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Leopoldoff Martin, Irène; Kellogg, David; Schneuwly, Bernard

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Developing Concepts of Development Vygotsky's *pédologie*: Introduction to the Special Issue

Irina Léopoldoff-Martin^a, David Kellogg ^b, and Bernard Schneuwly^a

^aUniversity of Geneva; ^bSangmyung University

ABSTRACT

The seventh international seminar on Vygotsky held in Geneva discussed a new French language translation of texts of from 'pedology,' the now largely lost Soviet science of the developing child. In this introduction, the guest editors touch on three concepts of development which coincide with the three elements of Vygotsky's best known idea, the Zoped, or zone of proximal development. In each case, we find that Vygotsky's pedological texts has the potential to completely change the way in which we have understood the concept.

Introduction to the special issue

Seven times in the last thirty years a group of researchers in France and Switzerland have brought out in the French language some major text of the Soviet thinker, teacher, and writer L.S. Vygotski (Vygotski, 1934/1997, Vygotski, 2003, 2005, 2010, 2012; Vygotskij, 2018). They have then met in a symposium to discuss the work and usually produced a well-received edited volume of papers (Clot, 1999, 2013; Rochex, Joigneaux, Netter, 2016). During the sixth seminar, the philosopher Lucien Sève remarked:

Perhaps what I would call Francophone Vygotskyism will some time offer good counsel to that Anglophone Vygotskyism whose support has been so precious to us, in as much as the dialectic and the valuable lessons of Marxian anthropology, somewhat less well anchored for them, continue to live for us . . . (Sève, 2015, p. 64)

Perhaps the time is now. The seventh symposium was held in Geneva in July 2018, and in lieu of an edited volume in French we present a special number of *Mind, Culture, and Activity*. In his own contribution to this issue, Lucien Sève notes that "inattentive" English readings of Vygotsky have often found culturalism, Gestaltism, and Spinozism – but much less often Marxism. Yet Marxism was, for Vygotsky, no mere agonistic display, but a bedside companion. A similar lack of attention – and even access – has tragically afflicted the texts of Vygotsky's pedology, or *pédologie*, as we referred to it in Geneva. These are writings devoted to "a once and future science" (as Michael Cole once said of cultural psychology quite generally) which was devoted in turn to the developing child. In this short introduction to the special issue, we propose to touch briefly on three areas of Vygotsky's *pédologie* which seemed particularly *a propos* to us in Geneva, all of which pertain to developing concepts of development (Schneuwly, 1999).

These three areas we propose to go into here happily coincide with the three components of Vygotsky's best known concept – the zone of proximal development, or Zoped as it has always been referred to in these pages (we might, somewhat whimsically, call this issue a "Zo-pédologie"). First, Irina Leopoldoff-Martin makes the case that these texts present a new view of the meaning of what Vygotsky intended by the word "zone," linked to the distance from one pedological age to another.

Second, David Kellogg argues that the papers in this issue provide the basis of a new, semantic or semiotic rather than activity-based, interpretation of what Vygotsky meant by “next” or “proximal.” Finally, Bernard Schneuwly applies the kind of analysis Vygotsky called “comparative genetic” to Vygotsky’s own work, making the case that these texts present a qualitatively new view of the meaning of “development.” In this way, we hope to convince you that Vygotsky’s next zone of development is the next zone of development for both Francophone and Anglophone Vygotskyism.

