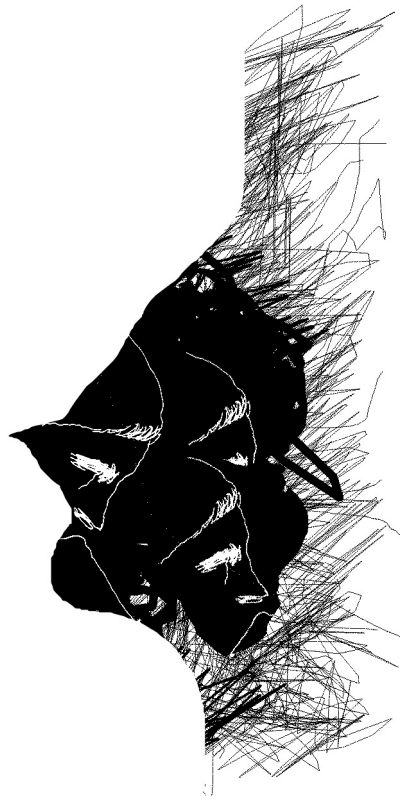


Interview / Entrevista



Challenges to the historical-cultural psychology to reflect on the research in the humanities: interview with Pablo del Río

Teresa Cristina Rego¹
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Abstract

The text presents compelling reflections of Pablo del Río Pereda, a renowned Spanish professor of Facultad de Humanidades, Comunicación y Documentación de la Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, editor and reviewer (along with Amelia Álvarez) of the Collection Obras Escogidas by Lev Vygotsky Semienovitch, and president of *Fundación Infancia y Aprendizaje* (FIA). Considered one of the main scholars responsible for the dissemination of Vygotsky's work in the Western world, Pablo del Río is highly respected in the international academic scene as an expert and interpreter of the so-called cultural-historical psychology. Along this line, he has developed and coordinated major research projects at various universities and institutions, such as *Universidad Complutense de Madrid* (Grupo GOMEL), *Universidad de Salamanca* (*Centro Tecnológico de Diseño Cultural*) and *Fundación Infancia y Aprendizaje* itself. He directs *Laboratorio de Investigación Cultural* (LIC) and *Master Oficial Universitario en Investigación Aplicada a Medios de Comunicación*. The interview was conducted in August 2012. On the one hand, Pablo del Río's account expresses his solid training, erudition and experience as a psychology researcher. On the other hand, it reveals the profile of a restless intellectual and critic, who is able to analyze with rigor and openness the vicissitudes of our time. Thus, the reflections presented here offer rich resources for the debate on the current challenges for psychology and the humanities in general.

Keywords

Cultural-historical psychology – Vygotsky – Marxist orthodoxy – Science and knowledge production in contemporaneity – Neurogenesis.

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Dos desafios para a psicologia histórico-cultural à reflexão sobre a pesquisa nas ciências humanas: entrevista com Pablo del Río

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Resumo

O texto apresenta reflexões instigantes de Pablo del Río Pereda, renomado professor espanhol da Faculdade de Humanidades, Comunicação e Documentação da Universidade Carlos III de Madri, editor e revisor (em conjunto com Amelia Álvarez) da Coleção Obras Escogidas, de Lev Semienovitch Vigotski, e presidente da Fundación Infancia y Aprendizaje (FIA). Considerado um dos principais responsáveis pela divulgação dos trabalhos de Vigotski no mundo ocidental, Pablo del Río é muito respeitado no cenário acadêmico internacional pelo fato de ser um profundo conhecedor e intérprete da chamada psicologia histórico-cultural. Nessa linha, tem desenvolvido e coordenado importantes projetos de investigação em diversas universidades e instituições, como a Universidade Complutense de Madri (Grupo GOMEL), a Universidade de Salamanca (Centro Tecnológico de Diseño Cultural) e a própria Fundación Infancia y Aprendizaje. Atualmente dirige o Laboratorio de Investigación Cultural (LIC) e o Master Oficial Universitario en Investigación Aplicada a Medios de Comunicación. A entrevista foi realizada em agosto de 2012. Por um lado, o relato de Pablo del Río expressa a solidez de sua formação, sua erudição e sua experiência como investigador da psicologia; por outro, revela o perfil de um intelectual inquieto e crítico, capaz de analisar com rigor e abertura as vicissitudes de nosso tempo. Assim, as reflexões apresentadas oferecem ricos subsídios para o debate acerca dos desafios atuais da psicologia e das ciências humanas de modo geral.

Palavras-chave

Psicologia histórico-cultural – Vigotski – Ortodoxia marxista – Ciência e produção de conhecimento na contemporaneidade – Neurogênese.

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Presentation



Born in 1944 in Spain, Pablo del Río Pereda has been a professor at *Facultad de Humanidades, Comunicación y Documentación de la Universidad Carlos III de Madri* since 1995. Previously, he taught at *Universidad de Salamanca*, from 1993 to 1995, and *Universidad Complutense de Madri*, from 1976 to 1993. From the latter, he graduated in Philosophy, Communication and Psychology in 1976 and obtained his doctorate in Psychology in 1987. In the undergraduate and graduate programs, he teaches various subjects related to communication, education and psychology, within the interdisciplinary territory of the cultural psychology of human development.

One of the leading scholars responsible for disseminating the cultural-historical perspective of psychology, along with Amelia Álvarez, he was the editor and reviewer of *Obras Escogidas* of Lev Semienovitch Vygotsky, a publication that allowed many Latin American researchers to get in contact with the author's works translated from Russian into Spanish. His commitment to the dissemination of the cultural-historical scientific thought has had a long history and was to some extent driven by the restrictions and problems of the period after the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, when he was still an undergraduate.

Pablo del Río also has an outstanding work in the broader publishing field, and is recognized in Europe and North America. In 1976, he set up the group *Aprendizaje*, once again with Amelia Álvarez – his companion in life, study and work – and with other notable colleagues. The group has published journals, books as well as diagnostic and reeducation tools, and initiated a nucleus of research on cultural development (CIEDH: *Centro de Investigaciones sobre Educación y Desarrollo Humano*). In 1993, the initiative became *Fundación Infancia y Aprendizaje* (FIA)¹, the institution responsible for publishing several periodicals – such as *Infancia y Aprendizaje and Cultura y Educación* – and important works of classical and contemporary authors. This foundation, of which Del Río is chairman, conducts programs of research, production and publication of scientific knowledge about human development, with emphasis on culture, psychology and education. It also operates in vocational training and higher education, the organization of congresses and seminars, as well as in supporting scientific societies. At FIA, he has a program called *Future Humans*, which is dedicated to research on the changes in child and human development in the cultural contexts in transformation and on the new problems that accompany such changes.

The researcher was one of the founders of the *Society for Sociocultural Research*, the organization responsible for the dissemination and expansion of studies in the cultural-historical perspective, having worked as a member of the organizing committee of the congresses held in Madrid (1992), Geneva (1996) and Campinas (2000). Later, this organization merged with the *International Society for Cultural Research and Activity Theory* (ISCRAT), more linked to the epistemological and methodological bases of Activity Theory, giving rise to the *International Society for Cultural and Activity Research* (ISCAR).

¹- The electronic address of *Fundación Infancia y Aprendizaje* is <http://www.fia.es>.

Over the years dedicated to research, he has coordinated numerous research projects whose purposes have always been guided by the following objectives: 1) to understand the biocultural genesis of human mind; 2) to perceive and empirically and theoretically highlight the evolutionary changes in the human fact nowadays and their projection into the future in the face of the scientific action and the influence of contexts and milestones of evolutionary development of children and youth, the transformation (decline, dissolution and sometimes preservation) of traditional cultures and of the external neuropsychological tissue, as well as the emergence of new (physical and imaginary) ecologies due to the change in human environments; 3) to understand the distributed psychic architecture (internal-external) of higher functions and develop means for its diagnosis (econeuropsychology) and for its best construction (cultural design and cultural educational design)². The importance of such projects to the problems that are present nowadays in the fields of psychology and education can be felt through themes such as: audiovisual diet and its role in the construction of reality and imagination; the importance of the contexts of development and of children's activities for the construction of attention; the effects of television diets on child and youth development, especially in relation to attention problems; the media and the construction of cultural identities. His concern is not only to detect problems caused by the current conditions of production, use and reception of media, but also to propose, in that environment, a strategic design of alternatives (DEL RIO; ÁLVAREZ; DEL RIO, 2004). According to the author, the directions and objectives of the investigations, many of them conducted in teams, meant facing severe funding difficulties, but researchers continue doing their work, supervising doctoral dissertations and other students' research.

