many learned works on Vygotsky, replete with rich studies on what he draws from behaviourism, Gestaltism and Freudism, anyone searching for a similar study on Vygotsky and Marxism to this day will come up empty-handed.⁹ And since we cannot understand that of which we know nothing, Marxian thought in Vygotsky remains invisible to many readers wherever it is not explicitly pointed out (which is rarely the case¹⁰) by a little banner that reads "here, Marx".

In my youth, in the late 40s and early 50s, as a passionate lover of psychology and with a fondness for Politzer but ignorant of the name Vygotsky, Book I of *Capital* was a life-changing discovery for me: against all expectation, the text seemed to *hear* my questions on personality and biography. Better still, it responded to those questions in various ways which seemed infinitely promising. Without knowing it, I was recreating the young Vygotsky's formative experience at a remove of 30 years: yes, Marx had the bases of psychological thought which had an entirely different potentiality to my mind than those I had been fed by most of the teaching at the Sorbonne on the matter. So I ventured into philosophy down the paths of a historico-cultural conception cleared by Marx, which I explored 50 years ago in my book *Marxism and the Theory of Human Personality*, making my way, unbeknownst to myself, towards an encounter with Vygotsky. That is what piqued Aleksei Leontiev's interest in the book, as he told me in Moscow at the end of 1970, and as is clear on reading *Activity, Conscience, and Personality*. He strongly encouraged my wife to finally translate *Thought and Language* into French, lending her his own copy. On subsequently discovering a wider range of Vygotsky's work, I understood that, for the most part, that was where I would find what, in short, I had always been seeking. But, being a philosopher by trade, I have noticed more and more the extent to which the understanding of Vygotsky is lacking the knowledge of exactly what Marxian thought can contribute, and has indeed contributed, to psychology. Having managed to put the finishing touches to and assure the publication of the last translation that Françoise Sève completed before her death in 2011 – that of *The History of the Development of Higher Mental Functions* – I thought it vital, in a long introduction to this work¹¹, to spend around 15 pages explaining what makes Marx's contributions to a materialist psychology so fundamental, condensing what I develop in the first three chapters of the volume in my trilogy *Thinking with Marx Today* that is dedicated to "Man". For what I am proposing to establish here, I must give at the very least a succinct idea of this.

When, in Chapter XIII of *Crisis*, Vygotsky ponders the correct way to approach creating a scientific psychology and he writes: "*Capital* has a lot to teach us", he has two connected

⁹ Also notable is the 2017 publication of a book like *Vygotsky and Marx* by Carl Ratner and Daniele Nunes.

¹⁰ In the 500 pages of *History of the Development of Higher Mental Functions*, a Marxian book from beginning to end, there are, in all, four explicit references to Marx.

¹¹ Work which was substantially aided by several precious personal communications with Ekaterina Zavershneva.

things in mind: “methodology” and “general psychology”. Let us begin with the “methodology”. What does *Capital*'s contribution consist of? Marx tells us in the postface to Book I: *dialectics*, taken from the idealist Hegel and entailing considerable work for its materialist reworking. And what sort of knowledge is dialectics? In the way that it is used, it is a *method*, but that is only the subjective face of the objective knowledge that it condenses, in which it is a *logic*, in the not-purely-formal sense of Aristotelian logic, but the substantial meaning given to it by Hegel in *The Science of Logic*. For the idealist Hegel, it is a *closed system* of the pure essentialities of all that is. In materialism, Marx reframed it in the course of his critical work on economics as an *open network* of the universal categories of rational thought – for example essence and appearance, abstract and concrete, universal and particular, objective and subjective, matter and form... As Lenin says in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, Marx, unlike Hegel, left us “a “Logic” (with a capital L)”, a grandiose speculative enterprise but a much more operational production: “the *logic* of *Capital*”, acquired from thought that is still under-estimated and under-examined today. Yet the logic of *Capital* constitutes a central part of Vygotsky's theoretical culture. If we examine it from the logical perspective, as he intends, for example through his ever-present ideas of analysis and synthesis, of structure and process, internal and external, natural and social, among others, the Marxian heritage of his thinking becomes obvious.

