

# Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Vygotsky: The Man and His Theory

Like the humanities and other social sciences, psychology is supposed to tell us something about what it means to be human. However, many critics, including such eminent members of the discipline as J. S. Bruner (1976), have questioned whether academic psychology has succeeded in this endeavor. One of the major stumbling blocks that has diverted psychology from this goal is that psychologists have too often isolated and studied phenomena in such a way that they cannot communicate with one another, let alone with members of other disciplines. They have tended to lose sight of the fact that their ultimate goal is to contribute to some integrated, holistic picture of human nature.

This intellectual isolation is nowhere more evident than in the division that separates studies of individual psychology from studies of the sociocultural environment in which individuals live. In psychology we tend to view culture or society as a variable to be incorporated into models of individual functioning. This represents a kind of reductionism which assumes that sociocultural phenomena can ultimately be explained on the basis of psychological processes. Conversely, sociologists and social theorists often view psychological processes as posing no special problems because they derive straightforwardly from social phenomena. This view may not involve the kind of reductionism found in the work of psychologists, but it is no less naive. Many aspects of

psychological functioning cannot be explained by assuming that they derive solely and simply from the sociocultural milieu.

This disciplinary isolation is not attributable simply to a lack of cooperation among various scholars. Rather, those interested in social phenomena and those interested in psychological phenomena have defined their objects of inquiry in such different ways that they have almost guaranteed the impossibility of mutual understanding. For decades this problem has been of concern to those seeking to construct a unified social science. Critical theorists such as T. Adorno (1967, 1968) and J. Habermas (1979) have struggled with it since the 1940s. According to Adorno, "the separation of sociology and psychology is both correct and false" (1967, p. 78). It is correct because it recognizes different levels of phenomena that exist in reality; that is, it helps us avoid the pitfalls of reductionism. It is false, however, because it too readily "encourages the specialists to relinquish the attempt to know the totality" (p. 78).

Keeping sight of this totality while examining particular levels of phenomena in social science is as elusive a goal today as earlier in the twentieth century. Indeed the more progress we make in studying particular phenomena, the more distant this goal seems to become. My purpose here is to explicate and extend a theoretical approach that tried to avoid this pitfall—the approach of the Soviet psychologist and semiotician Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1896–1934).

Vygotsky, of course, did not make his proposals in order to deal with today's disciplinary fragmentation, but many of his ideas are relevant to the quandaries we face. To harness these ideas, they must first be interpreted in light of the milieu in which they were developed. Hence I shall explicate the cultural and historical setting in which Vygotsky worked and then extend his ideas in light of theoretical advances made during the half-century since his death.

Vygotsky is usually considered to be a developmental or educational psychologist. Much of what I shall have to say, however, is based on the assumption that it is incorrect to categorize him too readily as a psychologist, at least in today's restricted sense. It is precisely because he was not *only* a psychologist that he was able to approach this discipline with a fresh eye and make it part of a more unified social science. In fact the Soviet philosopher and psychologist G. P. Shchedrovitskii (October 13, 1981—conversation) has argued that one of the main reasons for Vygotsky's success in reformulating psychology in the USSR is that he was not trained as a professional psychologist.

Under normal circumstances an outsider is not given the opportunity to reformulate a discipline such as psychology in a major country. Vygotsky, however, did not live in normal circumstances: he entered adulthood just as his country was experiencing one of the greatest social upheavals of the twentieth century—the Russian Revolution of 1917. This event provided two decades or so of what is perhaps the most exciting intellectual and cultural setting of our time. It was largely because of this setting that Vygotsky was able to develop his ingenious ideas and that these ideas could have a significant impact.

### *A Biographical Sketch*

Vygotsky's biography can be divided into two basic periods: the first, from his birth in 1896 until 1924, the year in which he made his initial appearance as a major intellectual figure in the USSR; the second, from 1924 until his death from tuberculosis in 1934.

