

FROM THE SALIVA OF DOGS TO POETRY: DEBATES ON MARXIST PSYCHOLOGY

IAN SPENCER

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to discuss the various debates inspired by Marxist psychology as they began in the USSR in the 1920s and 30s. It has been argued that a specifically Marxist-Leninist form of psychology shaped Soviet psychiatric practice.¹ Similarly, Soviet psychologists asserted that their approach was distinguished from pre-Revolutionary Russian and Western approaches by their 'dialectical-materialist principles'.² Some writers on Soviet psychiatric abuse took this at face value and used it to explain the psychiatric abuses of the 1960s and 70s by referring to the state imposition of a particular psychological paradigm. This, it is argued, stemmed directly from Marx or Lenin and hindered the development of free scientific enquiry in psychology and psychiatry. The abuse of psychiatry was then taken as being an inevitable consequence of socialism.³

Soviet psychology was in some ways different to its Western counterpart. Influential psychological analysis such as psychoanalysis were suppressed and a particular *form* of materialist psychology imposed. Psychologists who wished to keep their jobs, and sometimes their lives, had to adapt in various ways. Some adopted the officially sanctioned school of psychology as a means of furthering their careers. Others were obliged to adopt an Aesopian language in order to pursue their interests. In either case, it will be argued here that Soviet psychology was not shaped by the perspective of Marx or Lenin.

¹ P. Calloway, *Soviet and Western Psychiatry*, The Moor Press, Keighley, 1992, p.3.

² See, for example, A.V. Petrovsky, *Psychology in the Soviet Union*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1990, pp.7-9

³ See, for example, T. Khodorovich (Ed.), *The Case of Leonid Plyushch*, C. Hurst & Co., London, 1976, pp.131-9.

From the Saliva of Dogs to Poetry

MARXIST PSYCHOLOGY

Marx only mentions psychology once in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* when he writes:

‘We see how the history of *industry* and the established *objective* existence of industry are *the open book of man’s essential powers*, the exposure to the senses of human *psychology*. Hitherto this was not conceived in its inseparable connection with man’s *essential being*, but only in an external relation of utility, because, moving in the realm of estrangement, people could only think of man’s general mode of being - religion or history in its abstract - general character as politics, art, literature, etc. - as the reality of man’s essential powers and *man’s species activity*. [...] A *psychology* for which this, the part of history most contemporary and accessible to sense, remains a closed book, cannot become a genuine, comprehensive and *real* science.⁴

Therefore, for Marx, social science, speculative philosophy and the fragmented and positivistic natural sciences were all expressions of the division of labour and human alienation. The logical consequence of overcoming alienation is the emergence of a unified science. Such a science would not have the artificial distinctions drawn between the disciplines nor be abstracted from how humanity reproduces life as it transforms nature. Moreover, science would cease to be the select pursuit of a privileged section of the community but would be part of a truly human, free labour which had become man’s prime want.

For Marx, scientific psychology is concerned with uncovering humanity’s essence, one aspect of which is that humans transform nature and in so doing transform themselves. It is with that in mind that Marx used the term *industry* as meaning purposeful human labour. Marx was still influenced by Feuerbach in 1844 but it is clear that Marx’s discussion of psychology goes beyond an assertion of human species being as a biological abstraction. While Marx may have decisively ‘settled accounts’ with Feuerbach in the *German Ideology* there is nothing in the quote above to suggest that, even in 1844, Marx’s conception of humanity’s essence was reducible to biology. For Marx, physiology, although important, could not alone provide a basis for science. Humans are social animals and therefore any attempt to consider them as

⁴ K. Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1970, pp.142-3. (Here, as elsewhere, all emphases in the original).

isolated individuals, abstracted from society, constitutes a failure to understand real human beings. Importantly, Marx does not regard humans as infinitely malleable and clearly has a conception of human nature.⁵ The assertion that there is *only* historically specific human nature became a hallmark of Stalinism.

The Stalinist formulation reduced thought to neurological processes. Ironically, by choosing Pavlov, the USSR Academy of Sciences selected an example of positivism in psychology that was equally at home in the academic departments under capitalism. Pavlov cannot be held responsible for the purposes to which his work was put but it is significant that an approach to psychology was chosen that had little consideration of social issues. To put it another way, the psychological paradigm put forward by Stalinism was not a break with the positivist materialism of the pre-Revolutionary period but a continuation of it.

