

The “Revisionist Revolution” and Future Prospects of Vygotskian Studies

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This article provides critical analysis of A. Yasnitsky’s project of “Cultural-Historical Gestalt Psychology.” He uses this term to describe Vygotsky’s biggest discovery and the future of Vygotsky studies. Yasnitsky discards the activity approach to studying the human mind and reduces the social nature of personality to an “aspect” that did not receive serious elaboration in Vygotsky’s works. In the present article, it is argued that the prospect of the development of cultural-historical theory consists in elaborating on Vygotsky’s project of “height / acmeist psychology.” Its subject matter is “the reverse movement from consciousness to life,” as Vygotsky put it. The purpose of height psychology is to help humans master their affects by means of concepts. This science realizes “the motion toward freedom — toward a life guided by reason.”

Keywords: cultural-historical gestalt psychology, structure, perception, activity, consciousness, parallelism, height psychology, affect, concept.

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Great minds provide guidance for the movement of thought, and a historian of science should aim to disclose the heuristic potential of their writings. From this perspective, we aim to examine the recent “revisionist revolution” in Vygotsky studies, initiated by Anton Yasnitsky. Of course, we cannot avoid the question of inadequacy in reading the classic texts. Yet it is more important to understand *what future* the young Carbonari, with Yasnitsky at their head, are preparing for cultural-historical psychology.

I

The program volume, *Revisionist Revolution in Vygotsky Studies*, was published in 2016. The cooperation between its editors, Anton Yasnitsky and René Van der Veer, appeared to be short-lived and it is obvious, judging from Van der Veer’s other writings and personal remarks, that their theoretical views diverged in many respects. Two chapters by Ekaterina Zavershneva, previously published in Russian, were falsified in a “revisionist” way when translated (for details, see [4]).

Now let us take a closer look at “a fairly new, not so familiar image of Vygotsky and his scientific legacy” [18, p. 93].

Vygotsky’s work during the “instrumental” period of the 1920s is described as “mechanistic and fairly reductionist.” In so doing, Yasnitsky does not discuss the idea of the social nature of the human mind, although Vygotsky’s cultural psychology began with the concept of personality as “the social in us.” However, in his next book *Vygotsky: An Intellectual Biography*¹ Yasnitsky himself devotes a couple pages to an “unexpected discovery” (the title of the section) of the social nature of the mind. Many thinkers before Vygotsky cherished the idea of the social and cultural origin of the human mind, Yasnitsky writes. “The social dimension of tools and instruments — so clear in the philosophical works of Marx and Engels — is somewhat obscure in Vygotsky’s “instrumental psychology” research. ... Vygotsky and his team never investigated in depth the social aspect of psychological functioning properly. Furthermore, there was no special terminology in Vygotsky’s conceptual toolkit of the 1920s that would account for the social dynamics of personal interaction” [15, pp. 70–71].

There are neither proofs, nor arguments for these statements in his book. Dozens of papers on the *social nature*

¹ At first, Van der Veer was announced as a co-author [18, p. 311].

(not simply an “aspect”) of the human mind in Vygotsky’s works have been written. Perhaps, they could help to elucidate what was “somewhat obscure,” but Yasnitsky did not see fit to take them into consideration.

In the 1930s Vygotsky’s thinking underwent a “major shift” that Yasnitsky ascribes to the beneficial influence of Gestalt psychology. He calls this period of Vygotsky’s work “holistic.” As a result, “cultural-historical Gestalt psychology” (CHGP) was born. The term was invented by Yasnitsky about ten years ago (see [12; 13]). Since then, he has repeatedly, in great detail, highlighted Vygotsky’s personal contacts with the Gestaltists. However, never has he examined *in concreto* the content of the CHGP — excluding general phrases about holism and a “Galileian mode of thinking.”

Recently two more revisionist volumes have been published [16; 17]. Also, Yasnitsky has announced a collection of his edited works entitled *Cultural-Historical Gestalt Psychology: Historical, Methodological and Theoretical Perspectives* (forthcoming in 2022). It seems a reader can expect to find out what CHGP is and how it works.

It is important to realize that everything Yasnitsky and his coauthors write about Vygotsky is not only a revision of the past, but also a *vector for developing* the theoretical program created by Vygotsky and his circle. In discussing the evolution of Vygotsky’s views, Yasnitsky attempts to address what is dead and what is alive in his legacy (in his heir’s humble opinion, of course). And we, too, in showing the inadequacy of his reading of Vygotsky, must offer an alternative way of developing cultural-historical psychology.