In the zone: the problem of age periodization

Ninety years ago, beginning around 1928, Vygotsky set himself and his collaborators the aim of grasping child development as a dynamic whole, a qualitative progression throughout discrete periods of stability and instability. Their approach was to be an immanent one:

Only the internal changes of the course of development, only the breaks and twists in its course can give us a solid foundation to define the main epochs of the formation of the child’s personality that we call ages. (Vygotski, 1934/1997/2006/1987/ Vygotskij, 2018, p. 209)

The essential task was to find out about the internal transformations of development by observing symptoms and inferring the points of rupture they manifested. Vygotsky called these points of rupture “crises,” in contrast to other writers who had referred to them as negative phases. For Vygotsky, they were not negative at all but signs of a general reorganization of the system of consciousness as a whole. During these times of crisis, the child’s motives during the previous period were deconstructed and the stable structure of consciousness and behavior which had characterized the previous developmental period was demolished. “At each age,” Vygotsky wrote, “there is a passage between the previously formed structure and the new structure” (1934/2018, p. 227). The concepts developed by Vygotsky to periodize the age of the child were, as Blunden (2008) says, an “unfinished theory”.

But the foundation of this theory is clear enough: interaction between the child and what is usually referred to as the “environment.” The reader will soon note that we render the latter term with the French loan word *milieu*. In this way we hope to distinguish it from a material, natural, fixed setting and emphasize its socially, culturally and psychologically mutable character: in French, a *milieu* is not simply a material setting but a place in the middle of people, with all their ambiance and affordances. An indissoluble unity between the *milieu* and the person allowed Vygotsky to explain how the *milieu* acted in a differentiated way on the development of the child. Awareness of the situation in general, and the degree of understanding of what is happening in particular, was an essential factor: the *milieu* was both dynamic and relative. In research and observation, the focus was to be on aspects which were centrally affected by the *milieu*, such as personality, language, consciousness.

These relationships with the *milieu* appeared to Vygotsky and his collaborators as highly age-specific. They included a “final”, “complete” or “ideal” form toward which the initial, primary, and elementary forms could orient while developing (Vygotski, 1934/1997/2006/Vygotskij, 2018, p. 69). From this, two important corollaries followed. The first was that developmentally higher psychic functions were to appear first as forms of interaction between persons, before becoming child-specific, historically constituted and individually appropriate human capacities. The second corollary was a unit of analysis for the child-specific form of this interaction that gave rise to child personality, a unit to which Vygotsky gave the name *perezhivanie*. To avoid mistranslation, we have sometimes left this untranslated, following the practice of the special number of *Mind, Culture, and Activity* devoted to the concept (Volume 23, Issue 4); to avoid mystifying it, we have sometimes rendered it in French as *expérience vécue*, or, rather less elegantly in English, “lived-over experience.”

Such was the basic unit of analysis, which the late Françoise Sève translated into French as *unité de base* (Sève 1997/2006, p. 54), in order to distinguish it from the complex unity that is the result of development. But, as Kozulin points out, no unit of analysis can be reducible to its own explanatory principle, lest the whole scheme become tautological (2005, p. 117). So Vygotsky proposed a series of original concepts to explain the dynamic changes we observe in the unit of analysis: the social situation

of development, the central and peripheral neoformations and the central and peripheral developmental lines that led to them, as well as the stable and critical age periods already mentioned. The social situation of development corresponds, at each age and at a specific moment of development, to a relation of tension, even of contradiction, with the *milieu*: external constraints impel the child to take the path of self-emancipation, extending the ability to act and expanding the ability to mean.

Even more than the stable achievements, the so-called negative, or critical, periods led to neoformations, to new modes of interaction of the child with the material world that surround her or him, and although critical neoformations as such were short-lived, they were developmentally decisive. A critical neoformation emerging at a certain age empowered the child to restructure not only intellectual, but also physical and emotional life. One element that enabled this development, was the human capacity to imagine, that is to say, the ability to abstract from one's immediate reality, to form and to share generalizations of it, and ultimately to be able to anticipate transcending it. The concept of crisis was therefore at the very heart of Vygotsky's periodization. The critical periods were seen as radical, revolutionary, qualitative transformations, and their alternation with stable periods was an intrinsic, defining feature of his scheme. Pedologically speaking, in every stable period, the crisis was what Françoise Sève called the *zone prochaine du développement* – the next, or proximal, zone of development (1997, p. 39).