2- The author himself provided by email the information on his trajectory.

Asked about the authors and schools of thought that marked his education, Pablo del Río mentioned René Zazzo³, the master who introduced him to the psychology of Henri Wallon, marked by the approach to the person as a whole and the pursuit of the human being both in the biological and in the social sphere. Furthermore, according to the author, Zazzo's supervision led him to consider issues ranging from the general problems of the diagnosis of human development to the uniqueness of people. Now his link with the cultural-historical school was mainly virtual and occurred through readings, which began by Luria's work. Simultaneously, his group read and in some cases edited works of the Soviet scholars Luria, Leontiev, Elkonin, Galperin, Davidov, Zaporozhets, and especially Vygotsky. Later, he was influenced by the work of authors such as Heinz von Foerster,⁴ Von Uexküll⁵ and Miguel de Unamuno⁶. He also referred to scholars included in the tradition of the theory of drama and emotion, such as Calderón de la Barca⁷ and the Spanish mystics.

His identification with the Russian great thinker and researcher, as well as his professional and academic trajectory led him to examine Vygotsky's work in depth, and to contribute to its dissemination. In many of his writings and in the following interview, he examines the disturbing nature of such production: he highlights a Vygotsky more connected to art – especially to poetry, literature and drama – and a more rational Vygotsky, the scientist. In this sense, he uses the Platonic metaphor

3- French psychologist (1910-1995) who worked mainly in the area of child psychology.

4- Austrian-American scientist (1911-2002) whose work combined physics and philosophy. He was one of the architects of biocybernetics and one of the inspirers of the complex thought, theory developed by Edgar Morin.

5- Estonian biologist (1864-1944) who, from the perspective of ecology, proposed the *functional circle* of the interaction between the organism and the environment, and the notion of *Umwelt* or subjective world of the perception of animals in relation to their environment.

6- Spanish philosopher (1864-1936) who suggested a narrative model of human life: reading oneself and writing about oneself as a novel, as a cultural tool to appropriating one's own life in three levels – personal novel, national novel and universal novel.

7- Spanish poet and dramatist (1600-1681).

of two horses, a white and a black one, who live together in conflict in the *psychotechnics of the intellect* and *psychotechnics of feeling*, uniting them as far as possible in his short life in the idea of *drama* as a general model of the mind (ÁLVAREZ; DEL RÍO, 2007). Also, Del Río unveils an existential, historical and cultural Vygotsky *condemned* to the psychology initiated by him, but willingly linked to the *narrative of humanity*, facing the great questions that his time imposed on him.

Besides examining various Vygotskian concepts in depth (e.g. DEL RÍO; ÁLVAREZ, 2007), the author proposes new concepts and ideas both within psychology and neuropsychology, and in education. His interesting questions about the *external brain* and *neurogenesis* (DEL RÍO, 1994, 2002) were one of the topics examined in the interview. His approach to education, extremely important to our reality,⁸ besides involving problems that plague us today – for example, those related to attention and the misuses of media (e.g. DEL RÍO, 2000; DEL RÍO, DEL RÍO, 2008; DEL RÍO, 2010) –, addresses key issues such as the validity of the psychological theories of education for all cultures and the possibility of explaining the particular and the universal (DEL RÍO, 2007a, 2007b). His idea of education as self-evolution is intriguing and has roots in his ecofunctionalist approach and his reading of Vygotsky's work under the influence of Spinoza's thought, based on the idea of self-determination. In this sense, the author reflects on the possibility of another *cultural design*⁹ for the new generations, which implies a new curriculum, a new educational program for the human beings we wish to educate and, consequently, for a new brain.

In addition, the interview hints at a Pablo del Río critical of psychology and the humanities in their current configuration,

8- The issues explored in the interview about his ideas and his research program on education will be the subject of another publication.

9- According to the author, it is the exploratory engineering of the human being from the perspective of a constructive cultural Vygotskian neuropsychology applied to the implementation of technologies that are cognitive and meaningful to the mind of cultures and people.

which has problems such as *depersonalization*, reductionism, the lack of dialogue between lines and areas of knowledge, the link to the logic of exact sciences and to ideology, sectarianism, and effectiveness and the logic of productivity at any cost, hard problems we face in the academy. Also, he is a critic of the cultural-historical perspective itself, questioning aspects such as dogmatism, orthodox Marxist readings, the lack of protagonism in the view of human beings, the lack of openness to other currents and sciences and the exclusivity of Vygotsky's thought, which would not please the author himself.

The meeting was held one morning in August 2012 at the School of Education, University of Sao Paulo (FEUSP), during a break between the various academic activities developed by Pablo del Río in Brazil. On occasion, he had just finished a short journey of work at FEUSP¹⁰, during which he participated in activities as a visiting professor of the Research Group *Pensamento e Linguagem* (Thought and Language), based in School of Education, State University of Campinas (Unicamp).¹¹

We would like to thank Ana Maria Tejada Mendoza and Ana Paula Carneiro Renesto, two doctoral students at USP who were present during the interview and later transcribed and translated the recorded material in an excellent way. The latter also prepared a first competent edition of the text. The final edition, prepared by us, was subsequently read and reviewed by the interviewee.

Finally, we would like to thank Professor Pablo del Río for the brief but intense time together. It was great to know better a man who is friendly, dynamic, courageous, passionate about what he does and who puts forth questions that have unfortunately been rare in our midst.

10- The visit of Professor Pablo del Río to FEUSP was organized by Professors Elizabeth Braga, Teresa Cristina Rego, Oriosvaldo Manoel de Moura and Marilene Proença. It consisted of a meeting with study and research groups and of a lecture entitled *Dissemination and timeliness of Lev S. Vygotsky's legacy: contributions of Pablo del Río - Educating for the future: what to do today about the historical change?*

11- We would like to thank Professors Ana Luiza Bustamente Smolka and Luci Banks-Leite for their kind invitation to share the visit.

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We would like to thank you for your willingness to grant this interview. To start, we would like to learn a little about your analysis of Vygotsky's life and work, and about the relation between them. In your opinion, what were the main motivations that guided Vygotsky's research program?

It is difficult to speak about someone else's motives, especially someone who is no longer alive and who is already part of history. We know, as Dobkin – a friend of Vygotsky's – highlighted (1982) that one of the issues that most concerned him as a teenager and that was debated in the study circle of young students he took part in was the role of the individual in history. From this information, it is easy to locate two very visible strands in his work: a psychology with a strong materialist and Hegelian orientation, and another with strong literary and tragic root. The first one aims to understand and explain the historical and sociocultural determination of conduct from the social and collective tradition of the human being. The second aims to understand and explain the historical and sociocultural determination of personal conduct from the philosophical and moral tradition of self-determination, in the wake of Spinoza, and of a dramatic and tragic tradition of the human being, which he receives from his literary heritage. Vygotsky focuses his future work in a psychology with both types of protagonism (the collective and the individual ones) and both types of determinism (the material and the psychological ones) of the species in phylogenesis and history, and of the individual in an ontogenesis focused on the social and on the general human being, albeit in a personal protagonistic history. Thus, the intrinsic connection between his life and his work is radical. And monistic: the same Vygotsky seeks both of these things because he needs both. We could connect this requirement that he imposed on himself as a scientist – the existential and subjective pertinence of science, and the

epistemic and objective explanatory capacity – to the expressive denomination which some Vygotskian scholars (Luria, Sacks, Cole) have proposed: *romantic science*.

I think this is a question we should ask about all the authors and also about ourselves. In Vygotsky's case, the connections between life and work are very special. In an article published in the journal *Estudos de Psicologia* (DEL RÍO, ÁLVAREZ, 2007a), we analyzed this issue when discussing the drama of psychology and the psychology of drama in the Vygotskian perspective. There we highlighted that what is remarkable in Vygotsky is that he ended up electing the human theme as the object of his life, his research and his action, because it is a kind of tragic quest. He was very tragic and the tragic requires coherence, so the point from which he began would have made no difference. The end was almost defined, because he would not leave the problem without seeking its ultimate consequences.