II

The relationship between cultural-historical theory and Gestalt psychology is the first thing to be considered. Is it correct to say that the “Vygotsky–Luria circle’ continuously converged with the group of Gestalt psychologists, their students, and followers during the second half of the 1920s and, particularly, in the 1930s” [12, p. 64; 18, p. 208]?

In terms of personal contacts, awareness of new concepts and experiments of Gestalt psychologists — the answer is yes, definitely. Another question is whether there has been a *far-reaching convergence of research programs* that would allow one to detect the emergence of a hybrid called CHGP? Vygotsky’s recently published notebooks give us a quite clear answer to this second question. Here, we see the genius at work in his personal laboratory, at the cutting edge of science. He reflects on prospects, plans for the future, and provides a critical assessment of the traversed path.

The “instrumental” Vygotsky held an extremely high opinion of “structural psychology.” This is articulated clearly in his work printed in 1930. He asserted that Eu-

ropean psychology has split into two wings — objective and subjective, deterministic and teleological. The way out of this crisis was found “in the recognition of the structural unity of mental and physiological processes. ... Structural psychology rises to a higher requirement: to study the human personality as a whole, as a structure, and, above all, to study it in its structural correlation with the environment” [7, p. 116].

Even in that period Vygotsky saw two fundamental flaws in Gestalt psychology: (i) the ahistorical, “metaphysical” character of the concept of Gestalt, and (ii) the “utter neglect of a social factor in human psychology.” Nevertheless, structural research so far seems to him to have been a movement “in the same direction as the Marxist reform of psychology” [7, pp. 124–125].

Already by the autumn of 1930, his critical tone had turned much harsher. Then he claimed that “*Gestalttheorie* ignores the concrete person” [11, p. 141]. The structural unity of personality (isomorphism of mental and physiological processes) no longer satisfies him. Vygotsky is developing a doctrine of a deeper unity — *systemic*. “Systems are the key to the person” [11, p. 141].

A person emerges and develops in *cultural-historical* systems; his human way of life is determined “from above” — by society, namely, by his relationships with other people. In this sense, Vygotsky refers to his theory as “height psychology,” in contrast to Freudian “depth psychology,” studying the determination of mental life “from below.”

In 1931 Vygotsky wondered how to deal with Wolfgang Köhler’s laws presenting the historically evolved structures of perception as eternal. “Köhler — reject or demarcate while leaning on him? His regularities are pseudoregularities, i.e., what is historical is presented as eternal or as something that is lying in another plane” [11, p. 180]. As we can see, two variants of *divergence* are weighed: (i) complete rejection and (ii) adopting delimitation.

This note was made at the first internal conference on the results of Alexander Luria’s Uzbek expedition. They were interpreted as an experimental refutation of Köhler’s theory of perception. Gita Birenbaum, a student of Kurt Lewin, objected: “*Gestalt[theorie]* is not refuted.” (Yasnitsky and Eli Lamdan were braver: they claimed that the expedition fully confirmed the *Gestalttheorie* and refuted the hypothesis of cultural-historical conditioning of perceptual structures.)

The character of human perception is determined by the *concepts* that represent “the specifically human in the structures,” Vygotsky argues in his notebook entries. Knowledge of the nature of visible things frees vision from the bondage of the optical field. By this way biological affect is replaced by aesthetic reaction. “The determination² from above. Height psychology is a new type of movement, which I did not understand: from concept to perception” [11, p. 293]. This distinguishes between the *slavish* perception of an animal and the *free*

² In the English edition, *opredelenie* is translated as *definition*. But Vygotsky certainly means the *determination* of perception from the upper realm of culture to which any concept belongs.

perception of a man – the difference that Gestaltists do not see.

So, Vygotsky wanted to beat *Gestalttheorie* on its own ground – the psychology of perception. He intended to create a meaningful (*smyslovuiu*) theory of perception, revealing how the conceptual structure of consciousness determines perceptive process.

“We must overcome *Gestalttheorie* step by step and create in its place a psychology of man with the contrast between *Sinn* and *Gestalt* as the constant leitmotiv.

I must write *La perception humaine*³ contra Köhler.

In what consist the slavery of animal perception and the freedom of man” [11, p. 408].

Would a knowledgeable and conscientious scholar pass off this “step by step overcoming” as the “continuous convergence” of cultural psychology with *Gestalttheorie*?

