

## Not all that glitters is Marx: analysis of Stalinist critiques of Vigotski within the Soviet science<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In Brazil, there has been remarkable growth of the “activity theory”, whose foundation is associated especially to the Russian researcher Leontiev (1903-1979). This has been done in direct connection with the notion that Vigotski, Luria and Leontiev composed a *troika*, responsible for Cultural-Historical Theory as well as Activity Theory. The purpose of this article is to start a discussion on the truthfulness of this narrative from an analysis of the context in which it is arranged: (1) the content of the Stalinist criticism of Vigotski 1931-7, (2) the construction of the Stalinist Science by the Soviet regime, (3) the political and cultural contrasts between the 1920s and 1930s – especially regarding the establishment of Marxism-Leninism and pragmatism as main features of Stalinist regime. The text is intended to highlight the vigotskian ideas and lines of work condemned by the Stalinists critics and their potential impact in Soviet psychology developed in the 1930s.

**Keywords:** Leontiev, cultural-historical and activity theory, activity theory, stalinism, stalinist science.

Brazilian psychology and education have been greatly interested in activity theory. Its basis is associated especially with Russian researcher Aleksei Nikolaevitch Leontiev (1903-1979), and it expanded so considerably through historical-critical pedagogy that its status of a Marxist research paradigm for education is now claimed (Duarte, 2003). However, as the frog that became a bull (Vygotsky, 1991), I believe the expansion of activity theory has been careless with respect to the understanding of its meaning within the Soviet society. Among Portuguese-speaking Marxist commentators, its dissemination is almost without any criticism (with the exception of the work by João Batista Martins) for the version of the relationship between Vygotsky, Luria and Leontiev as a *troika*, a trio responsible for the elaboration of historical-cultural psychology. Vygotsky’s and Luria’s psychology are then merged with Leontiev’s activity theory.

Although an assessment of the reasons behind the growth of activity theory, its theoretical ideas and the scope of its applications within the Brazilian context are not part of the purposes of this article, a few brief observations about the *hagiographic narrative* can be made. In spite of the lack of a historical foundation and the theoretical complexity of the relationship between the authors, the narrative has continuously linked the names of Vygotsky and Leontiev.

The decisive participation of A. R. Luria (deceased in 1977) and Aleksei Nikolaevitch Leontiev (1903-1979) in the edition and commentary to Vygotsky, which gained

momentum after the Stalinist “thaw”, has been widely recognized worldwide. Yasnitsky (2009) attributed the strong impulse to the *troika*’s narrative after the publication of many texts in honor of the (powerful) Luria and Leontiev at the end of their lives. Memories, public presentations and interviews given by the authors, in addition to publications of their students such as Davydov and Radzikhovskii at the time of their teacher’s deaths, compose an uncritical apology (similarly to Golder, 2004, widely quoted in Brazil). In the Soviet Union (USSR), from the mid-1970s and early 1980s, the historical theory of the *troika* (Yasnitsky, 2009) started to gain momentum, and it was at that instant as well that the Soviet psychology began to expand in our country.

The work of Yasnitsky (2009) attributes to Luria and Leontiev the “hagiographic” narrative of the *troika*, with posterior reconstructions and interpretations carried out specially by A. A. Leontiev (son of Aleksei Nikolaevitch), responsible for its first systematic presentation. The same author analyzes many aspects related to the transformations of the informal network of researches that surrounded Vygotsky, the “Vygotsky Circle”, between 1924-1941, pointing out many inconsistencies in the hagiographic narrative (Yasnitsky & Ferrari, 2008a, 2008b) and showing the diversity and multiplicity of the professional connections established by the author.

The Leontiev family is still active in the field of humanities through Aleksei Nikolaevitch’s grandson, Dmitri A. Leontiev, followed especially by E. Sokolova (Leontiev, Leontiev, & Sokolova, 2005). These researchers maintain many connections in Russia and abroad. Thus, the history of the *troika* disseminated even among Marxist readers—in spite of its indifference towards a dialectic analysis of the social reality in which it was created. As a result, Vygotskian psychology is widely mentioned as the work

<sup>1</sup> Funding information: National Council for Scientific and Technological Development. Registration number 140259/2011-2.

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of the great scientists-missionaries, who, such as the Baron Munchausen, saved themselves from the sea of authoritarianism of the Soviet regime holding on to their own hairs<sup>2</sup>.

To the benefit of a new interpretation for the changing network of personal and professional relationships established by Vygotsky and his many collaborators, a “revisionist revolution” of the history of the Soviet psychology is taking place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the contribution of many authors such as Anton Yasnitsky, Ekaterina Zavershneva, René van der Veer, Jennifer Fraser and Michel Ferrari. We may question if its impact is strong enough for it to be considered a “revolution”, but we need to acknowledge the importance of the analysis of new references about the history of the Soviet science, especially those of N. Krementsov, together with older and more renowned references (Bauer, 1952; Joravsky, 1961, 1989), which were hardly studied in Brazil. They support the construction of a reliable historiography based on primary sources, reinforced by the considerable flow of files from the Soviet Union that were open starting from the late 1980s.

The study of new references is an essential task for the development of a critical Vygotskian psychology, based on Marxism, taking into account the Brazilian reality within the world context of popular struggles. Moreover, it needs to see its own constitutional process and aim at overcoming the authoritarian elements that characterize the dissemination and interpretation of Vygotsky’s legacy in the Soviet Union and abroad. With the premise that not all that glitters is Marx, the gold of the left-wing—but it could be Stalin, a load of pyrite—I carried out the post-doctoral research described here as a series of articles (three in Portuguese and three in English; these last ones are chronologically older).