This development of the concept of crisis was integral to Vygotsky's conceptualization of his other great enterprise, complementary to the pedology, which was known as “defectology.” Contrary to the exclusionary ring this term has for us today – and also contrary to the far more fatalistic term “disability” which we now employ – Vygotsky's defectology was militantly “inclusionary.” In many if not most cases, the “defective” child was merely one for whom a crisis had, provisionally, become a more or less permanent rather than a more or less transitional condition, blocking the direct path to development and requiring a more circuitous and even more heavily mediated progression. But such paths would be enabled by new social and cultural shortcuts which would empower societies which, contrary to the way the Darwinian order is usually conceptualized, encourage ways of life that value the old, the ill, and of course the very young. In sociogenesis, the first might be last, and the last come first.

Within semiotic reach: A next, or proximal, semantic zone of development

We know that Vygotsky spent most of his short career in two professions which no longer exist today: his pay stub, at any rate, must have had him down as a defectologist and then a pedologist, scaling by two different routes two different faces of the same natural whole, namely development. We don't have to think of one route as direct and steep and the other as indirect and easier – both are indirect and circuitous. Nor do we have to think of one as sunlit and the other as shaded – again, both have both moments in abundance. However, we do need to consider the equipment we provide to the children in their ascent in turn: This equipment – for walking and climbing and physical education, but also for reading and writing and concept formation – consists of cultural artifacts that have evolved over centuries and even millennia of culture.

To the extent that these cultural artifacts are designed rather than simply evolved by trial and error, they are, as Vygotsky remarks, made for the “normal psycho-physical make-up that has evolved during phylogenesis.” As a result, we find dramatic differences between children who have that standard psycho-physical make-up and those who don't – e.g., children who are blind, deaf, or have what are called “learning disabilities,” though perhaps it might be better to call them learning pre-abilities, since teachers simply have yet to design other paths of learning, technologies like braille and sign for blind and deaf children. As teachers, we sometimes imagine that our job is only to make “psychological tools” such as academic language more accessible to children – that is, our classroom talk has the same relation to academic language that a half or quarter size violin has to a full sized one.

But already in *The History of the Development of the Higher Psychic Functions*, which was discussed in the Sixième séminaire, Vygotsky notes the tendency to confuse tools and signs, and insists on a real similarity, a real difference, and a real, concrete link. The real similarity lies in their common membership in the logical category of mediating activity: as Hegel said, the ability of reason to allow one part of nature to overcome another rather than to attempt to directly intervene. The real difference lies in the fact that tools are directed to the part of nature that is formed by the external environment while signs are directed toward our own nature. Finally, the real, concrete link is their general use in the phylogenesis and ontogenesis of human behavior (1997, pp. 61–63).

As with any concrete link between a natural process and a cultural one (e.g., the link between caves and homes, between fur and clothes, between speech communication and use of speech as representation) we find that tools and texts time their entry on the scene very differently in phylogenesis and in ontogenesis. Tools as a mode of production which can reproduce the conditions of life emerge at the very beginning of the drama of anthropogenesis – or even before – while text, particularly in the sense of written text, appears on the scene much later. But when tools appear in infancy, as toys, the main developmental role is not so much to act on the environment as to allow the child to concentrate and direct his or her own behavior in play – that is, they are not tools at all but only signs in the production of text.

To say that the tool, even in infancy, is a sign in the production of text and not an instrument in the reproduction of labor is simply to make the elementary Marxist point that childhood proper is when the child consumes but does not yet produce adult food. Adolescence, in turn, is when the child is capable of producing food – and even reproducing his or her own body – but for historical reasons the child is not yet capable of reproducing his or her own labor. While it is mastery of tools that seems to be lacking in childhood, it is, thanks to what the French call “historico-cultural” development, still mastery of texts that is lacking in adolescence. This semantic, or semiological, rethinking of the Zoped does not do away with the idea of crisis – on the contrary, it explains it. The crisis arises because the child is confronted with more meaning that she or he can construe.