RUSSIAN PSYCHOLOGY 1905-1929

Before 1929 there is little evidence of a distinctively Russian psychology. Every trend in world psychology was represented in Russia before the revolution. However, under tsarism, even positivist materialism in Russian science had a radical component. This stemmed from the fact that opposition to the autocracy was extremely widespread. Given the difficulty of organising against the autocracy legally, liberal opponents expressed their opposition by other means. This could take different forms, such as a literary parody of tsarist society or in the appearance of materialism in science. It is important to remember that the movement for a materialist basis to psychology had a history going further back than 1917 and was rooted in logical positivism. A materialist approach to psychology tended to lead to difficulties with the tsarist censors. In 1850, owing to rebellious movements in the universities, the teaching of philosophy was banned and not restored until 1863. However, the teaching of logic and empirical psychology were permitted and as a result they became a focal point for students and academics opposed to the autocracy.⁶

There was widespread support among intellectuals for the February Revolution but hostility to the October Revolution. The Bolsheviks had to

⁵ N. Geras, *Marx & Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*, Verso, London, 1983, pp.65-6.

⁶ D. Joravsky, *Russian Psychology: A Critical History*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989, p.92.

From the Saliva of Dogs to Poetry

contend with a good deal of antipathy from intellectuals and specialists. Pavlov, for example, was explicitly hostile to Marxism, and condemned it as pseudo-science. However, this did not prevent Pavlov being maintained in a relatively privileged position. The Bolsheviks were compelled to make alliances with specialists in general. Pavlov, as Russia's only Nobel Laureate, was allowed privileges with regard to research facilities, a raised salary and better accommodation as his emigration would have been a propaganda disaster for the young Soviet republic.⁷ However, political expediency alone does not explain the liberal attitude to members of the intelligentsia. In the period up to 1925, there were relatively few examples of people removed from academic positions because of their hostility to the new regime, especially when one considers how widespread such attitudes must have been.

There are few recorded instances of academic psychologists who in 1917 were active revolutionaries. One was P.P. Blonsky who joined the Socialist Revolutionaries as a student and was imprisoned for various short spells during 1904-6. In 1923, at the first All-Russian congress of psycho-neurologists, he initiated the first recorded attempt by any political activist in the USSR to recast psychology in the Marxist mould. Aside from Blonsky 'No one has been able to find a single reference to Pavlov or Bekhterev in any pre-Revolutionary Marxist publication. (Many Soviet scholars have searched, since *ex post facto* they have joined Pavlov to Marx to Lenin in a holy trinity.) Such a uniform anomaly could not have been an accident'.⁸ Certainly no significant Marxist theorist discussed the subject in any detail prior to the revolution. This is not because there was no interest in the subject as Trotsky studied psychology when he was in exile in Vienna in 1908.⁹

Insofar as psychology was mentioned, it was only fleetingly and usually as part of a polemic against some right wing group who sought to oppose materialism in general and Marxism in particular. For example, Lenin in *What the "Friends of the People" are and How They Fight the Social Democrats*, argues that "the scientific psychologist has discarded philosophical theories of the soul and set about making a direct study of the material substratum of psychical phenomena - the nervous processes - and has produced, let us say, an analysis and explanation of some one or more psychological processes."¹⁰

⁷ V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 32, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1962, p.48.

⁸ Joravsky, *op. cit.*, 185-6.

⁹ L.D. Trotsky, *My Life*, Penguin, London, 1975, pp.227-8.

¹⁰ V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1960, pp.144-5.

In this early work, Lenin, can be read as reducing ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness’ to the physical action of the nervous system.¹¹ However, this would be to ascribe to Lenin a meaning that he never intended. At no point does Lenin claim any expertise in either psychology or philosophy. His objective was simply to criticise anti-Marxists who were influential in Russia at the time. The best example of this is to be found in *Materialism and Emperio-Criticism*.