This first article in Portuguese (which is the third in the chronological order) outlines the scientific-political context in which the criticisms to A. N. Leontiev to L. S. Vygotsky are organized, which will be analyzed in a future article focused on the production of the first author in the 1930s.

In order to stratify the many levels of analysis, whenever possible I use the study of the original texts in Russian (and/or compare the translations), the historical research and the research of commentators of Soviet psychology. Following Joravsky (1955, p. 3), I acknowledge that two types of casual factors are observed: a) in the published works; and b) in those that act from a distance and that are harder to assess, such as the interests of the party in science

2 Yasnitsky (2009, p.10-11) states that the “starting point” of Leontiev’s canonical version is the encounter of the three founding fathers that formed the *troika* in 1924. A second alliance was formed with the inclusion of the *pyaterka* (“the five”): Zaporozhets, Bozhovich, Levina, Morozova and Slavina. These eight individuals would have formed the “Vygotsky School”. Without any further detail, it is mentioned that Luria, Leontiev, Zaporozhets and Bozhovich leave for Kharkov. There, Galperin, P. Zinchenko, Asnin, Khomenko and Lukov join them to form the Kharkov School. Luria soon returned to Moscow, and Leontiev started to head all the administrative and research activities until his return to Moscow in 1935 (Leontiev, Leontiev, & Sokolova, 2005).

and the totalitarian social structure that was developed in the USSR.

## The Stalinist “Great Break”

Krementsov (1997, p. 31) states that the year of 1929 was the beginning of a dramatic change—in the words of Stalin himself, the *Great Break (Velikii Perelom)*—in all aspects of the country’s life. The parallel systems of the bourgeois and communist science were unified, creating space for the *nomenklatura*—according to Krementsov, “a list of positions that could not be occupied or vacated without the permission of the appropriate party committee” (1997, p. 40, translated by me)—that encompassed all institutional levels.

The freedom of the 1920s, which extended to all cultural spheres, was revoked to benefit the transformation of the “Marxism-Leninism” into a state ideology—which became official in 1929. For Netto, its accurate, succinct and precise synthesis would come in 1938, with the classic “Dialectical and Historical Materialism” (1938):

Following the problematic reflection of the last Engels (the Engels of *Anti-Dühring*, of *Dialectics of Nature* and of *Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of classical German philosophy*), and repeating the disputable affirmations of Lenin in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, Stalin thinks of dialectics in a simple and rough way. (Netto, 1982, p. 18, highlights by the author).

The totalitarian fusion between State and Party attributed to the latter the definition of the “correct” lines for socialism’s construction, strongly hierarchizing the society to the detriment of the previous cultural and political diversity provided by the Bolshevik state. The country was then governed by quinquennial plans, with clear guidelines for sciences in accordance with the Stalinist development project. The plans, the party resolutions and the (rare) discourses and texts by Stalin or his successors are promoted to the condition of bibliographical reference, always within a positive discursive context (Krementsov, 1997; Joravsky, 1961; Yasnitsky, 2009; Gerovitch, 2004), although the references to Lenin occupied more space in the Stalinist order. In general, “Marxism-Leninism” becomes omnipresent in psychology after the 1930s, although there was no intention of assessing the importance of Lenin for the sciences, which was evident in the debates of the 1920s (Joravsky, 1961).

We should highlight that the State “established a strict administrative control over the institutional structures, the scientific personnel, the directions taken by researches and academic communications” (Krementsov, 1997, p. 4, translated by me). Roughly speaking, the search for patrons among the decision makers of many levels became as important for the researcher as handling lab instruments or elaborating bibliographical reviews.

Hence:

In any case, it should be considered that *every and any text, without exceptions*, produced between the mid-1930s and the early 1980s, planned by the author for public release, had the double purpose of knowledge production and exchange, and on the other hand it needed to adapt to the extremely strict agenda of communist propaganda, express loyalty to the ideology of the Communist Party and its powerful chief-patrons of science. Thus, virtually all scientific texts from that time can be located somewhere in the *continuum* between ideology and science, but never in only of these extremes (Yasnitsky, 2009, p. 98, free translation).

In spite of the great difficulty involved in this “double challenge”, it is necessary to remember that the working scientists were a privileged class in the plan of the very hard daily life of the Soviet Union: they had the right to a larger food supply, social prestige, immunity to the confiscation of houses and apartments, and exemption from physical/military labor (Krementsov, 1997, p. 18). Considering the draconian Penal Code of 1932, through which flaws made within the production process could be criminalized—absenteeism was severely punished, in spite of the very hard conditions to perform manual labor (Reis Filho, 2007, p. 132)—science seemed to many a good career option in a scenario of increasing social inequalities, which started to be implemented in the 1920s.

In 1929, 650 members of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR were laid off or arrested. Many scientists were not Marxist, and many were opposed to the regime (Krementsov, 1997; Joravsky, 1961); however, since the Russian Revolution, they were considered absolutely necessary for teaching and research in the construction process of socialism. The party takes complete control in the late 1930s (Krementsov, 1997, p. 32-33), leaving researchers in charge of elaborating the most diverse organizational and discursive strategies to protect themselves from more brutal sanctions (Yasnitsky, 2009).