Vygotsky sharply criticizes the latter for a parallelist interpretation of the relationship between mental and corporeal phenomena. The attempt to solve the psychophysical problem through the “structural identity” of the processes in mind and body is “the first idea of parallelism” [11, p. 215]. Köhler, Koffka, Goldstein “again solve the problem within psychology in a parallelist spirit. ... This way the psychophysical problem becomes an empty abstraction *bereft of any content*” [11, p. 252].

Firstly, Vygotsky agreed with Karl Bühler’s assertion that “structural psychology is deeply related to Spinozism” [7, p. 118]. Two or three years later, while working on a book on emotions, he goes to great lengths to *detach* Spinoza from Gestalt psychology. “Spinoza is not a parallelist,” Vygotsky insists. “We might say that the *whole content* of *The Ethics* ... is the strongest – actually the only – refutation of parallelism.” [11, pp. 215–216].

Hence, the “holist” Vygotsky would regard the Cultural-Historical Gestalt Psychology, invented by Yasnitsky, as an eclectic mix of monism and parallelism. In Vygotsky’s eyes, eclecticism is the mortal sin of theoretical thought. “Like the two trees in the legend which were tied up in their tops and which tore apart the ancient knight, so any scientific system will be torn apart if it binds itself to two different trunks” [9, p. 328]. In these words CHGP can find its diagnosis, as well.

Vygotsky’s disagreement with Gestaltists grew year by year. While at first he regarded them as *collaborators* in overcoming the crisis of European psychology, by the end of his life he saw *Gestalttheorie* as the *main competitor* of cultural psychology, subjecting it to intense, multifaceted criticism. The critical downgrading of Gestalt psychology in Vygotsky’s work was traced in Chapter 8 of R. van der Veer and J. Valsiner’s monograph (it was ground-breaking for its time).

“By 1932–3, Vygotsky had started to consider Gestalt psychology a ‘naturalistic psychology’ that in its theoretical core did not differ from reflexology since it reduced meaning to structure. ... Thus, the great hopes of 1926 of Gestalt psychology freeing psychology ‘from

its biological imprisonment’ had failed, as Vygotsky perceived it” [6, p. 164].

Of course, this disagreement did not prevent Vygotsky from having a friendly dialogue with Lewin or from working closely with his students. Structural psychology remained for him the strongest magnet. Vygotsky by no means discarded its achievements, but seeks to reinterpret them in a cultural-historical spirit, “with the contrast between *Sinn* and *Gestalt* as the constant leitmotiv.”

Spinoza’s attitude towards Descartes is the same, for example. He relied on Descartes’ writings, used his notions and language, taught his *Principles of Philosophy* to a student and even demonstrated it *more geometrico*. Developing the strong points of Descartes’ teaching, Spinoza corrected his mistakes and filled the old terms with new meanings. In the Hegelian dialectic, this is called ‘sublation’ (*Aufhebung*). Vygotsky planned to *sublate* Gestalt theory, i.e., to reconsider it and “overcome step by step.” There is not the slightest doubt that he regarded Marxist historical psychology as a *higher and more powerful* program, capable of assimilating the discoveries of Freud, Köhler and Piaget.

III

Yasnitsky attacks every point of cultural-historical psychology that prevents it from merging with Gestalt psychology. The notion of objective activity and the Activity Approach are especially repugnant to him. Hence his efforts to exclude Alexei Leontiev from the “Vygotsky–Luria circle.” It is interesting to follow how much effort Yasnitsky makes to deconstruct the “myth of the *troika da piaterka*” (the three and the five, in Russian). He avoids mentioning Vygotsky’s letter on April 15, 1929, where the scientist writes in black and white: “I had a feeling of enormous surprise when A.R. [Luria] in his time was the first to follow this road, and when A.N. [Leontiev] followed him, etc. Now the joy is added to my surprise, that by the detected signposts the big road is visible not to me alone, not to **the three of us** [*nam troim*], but to **another five persons**” [10, p. 13]. Anna Stetsenko and Igor Arieivitch [5, p. 229] draw attention to the fact that, in his letters to Leontiev, Vygotsky constantly says “we,” “our theory,” discusses their common “way” in science, etc.

Yasnitsky must have read Vygotsky’s letters; his erudition is beyond doubt. There are too many willful omissions, on the verge of scholarly cheating, in his works.

The revisionist operation of ‘subtracting’ Leontiev from the *troika* is coupled with a rejection of *contemporary* research in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory – by Michael Cole, James V. Wertsch, Harry Daniels et al.