I must limit myself to a single example here: the fundamental category of essence and the way it was revolutionised by Marx. For the past 2000 years, the meaning of essence has been that which makes a being necessarily what it is – that is what Spinoza says at the beginning of the second part of *Ethics*. Beyond the variety of ways of conceiving of it, for example in Aristotle and Plato, essence, according to its ancient meaning, is considered as an *ideal, inherent* entity and eminently *invariable*, since it defines its own identity. Despite all the dialectical complexity that he brings to it, Hegel does not put in question these three characteristics of ideality, inherence and invariance. This is what Marx subverts. A major statement on the subject, often quoted and alluded to by Vygotsky, is the 6th of the *Theses on Feuerbach* committed to paper by Marx in 1845. In 1840s Germany, “the essence of man” – what it is that makes us examples of the *human type* – was a hotly debated topic. Marx revolutionised the question: the essence of man “is no abstraction in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations.” (2012, p. 3) A dazzling perspective, which inaugurated a brand new anthropological historical materialism – I will return to this point later – while creating a highly original concept of essence: no longer an abstract identity of the thing but *productive relationships* of this identity. This significantly changes the way of thinking: essence is not just ideality but covers a *materiality*, and is not originally internal but firstly *external* before being internalised, is not invariable but *evolutive*. A powerful new logic is formed here: the crux of the matter is to think not in terms of abstract identity but of *concrete relationships*, and all relationships, even the apparently immutable, are *processes*.¹²

¹² Translator's note: The French language, like the German language, has two different words for two very different ideas: *relation* in French (*Beziehung* in German), which refers to the subjective practice of interindividual exchanges, and *rapport* (*Verhältnis* in German), which refers to the objective structure of social organisation. Whether an employee is personally on good or bad terms with her employer falls into the category of *relations sociales* (social relations); that her status is that of a person selling her labour power, which is bought on the labour market by an employer in possession of the means of production, defines a mode of *rappports sociaux* (social *rappports*). The English language (like the Russian language) does not possess an equivalent for this linguistic differentiation, which is of major importance to the subject at hand. We have attempted to give an idea of this distinction by using the terms 'relation' and 'relationship', but the reader should bear in mind that when we say 'relationship' here, we are primarily referring to objective social structures like the labour market and political systems.

That Vygotsky thinks in these logical terms is shown not only in a few passages in which he quotes Marx but throughout his entire œuvre. Evidence of this is his constant battling against a mode of analysis that breaks down the whole into separate elements and conceives of its unity only as the sum of its parts – a process of associationism of which he offers an irrefutable critique – countering it with an entirely different mode of analysis in which the whole is treated as a global structure, the elements of which are relationships in themselves. Here we must closely consider Vygotsky's attitude towards Gestalt Theory. Working contemporaneously with its advocate, Vygotsky not only makes a case for the work of Koehler, Koffka and Lewin, he enthusiastically shares his Gestaltist critique of associationism, thinking, like all of them, in structural terms. But careful: there are two very different ways of presenting the whole as irreducible to the sum of its parts. One is that of Aristotle, the great ancient thinker of form, for whom it is not only primary in relation to the subject but also – let us re-read Book Z of *Metaphysics* – primary in relation to the subject it informs and not subject to becoming. The Gestalt psychology inaugurated in 1890 by the work of von Ehrenfels on the qualities of form draws its inspiration from the neo-Aristotelianism that was in full swing at the end of the 19th century. The logical culture of Vygotsky is another matter entirely, fed by Hegel's dialectics as revisited by Marx. Thus he is at once fundamentally in agreement with the Gestaltists on the irreducibility of a structure to the sum of its parts, and in frequently-expressed disagreement on two essential points: the structure does not obey the simple Aristotelian logic of the principle of identity but reveals internal *contradictions*, and for that itself is not invariable but *evolutive* – beyond the sole immutable nature considered by Gestaltism, human psyche returns to *history*.¹³