Information about Vygotsky's early life is sketchy. Other than family records and reminiscences, especially those of his older daughter, Gita L'vovna Vygotskaya,<sup>1</sup> the only major source of information about Vygotsky's early life is K. E. Levitin (1982), who in turn gathered much of his information from one of Vygotsky's childhood friends, Semen Dobkin.<sup>2</sup> Vygotsky was born on November 17, 1896,<sup>3</sup> in Orsha, a town not far from Minsk in Belorussia. When he was about a year old, his family moved to Gomel, a somewhat larger town in Belorussia, where he spent his childhood and youth. His father, who had finished the Commercial Institute in the Ukrainian city of Khar'kov, was a department chief at the United Bank of Gomel and a representative of an insurance society. His mother was trained as a teacher but spent most of her life raising eight children. Together this couple made the Vygotsky family one of the town's most cultured. The rather stern disposition and bitter ironic humor of Vygotsky's father contrasted with the very gentle personality of his mother. It was apparently from her that Lev Semenovich acquired his initial knowledge of German<sup>4</sup> and his love for the poet Heine.

The picture that emerges from information about Vygotsky's early years is one of a happy, intellectually stimulating life—in spite of the fact that, like other members of his family, he was excluded from several avenues of opportunity because he was Jewish. In tsarist Russia being Jewish meant living in restricted territories, being subject to strict quotas for entering universities, being excluded from certain profes-

sions, and several other forms of discrimination. These circumstances were undoubtedly the source of much of the elder Vygotsky's bitterness. He and his wife, however, seem to have provided a warm and intellectually stimulating atmosphere for their children, which is evident from Dobkin's comment that Vygotsky's

father's study was often at the children's disposal. There, they arranged all sorts of meetings and would go there to be alone for a while or to meet with a small group of friends. The dining room was also a place for communication as there was invariably lively and interesting conversation during the obligatory evening tea at a large table. Talks over the samovar were one of the family traditions which played an important role in the formation of the mentality of all the children, especially the older ones. (Levitin, 1982, pp. 24–25)

Instead of attending public schools, Vygotsky studied with a private tutor for several years and then finished his secondary education in a Jewish gymnasium. He profited enormously from his early years of study with his tutor, Solomon Ashpiz. Ashpiz's pedagogical technique was apparently grounded in a form of ingenious Socratic dialogue, which left his students, especially one as gifted as Lev Semenovich, with well-developed, inquisitive minds.

By the age of fifteen Vygotsky had become known as the "little professor" (Levitin, October 6, 1981—conversation), because he often led student discussions on intellectual matters. For example, he examined the historical context of thought by arranging debates and mock trials in which his peers played the role of figures such as Aristotle and Napoleon. These debates were a manifestation of one of Vygotsky's main interests during that period of his life—philosophy.

While still a child in Gomel, Lev Semenovich also began to show fervent interest in the theater and in literature. Of the former his sister said, "I don't think there was any period in his life when he did not think or write about the theatre" (Levitin, 1982, p. 20). With regard to the latter Dobkin reported, "Literature, especially his favourite poetry, always gave him much solace in life and always engaged his attention" (ibid., p. 20). Dobkin also reports that as a schoolboy Vygotsky "was forever citing favourite verses" (p. 27). Like all Russian children, Lev Semenovich knew a great deal of Pushkin's poetry, but in contrast to most of his schoolmates who usually preferred the lyric verses, he preferred Pushkin's more serious, even tragic, passages. In

addition, he loved the poetry of Blok, especially the "Italian Poems," which have a tragic air.

When reciting poetry, Vygotsky had the habit of singling out the lines that he felt captured the essence of the poem and skipping the remaining ones. For example, from Pushkin's "Mozart and Salieri" he recited only the beginning lines: "They say: there is no justice here on earth. But there is more—hereafter. To my mind this truth is elementary as a scale." This is by no means the end of Salieri's monologue. While much of the continuation is quite significant, Lev Semenovich recited only these lines, saying they were sufficient to grasp the essence. This notion of the heightened significance of an abbreviated linguistic form was destined to play an essential role in his account of language and mind.