The polemic style and the behavior of the groups from the Party were adopted by scientists and became part of their *habitus* (Krementsov, 1997, p. 32). The work of party cells in many institutions gained importance, and more scientists started to join the party—in the field of psychology, we can quote Luria in 1943 and Leontiev in 1948 (Yasnitsky, 2009), a membership which propelled career success. In the universe of elements which composed the world of Soviet science and that transcend the futile Marxist philosophy of Brazil, it is worth highlighting that, in addition to partisanship (*partijnost*), the central axis of Stalinism was the defense of “practicality” (Yasnitsky, 2009, p. 43).

Stalinists, as Joravsky and Krementsov showed, started to attack any supposed academic ivory tower that crossed their way in order to take possession of institutional

machinery or climb bureaucratic steps. This process was called “bolshevization”. About the international domain of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Netto comments that:

In little time, the defense of the soviet republic and the admiration for Lenin’s party was converted into a passive submission to the official conceptions of the party and the State adapted by the Stalinist direction. Bolshevization was this: the identification of the socialist ideals with the proposals of the Russian party—recognized as the “guiding-party”—the defense of the soviet republic converting itself into the uncritical acceptance of the measures of the soviet State. (1982, p. 21)

We consider this idea appropriate for the description of the social consequences of Stalin’s partisanship, including scientific institutions. In textual terms, the “bolshevization” (actually, Stalinization) resulted in a critical style which was careless and rough, as we will see in the criticisms to Vygotsky. As well put by Joravsky (1989, p. 340), sciences should also be an instrument to mobilize the masses in order to create a personality that meets the requisites of the socialist society. I highlight that “bolshevization” was the term given by Stalin to his “revolution from above”, not to be mistaken with his real practice.

## The specter of criticism haunts Vygotsky

Stalin’s famous complaint about scientists (their ineptitude for producing practical contributions to the evolution of socialism), from December 1929, had strong repercussions on the First All-Union Congress on Human Behavior in January 1930 (Joravsky, 1961). With the authorization of General Secretary Stalin, in January 1931 the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union enacted a decree against the “mechanism” and the “menshevizing idealism” in the field of natural sciences, accusing both factions of deviations from Marxism-Leninism (Bauer, 1952; Joravsky, 1955, p. 4).

In the months that followed January 1930, the cell of the Party within the Institute of Experimental Psychology (where Vygotsky, Luria and Leontiev worked) accused the director, Kornilov, of leading the theory-practice separation, and the Institute of not working enough with applied psychology, as well as of presumably keeping a (undesirable) diversity of trends. The party’s pressure tended to value the adoption of only one perspective for each science, paving—still in an unspecific way—the conditions for the monolithic supremacy of activity theory over the next decades.

The newspaper *Izvestiia* reported a “purge” (*tchistka*, term widely used in the bolshevization) in the Institute of Experimental Psychology in November 1930. In June 1931, the party cell adopted a resolution that summarized the results of this discussion (which was known

as the “discussion of reactology”—since the discussion of reflexology had already occurred in 1927). According to Koltsova (1996, p. 68), the bourgeois science was considered strange for the construction of socialism and claimed, not convincingly, that it had preserved its best. Back then, the Marxist-Leninist ideology created unsurmountable barriers between bourgeois psychology and non-bourgeois psychology.

the scientific and substantive aspects of reactology and reflexology worked mainly as context in these discussions . . . . For instance, reflexology was accused of having a hostile class influence in psychology; of importing idealist notions to the field [of psychology], under the flag of Marxism; of dissociating theory from practice; of militant eclecticism; agnosticism; and of Kantian distortions of the Marxist-Leninist theory of reflection. (Koltsova, 1996, p. 67)

As this article discusses later on, these accusations are perceptibly similar to the public criticisms made to Vygotsky—with the latter being diluted into the more general cultural and political context of the Soviet Union. Joravsky (1989) reports that Bekhterev’s reflexology, reactology and Vygotsky and Luria’s cultural psychology were strongly refuted. None of them qualified as the “authentic” Marxist psychology, without any Western contamination, and they all neglected the practice of the construction of socialism. These accusations were aligned with the first xenophobic wave in Soviet culture from the 1930s, which lasted at least until the end of the Second World War (Joravsky, 1955, p. 11; Kremmentsov, 1997). Kolbanovskii, a young militant from the party’s staff, replaced Kornilov in the direction of the institute. The dispersive effect over the main group of Vygostkians from that place was significant.

In this scenario, the criticism to Vygotsky’s work (directly associated with Luria) led to two movements: public criticism and self-criticism. A third movement was the criticism of his former student, Leontiev, approximately in 1937, in addition to the latter’s Kharkovite collaborators—Zinchenko and Lukov—both in 1939 (Yasnitsky, 2009). The first two movements were simultaneous, with the first having more material, which will be analyzed in this article.

The public criticism elaborated by State agents and/or adversaries in the field of Soviet science and education reached the next decade. Vygotsky lived with the constant threat of critical investigation by a State commission, which was effectively installed. Such a criticism created considerable pressure over its targets, requiring their answers (usually, in the form of self-criticism).

According to Veer (2000, p. 6), the object of the investigation was the ideological nature of Luria’s investigations in Uzbekistan. Some critics highlighted Vygotsky’s supposed prejudice (with or without Luria) towards the abilities and activities of the working population (Razmyslov,

2000; Kozyrev & Turko, 2000; Rudneva, 1937/2000). However, in the shadows, the own members of the party showed immense despise for the populations that inhabited the furthest regions of the Soviet Union (Joravsky, 1989), a feeling that partially guided the brutal collectivization campaigns in the countryside.