Partly as a response to the defeat of 1905, some Russian socialists--particularly Bogdanov and Lunacharsky--attempted to reformulate Marxism in what they felt would be a more popular form. Bogdanov in particular, seized upon the works of Ernst Mach as an approach to materialism that would be more accessible. Mach’s book, *Knowledge and Error: Sketches on the Psychology of Enquiry*, was dedicated to David Hume, among others, and was published in 1905. Although Mach’s work was influential for a time among natural scientists it was quickly surpassed in its discussion of physics and offered no great philosophical insight. This did not stop Bogdanov translating it into Russian with a foreword by himself that stressed the importance of Mach for an understanding of Marx.¹²

After Lenin’s death *Materialism and Emperio-Criticism* was used as a philosophy text-book in the USSR and used to justify the Party line of the CPSU on a wide range of issues. In particular, Lenin’s assertion of ideology as a ‘reflection’ of material reality was used to support the mechanistic materialism that became a distinctive feature of Stalinism. However, if one looks at Mach’s work and Lenin’s critique of it, it is clear that it is precisely the positivist aspect of ‘Machism’ that Lenin is most critical of. In other words, Lenin is attacking what Soviet psychology was to become. Although few would argue that *Materialism and Emperio-Criticism* is a good exposition of dialectical philosophy, it is undoubtedly a defence of dialectics against positivism.

There has been some suggestion that the psychological writings of Mach influenced Freud, although the evidence is largely circumstantial and derived from Mach’s acquaintance with Joseph Breuer. What is clear, though, is that Mach is closer to the behaviourism of Watson than the essentialism of Freud.

¹¹ See, for example, E.A., Budilova, *Bor’ba Materializma i Idealizma v Russkoi Psikhologicheskoi Nauke*, Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, Moscow, 1960, pp.102-3.

¹² J.T. Blackmore, *Ernst Mach*, University of California Press, London, 1972, pp.235-246.

From the Saliva of Dogs to Poetry

There is some evidence that Lenin was acquainted with Freud's work.¹³ Regarding Mach's discussion of dreams, Lenin wrote that "It is true that not only is the wildest dream a fact, but also the wildest philosophy. It is impossible to doubt this after an acquaintance with the philosophy of Ernst Mach. As the very latest sophist, he confounds the scientific-historical investigation of human errors, of every 'wild dream' of humanity, such as a belief in sprites, hobgoblins and so forth, with the epistemological distinction between truth and 'wildness'".¹⁴ It is intriguing to speculate on what Lenin meant by 'the scientific-historical investigation of human errors' which he seems to be defending against Mach's scepticism. It may well be that Lenin was acquainted with Freud's books, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900, and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, published in 1901, which contained his first account of parapraxes.

The crude nature of Lenin's discussion of psychology was a measure of the fact that few had even considered the question until then. The assertion that there needs to be a distinctively Marxist (that is, Soviet) psychology is a logical extension of the assertion of socialism in one country. A distinctively Marxist psychology in one country would be as unthinkable to genuine Marxism as socialism itself being confined to one country. Stalinism, as the doctrine of socialism in one country, is a nationalist doctrine. The assertion of a distinctively Soviet psychology is a logical extension of that doctrine. It is an expression of nationalism that takes a highly specific form. This can be seen most vividly in the manifest anti-Semitism of the 'Pavlov Sessions' of the Academy of Medical Sciences and the Academy of Sciences of the USSR on June 28-July 4, 1950.¹⁵ Not only was Pavlov held up as the leading representative of Marxist psychology but the same period saw a number of senior Jewish academics either displaced or their work withdrawn from publication. The work of some Jewish writers could not be published until after Stalin's death. Among these were two psychologists who were later to occupy a very high status in Stalinist psychology textbooks, S.L. Rubenshtein and L.S. Vygotsky.¹⁶

¹³ Petrovsky, *op. cit.*, pp.160-1.

¹⁴ V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 14, p.138.

¹⁵ L.R. Graham, *Science, Philosophy and Human Behaviour in the Soviet Union*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1987, p.174

¹⁶ Joravsky, *op. cit.*, p.376.

THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER

During the first Soviet congresses of psycho-neurology in 1923 until 1929, a debate took place concerning the nature of a putative Marxist psychology. Contributions to this debate produced some fascinating insights into social science. However, the victory of Stalinism meant that by 1929, debate was replaced by a stultifying conformity and the end of meaningful research into the issue.