If we understand this, his literary decade (1914-1924) – prior to the psychological one (1924-1934) – does not seem so heterogeneous or irrelevant. He started in the Humanities, studied Law and in the end he got to Psychology because he had to. When the German occupation of Gomel finishes, he worked with Arts and Education because he had to teach to earn a living. Having had a very good education in secondary education and in college, he is almost conditioned to pursue this career, like many scholars with good training at that time. As it happens to so many others, Vygotsky became an educator. As every intellectual, he was passionate about education. He really lived education.

His first work about art (about *Hamlet*) is a very good clue to understand his vital relationship with psychology. *Hamlet* took him to psychology because it initiated him in the *tragic*. Vygotsky responded to *Hamlet* as to a revelation in dramatic form in the sense that Tolkien (1993) attributed the concept of

applicability in literature, in relation to *The Lord of the Rings*. The epic or tragic work with existential applicability works as a *vision*, as a revelation, as a compass to guide the way to the vital task. A literary work is applicable if it is enlightening and emotionally stimulating to understand life. Many works in history, like Tolkien's, may have been written with this intention of enlightenment, with the intention that their reading serve to guide the reading of the current human reality. In *The Lord of the Rings*, you see the human, the evil, the good and the human battle. And in the end, the allegory is very suggestive: the smallest, the simplest, are the ones who actually allow the epic. So Vygotsky read *Hamlet* this way, as an initiation into the tragic and as a revelation that his own life would be marked by a mission.

Not that Vygotsky identified with *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* is not the model, but the challenge he faces. The fact that a young prince is suddenly called by tragedy, because his father has been murdered, leads him to a new existential dimension: it is necessary to awaken from his intellectual life of young adventurer and face the fact that he can no longer live this carefree life. He must make committed decisions.

Vygotsky found in *Hamlet* the initiation into the tragic, the challenge of understanding human life as something seen from the consciousness, which is the consciousness of death. He cites the final phrase of *Hamlet*: "I die. The rest is silence." In general, the challenge of the tragic has been incorporated into Psychology and the study of consciousness, because it is considered that psychology refers to life and not to death, to the knowable and not to the unknowable, which challenges us as a species. For the same reasons, a historical-cultural fact as remarkable as the religious conduct has also been left out of science (DEL RÍO, ÁLVAREZ, 2007b).

Many of Vygotsky's ideological and political problems proceed from this rather Spinozian double conviction of combining

science's skeptical search and the inescapable search for the meaning of existence. Throughout his life he tried to deepen the silence to which the end of *Hamlet* points. First he did it through philosophy and literature; then through science, through psychology, developing it jointly as a personal quest and as a social and historical mission.

The social commitment cannot be separated from the personal one; his life cannot be separated from his work. Personal feelings united with the professional and social senses of his mission can be summed up in a passage highlighted by Vygotsky in his study of *Hamlet*: "The world is mad. The time is out of joint!... Oh damn luck!... That I was born to put it in order!... ". The restlessness that Vygotsky found was at the same time existential, scientific and epistemic: nothing less than the understanding of the human being and the meaning of life.

In *Hamlet*, Vygotsky also found something else: the human fact remains unknowable, is a big challenge. And knowing where humanity is going is the great unknown of conscious humanity, that small part of humanity that cannot live without asking such questions. Most people decide not to ask them and live day to day, channeling their higher functions to a, say, practical, operatory conscience. Applying the capabilities of consciousness to broader times and larger spaces leads us to formulate those questions that Vygotsky asked and even today the effort is doomed to mystery, to the fact that you will not solve them, but you must get as far as you can. That is what Vygotsky did with *Hamlet*: on the one hand, he was faced with the mystery; on the other, he imposes on himself the challenge to accept the mission of putting in order as much as he could on the subject. So, he was condemned to this psychology.

How did Vygotsky perform his own role or character?

What influences lead us to devote ourselves to the craft of thinking, the work of investigating? Sometimes they are direct, and you meet masters. Not everyone is fortunate to meet great masters in person, but you will anyway meet them virtually, through a book, for example; you will capture the attitude, the momentum behind the work. And that leads us to know the content and investigate further. Direct influences are important, but not always possible. I had such luck when I met René Zazzo. However, my access to great masters was enriched through books. I also received other great intellectual and human heritages.

As books, books are instrumental mediators; but as works of people books are also social mediators. During his life, Vygotsky was accompanied by two books which he took everywhere: *Ethics* and *Hamlet*, which, in turn, configured the company of Spinoza and Shakespeare. Thus, books bring not only new knowledge, but also the meaning of the human being, the human *what for* of such knowledge. In any authors we read, we always capture their characters. It is impossible for them to hide behind the writing, although many try to do it. As Unamuno used to say, there are people who talk like books, and there are books which talk like people.

One of the things that the scientific rhetoric teaches us is the rhetoric of concealment. We should never say “I think”, but “It might be thought that”. And we never say “Something happens”. Everything is put in the passive voice, everything is said between quotation marks. This is acceptable and positive, on the one hand, because it shows one’s humility and care about the extent to which one can state something. But the downside is the depersonalization of science, which has caused a lot of harm and eventually removed its vital impulse. After all, the memory of science is the memory of scientists, the thought of science is the thought of scientists, the feeling of science is the feeling of scientists. And it seems that there is science without the subject and that science is nothing

more than subjects’ distributed and shared thought. That is, if we do psychology of science, we will conclude that science is nothing but a complex of distributed mediations, located in the culture, partly alive and partly inherited; those mediations are in the cultural memory or long term cultural memory, which are partially and occasionally incorporated into the present life as a living memory, as work memory, but which are not realized, are not activated without an existential community of people in each historical moment.

Well, if this whole process is observed from a Vygotskian, sociocultural perspective, science is a system of knowledge, but it is *someone’s* knowledge: a distributed subject whom an entire community shares; a culture, humanity. You cannot, therefore, eliminate the word *subject* of science, which is what has been done. In other words, in science there is still protagonism, not only a historical, social action, but also a personal action. And, using all that sort of disguise and concealment in the process of communication and scientific production, we end up ignoring the great questions that puzzle scientists, the great challenges of human beings. In physics, for example, I may not ask myself existential questions, yet everyone falls in love when we try to understand what happened with the *Big Bang*. And now, thanks to the discovery of subparticles and stuff, and the possibility of an understanding of the origin of the universe, everyone is thrilled with it. And why shouldn’t they be? How could we not be thrilled with our own origin, with our own destiny? This reduction that physicists have not done, though they have a more inert object, we psychologists do with an object that is so much more alive. Although we psychologists are in the face of a subject with much greater capacity of freedom, of existential question, we have a more self-limited scientific performance.

This brings us to a statement in Vygotsky 1929 Manuscript: “It is not thought that thinks: a person thinks.”

Yes, and the subject is being left out.

The analysis of Vygotsky's intellectual history and work makes us think about this dialectical interplay between individual protagonism and collective historical processes. In fact, someone does science, but scientific advances are never totally divorced from the discoveries in his or her broader cultural context (which in turn result from the commitment of a set of individual efforts). However, it is curious to note that, both in the psychology of that time and in the current psychology, there is a kind of deification of Vygotsky. In an autobiographical text, Luria himself calls Vygotsky a genius. And Vygotsky tried to leave this role on numerous occasions. He said that knowledge was always related to a time, a culture and a place. Could you please comment on this issue?

Today there seems to be a consensus in the academic community about the intellectual excellence of Vygotsky. When he was alive others already recognized him, and he was probably aware of the uniqueness of his thought: he exercised it trying to develop an intellectual leadership to drive the construction of a project in psychology. I think it was not arrogance, but the acceptance of a challenge, a historical role – he felt he was called by destiny, just like *Hamlet*. And because he had had tuberculosis since he was 17 and he knew he was dying, Vygotsky was vaccinated against presumption. He felt provoked to make the most progress on this great psychology challenge in the time he had left.

A sense of urgency...

Yes. This issue of the relationship between the genius' individual agency and collective agency in history is an interesting topic. Both collectivist and individualist narratives tend to propose extreme versions. On the one hand, the individual as the sole subject of history, which

is read as a sequence of actions of extraordinary individualities; and on the other hand, history as the flow of collective actions determined by material conditions.