Certainly, the *troika* was in no way monolithic. In 1931, Vygotsky and Leontiev diverged in their views on the course of development of cultural psychology. From Vygotsky’s notebooks, we are able to learn what exactly

³ The article title [2].

displeased him in Leontiev's research program (see [11, pp. 247, 261–3, 275–6]).

The story of the schism is often reported as if Vygotsky had abandoned the 'instrumental' studies and engaged in the analysis of word meanings and inner experiences (*perezhivaniya*). This is the view held by Leontiev himself and shared by Yasnitsky, who only changed the assessment from minus to plus.

Meanwhile, the study of 'units' and systemic meaningful structure of consciousness was only a fragment of the planned "height psychology" building. Yasnitsky mistakenly believes that Vygotsky planned to crown his work with a "holistic" theory of consciousness à la the Gestaltist ones. The editors of *Vygotsky's Notebooks* make a similar mistake by claiming that his ultimate goal was "the theory of dynamic semantic systems and the psychology of experience (*perezhivanie*)" [11, p. xvii].

Consciousness is an *element of life*, acting as a mediator in the life process: "Consciousness determines life (its style) but itself develops from life and forms one of its aspects: *Ergo*, life determines life through consciousness" [11, p. 487]. "To change life is the main function of consciousness" [11, p. 221].

Vygotsky calls the doctrine of how consciousness changes life "height" or "acmeist" psychology. It is designed to teach each individual person to control himself and thereby help us to become free.

In acmeist psychology, the individual's mind and behavior are affected "from above" – from the heights of culture, consciousness, and reason, rather than "from below" – from the depths of unconsciousness or sensory fields. Higher psychological functions are determined by cultural values and concepts, not by instincts and passions. Here is all the difference between freedom and slavery of mental life.

Vygotsky's notebooks provide the only surviving outline of his intended book on the subject. Its structure is as follows: (i) knowledge and concepts, (ii) affects, (iii) freedom as "affect in the concept," (iv) a meaningful and systemic structure of consciousness, (v) height psychology [11, p. 224].

By nature, life is ruled by blind affects, or passions. Human consciousness is called upon to overcome the passions by means of concepts. This is the problem raised in *Ethics*, the earliest work on height psychology. "Spinoza's supreme idea ... *Knowledge changes life*. ... He all the time investigates the question as to how the *motion toward freedom really takes place: toward a life guided by reason* – and this is freedom. His central idea is the power of reason" [11, pp. 215–6]. "*The reverse movement from consciousness to life. Spinoza*" [11, p. 355].

Everything that is "height" in psychology completely escapes Yasnitsky's attention. He never once mentioned Spinoza's name in the *Revisionist Revolution* and even in the intellectual biography of Vygotsky! Much clearer to him are Stalin and Trotsky, their names are there at every turn. Naturally, Yasnitsky comprehends height

psychology with the help of the same Trotsky plus Nietzsche, who compared his own writings with "the air of the heights" [14, p. 15]. In fact, Nietzsche's apology of instincts is a *depth philosophy*, the direct antithesis of Vygotsky's height psychology.

It looks like the "intellectual biographer" had no idea what Vygotsky needed from Spinoza and why he devoted himself to the study of emotions at the "holistic" peak of his work, instead of creating CHGP. Yasnitsky simply ignores the work that Vygotsky called "the book of my life" and dedicated "to the blessed memory of my father." Unsurprisingly, since this book does not fit into the invented convergent project.

The "height" problem of the "motion toward freedom," or the "reverse movement from consciousness to life," is alien to Gestalt psychology. It had established the dependence of primary intellectual operations on the structure of the visual field, but had failed to notice how concept (and cultural thinking as a whole) alters the structure of perception, our natural 'optics.' For the purpose of experimental verification of this idea, Vygotsky sent Luria and Koffka on the Central Asian expedition.

Vygotsky believed that Leontiev was stuck at the initial stage of "direct movement from life to consciousness." Surely, consciousness emerges in the bosom of life, i.e., objective-practical activity, as a reflection and experience of life, but it acquires reality *sui generis* in the *word*. "The word duplicates consciousness," it turns consciousness into a "dialogue with oneself." "Consciousness without the word = activity [in Leontiev] and perception [in Köhler]" [11, p. 272].

Leontiev refused to follow Vygotsky to the heights of the consciousness developed by the word. He wished to continue studies on the primary stage, where consciousness arises from life. But this approach cuts off the way of understanding the *development* of the human mind, Vygotsky claims. "Development is ignored. Everything is moved to the beginning. But then everything [is moved] to the conception. The most important thing does not take place in the beginning, but in the end, for the end contains the beginning. The height viewpoint. [Leontiev] should not all the time work near the lower boundaries" [11, c. 247].