It was not easy to discover possible “practical applications” for an immature science such as psychology (Joravsky, 1989). This pressure occurred as well in the West—going against the expectations of authors from different times, spaces and projects, such as Wundt, Chelpanov and Skinner (Walsh, Teo & Baydala, 2014; Rutherford, 2009). In this moment of aggressive Stalinization of the sciences, the Vygotskian self-criticism was far from being an isolated case. However, it involved elements which were intrinsic to the evolution of its ideas (it was not a mere reaction to Party-State demands), and its content, is still much less precise than the official criticism more than 80 years later.

Joravsky (1989, p. 346; p. 364) interprets that one of the reasons for Luria’s expeditions in Uzbekistan, in a research together with Vygotsky, was to transform the vague Stalinist slogans on the importance of “practice” into something more palpable, less laboratorial than the previous works of the group. At that time, the application of tests both in the field of psychology applied to work (psychotechnics) and pedagogy flourished as well, copying the Western ambition of fitting each subject to the most appropriate work position or education for them.

The research with minorities (also called “ethnic psychology” by Medvedev, 1996) was rooted in Wilhelm Wundt’s folk psychology. In Russia, in 1922, Ovisianiko-Kulikovsky’s “Psychology of Nationality” was published, with researches about minorities being widely popular in the 1920s. Zalkind, who was still the official voice of the party for psychology issues (Bauer, 1952), stated in 1930 that:

The dynamics of growth of national minorities is immense. As the Turkestan-Siberian railway and new irrigation channels are built, profound changes will take place within a very short period of time in Turkestan, in terms of the psycho-neurological characteristics of the working masses. (Zalking, 1993, p. 12, free translation)

This quote by Zalking was published in a special issue of the magazine *Pedologuiia* dedicated to researches with people from the furthest regions of the Soviet Union. At first, the atmosphere was very favorable for the researches in Uzbekistan—with expeditions from Luria to the field in the summers of 1931 and 1932 (Joravsky, 1989) -, which encompassed a study of the mental processes (perception; concept formation; casual, religious and arithmetic thought) of the Uzbek population, which was then under the shock of forced collectivization in the countryside.

Regarding this historical moment, Valsiner (1993, p. 7) and Joravsky (1989, p. 352) agree in the observation

that the soviet ideology was guided by the German notion of *Kulturträger*, which appears in the soviet vocabulary representing the despise associated to the colonizers that aimed to bring a new level of civilization to less developed people.

The research is controversial under many aspects (which, unfortunately, I cannot discuss extensively, for here the priority is its relationship with soviet policies). Access to its entirety was not given; the selection of the subjects had little details; the interaction lasted only a few months, although Luria did learn Uzbek (Homsкая, 2001, p. 26). Kurt Koffka, a gestalt psychologist responsible for the perception studies of the second expeditions, pointed out the cultural asymmetry and the power asymmetry between the researched and the researchers, disagreeing that the subjects which were considered more “primitive” did not manifest optical illusions (Veer & Valsiner, 2001; Yasnitsky, 2013; Lamdan, 2013). The Luria-Koffka disagreement is considered nowadays one of the reasons why the data from the second expedition was not published in the 1930s (Lamdan, 2013), a reason that was added to the official criticism of the Stalinists.

After the expeditions, the political condemnation of Vygotsky and Luria occurred—although it is necessary to admit that the State refused to all soviet psychologies the condition of “true” Marxist psychology (Joravsky, 1989), creating an atmosphere of fear and confusion for researchers. Not knowing which path to follow to construct a new psychology that would be acceptable for the authorities was another reason behind the caution in publishing new ideas—which could be pulverized in the following months and lead to important sanctions (Yasnitsky, 2009).

Far from being uncommon at the time, although it was the only one among the Vygotskians, the Uzbekistan episode was an example of the disagreement between scientists and bureaucrats, attracting an official commission to investigate the case, as was mentioned above. The commission’s report resulted in Razmyslov’s official criticism (1934/2000). As for its impacts in Vygotsky Circle, this was the most important criticism from the early 1930s, being a direct expression of the party’s assessment about Vygotsky and Luria. Although more severe consequences did not occur, such as prison or death sentence, Homsкая (2001, p. 30) affirms that the commission threatened to retaliate if Luria’s new researches did not follow the official ideological line.

In this sense, the party’s message was clear and established a limit for psychology that would only be suspended in Gorbachev’s administration (Medvedev, 1996), which began in 1982 (Reis Filho, 2007, p. 226). The research of cultural differences that showed discrepancies in the population education between soviet nationalities and/or the ineffectiveness of any policy was not welcome. In general, the research of ethical differences (involving language, thought and costumes) started to be discouraged by the regime, which was essential for psychology to become increasingly aseptic, defending a Marxism which focused

on quoting the classics—Marx, Engels and Lenin (which was the case for the main “general” psychology authors during the soviet regime, Leontiev and Rubinshtein)—or experimental work. Vygotsky and Luria’s rich and comprehensive project for a Marxist cultural psychology was short-lived.

Razmyslov’s analysis of Luria’s research protocols and companies in Uzbekistan are tragicomic even, illustrating the authoritarian mentality that spread throughout the USSR. For the critic, instead of showing how capitalism’s signs were banished from the economy and conscience of Uzbek workers, creating the new man, Luria’s pseudo-science neglected the “examples of a highly developed political awareness developed among the workers of collective farms in Uzbekistan as examples of situationist thought” (Razmyslov, 2000, p. 52). One of the examples the critic uses to illustrate Luria’s supposed negligence is the fact that the researcher asks a 67-year-old (a guard in a cooperative) if he would like to go to Moscow with the researchers. In the sequence of the dialogue, the man answers: “I would go if I were young. In Moscow, I would do whatever the State told me to do. If they told me to be a peasant, I would to that” (Razmyslov, 2000, p. 53). In short: the “high political awareness” mentioned by Razmyslov is mistaken for the State’s discourse of obedience, which was not valued by Luria’s group.