Looking at Vygotsky from the model of a history of individuals leads to converting him into a genius or a hero. Seeing him from the model of a history of collectivities leads to relativize his figure and assume that if he had not done what he did, some other scientist would have reached the same ideas about mediation or human development, such as the cultural development of higher functions.

As Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991) pointed, in addition to the merits of Vygotsky's own work, it is necessary to consider a set of contextual circumstances that would explain the recent rediscovery of Vygotsky and the personification in him of a whole strand of thought which has a broader basis, in which various other authors whose figures are now less notorious participated. That is right and we should look at him from a view of science as culture and a view of history as the *history of mentalities*, as the effect of distributed processes that configure the historical evolution of the worldviews, epistemologies and mental architectures of communities and people.

Also, I think that in Vygotsky's case, there was a concurrence of these collective and cultural processes of scientific thought and of a personal process which could hardly have occurred as the result of only one of these two histories (the individual or the collective one). There was an intellectual and existential lucidity: the ability to combine the rational and material determination of conduct with the psychological self-determination, *i.e.*, personal history with collective history. Vygotsky did a psychology with what he also tried to do in history. It was not about merely revealing the past history of humanity from the perspective of science. It was about writing, through science, the future history of mankind. Rather than presuming a single and material determination of the past and future history, he

assumed the combined intervention of dramatic mechanisms of self-determination of human behaviors. So to speak, Vygotsky integrated the requirements of Hegel and Spinoza. The latter tried to take distance from *delirium* or from the anthropocentric view of the human being who one sees as absolutely free and independent from nature, making a call to the objectification of our material determination, to rationality. It is this call that meets historical materialism by considering man as objectively subjected to the evolution of matter. But the second Spinozian concern was to explain that, if this is right, human beings can and must achieve a certain level of consciousness in order to self-determine, to be able to materially confront – but with a certain ability to act consciously and voluntarily – the conditionings of their material world. Vygotsky postulated a model to unite the demands of Spinoza's and Hegel's rational explanation to the psychic understanding of the processes of dramatic transformation of the soul which Spinoza sought and which Aristotle described in his book *Poetics*.

A basic element in the Vygotskian mediation model is the contribution of the social and instrumental processes to the construction of conscious processes, a contribution that he receives in large part from the tradition of historical materialism. But there was another element, which, as Jean-Paul Bronckart (2004) points out, led him to articulate science's requirement of explanation with hermeneutics' requirement of understanding. The analysis of subjective psychic processes that enable the dramatic action of inner language meets the second requirement; the analysis of the objective psychic processes that allow material action meet the first requirement. In this sense, Vygotsky characterized higher functions by their voluntary and determined nature. Therefore, in the study of these functions, he addressed not only the intellectual aspects (today we would say *cognitive*), but also the intentional and voluntary ones. Luria would investigate these directive processes in his experiments on

voluntary action, adopting expressions such as *directive function* and *executive function*.

For me, the most characteristic feature of Vygotsky's thought is the connection between the physical and the dramatic, the intellectual and the directive, the material determination and the mediated or *poetic* self-determination. And this unit tends to be lost in many analyzes of his work. Contemplating his life and work together allows not only perceiving him, but also reaching more precisely the theoretical heart of his proposal.

As we noted in the article already mentioned (DEL RÍO; ÁLVAREZ, 2007a), from a double quest – not only scientific, social and historical, but also poetic, personal and existential – Vygotsky sought to provide psychological science with self-determination, perhaps because, to be in agreement with its object (which is, at the same time, subject), such science must assume the entity not only of analyst, but also of character, of collectively self-determined conscience. For Vygotsky, psychology – rather, scientists or researcher psychologists – seems to be an important character in the historical drama with the maieutic task of unveiling consciousness, of scientifically clarifying the meaning of life and of illuminating the ways to create and develop more consciousness, in the same way *art* – rather, artists, creators – would fulfill its purpose trying to dramatically unveil the meaning of life and creating a kind of consciousness, of cultural operators on it.

Science tends to see its search process as something objective, as the *history of knowledge*, excluding the narrative processes of human protagonism. Nonetheless, science succumbs to the narrative led by heroes and myths, as demonstrated by Jaan Valsiner (1994). Although, through very absolute and abstract categories, we judge epochs, societies and distributed thought, they are always contingent on cultures, moments when the actions of individuals – particularly strategic and continued actions – have a role that

is limited, but that is sometimes deep and trigger of cultural processes. I think there are deviations in the history of ideas as well as in the material history of cultures and economies. I do not believe in a preset history following a scientifically and objectively described plan, a history with *good* theoretical *form*; nor do I believe that ultimately or totally and *personally* we make history, as psychology and idealist philosophy believed. Of course, there are historical conditionings, but there are choices and it is necessary to exercise them freely. By providing distributed social thought with intentions and models of thought and feeling (of mediators to change social processes themselves), the quest for self-determination and individual intentionality would have a real impact on collective historical processes. Thus, there would be a bridge to articulate personal protagonisms to collective ones and the personal transformations and asceticism to social transformations. Protagonism in history has a lot to do with the wish to exert it. As Roland Barthes (1986) says, “live tragically not those to whom life sends tragedies, but those who dare live them.” In other words, one must deserve tragedy and not just suffer it. In this sense, Vygotsky embraced tragedy and the challenge of doing a historical psychology. If he had not had that feeling of historical responsibility, he would probably have discovered the process of mediation, but he would not have produced this psychology. He would not have tried to propose this idea as support for reconfiguring human action in history.

This is a feeling (the depersonalized collective flow of history) that is also very present in the cultural-historical perspective. Some think that there is an orthodox cultural-historical psychology, including a Vygotskian one. Personally, I do not believe there is a single, prescribed line of the development of the historical thought and cultural stages, nor a single narrative or a single ladder. This is a deeply antievolutionist thought. This does not occur in biology, so why should it happen in history?

In this sense, I believe that, yes, Vygotsky lived his character thinking that his ideas could be decisive, but he did it not so much out of arrogance but more out of a sense of urgency.

It is curious to note that, in Vygotsky’s project, there was a deliberate concern for integrating very different subject fields, areas and human dimensions, which had traditionally been treated separately. Do you think that was the basis for the *new psychology* that he aimed to build?

Yes. Let us not forget that, despite the drama roots and vital and existential roots, Vygotsky was an intellectual and a rationalist, someone who responded a lot to what we call cognitive psychology today. He was essentially a man of reason seeking serious explanations. Sometimes, this is an uncomfortable contradiction to accept in Vygotsky, because we cannot take the intellectual and scientific logic of reasoning and analyze his systems only from there, forgetting everything else. Nor can we take *Vygotsky of the art* and reject *rational Vygotsky*, because Vygotsky was extremely rational. Such tension is very interesting: Vygotsky was able to see something and its opposite at the same time. And still he was not thrown off balance; instead he fell in love. This is an important feature: first of openness, of capability for exploration; and second, the mission of the human as a call for consistency, for getting to the bottom of the issue. This characteristic condemned him to do psychology and at the same time led him, as a good historical materialist, to apply his psychology to the future history of his own society.

Maybe this is naive and arrogant, but Vygotsky believed that *psychology* could enlighten humanity in its evolution, in which he differed perhaps from most Marxists with whom he lived in his time, who thought the *economy* or Marxism more ideologically applied would illuminate the historical path.

Such distinction would bring profound political problems because psychologists tried to do psychologies subordinated to economic Marxism (I do not mean Marxism as a general model of historical dialectics). And he was a Marxist of historical dialectics in general, but he was not so in the sense of thinking that psychology should be subordinate to economy. This is a very big debate.

We know that Vygotsky had to fight the pressures of Marxist orthodoxy. In your view, are these pressures still present today?

I think they have not finished. In my own experience, when I met eurocommunism in Europe, along with many professionals and a number of intellectuals, I faced the Marxist orthodoxy. We argued that culture and psychology are not reducible to an ideological model of Marxism.