Vygotsky graduated from his gymnasium in 1913 with a gold medal. Though widely recognized as an outstanding student, he had great difficulty entering the university of his choice—largely because he was Jewish. The first problem he encountered was the "deputy's examinations," so called because they were attended by a deputy or representative of the province, who had the decisive say. The deputy, usually a teacher from the public gymnasium, was often quite anti-Semitic.

During this period there was a quota on the number of Jews who could enter Moscow and Saint Petersburg universities: no more than 3 percent of the student bodies could be Jewish. As Levitin (1982, pp. 27–29) points out, this meant that all the Jewish gold medalists and about half the silver medalists would be admitted. Since Lev Semenovich had every reason to expect a gold medal, his matriculation to the university of his choice seemed assured.

Midway through Vygotsky's deputy examinations, however, the tsarist minister of education decreed a change in procedures by which Jews would be chosen for Moscow and Saint Petersburg universities. The 3 percent quota was maintained, but Jewish applicants were now to be selected by casting lots, a change apparently designed to dilute the quality of Jewish students at the best universities. Dobkin remembered Lev Semenovich's response to this change. Lev

showed me the newspaper with the report about the new circular, which meant a great misfortune for him personally and for his whole family since it dashed his career plans and hopes of getting a university degree.

"There," said Lev, "now I have no chance."

The news seemed so monstrous to me that I replied quite

sincerely: "If they don't admit you to the University it will be a terrible injustice. I am sure they'll let you in. Wanna bet?"

Vygotsky, who was a great bettor, smiled and stretched out his hand. We wagered for a good book.

He did not make a single mistake on his final exams and received a gold medal . . .

And then the incredible happened: late in August, the Vygotskys received a cable from their friends in Moscow telling them that Lev had been enrolled at the University by the draw. On the same day, he presented me with a volume of Bunin's poetry inscribed "To Senya in memory of a lost bet." (Levitin, 1982, pp. 28-29)

Lev Semenovich's parents insisted that he go into medicine at the university. At the time this seemed to be a good path, since for Jews medicine guaranteed a modest but secure professional life. Vygotsky was more interested in history or philology, but these departments were devoted primarily to training secondary-school teachers, and as a Jew he was forbidden to be an employee in the tsarist government. Lev Semenovich was also interested in law, but court officials (with the exception of lawyers) could not be Jewish in tsarist Russia. Thus Lev Semenovich entered the university in Moscow in medicine. However, according to Dobkin, "hardly a month passed before he transferred to the law department" (*ibid.*, p. 29). Apparently Lev Semenovich planned to become a lawyer, one of the few professions that would allow him to live beyond the pale.

In 1914, while in Moscow as a student, Vygotsky also began attending the Shanyavskii People's University, an unofficial school that sprang up in 1911 after a minister of education had expelled most of the students and more than a hundred of the faculty from Moscow University in a crackdown on an antitsarist movement. Many of the best professors in Moscow had been the victims of this expulsion. As a result Shanyavskii University was a more interesting institution at that time than Moscow University. Vygotsky's majors there were history and philosophy.

Vygotsky graduated from Moscow University in 1917 with a degree in law. Although he received no official degree from Shanyavskii University, he profited greatly from his studies in psychology, philosophy, and literature. He returned to Gomel after his graduation to teach literature and psychology.

Very little information is available about the impact of the 1917

Revolution on Lev Semenovich. Innumerable personal and historical accounts have documented the massive changes introduced into the lives of everyone involved, and one must assume that Vygotsky was no exception. As A. R. Luria (1979) has documented, the Revolution profoundly changed disciplines such as psychology as well. Whole new realms of inquiry were opened, and opportunities for younger scholars,<sup>5</sup> were greater than had previously been imaginable.

Lev Semenovich continued living in Gomel's relatively peaceful setting for seven years after his return in 1917. With his cousin David Vygotsky he taught literature at a school in Gomel. He also conducted classes on aesthetics and the history of art in a conservatory and gave many lectures on literature and science. Furthermore, he organized a psychology laboratory at the Gomel Teacher's College, where he delivered a series of lectures that provided the groundwork for his 1926 volume, *Pedagogical Psychology*.

