

ANOTHER LOST WORLD OF RUSSIAN PSYCHOLOGY

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Throughout twenty years of investigation on published and unpublished materials and personal contacts with major and minor figures of Russian psychology, I was always upset by discovering new events, new stories and new texts I had never gotten wind of. Recently, during my integral translation into Italian of *Thinking and Speech* by Vygotsky (1934), I began with the last Russian reprint of 1982, but I found that this reprint contained a text very often different from the 1956 reprint, and that the latter was different from the first edition of 1934. However, our Russian colleagues have been going on quoting the 1982 reprint, likely because they themselves do not know this detective story of Vygotsky's work or they have lost their memory of their scientific history. For instance, what really was paedology; what did this psycho-pedagogical movement really pursue in the twenties and thirties? We have reasonable answers in recent monographs by Western scholars (Joravsky, 1989; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1992), but we are yet waiting for a more exhaustive interpretation from Russian scholars.

Reading all the interesting texts published here, another new world disclosed itself to me. Some missing links appear now in a new light, all concerning the affair of Russian comparative psychology in the first half of this century.

I wish to start from a personal recollection. In 1972, during my first stay at the Institute of Psychology of Moscow, I was walking near Gorky Park when I suddenly saw a plaque on the crumbling wooden front door of an old building. On the plaque was written "Darwin Museum." I had found by chance what I had been searching for a long time after I had read of this Museum in the classical *Handbook of Soviet Psychology* by Cole and Maltzman (1969). No Russian colleague had been able to tell

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me where this Museum was. And when in 1975 I visited this Museum again, with an Italian colleague, the late Raffaello Misiti, the official guide accompanying him was reluctant to believe in the existence of this Museum because she had never heard of that institution. She admitted her ignorance only when I accompanied her and my friend to the Museum.

In this place there was an unbelievable collection of pieces showing the evolution of animal species and the research in comparative psychology by Ladygina-Kots (1889–1963). The Museum had been founded by her husband, A. F. Kots, at the beginning of the twenties. The most important work by Ladygina-Kots was her comparative analysis of the cognitive and emotional development of a child (her son Rudy) and a chimpanzee, illustrated in the splendid, but very rare book *Infant Ape and Human Child* (1935; the English summary was reprinted in 1982). Ladygina-Kots' approach lay in studying the common lines and specific lines of psychological development in different animal species. Her orientation was not reductionistic, but searching for general properties in the behavior of different animal species, and stressing the differentiation which emerged at the behavioral level in animal evolution. Her genuine Darwinian approach did not fit the Pavlovian reduction of the behavior of different animal species to common general mechanisms, that is, conditioned reflexes. Her research activity was discouraged and was not developed further beyond her personal contribution.

One may find a similar orientation in comparative research on animal and human behavior in the work of Wagner and Khotin. These authors clearly pointed out the theoretical absurdity of reducing the variety of behavior in different animal species to common chains of conditioned reflexes, as was claimed by Pavlov and his pupils (for Pavlovian research comparing different species see Vatsuro, 1948; Voytonis, 1949; Razran, 1961). Khotin, attacking in his *Biological Psychology as a Science* (1934–35) both the reductionism “from below” and “from above,” regarded them as metaphysical interpretations of the complexity of behavior (“Denying the existence of specific differences between animal and human psychological activity, they both arrived at metaphysics”). It is the same remark made by Vygotsky (1925), referring to Wagner's work, and by Luria more than fifty years later (1977). The following statement by Khotin might be directly accepted by the Vygotskian or historico-cultural school. “The cause of the failure of physiological monism ‘from below’ was [. . .] the fact that the representatives of this trend [very likely Pavlov and Bekhterev, LM] reduced all behavior of animals and humans to biochemical and physiological processes and went no further. They overlooked thereby the historical path that animals followed from protozoa to human beings, during which they elaborated different types of psychological activity corresponding to different stages of evolution.”

The other very important theme that was discussed by Russian comparative psychologists was the need of a unifying principle to explain the behavior of animals and human beings. Of course, taking into account the previous criticism of physiological reductionism, the principle was not found in the conditioned reflex, or in another kind of physiological mechanism, but it was identified in the theoretical way to organize empirical data on animal and human behavior, that is, on the concept of evolution. The conditioned reflex was considered only a brick in the evolution of behavior. It was not the behavior itself. In other words, the physiological mechanisms or the behavioral patterns should be read through a more comprehensive principle and should not be reduced one to the other or vice versa. The unifying principle should serve to link the disconnected trends of research in psychology, each one following its own theoretical principles.

The crisis of psychology, illustrated by many scholars in the twenties, e.g., Buhler (1927), was explained by the branching out of theoretically different psychological schools (behaviorism, reflexology, Gestalt theory, psychoanalysis, etc.). In his book *The Historical Significance of the Crisis in Psychology* (1926, first published in 1982), Vygotsky again referred to Wagner on this crucial aspect of contemporary psychology. Although Vygotsky tried to point out other unifying principles to overcome the then current crisis in psychology, it is worth noting that the Russian comparative psychologist, Wagner, and the Russian developmental psychologist, Vygotsky, were emphasizing the same problems and looking for similar solutions. They wished to make a stand for their view of the relevance of evolutionary and developmental dimensions of behavior, against all attempts to overwhelm the complexity and variety of behavior by means of general and superficial mechanisms or abstract notions.

What the Pavlovian school of the hard dialectical materialistic psychology offered was a static view of behavior built upon simple physiological mechanisms and psychological structures. Indeed, this represented the scientific side of the rigid and crystallized approach pursued at a political and social level. This scientific approach fitted well in a static view of society.

It is not surprising that the members of both a comparative psychology school and a historico-cultural school, let us say, the members of an evolutionary-historical approach to human behavior, were persecuted. What is today a lost world of theoretical and empirical research was also a great opportunity to develop a dynamic view of human behavior as a necessary basis for the psychological growth of human beings in a democratic society. As we read in Vygotsky's or in Khotin's texts, the awareness of the progressive social relevance of their positions was always clear as it was clear to their opponents that these ideas were dangerous for the monolithic Russian society born after the Revolution.

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