Vygotsky thought that psychology could enlighten us. Perhaps it could enlighten us if it were more concerned with the existential question. But psychology became very little existential; it lives in the mirage of the buttons, the mechanistic mirage whereby each thing is in its box and all boxes are arranged so that we only have to open them and unveil them slowly by means of research, one by one, and everything has already been written, is already fixed in the genome, in physics or chemistry. In other words, rational explanations follow this reductionist path and existential explanations are forgotten because the question is not accepted, the challenge is not accepted. The tragic question does not exist, we do not have a meaning. We are more of an animal that will die, and there are chance and chaos as unconscious models behind that, which ultimately means that there is a renunciation to address the major research problems of psychology. And this becomes almost a paradigm, because psychology continues being a slave to physics and chemistry; it thinks that, in order to continue being scientific, it should not go out from there. There is still a huge inferiority

complex of human sciences and at the same time, an existential, antiexistential reaction of cowardice in the face of the challenge of the tragic. I apologize for the term *cowardice*: I am using it epistemically, without trying to judge intentions; I want to apply it not to people, but to the position towards science. Adopting such a position has to do not with personal virtues, but with the internalization of a way of understanding psychology, a way that I believe causes us harm.

Was Vygotsky an author who helped you orient yourself toward the existential questions?

Of course, one is guided by the authors that seem to address certain things in more depth. And that is the reason why Vygotsky, Unamuno, Zazzo and others inspired me. One is guided by the authors one intuitively that are focused not only on the cognitive, intellectual problem, but also on the problem that we can call existential from the point of view of philosophy, or simply evolutive or evolutionary from the point of view of biology, of life sciences. It is a non-inert science that understands the great movements of the cosmos, and we are involved in these movements.

You have just mentioned evolutionism. How do you see evolutionism in Vygotsky's work?

It is difficult. Vygotsky had an enormous intellectual appetite and therefore read about everything, from a wide variety of sources. First, he had a great education with tutors at home, a traditional literary humanist education and a very good philosophical, very Hegelian education. But in the end, his author was not Hegel. It was Spinoza. So in Vygotsky, there was on the one hand a large humanistic influence: art, drama, theater, poetry. On the other hand, there was another strong philosophical influence, which ultimately would be historical materialism and dialectical thought, the influence of Spinoza. And why do

I separate them? Because Spinoza enabled him to link to part of the artistic thought, which would be Calderón (an author he got to through Schopenhauer). But in Spinoza there is the problem of determinism and self-determination, which logically connects to the historical protagonism, i.e., the idea that “I can actually do something, I’m someone who can decide something; I am free first; so, if I’m free, I can determine my life and the course of history”. If we analyze this idea, it relates to the historical thought of Hegel, Marx and Engels. However, the connection sought by Vygotsky was not the one which traditional Marxists would generally establish, but a much more intimate connection with the problem of determinism.

These are the three best known influences and I always say that a fourth one has been forgotten, which is very evident when one reads *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology* or *Tool and Sign*: the influence of ecofunctional thought. Vygotsky postulated the problem of consciousness and functions from the animal world. Animals are in the environment, and are prisoners of the present. How does a prisoner of the present living a concrete life become a free being, endowed with consciousness and able to circulate through the past, the present and the future? That interferes and transforms this world? Of course, the basic origin of mediation is in biology, in the ecofunctional model. And the affiliation between Vygotsky, biology and the ecofunctional thought has not been sufficiently examined.

But he does not follow that path much either. Once he developed his model, he was more concerned with another type of things – defectology, child development, higher functions, neurology – and he returned to the drama. The Vygotskian model of mediation, however, remains strong, as he secures it very well in biology.

In your opinion, is such strong theoretical framework in biology a limitation or an advantage?

An advantage. Many of the problems that we have in psychology in general or in the cultural-historical perspective with Vygotsky’s work are due to people forgetting that and reading Vygotsky in a rather mentalist way – the symbol, the sign, language. It is a mistake to read the language as if it were a world of thought which has nothing to do with biology. Sometimes I read articles from people of the current Evolutionary Psychology who work more on the natural functions and find a greater connection of thought and language with biology than the one that many Vygotskian or many historical-cultural psychologists find, which is worrying – not for them, but for us.

You state that the concept of mediation is related to the ecofunctional thought and that Vygotsky also has ties with the Marxist, Hegelian, and Aristotelian thoughts. So does he have these two roots, both in biology and in philosophy?

Yes. Like all of us, Vygotsky is the son of his time and, therefore, of intellectual heritages. Such intellectual heritages always have a bright side and a limited one, because no thought can be so good as to encompass everything. Then, he handled the heritages he received, and had to combine them, face them, resolve them. But the fact that Vygotsky is Russian, that his disciples developed their work in the Soviet Union, conditioned a lot how he was read. And, yes, he was a prisoner of that, indeed, a voluntary prisoner, because he was a convinced revolutionary who believed in historical thinking and dialectical thinking. But he did not believe it completely, and did not let himself be dragged by the Marxist regularity of the single line, of the lack of protagonism and relevance of individual life and liberty. Someone who thinks about Spinoza and Calderón can never accept the loss of liberty, much less of intellectual freedom.

It would be interesting if you please discuss the sometimes dogmatic and ideological readings

that people do of the Vygotskian legacy itself or of what is, in a sense, *legitimized* by the cultural-historical paradigm. How is the relationship between ideology and science established?

To do science, it is necessary to free oneself from ideology. I remember that, when René Zazzo moderated the discussions in the laboratory and, to address a topic, someone invoked an ideological argument – he was a communist and everyone knew it, which caused a bit of complicity on the part of the left and the recourse to Marxist ideology as an authority argument – he got frantic: “We’re talking about science and here we don’t accept any arguments which are not scientifically grounded”.

It is terrific that being a Marxist makes one have a greater concern for social justice, for ensuring that child workers do not receive discriminatory treatment in their development. But, to analyze things scientifically, you cannot invoke an authority argument because of ideology. And this is happening because people are imposing one reading of Vygotsky as if there were a single Vygotsky legitimized by a historical materialist scientific orthodoxy, which implies a certain ideological authority argument, an implicit court (and let’s not forget that at the time there were explicit dictates and Vygotsky was censored). We are all prone to this type of thought: making ideas clear, and finding a more orthodox Vygotsky than he really was. This is a misconception because Vygotsky is very contradictory at times. He overcomes some of his own *a priori*s and others he does not. And he manages to break other *a priori*s of his time with great lucidity, such as the normalization of functions. Somehow, we build on inherited brain structures and, therefore, we are prisoners of these structures. In terms of neurology, that is what Luria called the *pitcher theory* or *crystal theory*: my experiences in my brain are structured on the neural networks that I have, and the networks that developed ontogenetically. So my pitcher

is different from your pitcher. The fact that prior structures condition is something we must take into account. Sometimes during one’s life, one manages to break a prior structure and rebuild it, which is very difficult. Usually the new scientific generation does it: “Well, these people have done this by applying a very regular structure; it is necessary to break it and create a more powerful one”.

We Vygotskians surely are prisoners of many of these structures. Vygotsky would have rejected deeply that the cultural-historical psychologists did Vygotskian psychology only and did not follow other lines of psychology, because he said that there is only one psychology. That is, if the cultural-historical model or the mediation model is powerful, it has to integrate into the rest of psychology, and the rest of psychology will have to recognize it and be integrated into it.

This is a mirror problem: cognitivists think that nothing useful will ever come from Vygotskians, so they do not read them or do not know how to read them. This establishes a double rejection: when someone rejects you, you also reject him or her, and this leads to growing ignorance. This is happening and it is a tragedy, because cognitive psychology has many positive things, but they do not know and do not understand the model of higher functions, for example.

What you say applies not only to different schools and internal lines of psychology, but also to the dialogue of psychology with other fields of knowledge. That is something that Vygotsky did and we do not know how to do yet.

Yes. Faustino Córdón, another one of my professors was an ecofunctional biologist. I am not a biologist, but I learned a lot in a seminar with Córdón, who was working on the evolution of protoplasm and discovered the first enzyme. This is something that people did more in my youth and that they now do less

and less. I know many psychologists who say “I only work with the memory of propositions or autobiographical memory, and do not take me outside that”. Scopes are highly reduced. And Cordón said: “There is only one science”. He is known for having worked on tetanus and developed drugs in the laboratory. That is, he worked with very basic feeding processes, enzymes and stuff. And he said the following: “In the end, feeding allowed me to understand the evolution of species. There is a close relationship between the concrete and broader themes. And if you do not go all this way, in fact, you will understand neither feeding (that you were examining at the concrete level), nor evolutionism”.