One of the results of the debate concerning the nature of Marxist psychology was that from 1923, how one viewed that psychology became a defining feature of one's political position. It became a political debate conducted where one's loyalty to the regime was at stake. Jobs, and later lives, were lost over debates that seemed doctrinal but were, in fact, the expression of a scramble for positions within the increasingly bureaucratized regime. Chelpanov, who until 1923 was head of the Moscow Institute of Psychology, was removed from his post and replaced with a political appointee, Kornilov, who in turn lost his position in 1930. Kornilov set about appointing academics to the Institute of Psychology who held views on psychology consistent with the prevailing line of the regime. At the time, Chelpanov's enemies described him as 'subjectivist' and 'idealist', a charge that was repeated as recently as 1989.¹⁷ However, this is misleading as it implies an ontological commitment to mind or psyche as an immaterial substance to be investigated by psychology. Chelpanov required no such commitment from his staff. In fact, Chelpanov was probably a relatively open-minded liberal academic. S.L. Rubenshtein, who went on to hold high office in the Soviet psychological establishment, approached the reality of Chelpanov's position when he said that "in general, Chelpanov had no psychological theory of his own." In the coded terms of Stalinist criticism, it could be argued that this was just a way of saying that Chelpanov was a tolerant eclectic.¹⁸

The fact that each of the leading figures in Soviet psychology was utterly dependent upon remaining in political favour is well illustrated by the case of Blonsky himself. Having initiated the call for a Marxist psychology, he fell out of favour in the 1930s and much of his work was only published in the 1950s.

¹⁷ M. Yaroshevsky, *Lev Vygotsky*, Progress Publishers, Moscow. 1989, p.91.

¹⁸ Joravsky, *op. cit.*, p.108.

From the Saliva of Dogs to Poetry

In November 1929, the press reported a purge of ‘wreckers’ from the Academy of Sciences. Shortly afterwards, the Moscow Society of Neuropathologists and Psychiatrists was forced to drop its previous membership requirement that one should have published research. A society which had previously numbered about four hundred, including about eighty of whom had been co-opted, was effectively compelled to elect three hundred new members and a new slate of officers. ‘Half were Communists, the other half members of the All-Union Association of Workers of Science and Technology for Aid to the Construction of Socialism’. Over the period 1929-31 most other scientific societies dropped similar requirements and were compelled to accept new members.¹⁹

PSYCHOANALYSIS IN THE USSR

The roots of Russian psychoanalysis go back to 1908 when N.I. Osipov trained under Jung and visited Freud. The Russian Psychoanalytic Society was established in 1911. It ceased functioning during World War I but was re-founded in 1921 by I.D. Ermakov: “He was instrumental in the establishment of the State Psychoanalytic Institute in that year where he offered courses on the psychology of the creative process. Ermakov also published pioneering psychoanalytic studies of Pushkin and Gogol, and edited a nine-volume series of Freud’s work in Russian translation”, which remained the only officially approved translation of Freud in the Soviet era.²⁰

Up until the middle 1920s, psychoanalysis remained popular in Russia. Soviet psychoanalysts formed approximately twelve percent of the world-wide membership of the International Psychoanalytic Association. There were about 30 members of the Russian Psychoanalytic Society listed between 1922 and 1929. Psychoanalysis became the object of scrutiny and some prominent Russian psychologists began a serious debate concerning a possible synthesis of Marxism and psychoanalysis. By 1924, it became the object of suspicion that led to the closure of an experimental home in Moscow using psychoanalysis for the treatment of disturbed children. By 1925, psychoanalysis came under attack. Within a few years, leading psychoanalysts (Osipov and Wulff) emigrated while others such as A.R. Luria abandoned his psychoanalytic research and moved into experimental neuropsychology.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., p.336.

²⁰ M.A. Miller, ‘Freudian Theory Under Bolshevik Rule: The Theoretical Controversy During the 1920s’, *Slavic Review* 44, 1985, p.626.

²¹ Ibid, pp.638-9.

In 1926, Trotsky's essay, *Culture and Socialism*, defended both Pavlov and Freud as being consistent with a Marxist approach to psychology. He argued that:

Pavlov's reflexology proceeds entirely along the paths of dialectical materialism. It conclusively breaks down the wall between physiology and psychology. The simplest reflex is physiological, but a system of reflexes gives us "consciousness". The accumulation of physiological quantity gives a new "psychological" quality. The method of Pavlov's school is experimental and painstaking. Generalisations are won step by step: from the saliva of dogs to poetry, that is, to the mental mechanics of poetry, not its social content - though the paths that bring us to poetry have as yet not been revealed.