Vygotsky repeatedly quoted Marx's famous aphorism: "The anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape." What does this mean when applied to psychology? The nature of the human mind, its potential, is revealed in its plenitude *at the heights of culture*, and only from this Everest, can one see the whole picture of mental development. Hence the conclusion: the psychology of the *free man* is the key to prehistory of psychological development⁴.

The general plan of the work appears to Vygotsky as follows: (i) a study of the process of the emergence of consciousness from life, (ii) a study of the internal structure of consciousness, (iii) a study of the process of conscious mastery of life. Height psychology is a *theory of*

⁴ Cf.: "Shakespeare's tragedy explains the enigmas of primitive art and not the other way around" [8, p. 319]. This is the formula for the "height viewpoint" in aesthetics.

cultural liberation of the human mind from the captivity of natural passions.

Vygotsky defines freedom as “the concept that has become an affect” [11, p. 374]. This transformation is precisely what height psychology studies. Behind every higher cultural emotion is a concept. The tie of concept and affect emerges tangibly and most clearly in arts. So, theatrical art teaches people to manage their own and other people’s emotions intelligently, of their own free volition. It gives us the experience of freedom.

It is worth stressing that both concept and affect are treated by Vygotsky as *forms of objective activity*, or, more precisely, as its opposite poles. Concept expresses the objective side of activity, its “object relatedness”; affect expresses the motivational side of activity, its reverse impact on the subject. Vygotsky’s “dynamogenic,” i.e., activity-oriented, understanding of affect appears to have been acquired through his study of Walter Cannon’s foundational work [1].

So, Vygotsky’s approach should not be contrasted *in abstracto* with Leontiev’s “activity approach” as Yasnitsky and the authors he refers to, Aaro Toomela and Ronald Miller, do. Leontiev is right to regard Vygotsky as the founder of activity theory in psychology⁵. But this is *another* theory of activity, considerably different from Leontiev’s one. Its “height” problematics – the relationship between concept and affect in human activity, the

issue of freedom as “the affect in the concept” – fell out of Leontiev’s field of vision.

Conclusion

These days, Vygotsky studies are conducted in different directions. We can meet various hybrids with neo-behaviorism, social constructivism, enactivism, neo-Piagetian approaches, et al. Yasnitsky crosses Vygotsky and the Gestaltists. For my part, I believe that the arterial road of developing the cultural-historical theory is the resumption of the project of Spinozistic, acmeist psychology, initiated by Vygotsky. But his works certainly open up other promising avenues, too.

I pay tribute to the factual richness of Yasnitsky’s writings. He is well informed in his strictly specialized field and aware of the limits of his competence, keeping his distance from art and philosophy (with the exception of *der Fall Nietzsche*). But is it acceptable to remain silent about facts that are harmful to the cause of the revolution? Science is not politics and, normally, does not do that. I would add that Yasnitsky’s revision is fraught with unfortunate consequences for *contemporary* cultural-historical psychology as well. One can only hope that the damage so far is not too great and is quite fixable.

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⁵ Already in his obituary to the Master, Leontiev noted that “L.S. Vygotsky’s treatment ... of the psyche as a human *activity* was the cornerstone of the entire scientific psychological theory that he developed” [3, p. 19].

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«Ревизионистская революция» и перспективы исследований Выготского

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В статье проводится критический анализ проекта «культурно-исторической гештальтпсихологии», продвигаемого А. Ясницким. Этим термином он описывает главное открытие Выготского и будущее Vygotsky studies (исследований Выготского). Ясницкий отвергает деятельностный подход к исследованию психики и сводит социальную природу человеческой личности всего лишь к «аспекту», не получившему серьезной разработки в трудах Выготского. В этой статье доказывается, что перспектива развития культурно-исторической теории заключается в разработке проекта «вершинной/акмеистической психологии». Ее предмет — «обратное движение от сознания к жизни», по определению Выготского. Предназначение вершинной психологии состоит в том, чтобы помочь человеку овладеть своими аффектами при помощи понятий. Эта наука осуществляет «движение к свободе — к жизни по руководству разума».

Ключевые слова: культурно-историческая гештальтпсихология, структура, восприятие, деятельность, сознание, параллелизм, вершинная психология, аффект, понятие.

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