The development of the concept of development

A “comparative-genetic” analysis of Vygotsky’s texts in pedology – that is, one which looks both synchronically at other texts being written and diachronically at the development of Vygotsky’s concept of development – reveals certain fundamental transformations in the latter. The dominant conception of the time might be described as follows:

- Development is endogenous, i.e. controlled by essentially internal factors, to which are added others, such as secondary specifications, depending on the internal process;
- Development is individual, given its internal determination;
- Development is unidirectional and predetermined, with an unavoidable, predefined purpose, toward which development necessarily orients itself, with phases that are always the same, invariable; -
- Development is linear and therefore does not undergo any fundamental reorientation.

From the very first pedological works (see in particular Vygotsky 1928), Vygotsky proposed a concept of development that radically broke with these conceptions, thus establishing the foundations of pedology as a science of child development. Based on the idea of mediation and the instrumental approach to the human psyche – an approach that emphasizes the sign as an instrument to act on others and on oneself – he proposed two important transformations. The first was based on the introduction of the notion of the instrument and higher psychic functioning and meant that development did not have to be thought of as a linear, continuous movement, but could imply revolutionary upheaval. The second stems from the idea that higher psychic functions are social constructs.

Development cannot therefore be conceived as endogenous, but must be thought of as a relationship between shared culture and a sharing mind, or, to put it in somewhat more contentious philosophical terms, what is external to the individual and what is internal. For as Vygotsky puts it,

The self-movement logic of the development process must be demonstrated. Revealing the self-movement of the development process does not mean understanding the internal logic, but the mutual conditionality, the links, and the cohesion of various factors in the unity and the struggle of opposites involved in the developmental process. (Vygotsky, 1931/1990, p. 317)

What does this struggle of opposites mean?

The very essence of such development (by evolution and revolution) is thus the conflict between the evolved cultural forms of behavior with which the child comes into contact and the primitive forms that characterize his or her own behavior. (Vygotsky, 1931/1974, p. 190)

This means that human potentialities are not automatically realized from within, but are the result of movements which overcome contradictions, which include on the one hand a personal pole, namely the degree of control of potentialities which has already developed, and on the other hand the social living conditions, the situational pole, with which a child is confronted.

It might nevertheless still be thought that the outcome of this struggle of opposites is predetermined. It might, for example, be thought that at this point in the construction of his theory of development Vygotsky conceived of development as an inevitable march toward an end that would always be the same and that would never be able to take different forms, to move toward culturally and historically different ends depending on the effects of education and teaching as artificial development.

Not so. Four dimensions can be identified on which Vygotsky was making a fundamental transformation that was both reason and result, both cause and consequence, of a fundamental restructuring of his approach, based of course on the already extant foundation. Rupture there was, and non-linearity as well, but also involution and loss: a real development of its concept of development at the heart of a more fundamental restructuring was underway. Although both the explanans and the explanandum remained one and the same, the four dimensions of transformation were the following.

First of all, the relationship between teaching, education, learning and imitation on the one hand and development on the other hand had not yet been established in accordance with the very principles affirmed by Vygotsky himself, namely of a dialectical relationship between inside and outside, and consequently a contradiction between external elements and internal capacities. In fact, his formulations still reflected an essentially endogenous conception of development, as if it, although influenced by external factors, was taking place according to its own independent laws. In other words, the movement of development was only “self-movement.” Through a long reflection on this issue, he would eventually be able to propose a concept that perfectly met the constraints imposed by his own system, reconceiving the relationship between educational intervention and development as a “zone of proximal development”.