Freud's method proceeds in a different way:

It assumes in advance that the driving force of the most complex and delicate psychic processes is a physiological need. In this general sense it is materialistic, if you leave aside the question whether it does not assign too big a place to the sexual factor at the expense of others, for this is already a dispute within the frontiers of materialism.

Trotsky criticised Freud and regarded some of his hypotheses as "sometimes fantastic conjecture" but then asserts categorically that:

The attempt to declare psychoanalysis "incompatible" with Marxism and simply turn one's back on Freudianism is too simple, or more accurately, too simplistic. But we are in any case not obliged to adopt Freudianism. It is a working hypothesis that can produce and undoubtedly does produce deductions and conjectures that proceed along the lines of materialist psychology.²²

²² L.D. Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life*, Monad Press, New York, 1973, pp.233-4.

From the Saliva of Dogs to Poetry

Trotsky opposed any attempt to transmute the theory of Marx into a universal master key that ignored other spheres of learning.²³ His intervention was entirely consistent with the view that a scientific approach to psychology, or anything else, would require a world socialist society, the end of alienation and the division of mental and manual labour. It was an appeal against dogmatism and for an honest, materialist investigation that did not try to pre-judge the issue or make the facts fit a predetermined view.

By the time that the Stalinist elite was consolidating its control over academic institutes, Trotsky had been expelled from the Party and exiled. The association of Trotsky with psychoanalysis meant that the latter “became associated pejoratively not only with ‘bourgeois science’ but also with the alleged threat to party and revolutionary unity posed by ‘Trotskyite deviationism’”.²⁴

The attempt by Stalinist psychologists, dependent for their position on a system of patronage, to caricature Freud as a philosophical idealist is an example of how Stalinist *‘diamat’* was a parody of Marx’s method. The intensity of the debate gives a clue to what was at stake. If, like Marx, one’s starting point is that, under commodity production, there is a separation of man from his essence, which is the consequence of class society, then the question of the ownership of the means of production is only one, admittedly vital, aspect of the liberation of humanity. Before socialism can come into being, the working class has to take power, but this is not all. The aim is the establishment of a truly human society where all production will be to meet human need. Therefore, the whole communist project is an ontological one, the end of human alienation. In such a society, abundance can move from a potentiality, as at present, to an actuality. Under conditions of abundance, humanity becomes free to develop itself through free creative labour in any way it chooses.

In place of this view, the USSR’s claim to be a socialist society was based purely on the fact that there was no private property and therefore no ruling class. This meant that all discussion of human nature, essentialism, and alienation had to be consigned to Marx’s ‘early’ phase. The 1844 manuscripts were disregarded as pre-dating the mature formulation of his dialectical materialism in *The German Ideology*. It was asserted that 1845 marked a

²³ Ibid., p.221.

²⁴ Miller, *op. cit.*, p.643.

decisive epistemological break between the early Marx who was still under the influence of Hegel and Feuerbach, and the mature Marx who finally shed the remnants of idealism. Marx's ideas did develop but his concern with human nature was as fundamental to him when he wrote *Capital* as when he wrote the 1844 manuscripts.²⁵ There was no such epistemological break as one can see by looking at one of Marx's most 'mature' works, *Capital*. He argues that that one must deal "...with human nature in general, and then with human nature as modified in each historical epoch".²⁶

No one who knew what life was like in the USSR during this period could claim that alienation had been transcended. Therefore, any philosophical or psychological system raising this awkward question had to be suppressed or marginalised. Hegel came to be treated as a historical curio and dialectics assumed only a formal role in Stalinist writing. The school of psychology that was most suitable was that which was most firmly rooted in positivist materialism. Psychoanalysis, in which there is a conception of alienation, had to be suppressed. Obviously, Freud's conception of alienation is quite different from that of Marx. For Freud, humanity's animal drives have to be repressed and it is this repression that is the source of neurosis. Moreover, he regarded such a state of affairs as an immutable feature of the human condition and the price we pay for civilisation. However, for Marx, alienation can be transcended and the end of private property is a precondition for such a transformation.