Similarly, in January 1937, the most offensive and defamatory criticism, from Rudneva (1937/2000), was published. He stated that it was wrong to think that the mind of the adult could not change, and it was not even “necessary to prove that this conclusion has been rebutted by all the accomplishments of our country’s cultural revolution” (p. 85). This Stalinist vocabulary, dogmatic, affirms itself through a nature which is impermeable to debate and adverse to the analysis of the social reality of its time, whether soviet or Western.

After the assassination of Sergei Kirov, the head of the party in Leningrad and potential rival of Stalin in terms of power, in December 1934 the atmosphere of terror became more intense in the USSR (Deutscher, 1970) as Stalin started the Great Purges with mass assassinations, including practically all Bolshevik leaders, such as Bukharin, Zinoviev, Rikov, Yagoda, Kamenev and Trotsky (the latter in 1940). Many other intellectuals, artists, soldiers and workers in general were killed, arrested or sent to Siberia’s prison camps (Deutscher, 1970, p. 323), where great part of the soviet scientific research was developed. In the beginning of 1939, the public purges came to an end, and a process of russification and Stalinization of the Third International began, affecting the proletarian movement worldwide (Netto, 1982).

Thus, we understand the complex situation of the former members of the Vygotsky Circle in a contradictory context in which Pavlov, anti-Bolshevik, gained more and more laboratories and publicly declared his enthusiasm with the “social experiment” carried out by soviet authorities in 1934 (Joravsky, 1989), who agreed with his

mechanic interpretation of human nature. In the meantime, in another of the many paradoxes of the soviet regime, Zalkind, a loyal communist who was already mentioned in this article, fell out with the regime in 1931 (Joravsky, 1989, p. 279) and ended up killing himself in 1936.

## The campaign of criticism to Vygotsky

A campaign to criticize the Vygotskian work occurred right after the decree “On Pedological Perversions in the Narkompros System”, in July 4 1936 (Wortis, 1953). Our direct access to the texts that criticize Vygotsky between 1936 and 1940 was restricted to the works of Rudneva (2000), Kozyrev & Turko (2000) and A. N. Leontiev (1937/2005).

Although they do not reach 100 pages, four of the six texts that I analyzed precede the decree. Three of them prioritized other spheres of the Vygotskian work instead of pedology. Joravsky (1989) notices a strong anti-intellectualism in the process of Stalinization of the society (which is also evident in Koltsova, 1996). In the style of the articles, we observed that the negative assessments are made with little or no evidence against Vygotsky, Luria and their close collaborators, in the form of mere illations without any argumentative foundation, generally constructed based on quotes considered without their context, meaning and position in the work of the author(s). Most texts contain severe misinterpretations, which highlight their political-ideological “Bolshevizing” essence, separately from the debate with the public which knew the Vygotskian psychology.

Its central axis was the standard accusation of the Great Break: the imputation of “non-Marxism” (Joravsky, 1989; Kremontsov, 1997), i.e., of deviations from the authentic “Marxism-Leninism”. In the words of Razmyslov, “we that already know Vygotsky’s visions with respect to school and other issues should, of course, keep guard since he is the person who interprets the postulates of the founders of Marxism in his own way” (2000, p. 56, translated by me).

It is a paradox to see that, while Vygotsky’s independent spirit made him a target of criticism in the Soviet Union, the creativity of his Marxism made important commentators from Western countries praise him (Shuare, 1990; Joravsky, 1989). For them, the interpretation of Marxism was progressively centralized in the hands of the party, which, as Kremontsov (1997) shows, dealt with the philosophers of the Academy of Sciences in the shadows. These same philosophers alternated between moments of rise and fall, such as Deborin and Rubinshtein. This totalitarian control of the party followed the Stalinist notion of *partijnost*, in an open conflict with Lenin’s ideas about the scientific production being engaged in the struggles of the working class (Joravsky, 1961, p. 26). A fundamental challenge to authors from different sciences, philosophy and education after the Great Break was to adapt their respective fields of work to the official Marxism, a practice that

was not modified even after Stalin’s death and the revelation of his crimes, in 1956.

The critics slightly change their perspectives with respect to the identification of flaws in Vygotsky’s Marxism (with or without the participation of Luria). For instance, a flaw in the Vygotskian understanding of the historical environment and the class position of the “young person” (Feofanov, 2000) is identified, in the direction of an analysis of the social forms of awareness and class ideology (Razmyslov, 2000, p. 48), in addition to the concrete activities of the being (Abel’skaia & Neopikhonova, 2000). Razmyslov states that:

he was probably talking about the environment of class of the child, their environment of production, the influence of school, the group of Pioneers and the Komsomol movement as transmitters of the influence of the Party and the Proletariat to the children, that there are stages while we gain knowledge of the world (p. 49, free translation).

In a text originally published in 1950, we see Leontiev (1961) loyally following these new guidelines with respect to the way to analyze childhood.