Dobkin recalls that he, Lev Semenovich, and David Vygotsky began publishing inexpensive copies of great literary works in 1918. This venture was dubbed "Ages and Days," and its trademark was composed of a sphinx and a butterfly. After existing long enough to produce two volumes, it was closed down because of the paper shortage that was by then affecting Gomel as well as the rest of the country. Lev Semenovich's two partners in this business left Gomel soon afterward; Vygotsky went to Petrograd in search of work, and Dobkin to Moscow to further his studies.

At the time of Dobkin's departure in 1920, Vygotsky was in poor health. The disease that was eventually to kill him, tuberculosis, had begun to take its toll. It was already a serious enough threat to Vygotsky's life in 1920 that he spent a brief period in a sanatorium and asked one of his former professors from Shanyavskii University to publish his collected manuscripts in the event of his death. He recovered from this bout of tuberculosis, however, and continued his projects in Gomel. In 1924 he married Roza Smekhova. They had two daughters.

Between his graduation from the university and his move to Moscow, Lev Semenovich somehow managed to fit a great deal of reading into his hectic schedule of teaching, public lectures, publishing, and writing. Among the authors that figured prominently in Vygotsky's readings were poets such as Tyuchev, Blok, Mandel'shtam, and Pushkin; writers of fiction such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Bely, and Bunin; and philosophers such as James and especially Spinoza. He also read

the writings of Freud, Marx, Engels, Hegel, Pavlov, and the Russian philologist Potebnya.

In retrospect all this work seems to have been preparation for an event in 1924 that was to change Vygotsky's life irrevocably. This turning point, which separates the two major periods of Vygotsky's biography, was his appearance on January 6, 1924, at the Second All-Russian Psychoneurological Congress in Leningrad. There he made a presentation, "Methods of Reflexological and Psychological Investigations."<sup>6</sup> Several of Vygotsky's future students were at the meeting and later fondly recounted the electrifying effect this unknown young man had on the conference. According to Luria,

when Vygotsky got up to deliver his speech, he had no printed text from which to read, not even notes. Yet he spoke fluently, never seeming to stop and search his memory for the next idea. Even had the content of his speech been pedestrian, his performance would have been notable for the persuasiveness of his style. But his speech was by no means pedestrian. Instead of choosing a minor theme, as might befit a young man of twenty-eight [sic] speaking for the first time to a gathering of the graybeards of his profession, Vygotsky chose the difficult theme of the relation between conditioned reflexes and man's conscious behavior . . . Although he failed to convince everyone of the correctness of his view, it was clear that this man from a small provincial town in western Russia was an intellectual force who would have to be listened to. (1979, pp. 38–39)

Vygotsky's brilliant performance so impressed the director of the Psychological Institute in Moscow, K. N. Kornilov, that he immediately invited this "Mozart of psychology" (Toulmin, 1978) to join himself and others in restructuring the institution. Lev Semenovich accepted and later that year left Gomel to begin his new career. Upon his arrival in Moscow, he lived for a period in the basement of the Experimental Psychology Institute. Dobkin recalled that Vygotsky's room contained archives of that institute's philosophical section, including reports on ethnic psychology. Vygotsky plunged into reading these archives, which made up the walls of his new living quarters, thereby continuing his education.

In 1925 Lev Semenovich completed his dissertation, "The Psychology of Art." During the fall of that year he received permission to have a public defense, but a renewed and serious bout of tuberculosis made that impossible. Recognizing this fact, the qualifying commission

excused him from a public defense, and he was passed. The origins of Vygotsky's dissertation stemmed from as early as 1916, when he had completed a lengthy manuscript on *Hamlet*. According to Dobkin, Lev Semenovich had actually begun the manuscript as a schoolboy when seeing *Hamlet* had left a great impression on him. The early versions were Vygotsky's "most closely guarded secret" (Levitin, 1982, p. 32) during that period of his life.