The debates on psychoanalysis in the 1920s were qualitatively different to subsequent discussions of the subject by later Soviet writers. For example, V.N. Voloshinov published a critique of psychoanalysis in 1927. The first half of Voloshinov's book contains a detailed exposition of the main tenets of Freud's theories.²⁷ One does not have to agree with the critique of psychoanalysis that makes up the second half of the book, but it is a scholarly and apparently sincere appraisal of Freud by someone attempting a critique from a Marxist perspective. This stands in stark contrast to the descriptions of psychoanalysis to be found in later books which seem to illustrate only that the author either had not read Freud or was simply engaged in publishing the official line. The open practice of psychoanalysis in the USSR was suppressed by 1933.

²⁵ Geras, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

²⁶ K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1954, p.571.

²⁷ V.N. Voloshinov, *Freudianism: a Marxist critique*, Academic Press, New York, 1976.

From the Saliva of Dogs to Poetry

THE CASE OF LEV VYGOTSKY

Vygotsky's career is an interesting case study of the history of Soviet psychology. From his earliest contributions to psychology, Vygotsky generated a good deal of interest. After his death in 1934, his work fell from favour and ceased to be published. Following Stalin's death, Vygotsky was rehabilitated in the USSR and subsequently some in the West argued that his work represents a paradigm example of Marxist psychology.

Vygotsky was born in 1896 in Orsha in Byelorussia and graduated in 1917 from the law faculty of Moscow University having fought his way into the small percentage of places allowed for Jewish students. There are no accounts of Vygotsky having been active on the revolutionary left and it is unlikely that he had read Marx and Engels prior to 1917. For example, his early works, mostly unpublished at the time, were on literary themes. Vygotsky did not come to prominence as a psychologist until 1924 when, at the invitation of Kornilov, the head of the Moscow Psychological Institute, he read a paper on *The Methodology of Reflexological and Psychological Research* at the second All-Russian Congress of Psycho-Neurology. At the time there was still considerable diversity within Soviet psychological research but a hegemonic position in favour of biological psychology was quickly established. It had, after all, been the background of the majority of psychologists at the time.

One of Vygotsky's publications in 1925 was the introduction to the Russian edition of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which he wrote jointly with Luria. In this short essay, Vygotsky and Luria spoke with enthusiastic praise of Freud's work. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, written after World War One, Freud introduced the controversial concept of the death instinct. Vygotsky and Luria stressed the dialectical nature of Freud's new formulation of the human psyche as a unity of the dialectical opposites of Eros and Thanatos. Their introduction was written in the spirit of an open-minded appraisal of scientists prepared to discuss the issues raised.

Luria's own history up until this point was firmly in the psychoanalytic camp. While a postgraduate in Kazan, Luria came across Freud's work and soon founded the Kazan psychoanalytic group. He continued to be known for his psychoanalytic research until about 1930.²⁸

²⁸ Miller, *op. cit.*, p.635.

Vygotsky was clearly influenced by Marx. It is also significant that in 1930 he published a paper called *The Socialist Alteration of Man* in which he quotes approvingly the passage from the 1844 manuscripts where Marx briefly discusses psychology. It was clearly a defence of Marx's ontological project by arguing that a socialist society would not merely take control of the means of production but would also result in the transformation of humanity itself.²⁹ Vygotsky was also aware that there was a conflict involved in the fact that there was not one single agreed psychological methodology but a series of contending schools in the USSR and elsewhere. This was to be the subject of one of his publications, *The Historical Meaning of the Psychological Crisis*.³⁰

The debate around Vygotsky's Marxist credentials often centres on whether he 'believed in' Marxism or simply used a Marxist terminology in order to fit in with the new regime. However, what makes a scientific approach distinctively Marxist is whether one employs Marx's method. In this respect, Vygotsky's position is not entirely clear. For example, Vygotsky himself regarded Spinoza as his greatest influence.³¹ In later works he and Luria clearly did adapt their writings to fit in with the prevailing line. Of course, this position may be understandable, as one's life could depend upon such adaptation. A good example of this is the contrast between Vygotsky's 1925 essay *The Question of Consciousness in the Psychology of Behaviour* and his joint publication with Luria, *Ape, Primitive Man and Child*, originally published in 1930. In 1925, Vygotsky defended the study of consciousness as a vital part of psychology against those who attempted to reduce psychology to the study of conditioned reflexes. He argues that such an approach draws no distinction between animal and human psychology and dissolves sociology into biology and psychology into physiology.³² However, by 1930 Vygotsky is arguing that intelligent (human) behaviour arises out of a complex combination of conditioned reflexes. He and Luria are also duly deferential to Pavlov in the manner that was to become typical in Soviet psychology publications.³³ Vygotsky, in his book *Myshlenie i Rech* (1934), was also