“For dialectical thought”, he writes (Vygotsky, 2014, p. 243), “there is nothing terribly new in the theory that the whole does not mechanically result from the sum of its parts.” But, understanding this great truth differently to the Gestaltists, he pushes it much further than them, without needing to endlessly quote Marx, to the central views in the dialectical logic of *Capital* which are the *conflict* born of contradictions – just as the learned arithmetic calculation of the adult stands opposed to the spontaneous arithmetic of the child (Vygotsky, 2014, p. 361-367) –, *Crisis* condenses the conflict, the *qualitative leap* where it unravels for better or worse – the child cannot emerge from the conflict between the two arithmetics without learning to “leap” from one to the other (p. 495). That Vygotsky made the innovative Marxian thinking on essence his own and pursued it to its conclusion, I could also prove, by examining the powerful logical process that drives the wonderful final two chapters of *Thought and Language* – but it would take a long time. Let us simply briefly state that what is established in Chapter 6 is that the difference between lay concepts and scientific concepts relates essentially to “different relationships of generality between the concepts” (p. 407); and Chapter 7 establishes that, in its essence, “the relationship of the thought to the word is not a thing but a process” (p. 428). All of Vygotsky is here, up to his very last texts: the essence of the human psyche can always be found, in the final analysis, in the *historical relationships* in which it exists. This logical way of thinking is without contest one which he learned very early on from Marx – in the 6th thesis on Feuerbach and Book I of *Capital*. Only the lasting ignorance of the Marxian œuvre and its logical richness has prevented its being seen.

¹³ Michel Brossard drew my attention to this point in the preface Vygotsky wrote in 1934 for the Russian translation of a book by Koffka (*Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 195-232, Plenum Press, New York, 1997), in which he clearly states the necessity, to his mind, of dialectically going beyond the Gestaltist concept of structure.

Even more convincing, if possible, is the consideration of what Vygotsky's "general psychology" owes to Marx's anthropology, as expanded on by Engels. Indeed, let us restate it here: historical materialism is an indivisible theory of social and personal structures, two sides of the *same* reality. To briefly repeat it here, this anthropology applies five fundamental concepts. 1. Productive activity (*Tätigkeit*, which quickly replaced *Praxis* in Marx, a term which does not sufficiently express this crucial productive dimension): Human beings, according to *The German Ideology*, are essentially distinguished from animals by the fact that they *produce* their means of subsistence and therefore their very being; 2. Mediation (*Vermittlung*): The immense power of human activity is owing not only to the production (the seeds of which exist in the animal world) of the tool that mediates more and more the relationship to nature but especially to the *social labour* where this mediation acquires crucial dimensions; 3. Objectalisation¹⁴ (*Vergegenständlichung*): Human productive activity generates an entire universe of objects, social relationships, symbolic productions, ways of being, of feeling and thinking, a second humanity no longer natural-internal but social-external where the human psyche endlessly accumulates the *world of man*; 4. Appropriation (*Aneignung*): Though individuals are granted membership of the species *Homo Sapiens* from the outset, they must become a member of the *humanity*, to hominise themselves by appropriating a singular part of this objective humanity, through a formidable dialectic of the external and internal that without animal equivalent and of considerable anthropological consequence. 5. Alienation (*Entfremdung*): Cultural *humanitas* not being given to individuals in advance, its personal appropriation depends on social conditions which favour or thwart it, and in every class society, it clashes unequally but inevitably with alienation, with the *stranger-being* of the immense social human powers which, not being the property of all, are not controllable by anyone.