The conceptual contradictions of this movement of criticism are evident even in a superficial analysis. For instance, Zalkind’s pedology—which proposed then a comprehensive characterization of the life of the child in their social environment, being at the center of Leontiev’s (1937/2005) criticism—and even Vygotsky’s—with the notion of a social situation of development—were banished in 1936, following the example of the aforementioned “ethnical psychology”. Thus, more studies about the child in their class environment are demanded only rhetorically—in practice, the most serious attempts with this aim are eliminated. Hence, space was instituted only for the publication of texts that maintained a neutral or positive position with regard to the soviet policies for childhood. Since these policies were exempt from criticism, requiring the adherence—as enthusiastic as possible—of academics, the promotion of psychology imposed the need to find space for it within the policies that were already created. That was what Leontiev did in his defense of the relevance of psychology for pedagogy, trying to disassociate it from the pedological deviations in the post-war scenario (Leontiev, 1946).

Talankin (1931/2000) demands from Vygotsky and Luria the analysis of the development of mental processes based on the history of work, while Abel’skaia and Neopikhonova (1932/2000) accuse the authors of removing tools and signs from the analysis of the relations of production. In this sense, an absence of the concepts of the Marxist social ontology as productive forces, relations of production and class struggles would be noticed in Vygotsky and in Luria (Razmyslov, 1934/2000, p. 47). The author adds that Vygotsky and Luria, “not knowing Marxism, and not having the method of dialectic materialism, are constantly preys of this or that bourgeois psychological perspective in

vogue (p. 57). With a discourse characterized by aggressiveness, as noted by Veer (2000), Rudneva (1937/2000) did not hesitate in associating them to the bourgeoisie, fascism and counterrevolution.

Vygotsky's association with an uncritical appropriation of the bourgeois psychologies is made by Razmyslov, Feofanov, Kozyrey and Turko. Vygotsky did not start from awareness of class to deal with the individual awareness, but from the awareness of something vague, "hazily" collective, tributary from the French neo-positivism (of Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl) (see Razmyslov, 2000). Talankin also accuses Vygotsky and Luria of positivism, similarly to Leontiev (1940-1941/2003;1937/2005, pp. 20-21).

Leontiev refers to the texts of Talankin and Razmyslov not in the 1930s, but in a (posthumous) text dated from 1982: the Appendix of Volume I of Vygotsky's *Obras Escogidas* (OE), published with the mediation of Leontiev, and presumably written after 1996, the year after the soviet authorities gave the green light for the publication of the OEs (Fraser & Yasnitsky, in print, p. 23). Let us see what he says:

Naturally, it would seem that, by situating the awareness of the world in products of culture as depurated as sign and meaning, Vygotsky would be renouncing to the psychological program initially aimed at the study of practical activity with the help of objects, the work of men, a study which concentrated all Vygotsky's efforts.

It should be said that some psychologists of the 1930s (for instance, A. A. Talankin, P. I. Razmyslov and others) captured and indicated the weak aspect that existed in the interpretation of the relation between awareness and real life, and that would be patent in the historical-cultural theory. The problem was too complex in psychology and still is. (Leontiev, 1991, p. 448, free translation)<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, at least with respect to the awareness—real life relation (the focus of the analysis of the second article of this series in Portuguese), Leontiev accepts Razmyslov's (2000) and Talankin's (2000) criticisms—although he does not explain which would be these "other" analyses of Vygotsky's weaknesses. This observation was made years after the wave of criticisms he received, even after the Stalinist Thaw (which began with the revelation of

Stalin's crimes by Kruschev), differently from Leontiev's (ca. 1930/2005) most extensive criticism, already out of a scenario of censorship to the work of Vygotsky. By agreeing with Talankin, Razmyslov "and others" show, as in other moments, differences from their former leader. It is one of the many evidences that indicate the fragility of the narrative of the *troika* as an unitary nucleus of conception and development of Vygotskian ideas, showing the weight the political context had in the appropriation of Vygotsky's work made by Leontiev.

As it was typical of the Bolshevization, the criticisms demanded from the historical-cultural notions about mind/awareness and their relationship to the external environment—that necessarily went through a new theory of language—the presence of Lenin's reflex theory (*ot-razhenie*). As I discussed in other texts, the meaning of this demand was the fact that Lenin—particularly, in his "materialism and empirio-criticism"—was only one of the sources for the ontological and epistemological elements present in Vygotsky's (1927/1991) Marxism, without prevailing over Plekhanov, Marx and Engels. Even if the publication of Lenin's *Philosophical notebooks* did not get any special attention, until the Great Break opened the path for this author to rival Marx and Engels among the philosophers that discussed the world of sciences.

Throughout the 1920s, Engels was generally considered a most important source for the philosophy of natural science than Lenin; the "Bolshevization of philosophy" was necessary in 1930-1 to bring Lenin closer to Engels in the standard list of "classics". Above all, Lenin's new "classic" was much closer to the state of a primitive draft than Engels' ["Dialectics of Nature"—G. T.], which had considerable excerpts of argumentation and exposition. (Joravsky, 1961, p. 216)

In this context of the Great Break, Stalin and his regime demanded a larger presence of Lenin and his reflex theory—even in the field of mathematics and natural sciences (Krementsov, 1997). In this atmosphere, Vygotsky and Luria made the mistake of not analyzing mental functions in the light of the Leninist theory, dismissing problems of sensation and perceptions; they focused directly in ideas, concepts and in thought in general. Maybe the authors did not understand the dialectical interaction and connection between them; the connection between the material world and our awareness (Razmyslov, 1934/2000, p. 47). The same can be said about the precious role of the "practice" and the condition of the concept as a product/generalization of sensations and ideas, in the abstract-concrete relationship; universal and singular. Rudneva (2000) observed that Vygotsky did not focused on the human mental activity as an unified and creative reflex of the objective reality in the awareness, but as a process which was idealist, self-sufficient and independent of the class and productive activity of the person, dismissing the material foundations