²⁹ L. Vygotsky in R. Van der Veer, & J. Valsiner, *The Vygotsky Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, pp.175-83.

³⁰ Joravsky, *op. cit.*, pp.262-3.

³¹ L.S. Vygotsky, *Sobranie Sochinenie, tom 1*, Pedagogika, Moscow, 1982, p.14.

³² *Ibid.*, pp.78-98.

³³ A.R. Luria & L.S. Vygotsky, *Ape, Primitive Man and Child*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1992, pp.2-4 and 20.

From the Saliva of Dogs to Poetry

critical of Freud and one is left wondering whether this is the result of a reappraisal of his earlier enthusiasm for psychoanalysis or, more likely, that he had to adapt his work in order to be published at all.³⁴ Luria also subsequently recanted his psychoanalytic 'heresy' and concentrated on psycho-neurological research, subsequently becoming a very senior figure in Soviet psychology.

Although much of Vygotsky's work was suppressed until Stalin's death he was not the subject of the same wholesale vilification as Freud. Vygotsky's students and associates such as Luria, Bekhterev and Leontiev all went on to hold high rank and status in the USSR under Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev despite their open acknowledgement of their intellectual debt to Vygotsky, whose own collected works were not published in the USSR until 1982-4. Vygotsky's preoccupation with the fact that, in a supposedly socialist society, there continued to be competing scientific paradigms obviously provoked unease in the Soviet elite. It is tempting to conclude that had he not died of TB, Vygotsky would probably have been shot.

After about 1930, it became a standard feature of all psychological writings to include a selection of quotations from one or more of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Pavlov. After his rehabilitation Vygotsky was also included. It seems clear that Vygotsky had 'thoroughly absorbed Marxism'.³⁵ Probably because of this, he was also opposed to the notion that one can create a Marxist psychology. Following his rehabilitation, the ritual references to Vygotsky were selective, determined by state censorship and largely concentrated on his later works, which had, themselves, adapted to this censorship.³⁶ Vygotsky's scepticism of constructing a Marxist psychology may also be due to the fact that, for him, Marx was only one of a number of highly influential thinkers. Like many Russian intellectuals at the time Vygotsky was influenced by a wide range of European thinkers, including Piaget and those associated with Gestalt psychology. In other words, his method was more eclectic than Marxist.

³⁴ Vygotsky's title is *Myshlenie i Rech'* - Thinking and Speech. In 1962 this was heavily abridged and published as *Thought and Language*. The 1962 version is poorly translated throughout. An improved edition was published in 1986.

³⁵ Joravsky, *op. cit.*, p.259.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.254-62.

One of the interesting facts about the attempt to popularise Vygotsky in the USA is the period itself. The popularisation was undertaken by Joseph Wortis in the 1950s. Wortis effectively represented the Stalinist position on matters of psychiatry and psychology. In his book, 'Soviet Psychiatry', he writes approvingly of Vygotsky and is disparaging of psychoanalysis in the manner common place in all Soviet publications.³⁷

In the early 1950s when the anti-Semitic campaign, which expressed itself in the 'Pavlov Sessions', was cut short by Stalin's death, a new concordat between the elite and the intelligentsia began. The killings and arbitrary arrests ended in an effort to secure support from the intelligentsia to achieve the elite's ends more efficiently. After the death of Stalin, the intelligentsia were no longer imprisoned for not adhering strictly to the ideas of Pavlov or be removed from their jobs for being Jewish. Yet, the view that there had to be a distinctively Soviet psychology persisted. Freud was still unacceptable but in order to have any meaningful psychological research (including industrial and social psychology) psychologists had to be permitted to go beyond Pavlov.