For those who have read Vygotsky without knowing these anthropological views, which is still generally the case, even the minimal exposure here will be a revelation; it shows that, in its broadest terms, the Vygotskian historico-cultural conception of the human psyche is directly inspired by Marx. We can even discern a term-to-term correspondance of most of these concepts: to the central role of *Tätigkeit* in Marx corresponds that of *dejat'el'nost'* in Vygotsky; to *Vermittlung* corresponds *pocredničestvo*; *Vergegenständlichung* does not have an equivalent, which without doubt is not devoid of meaning, as I will show later, but of course the idea of a historic-objective humanity is central in Vygotsky, formulated in the concept of civilisation (*civilizacija*) and more often culture (*kul'tura*), having critiqued those who see it only as spiritual, ignoring the "material facts and phenomena" which constitute it to begin with (Vygotsky, 2014, p. 119-120); Vygotsky's *ucvoenie* corresponds exactly with Marx's *Aneignung*; only *Entfremdung* appears not to be employed by Vygotsky, and is used only in examples, as when he states that, to his mind, the heaviest handicap for the organically deficient child is less the natural deficiency than the lack of access to the culture that this induces, which evokes an analysis in terms of social alienation. For all that, Marxian *anthropology* was by no means a *psychology*; all the work necessary to progress from one to the other had yet to be done, and that is what Vygotsky brilliantly achieved.

Truly, Marxian thought was decisive in the fundamental orientation of Vygotsky's psychology. And it was thus to the very end, right up to his remarkable posthumously-

¹⁴ Author's neologism referring to the specific human activity of the creation of *objects* and the production of *things*, derived from the French adjective *objectal*.

published text on the cerebral localisation of mental functions, which he had planned to present at the Kharkov conference in June 1934 (he died a few months before). In it, he explains the higher mental functions of man that are formed out of the social exterior and how their cerebral localisation cannot be the same kind as those of the animal or human functions in the biologically-given centres, such that any simple extrapolation to the human brain of what is functionally observed in the animal brain “can only lead to gross errors.” (Vygotsky, 1982, t. 1, p. 174; author’s translation). Three quarters of a century later, there remains therein a crucial hint for research on the brain, and more broadly for neuroscience, which would gain much from ceasing to ignore Vygotsky. As would those who persist in denying any basic psychological alterity between human beings and other superior vertebrates in the name of a simplistic materialism, rightly denying the existence of any metaphysical frontier, but blind to the crucial mutation recognised by the historico-social conception – here, the fallacious dogma of methodological individualism bears a heavy responsibility.

* * *

To the very end – up to one final reference to *The German Ideology* on the last page of *Thought and Language*, dictated while at death’s door – Vygotsky shows, however parsimoniously, how much he thought like Marx. Only one other thinker held a comparable place in Vygotsky’s thinking: Spinoza – which raises the suggestion of studying the relationship between Marx and Spinoza in Vygotsky. I certainly do not plan to undertake that task upon concluding here. Just one remark, without intending to minimise all that Spinoza inspired in Vygotsky: his *status* is nevertheless different to that of Marx. In many texts, Vygotsky sets out Spinoza’s point of view, valorises it, rarely contests it, often defends him against his critics – in *Theory of Emotions* for example, he spiritedly refutes the reduction of the Spinozian materialist monism of the corporeal and the spiritual to a dualist “parallelism”. Spinoza is in short treated as a most important author.¹⁵ On Marx, nothing of the sort: while he is explicitly present, it is in the form of quotation without comment or even pure reference. Here, Vygotsky does not feel the need to explain himself – Marx is not treated as an author but as his theoretical culture. If the remark is not wrong, it makes sense. It underlines the extent to which Vygotsky’s thought is intimately Marxian. To say so has nothing to do with the puerile effort to enlist him under the banner of “Marxism”, to which he was clearly allergic and which is no better than the opposite attempt to purge him of Marx by any means necessary. It seems that, today, research on Vygotsky and Marx is finally entering its adulthood. To those such as myself who have been calling for this for over forty years, this news is no small matter.