<sup>3</sup> In the original: "Naturalmente, parecería que, al situar la consciencia en el mundo de los productos de la cultura tan depurados como son el signo y el significado, Vygotsky estaría renunciando al programa psicológico dirigido inicialmente al estudio de la actividad práctica con ayuda de objetos, laboral del hombre, estudio al que estaban orientados todos los esfuerzos de Vygotsky. Hay que decir que ya algunos psicólogos de los años 30 (por ejemplo, A. A. Talankin, P. I. Razmyslov y otros) captaban y señalaban el punto débil que existía en la interpretación de la relación entre la conciencia y la vida real, y que en la teoría histórico-cultural se haría patente. El problema era muy complejo en la psicología e sigue siéndolo."

of the awareness (the self-sufficiency was also “exposed” by Abelskaia, Neopikhonova, Razmyslov, Kozyrey and Turko).

In face of the demands of the party, it would be too optimistic to desire a long life for the original ideas of the historical-cultural theory about language and its relation to awareness. Feofanov (2000) highlights the character of language as a practical awareness, with a social origin, demanding the presence of the new official interpret of the party for language issues—Marr. The presence of Marr, considered by the critics the linguist who was ready to show how awareness results in development of the object and of the technical means derived from production, in addition to Engels, is also demanded by Kozyrey, Turko and Rudneva.

The texts published after the decree about pedagogical perversions from 1936 strongly attack Vygotsky’s educational and pedagogical ideals. The extinction of pedology was one of the rare cases in which there was an open intervention from the Central Committee (Joravsky, 1989, p. 36), a rare case in which an entire science/practice was destroyed by decree in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As mentioned above, the campaign of criticizing Vygotsky was installed only after the decree (Rudneva’s text paraphrases him even in its title, *Vygotsky’s pedagogical distortions*), as a blow to an area of studies and practices that had been strongly stimulated since the Great Break.

Curiously, in 1931, after Lunacharsky was dismissed from the Commission on Education and the subsequent takeover of the command by passionate Stalinists, a strong support to pedology was proclaimed. In that time, Vygotsky produced significant contributions for pedagogical theory and practice. As a field, it encompassed the selection of children (with performance below or above the average of the age group) for special schools, with the adaptation of programs to the specific needs of the students (Joravsky, 1989, p. 347)<sup>4</sup>.

Fraser and Yasnitsky (in print) point out that about 14% of students aged between 7 and 13 failed in Leningrad between 1935-1936, which made the party be criticized with respect to the pedagogical practice. However, in the context of Stalin’s conservative reforms, which held parents and teachers accountable for the ideological molding of new generations, it is certain that pedology—to which many psychologists were allocated—was too modern. In the process of the “revolution from above”, orchestrated in Stalin’s regime, other forms of psychological and psychiatric counseling that differed from measures of reward/punishment

4 The theme of soviet pedology is complex and escapes the limits of this article. In summary, for Joravsky (1989), the strong impulse it received was an example of the contradictions which are inherent to the search for an equalization of the Soviet Union with advanced capitalist, in order to surpass capitalism in the future—the famous jargon “catch up” and “overtake” reproduced by Stalin (Krementsov, 1997; Joravsky, 1989) and the socialist revolution. It is interesting to observe the strong appeal that Taylorism and Fordism had in the Soviet Union (according to Joravsky, 1989, p. 342, since Lenin), going beyond the pragmatism that characterizes the culture of the United States. The soviet society was saturated with a mechanic scientism.

and surveillance over individuals were also disqualified. The revolution, which in many aspects is more similar to State capitalism than to communism (Neves, 1994, p. 72), continued defending a unitary and monolithic growth of the mass as a whole.

The authoritarian character of the “Bolshevization” becomes evident in the accusations Rudneva made to Vygotsky’s educational ideas. The author is unfairly accused at least five times of defending the “theory of dismissal of the school”, attributed to the left wing of the party (i.e., the Trotskyist wing), one of the clichés of the accusations released in the end of the 1930s. Leontiev and Luria (1956/1970) defend him of the accusation when his work goes back to being published in the USSR. It affirms that Vygotsky “is against measures that encourage and reprimand, against tests, and against grades” (p. 75) and undervalue the importance of teachers. Many flaws that Vygotsky is being accused of are precisely what the author defends. For instance, the idea that intellectual development is the result of learning, an aspect he denied in his writings.

The theory of the crises of development, the notion of optimal periods of learning and the “invariability of the environment” throughout the life of the child (Vygotsky, 1935/2010) are attacked as well. Such as the decree against pedology, Rudneva’s text still accuses him of suffocating human development for the determinism of two factors: hereditariness and environment. Among Vygotsky’s critics, she is the only one that mentions Leontiev as one of his pupils (together with Luria, Sakharov, Shik and Zankov) and as a disseminator of the bourgeois method.

## Final considerations

In the 21st century, the process of reviewing the history of soviet psychology and science has gained strength, leading to the criticism of the hagiographic narrative—highly dependent on the notion that Vygotsky, Luria and Leontiev composed a *troika*—related to the origin and development of Vygotskian psychology.