Vygotsky fitted the bill as he was undoubtedly a materialist. If one ignored his early works and judiciously edited the rest it was possible to portray him not only as a Marxist but one who had adapted to the Party line of the 1930s and was therefore distinctively Soviet. This is unfortunate for Vygotsky who opposed the direction psychology took in the late 1920s, but, it has to be said, not so much so as to join the opposition.

A DEFECTIVE PSYCHOLOGY

From 1953 onwards, many restrictions on science and literature were lifted. The main effects of 'the thaw' on psychology were that psychologists such as Vygotsky could be studied once again. In art and literature, it became possible to escape the stifling effects of 'socialist realism.' In psychology it became possible to undertake research which went beyond neurology. The restrictions still led to a concentration on particular areas, such as developmental and physiological psychology, but it was possible to at least undertake research without having to fear that suddenly there would be another change of policy

³⁷ J. Wortis, *Soviet Psychiatry*, Williams & Wilkins, Baltimore, 1950, pp.20, 40.

From the Saliva of Dogs to Poetry

and one would end up in a labour camp for writing an article. Generally, the type of psychology that was studied in the USSR was that which was likely to yield rapid results in medicine or industrial psychology. In other words, Soviet psychologists were free to undertake research that would help the elite achieve its objectives but which would not challenge the elite.

Articles still attacked psychoanalysis as 'idealist' and 'bourgeois' but they did at least begin to discuss such themes again. In other words, previously prohibited subjects were now discussed in an Aesopian way. For example, in 1974 an article in *Voprosy Psikhologii* presented a critique of the 'Class Orientation of the Bourgeois Psychology of Abnormal Personality: Freudianism and Neo-Freudianism'.³⁸ In it, Fromm, Marcuse, Freud and Karen Horney are subjected to a critique that is based on the assertion that their theories of personality necessarily reflect their (bourgeois) class orientation. However, in presenting his critique Roshchin presented an otherwise reasonably accurate account of their theories and thereby gave them a wider audience too.

By the 1990s, the poor state of Soviet psychology was the subject of open comment. Articles appeared which frankly expressed the frustration of Soviet psychologists. Scathing attacks on Soviet psychology were published that were analogous to the kind of open admission of psychiatric abuse, which also appeared in the Soviet press at the same time. One writer assessed the situation in Soviet psychology thus:

...thousands of scientists have defended dissertations, hundreds of thousands of articles and books have been published, but – and we must state this with complete candour or there is no way out for us – these have all amounted to playing in our own back yard. In almost no area have we been able to approach the level of universally recognised leaders. Either we descend to a hopeless provincialism and quote one another, isolating ourselves completely from world science – which nonetheless we criticise “on methodological grounds” – or we repeat Western studies after a long delay – for example in cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics, and now in “humanistic psychology” etc. our development is along the lines of that

³⁸ S.K. Roshchin, 'Klassovaya Napravlennost' Burzhuaznoi Patopsikhologii Lichnosti. Freidizm i Neofreidizm', *Voprosy Psikhologii*, 6, 1974, pp.36-49.

merciless saying: “We were the first to do this in Asia, not counting, of course, Japan.”³⁹

In conclusion then, the reason why Soviet psychology was largely biological or experimental was not because Soviet psychologists were influenced by Marxist materialism but because it was practically impossible to do any other type of research. Insofar as Soviet psychology was materialist, it owed everything to the positivist materialism of pre-Revolutionary Russia and the positivism of Western science and nothing to Marxist dialectics. The search for a distinctively Marxist psychology in the USSR of the 1920s and 30s owed nothing to Marx or Lenin and everything to Stalinism.

³⁹ L.A. Radzikhovskii, ‘The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology’, *Soviet Psychology: A Journal of Translations*, July/August, 1991, p. 73. This originally appeared in 1989 in ‘*Vestnik Akademii Nauk SSSR*’ under a title which consciously used Vygotsky’s essay title of the same name, *Istoricheskii Smysl Psikhologicheskogo Krizisa*. Part of Radzikhovskii’s article was taken up with a critique of Vygotsky for, allegedly, being a Marxist. However, he reserves his bitterest attack for Vygotsky’s epigones, such as Leontiev, blaming them for the stultifying nature of Soviet psychology.