In fact, this problem is not limited to psychology: it exists in the humanities in general. Currently, there are very interesting works by geneticists, sociologists, anthropologists and historians who analyze issues similar to the ones Vygotsky studied (such as the subject’s protagonism, non-subservience to social determinism, and the dialectical relationship with culture), which could help to advance the debate. Many researchers do not make these links and the few who dare make them are often considered insane. But in his time Vygotsky made them with great competence and constancy. In the contemporary world, what are the barriers for this necessary dialogue to take place and for other advances to occur in the field of science?

The debate on whether sciences have to open is very difficult today because we do not have time, we are in an obstacle course. It is more important to go fast than to go in the right direction, because people believe that an appropriate direction is any direction that produces patents and articles. There is a productivity mechanism according to which any race is valid, provided that it produces an object. Today there are many myths and this is one of the difficulties of science, because if you are working on a profound question,

you cannot investigate it. The problem is that thought processes are long and medium-term, while the evaluation systems are short-term. So there is a mismatch between the mechanisms of measurement and the mechanisms of processes. There is a methodological reductionism. The methods of accountability count very badly but believe in their apparatus of counting, in their rule of measure. We live in a very painful and superstitious stage of science: people have mistaken the method for the methodology, the construct for the theory, the facts for the data. We have no time to talk, even among educators and among psychologists; talking with sociologists and biologists is even harder. And this has greatly impoverished research.

In the field of the cultural-historical perspective, the tradition of interdisciplinarity has also been present. When the *Society for Sociocultural Research* met in Madrid in 1992 (then in Geneva in 1996, and in Campinas in 2000), we tried to provoke an interdisciplinary dialogue and retrieve cultural historical thought in the progress made in the various disciplines, and very especially, in different cultures and in different languages. There was an orientation explicitly open to other currents. The idea was to disseminate the cultural-historical thought sharing it with other currents, perspectives and schools. We focused on redoing the agenda and seeing what the problems of the future would be. There was then another society: ISCRAT (*International Society for Cultural Research and Activity Theory*), in a trajectory more closely linked to the continuity of the cultural-historical thought developed in the former Soviet Union and Europe. Both merged into ISCAR (*International Society for Cultural and Activity Research*), which required an effort of dialogue so that the goals of continuity and openness converged.

Although my own personal circumstances have conditioned my activity and kept me somewhat away from conferences in recent years, which prevents me from having updated information, I am concerned that

the intercultural and interlinguistic – and perhaps the interdisciplinary – orientation has lost vitality. Perhaps we Vygotskians have converted ourselves into one more subject area, into a more self-limited parcel of the scientific community, also getting submerged, as everyone in the process of fragmentation, parceling and subordination of science. Perhaps as an effect of still focusing too much on a historical legacy, rather than on its shortcomings, we have succumbed to the limitations of conventional disciplinary parcels and their inability to face the great evolutionary and epistemological problems of human sciences.

Personally, I am concerned that the communities of researchers can collect and reissue today the challenges Vygotsky proposed to himself nearly a century ago: what is the human species and what are its cultures?; where have we come from, and above all where are we going, where can we go? How can the challenges of research on our historical evolution as a process that is open and partly accessible to our capacity for self-determination and design defy all science, including in it the Vygotskian legacy?

Shall we talk a little about the implications of your field of research and study for education? Was it you who developed the notion of cultural developmental milestones?

I developed this notion with Amelia Alvarez (1996). Although we have known and worked with Urie Bronfenbrenner, the idea only partially corresponds to the *systems* postulated by him. The concept of *milestone* is a little more linked, on the one hand, to the traditional models of ecofunctionalism and, on the other, to the Vygotskian study of mediation mechanisms in cultures. I believe Bronfenbrenner sought to make an orderly description, a categorical description of contexts of development, which partly satisfies the current efforts of evolutionary psychology, considering what the word *context* – the most used one – implies as

conditioning of child development. Furthermore, the term *development contexts* denotes a too circumstantial focus because it is secondary. Our concern is directed to a more functional analysis of the culture in which children develop, because we understand them as immersed not only in one context or another, but in an extracortical network of functions which are shared and embedded in culture.

This concept is very interesting and so is the way you see change, socio-historical evolution, unsettled evolution, fragmentation, that is, your psychoecological approach.

For me, the models of exosystem or macrosystem, albeit acceptable in terms of abstract description, have always struck me as somewhat undefined at the time of intervention, when you need to make drawings and performances on activities and functions more related to the psychologist's traditional instruments (diagnostic evidence and mediation tools for reeducation or development). Sometimes valid concepts as explanatory or explanatory categories are not operational, operative in diagnosis or drawing. This happens with Leontiev's trio: *activity, action and operation*.

When I teach *activity* to students, I use Leontiev and the example of writing a love letter. In this case, pressing a key is the operation, typing is the action and writing a love letter is the activity. And they understand the activity system perfectly. Leontiev's model is beautiful and works very well when you explain it. When I try to see it in the daily life of pre-school children or in the lives of indigenous people, I begin to have problems, because it occurs with it the same that happens to concepts in general: every concept can be the attribute of another concept. In turn, every attribute is a concept and every concept can be the attribute of a concept. Therefore, every activity can be the action of another activity and every operation can be an activity by itself, because once I have transferred the meaning

and emotions to a particular action, that action becomes an activity. Therefore, models are useful for analyzing and understanding, but you must take care when you convert them into universal theoretical models.

In the Soviet debate, they were hard pressed by the need for orthodoxy, to have a settled model, because all political models have the habit of classifying the world into good and evil, into accepted and not accepted, which was very harmful even to Leontiev himself. Leontiev is a great psychologist, a very intelligent person, but he was a prisoner of the obligation to provide the political regime with clear references, of having to build an orthodox psychology accepted by the regime. And this always distorts things. Now we are researching the cultural *diets*, the imaginary and the media, and we do not wish to describe them as exosystems, although this was expected, since we apply Bronfenbrenner's taxonomy. In this sense, models, especially the hierarchical and classificatory ones, are initially very useful and operate as crutches that allow approaching problems, but one must be very careful. Paper allows wrapping up the gift, but it is necessary to see that the paper is not the structure: it is the wrapper, something that allows me to handle the gift. In this sense, I am very cautious, for example, with the activity theme. Criticizing Leontiev became possible during the *Perestroika*, when there could be a debate on the orthodox model of activity, when Jaroshevsky and others postulated what is what in the dialectical model of analysis. I cannot, for example, convert the object of analysis, which is activity, into an explanatory *object* of the *activity*. That is, nothing can be the means and the end simultaneously. The means to explain the activity is mediation. Therefore, the explanatory principle is *mediation* and the object is the *activity*. Leontiev fell for this because he was under a lot of pressure from the context in which he lived.

I think that, to be loyal to the cultural-historical perspective, one should treat it in an

unorthodox way, but in a critical or even rebellious way. One must free oneself a little from certain constraints that the very history of cultural-historical perspective has created. And to me the *activity* continues being a key concept. I speak of activity from ecofunctionalism, not from the cultural-historical theory. Why? Because activity was a central concept before the cultural-historical theory, and will remain so. Therefore, it is important to avoid sacred words. I am concerned that there is an orthodoxy in the cultural-historical perspective and I think this is a problem that involves freedom. Among researchers who rely on this paradigm, I believe there is a line more open to other subjects and currents of psychology and another line trying to work within a perfectly defined and self-sufficient theoretical model. It is in this sense that I recollected the initial objectives of the SSCR (*Society for Sociocultural Research*), that is, returning to the sources, the issues which Vygotsky proposed and which humanity – and psychology, as their assistant science – have proposed today. In other words, what are the problems of human beings that we should continue investigating at the moment? In what way? And what social and cultural problems need addressing? I believe this could be the future development of such perspective.

You raised the question of meaning. Thinking about the units of analysis proposed by Vygotsky to explain the psychological functioning – mediated action, word, meaning, sense – is it possible to examine the activity from the viewpoint of sense?