And the great interest of this is that it raises intriguing new questions. In particular the one with which I will conclude: are there any major gaps in Vygotsky’s understanding of Marx? Generally speaking, I do not consider it an exaggeration to say that his understanding of Marxian thought was without equal in the learned world of 1930 – I would even be tempted to say that it remains exceptional to this day. The fact remains of course that his reading of Marx has its limits – all reading does. What I suggest examining concerns his understanding and use of the crucial 6th thesis on Feuerbach. To mention very briefly what would require an entire

¹⁵ With boldness Spinoza assumes the logical contradiction, for example, by setting out the identity of the opposites that are expanded upon and considered: nature and God; it thus goes beyond the framework of Aristotelian logic without disposing of the Hegelian, as when he writes “*omnis determinatio negatio*”. Vygotsky reads Spinoza dialectically, putting him so to speak ahead of dialectics. A question that would justify an entire study.

chapter: We have often read, to this day, that Marx wrote that in his reality the human essence consisted of “the whole of social *relations*”; however, he did not write *Beziehungen* but *Verhältnisse*, having in mind – as specified in *The German Ideology*¹⁶ – not simply the *relationships between individuals* but *social relations* in their immense objectivity, such as the technical and social division of labour. Two undoubtedly connected but fundamentally distinct ideas. According to its incorrect reading, this critical wording may be a simple theory of social psychology: individuals are what their *interpersonal relationships* make of them – an accurate idea, certainly, and even fertile, but which does not yet determine a complete historical *materialism*. In the reading imposed by the text, and all of Marx’s thinking, what makes us the humans we are is also to be found *beyond* our intersubjective relationships, right up to the heavily objective *social structures* they imply and which govern them – which is where a truly materialist anthropology is born. To consider this crucial question, Vygotsky possessed and utilised only one Russian term: *otnošenie*, which means relation as well as relationship. This undifferentiated concept therefore leads us to an impasse on the incredibly important distinction between intersubjective relationships and objective social relations.

The question is clear: Was Vygotsky sufficiently attentive to the full difference between *Beziehung* and *Verhältnis*, which the sole term *otnošenie* tends to negate? A psychologist above all else, was he more concerned with the intersubjective social relationships – for example the “forms of behaviour” which he categorises under “Janet’s law” – than with social relations taken in their concretised objectivity, the educational effect of which on the human psyche is immense (take for example the *money-form*) but much more indirect? Doesn’t the fact that he has no equivalent of the Marxian concept of *Vergegenständlichung* indicate a certain underestimation of the processes of social objectification in the strongest sense of the term? A huge question. This was perhaps the pretext for the vicious Stalinian accusation of non-Marxism levelled against him, and a motive for Leontiev’s distancing himself from him. Therein, without a doubt, a non-negligible portion of the general direction of the Vygotskian oeuvre is decided, as well as what is to be elucidated in order to progress further in that same direction. Today, we discuss with good reason the meaning that the concept of *pereživanie* might have in Vygotsky. Should we not examine with just as much care the meaning and use of *otnošenie* in his work?

But if we undertake it, short of concluding perhaps at an effective limit of his thinking and his work, we must certainly not lose sight of that the fact that *at the same time* – complex are the paths of innovative research – he has thereby magnificently enlarged Marxian anthropology, by richly exploring the crucial dialectics of sign, signification and meaning and therefore of consciousness itself, a contribution in which Stalinian idiocy saw the vile mark of a bourgeois idealism...If Vygotsky indeed owes much to Marx, the Marx that we can today make even more productive in the immense field of the human sciences owes more than a little to Vygotsky. We have not finished studying human beings with both of these men together.

¹⁶ "This sum-total of forces of production, of capital, of the forms of social exchange which each individual and each generation finds as a preliminary given, is the concrete foundation of what philosophers have represented as" substance" and "essence of man" ... "(Marx, 2012, 39, translation revised by the author). - *Beziehung* - in French *relation* - refers to an interpersonal process not persisting beyond itself, *Verhältnis* - in French *rapport* – refers to an impersonal social structure subsisting on the mode of the thing. In a company, the employee may or may not have an individual relationship with the boss; everything else is their class relation, that is to say the objective status of the one as holder of means of production, the other possessing only his labour power.

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