Secondly, in his 1931 book *History of the development of higher psychic functions* the development of memory, will or thought had been essentially conceived as “intrafunctional.” But in the pedagogical texts, it would become more and more the development of relationships between functions and the systems that they formed that would become the focus of attention, eventually leading to that system of systems that constitutes the personality (see in particular Vygotsky, 1930/1985/1985). To tackle these problems effectively, Vygotsky had to move from the unit of analysis that was the instrumental act to another that he defines in a particularly precise way in *Thinking and Speech: verbal meanings* (1934/1997). This was a unit which, as Vygotsky showed in passages very close to Saussure, combined two functions: that of generalization, a complex, socially elaborated form of representation, and that of communication, of sharing with and action upon others. Verbal meaning was, in addition, an extremely malleable unit whose functioning could be fundamentally transformed according to the functions it performed. The analysis of the inner language was, yet again, the model that allowed Vygotsky – and will allow us – to see a transformation of functioning within a new system that is being created: a transition to a functioning in pure, purely predicative, abbreviated meanings. In this new

conception, it would no longer be only the entry of the instrument or sign into the function that would bring about a radical change (logical memory, will, problem solving). Rather, it would be the arrangement and articulation of the component parts of the whole psyche into new units that corresponded to these ruptures, these revolutions and that operated on the psyche in its entirety.

Thirdly, Vygotsky reiterated the idea that the different functions and the systems they form developed in an unequal, non-proportional way, including moments of loss and involution (this is particularly clear in the lectures included in the introductory lectures of the “Foundations of Pedology,” 1934/2018/2019). This did not mean that the other functions do not develop, quite the contrary. But it did mean that they develop according to very different rhythms and to very different extents, with the result that the interfunctional relationship was highly variable in its proportions. Changes affected the different components very unequally, just as the force of a whirlpool may be more felt in the center and less so in its periphery. This was to say that there are developments taking place in one area and not in another, and that this inequality introduces internal contradictions that constitute yet another driving force in development. These contradictions have their *raison d'être* in other contradictions, e.g., that between external and internal. There are therefore a “myriad” of contradictions that develop from this contradiction in principle, which is determinant in the final instance.

Fourthly, Vygotsky also showed that meaning incorporated in words and language, namely concepts, also made it possible to transform the relationships between reason and affect, and thus to create new cross-functional systems. Vygotsky addressed this problem in his work on emotion, but more concretely from the point of view of development in his book *Pedology of the Adolescent*:

Now, with the analysis of imagination, we see again how these new forms of behavior are dependent by their origin on sexual maturation, and the impulses associated with it, serve the aspirations of the adolescent, we see how the emotional and intellectual side of the adolescent's behavior finds its complex synthesis in the creative imagination, how abstract and concrete factors form a synthesis within it, how desire and thought form a complex combination in their new unity - in the creative activity of the imagination. (1931/ 2021)

This move away from an emphasis on the use of tools toward the understanding of texts is a common thread in almost all of the papers included here. Lucien Sève, for example, strongly contests that such a move is incompatible with a Marxian approach, despite widespread resistance by mere *Marxisants* at the time and even now. Jean-Paul Bronckart explains resistance to the move in the West, and even in the Geneva school where many of the symposium participants were trained, by tracing the roots of mind-body dualism in the school curriculum back to Auguste Comte. Janette Friedrich attempts a reading of the pedological texts as problem-specific and finds two quite specific problems with new subject matter that explain Vygotsky's new method. Christiane Moro argues that even in infancy, self-directed acts of communication play a role in development which is every bit as decisive as those directed to the milieu. Three more empirical papers – Clerc-Georgy and Martin, Léopoldoff and Gabathuler, and Kellogg – offer a view of what this shift to a semiotically defined “next zone of pedological development” might look like in preschool, during school age, and for the adolescent.

But let this introduction be *aperitif* rather than *hors d'oeuvre*. Vygotsky wrote, in a notebook entry not long before he died, that although a number may be expressed in an infinity of ways, a change in wording and even sounding always entails some change in meaning (2018, p. 486). Intension that has been tempered in the forge of human consciousness is always in the final analysis ineffable, and we would not, even if we could, spare you the challenge or spoil the delight to come.

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ORCID

David Kellogg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6837-5501>

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