Yes. He was accused of being inconsistent because he did not have the same unit of analysis, the same object of analysis. But we all have to be free, and so was he. Now I am interested in the sense just as he begins to address it in *The Psychology of Art*; then, when he was studying the first step of semiotic mediation, comes the sign in examples such as the bone, vestigial functions, the ring moved

from one hand to the other or the handkerchief. When analyzing semiotic mediation in the second step, he deals with the meaning and soon goes back to the sense, at the end of the last chapter of *Thought and Language*. In fact, mediation is on the agenda all the time. What happens is that he addresses different levels of mediation. When Vygotsky discusses the meaning, there is a passage in which he says something like this: "In the beginning, I was interested in the reference role, what the sign replaced, the thing. I was therefore interested in the external meaning, but now it does not interest me. That is, I am interested in what the vision of the situation generates in the mind and the attitude in the face of an action, the ideas, the feelings". This is what he called phasic level before the semantic level. With that, he returns to the sense, but it is not the sense present at the beginning of *The Psychology of Art*; ten years later, Vygotsky has a mediational architecture on which the sense can be sustained.

Akhutina and Luria postulated that, deep down, he never came out of that same axis of mediation, but he gradually focused on different aspects, and thus had to change the object of analysis to bring such process to light. That is, the object of analysis is precisely different aspects of mediation. Actually, if we have sense, sign, meaning and sense, there is not much change. But some of the debates have been very scholastic, assuming a unique and timeless Vygotskian legacy – and not a process with several transformations – and intending to find a complete and univocal articulated model. I agree with Akhutina and Luria that Vygotsky was consistent in this transition. He was doing not contradictory things, but consecutive things, which allowed him to approach the problem in different layers of solution or approach: at a moment, Vygotsky unveils the role of mediation, roughly speaking, of art; at another moment, he takes into account the sign, operators; then the operators are no longer artifact-object operators but operators

of meaning – it is the concept; and finally it is no longer the concept that is at issue, but again the sense, now formulated on the basis of concepts and no longer of the initial sense – love, death. One must understand, therefore, how Vygotsky peels off his onion. He used to write straight with crooked lines his model of cultural evolution, mediation, construction of this sense, of this world, of this drama in mind, and he showed with what elements he gradually built it. Sometimes the elements stand, and sometimes they fall because he was mistaken, he had forced something. But the model stands: although he did not see his path well, he made his way as he could, just as we all do. Therefore, it is very important to capture the sense in Vygotsky, rather than the meaning. Are the debates on orthodoxy debates on meaning? Conviction about a theoretical model is a problem of sense, and it is at the level of sense that I consider myself a Vygotskian. I do not consider myself linked to any of the specific proposals in terms of meaning, that is, I have not signed an orthodoxy or a blank check.

Beyond dogmatism and the lack of openness to interdisciplinary dialogue, today research conditions do not favor the development of longitudinal studies (like those on memory that Luria developed following subjects for decades). Are the challenges imposed to construct research programs that allow us to study the human condition bigger these days?

In this sense, as for interdisciplinary dialogue, dialogue within the Vygotskian perspective and openness of science, we must open many windows, many doors. The stage of dissemination is over and the people interested in the perspective already have enough texts and forums to get acquainted with it. More than working with ready ideas, what we seek is to resume the points of conflict in the cultural-historical thought, in which there is a promise, but there are also obstacles, problems. In other words, the Vygotskian perspective has to get lost

to find itself, has to learn to open the door. In that sense, what you have mentioned is correct, i.e., there is an excessive fear of talking with the others. Of course this is also due to the others' prejudices against talking with us. There has always been prejudice, and we all have to make efforts. We need to regain dialectical vitality, cultural vitality, the vitality of an investigator with historical consciousness. And that takes us to long-term investigations. The entire apparatus of the current academic research is fostering short and medium-term investigations and requiring short-term productivity. This is ominous. It may make sense in areas in which science is subjected to technology, as in the programs of drug development or explanation of a gene, in which one works with an agenda much more marked by industrial productivity. Science and efficacy have different times, but we can understand.

Now, in social processes that, by definition, are medium and long term, technology has to be submitted to science. For example, the cultural-historical or cultural-genetic activity on rising generations is generational. So we are talking about average cycles of 10, 15, 20 years. The ontogeny of a child consists of cycles of 3, 5, 10 years. The processes of cultural influence of what may be called the natural history of culture, of the effects of television and literature on science itself, which also applies to content analysis to see how scientific ideas can diffuse or not, are medium and long-term cycles. In social processes, we have the advantage that, as there is no industry, nothing rushes us. But they do not give us money for it either. Yet they have applied to us the short-term expectation.

Indeed, Luria did tremendously important investigations for many years on the mind of a mnemonist and also on a man who lost his memory and whose world was thus destroyed. There is a work by Umberto Eco (*The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*) in which the protagonist does not know who he is and starts to read the books and comics from his childhood to try to understand how

he became himself, making his way backwards. It is a wonderful novel, beautifully constructed from some autobiographical memories and memories of the culture of the author's time. Eco makes a kind of literary inquiry, while Luria presents a scientific inquiry into the culture of an entire era. I greatly admire doctors because they manage to do wonderful investigations, because if they have a patient for 15 years, they have a loyalty to the individual which after all is a loyalty to the topic. Oliver Sacks is also an investigator of single cases and can reach the depths. This has been lost in research. I worry a lot with the construction of the imagery and narratives. To study them, we need to make very long and massive investigations. Today researchers are under great pressure to perform projects in a short period of time, preferably on topics in vogue (which generally offer more possibility of funding for research). Thus, many end up having a fragmented and reductionist agenda, which makes it very difficult to track the important questions.

To work around this situation, researchers devote themselves to doing unofficial investigations and use the time of their nights and vacations. They have to maintain the continuity in spite of the system, because it has lost orientation, it is fragmented due to effectiveness and does not know where to go. In Spain, we have increased scientific productivity because there have been many more articles indexed in high impact journals. But does this really mean that we are investigating more, doing more research and finding out more? In a study led by Amelia Álvarez with directors and evaluators of scientific journals, several of them pointed to the existence of much empirical stuff, i.e., articles that have all the measurements of the apparatus of accountability, productivity, but contributed virtually nothing to research. And the vast majority of the studies published are like that. Politicians claim to measure immediately with simple tools what can only be measured in a long process and with complex instruments. I remember that when I was a member of research committees, the guidelines

for evaluating projects and researchers sought to ensure that they would discover something new and relevant, but at the same time to ensure that the investigator was updated and followed the authors who had made the most recent advances in the subject. Ultimately, what they ask is the assurance that the work assessed has approved exactly what already exists, so that nothing new comes out of there.

No doubt, we live a very bleak moment, and this whole situation has probably affected your production. You have a long and relevant academic career. Could you please tell us what the way out of this state of affairs is – if there is one?

I do not think my career is relevant. I want to believe that my quest and my intuitions are so, but my empirical investigations have been greatly affected by all sorts of conditionings. Many of those conditionings are the result of my own choices and limitations, while others may be due to institutional constraints and deformations. In general, I have been sensitized and affected by the institutional machinery, which is largely our own collective responsibility, the academics' responsibility. For example, when I began to investigate the external brain – which is what I perceive as the most relevant in my search – and submitted the project of what we might call exoneuropsychology from the perspective of the model of functions distributed outside the mind, it was rejected. I was evaluated three times in a row. I heard that, when the director of the evaluation institution saw the rejection and the project, he wondered: "How could they reject it?" It seemed to him that the rejection was not consistent; he resubmitted the project twice to two other evaluators and they rejected it again. Of course, the currents of neuropsychology in Spain are very conventional: they do not accept neurogenesis and do not accept extracorticality.

It is not easy to make research in neuropsychology feasible without resources.

Topics such as neurogenesis, on which I wanted to seek empirical evidence, are very difficult to investigate if you do not have resources and access to hospitals. Also when we postulated the cultural construction or destruction of attention, the project was rejected again. They argued: "How will we argue that attention is not an innate process? There is no evidence of that". It is not true that there is no evidence. All the arguments of the evaluators were quite debatable because the evidence accumulates in the other direction. I counter-argued, but they did not fund the project.