With the aim of contributing to the defeat of that notion, this article presented a brief summary and debate about the important scientific and political facts that determined the process of reconfiguration of scientific production in general and in psychology in particular as a consequence of Stalin’s “Great Break” (1929-1932). The party imposed some general lines of scientific production, and the soviet psychologists adapted to them throughout the 1930s. As I analyzed in this article, the standard accusations of the Stalinist critics were being expressed—more than being developed—in the process of criticism to Vygotsky (by himself or directly associated with Luria) and his collaborators.

In this process, I highlight the forced end of the intellectual diversity in the field of psychology (in the search for the genuine, “true”, Marxist psychology); the need to favor Lenin (particularly, his reflex theory) and the founding fathers of the soviet sciences; the elimination of signs from



Western philosophy that could lead to accusations of eclecticism, counterrevolution, fascism and similar concepts. As shown by Kremmentsov (1997), academic strictness was left in the background to benefit the search for “scientific” discourses that could pass the screening process of Stalinist censorship. More than a source of production of ideas, Marxism became an instrument for the process of competing over institutional resources.

However, I think that the most harmful impact left by these changes was the significant shrinking of Vygotsky and Luria’s historical-cultural psychology within a science *vs.* ideology *continuum* that hid the relationship between researchers and decision-makers of the party. With the negative reaction to Luria’s field research

in Uzbekistan, simultaneous to the consolidation of the totalitarian soviet state—which included the process of Bolshevization of sciences—the criticisms to Vygotsky reflected a new political situation to which social, cultural and even clinical psychology were not invited. Thus, the interaction between researchers and the concrete reality of the soviet people was severely restricted. Understanding these transformations is essential for the critical aspects of the historical-cultural theory to rethink their future as a psychology committed to emancipation, carrying out an appropriate analysis of the soviet psychology from the 1930s, particularly the work of Leontiev and his activity theory, which has gained a distressing relevance over the last decades.

### **Nem tudo que reluz é Marx: críticas stalinistas a Vygotski no âmbito da ciência soviética**

**Resumo:** No Brasil, tem havido notável crescimento da chamada “teoria da atividade”, cuja fundamentação é associada especialmente ao pesquisador russo A. N. Leontiev (1903-1979). Isso se tem feito em conexão direta com a noção de que Vygotski, Luria e Leontiev compuseram uma *troika*, responsável pela elaboração da teoria histórico-cultural e da teoria da atividade. O objetivo deste artigo é iniciar a problematização da própria veracidade dessa narrativa a partir de uma análise do contexto no qual se dispôs o conteúdo das críticas stalinistas a Vygotski de 1931-1937, da construção do sistema de produção científica no regime soviético e dos contrastes políticos e culturais entre os anos de 1920 e 1930 – especialmente o estabelecimento do *marxismo-leninismo* e o pragmatismo como marcas do regime stalinista. O texto contribui para a análise das ideias e frentes de trabalho vigotskianas condenadas pelos críticos stalinistas e suas potenciais repercussões na psicologia soviética elaborada nos anos de 1930.

**Palavras-chave:** Leontiev, teoria da atividade, psicologia histórico-cultural, stalinismo, ciência stalinista.

### **Tout ce qui brille n’est pas Marx: analyse de la critique stalinienne à Vygotski dans la science soviétique**

**Résumé:** Au Brésil, il y a une croissance remarquable de la «théorie de l’activité», dont la fondation est associée en particulier au chercheur russe A. N. Leontiev (1903-1979). Cela a été fait en liaison directe avec l’idée que Vygotski-Luria-Leontiev étaient le trio responsable pour le développement de la théorie historique-culturelle et de la théorie de l’activité. Cet article se propose à remettre en question la vérité même de ce récit – restreint à le champ de l’histoire des idées – à partir d’une analyse du contexte dans lequel a surgi la critique stalinienne à Vygotski entre 1931-1937, la construction du système de production scientifique du régime soviétique et les contrastes politiques et culturelles entre les années 1920 et 1930 – en particulier l’établissement du marxisme-léninisme et du pragmatisme comme marques du stalinisme. Le texte contribue à l’analyse des idées et des fronts de travail vigotskiennes condamnés par les critiques staliniennes et leur impact potentiel dans la psychologie soviétique développée dans les années 1930.

**Mots-clés:** Leontiev, théorie de l’activité, la psychologie historique et culturel, la science staliniste.

### **Ni todo lo que brilla es Marx: análisis de las críticas estalinistas a Vygotski en la ciencia soviética**

**Resumen:** En Brasil, se produce un notable crecimiento de la “teoría de la actividad”, cuya fundación se asocia sobre todo al ruso A. N. Leontiev (1903-1979). Esto se lleva a cabo por la relación directa con la idea de que Vygotski, Luria y Leontiev compusieron una *troika*, responsable del desarrollo de la teoría histórico-cultural y de la actividad. Este artículo tiene la intención de empezar a cuestionar la verdad de esta narrativa –limitada al campo de la historia de las ideas–, a partir de un análisis del contexto en el que expuso el contenido de las críticas estalinistas a Vygotski del 1931 al 1937, la construcción del sistema de producción científica en el régimen soviético y los contrastes políticos y culturales entre los años 1920 y 1930 –en especial el establecimiento del marxismo-leninismo y el pragmatismo como marcas del estalinismo. Este texto debe de contribuir al análisis de las ideas y los frentes de trabajo vigotskianos condenados por los críticos estalinistas, y su potencial impacto en la psicología soviética desarrollada en la década de 1930.

**Palabras clave:** Leontiev, teoría de la actividad, la psicología histórico-cultural, el estalinismo, ciencia estalinista.

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Received: December 30, 2014

Revised: November 04, 2015

Accepted: May 07, 2015