In Spain, although we have managed to homologate certain healthy procedures, there is always sectarianism: a behaviorist rejects a Freudian, a Freudian rejects a behaviorist, a behaviorist and a Freudian reject a cognitivist, and vice versa. As far as I could and knew, whenever I evaluated, I took care not to be influenced by the work done from the point of view of a particular orientation. But I must say that, in the evaluations of many colleagues, I saw epistemic, methodological, and even institutional and ideological positions operating. When someone is working productively and legitimately, whatever the perspective, this matters a lot. No one is vaccinated against sectarianism, and the claim that there is only a ruler to measure is now as dangerous as the Marxist orthodoxy was to Vygotsky. At the moment, we live in a free and democratic world. But is there complete freedom in academia? I do not think so. We have been unable to eliminate historically constructed prejudices and they will continue to accompany us for many years.

In this sense, we must constantly struggle for the freedom to investigate what you believe is necessary to investigate. I continued interested in neurogenesis and in the cultural processes of construction and deconstruction of attention, doing what I could. Clearly, I lack the means, but I think it would be worse to accept the price of conditioned resources. The current generations of researchers in Spain face a scenario like this: they keep jumping

a series of obstacles and passing through a series of narrowings. Once you accept this game, you are imprisoned in a very narrow way. A part of the new generations has agreed to pay the price of the academic career and is very constrained by this kind of issues. We need to regain freedom. And sometimes you pay a price for it, which is the price of the struggle, of being discriminated against and having fewer resources. But what you cannot afford is the internal price of renouncing your themes, hypotheses and ideas.

Finally, could you please talk a little about your studies related to neurogenesis, an extremely interesting topic to which you have dedicated yourself for a long time?

Somehow, we are all fed and strengthened by the *a priori* of the mentality and the paradigms of our time, and yet we are their prisoners. The blessing and the curse of human beings come with their culture, whereas the blessing and the curse of scientists come with the knowledge they inherit. The role of science is to receive the inheritance, but to overcome its *a priori*. To overcome them, however, it is necessary to start from them.

The *a priori* that excluded and that stopped the neurogenesis hypothesis is that the brain is an artifact, a stable organ: in phylogeny we have reached brain, cortical development, and a stability was produced; in individual contingencies, there is neuronal damage, but there is not a new neuronal growth, i.e., there are new synapses, but there is no neurogenesis. And all metaphors are of the following type: the brain resembles the computer and, thus, it has hardware and software. Such *a priori* generate a thought that conditions our ideas about development. The very development of the cultural-historical perspective is a prisoner of the hypothesis of non-neurogenesis, established in medicine, neurology and psychology since Cajal's histology, since the early years of the twentieth century.

In his last writings on brain structure, when he was studying medicine, Vygotsky intuited that there are brain changes. He did not present the idea explicitly, because he had no time to do the second formulation after the model of higher functions. These are culturally constructed through mediation, and Vygotsky coined two concepts to account for this, although they do not actually explain the process: *appropriation* and *interiorization*. When an external operation – such as the multiplication table, the sight that works with the image or the external look – turns into an inward operation, there is a passage process. The Russian term for interiorization means many things – interiorization, revolution, reconstruction – but it has always been translated as *internalization*, which makes it appear that you take inside what is outside. This is a more complex concept, but in any case a cyclic external operation becomes internal. In this process, does something happen to the brain? This is the question that Vygotsky asked himself in his last two years, when the brain was his study subject. And he thought that if the cultural-historical theory fails to demonstrate what happens in the brain, it is more of a theory of mental character. This would lead therefore to the dualism, the separation between body and mind. He did not coin the concept of neurogenesis, but he began to approach it.

Hence also the explanation about growth in layers and deterioration, which has remained throughout the neuropsychology of recovery and was developed by Luria's school: the hypothesis that the construction of new cortical layers has a logic in the constitution of higher functions: depending on whether lesions are in the deep layers or in the external layers, the consequences on the performance of a higher function are distinct. Therefore, this hypothesis assumes that there is neurogenesis. And Luria was very loyal to Vygotsky in terms of authorship concerning the hypothesis of brain growth. Based on this, Luria and many of his contributors worked with the idea that

higher functions imply brain growth, the emergence of new cortical areas, something that has been demonstrated. And for them, these areas are not characterized by traditional localizationism, but by a development of mechanisms. What we call operators of instrumental mediation – the abacus, for example – in Luria’s neuropsychology became neurological mechanisms. Such mechanisms have locations and can be traced in neurology and neuropsychology works, but basically are integrated into very articulate systems. Vygotsky also said this already: functions usually reverberate throughout much of the brain, and not in a single place.

This whole brain architecture in which Vygotsky advanced in Luria led to the evidence of neurogenesis. However, these are Soviet studies that are disseminated only in the West. As far as I know of Luria’s work, I am sure that neurogenesis exists and that this is the only way. The evidence on neurogenesis has accumulated over the past five years. There is research on how new cortical areas appear in Buddhist monks after ten years of meditation or in the famous London taxi drivers after years of practicing their profession.

Can we assert that neurogenesis has been consolidated as a field of study? Could you please comment on the latest research on the subject?

Neurologists and biologists are doing research on neurogenesis. Bauer and Altman demonstrated neurogenesis in animals in the 1970s, but their publications were not taken seriously until the 1990s. At the moment, Altman is already recognized as a historical figure in the development of neurology. So far, there are two things: neurogenesis is a natural mechanism in animals, whose brain is mutating. If we add this to what Bruner calls phylogenetic immaturity, based on the investigation by De Vore about prematurity in human childbirth in the phylogenetic process or phylogenetic

miscarriage, it is possible to understand that Vygotsky was right and that most of the brain growth after childbirth is neurogenetic, caused by the incorporation of higher functions. In other words, much of our neurogenesis is not the result of a purely natural system, but of a combined system of biological development mediated by culture.

We distinguish three memory systems. The first two are the genetic system (genome), which influences the conformation of the brain, and the nervous system, by means of which the brain incorporates knowledge. When the organism dies, the knowledge provided by the second of these systems disappears, but the genome continues. Thus, both systems complement each other: one of them (the brain) is very flexible and the other is very rigid; one is very stable and the other is very unstable. These two systems work very well, but Vygotsky points to the existence of a third one: culture, which performs social and instrumental mediations. Indeed, from the functional and psychological point of view, there are functions that are performed in culture. And if neurogenesis is right, such a system is incorporated into the second, working from the outside and restructuring the cortical system.

This piece of news is tremendously important because it implies that the system of human evolution consists of three parts and the brain actively responds to both the requirements of the genome and those of culture (of *culturome*, we might say, to establish a terminological equivalence). These are not three shares in parallel, but three parts which interact. The interaction between the second system and the first one today is a fascinating and very complex topic with which biology is still struggling. Research is underway and will still be for a long time. But the relations between the second and the third system are the ones that have opened the way for the last five or ten years.

Neurogenesis has become evident, not just to Luria’s school, but also to the West. Yet,

most of the people who work on neuroscience lack the key to the distinction between natural function and higher function as well as the key to understanding how neurogenesis is related to such distinction and that many of the human neurogeneses (not all, obviously, because there are still neurogeneses of natural functions, so to speak, of animal character – when you receive a new leg, you can reconstruct the movement) are related to higher functions, i.e., they are culturally activated neurogeneses. This is the line we are in, without the necessary resources. I must say that we remain exploring the terrain, rather than doing an effective job. In any case, we try to understand the functions distributed externally and make a diagnosis of them, since the functional research has focused

almost exclusively on internally corticalized functions. Thus, our intention is to objectify the externalized functions and the interactions between the internal and external functions.

As you can see, the relation between the study of external neuropsychology and internal neuropsychology is the most direct development to be implemented from Vygotsky's theoretical proposal, taken globally. It is to map and articulate, in every individual and in every culture, the functional tissues distributed externally and internally. In both cases, the process is evolutionary: culture changes and so does the brain. So for us, there is not much distance between cultural psychology, as proposed by Cole, and neuropsychology, as proposed by Luria in his last work of vital reflection (1979).

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This bibliography is organized into four sections:

1. Cultural ecopsychology (current theme of the author's research);
2. Education from the cultural-historical perspective;
3. General problems (issues of cultural psychology for art and drama, emotion, identity, media and effects of culture);
4. Compilations, translations and editions (the work of Vygotsky and other authors of the historical-cultural perspective).

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