The years between 1924 and 1934 were extremely busy and productive for Vygotsky. Soon after his arrival in Moscow, Aleksandr Romanovich Luria (1902–1977) and Aleksei Nikolaevich Leont'ev (1904–1979) joined him as students and colleagues. Together these three became known as the "troika" of the Vygotskian school. Several other students and followers eventually joined the school, but it was Luria and Leont'ev who were destined to be the major developers of Vygotsky's ideas after his death.

Luria's initial encounter with Vygotsky reflected a respect bordering on awe. Such an opinion is not uncommon among those who worked with Vygotsky. He seems to have had a profound impact on the lives of almost all his students and colleagues. Roza Evgenevna Levina (May 3, 1976—conversation) recalled her first contact with Vygotsky as being completely overwhelming. She and four other students who were to become followers of Vygotsky were in their third year at the university in Moscow when they met him. They were between twenty-one and twenty-three years of age at the time, and Vygotsky was thirty. But from an intellectual perspective he seemed "several generations older." Levina recalls taking notes on Vygotsky's ingenious (and often spontaneous) lectures and understanding them only years later. Another of his students, P. Ya. Gal'perin (1984), has recounted how "all of Moscow came running" to hear Vygotsky's clinical diagnoses and how students sometimes listened to his lectures through open windows because the auditorium was completely packed.

The almost messianic impression that Vygotsky made is borne out in many other observations as well. For example, Luria, one of the most prominent neuropsychologists of the twentieth century, said, "All of my work has been no more than the working out of the psychological theory which [Lev Semenovich] constructed" (1978), and of his own professional life Luria said, "I divide my career into two periods: the small and insignificant period before my meeting with Vygotsky and the more important and essential one after the meeting" (Levitin, 1982, p. 159).

The excitement that Vygotsky generated among his students and colleagues is perhaps impossible to appreciate in today's setting. They were totally dedicated to the man and to his ideas. According to Luria, "The entire group gave almost all of its waking hours to our grand plan for the reconstruction of psychology. When Vygotsky went on a trip, the students wrote poems in honor of his journey. When he gave a lecture in Moscow, everyone came to hear him" (1979, p. 52).

What generated such excitement and enthusiasm among Vygotsky's followers? At least two essential factors were involved. First, the genius of Vygotsky. His mind absorbed a huge amount of diverse information and analyzed it in accordance with an evolving set of guiding principles. But the same can be said of many people who have not had Vygotsky's impact; it alone cannot explain his influence. One must also appreciate the importance of a second factor, the social and political environment of the USSR during the two decades between the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the beginning of the Stalinist purges. This period, especially after the end of the Civil War in 1922, was one of upheaval, enthusiasm, and energy unimaginable by today's standards. People such as Vygotsky and his followers devoted every hour of their lives to making certain that the new socialist state, the first grand experiment based on Marxist-Leninist principles, would succeed. When one appreciates the life-giving energy provided by this environment and by the commitment of intellectuals to the creation of a new society, Vygotsky's work and influence become easier to understand.

The last decade of Vygotsky's life was extraordinarily hectic and productive. He joined the Psychological Institute of Moscow University in the modest position of junior staff scientist (or staff scientist, 2nd class, as the rank was then known). The year before his arrival in 1924 the directorship of this institute had passed from G. I Chelpanov to Kornilov. The major reason for the change was that Kornilov was viewed as a "materialist" devoted to developing a Marxist psychology, whereas Chelpanov had been labeled an "idealist." Kornilov's takeover signaled the seriousness and dedication with which scholars were then trying to employ Marxist principles when approaching issues in psychology (as well as in other disciplines).

Vygotsky viewed his task in this new institutional setting as twofold. First, he wanted to reformulate psychological theory along Marxist lines. This theme in Vygotsky's writings is sometimes dismissed by Western readers as mandatory lip service to something he did not really believe. This was absolutely not the case with Vygotsky. Although

Soviet psychology was later to suffer from immersion in a dogmatic political climate (compare Tucker, 1971; Kozulin, 1984), Vygotsky died before this condition became a pervasive fact of life. His belief in Marxist principles was honest and deep. According to Luria, "Vygotsky was . . . the leading Marxist theoretician among us . . . in [his] hands, Marx's methods of analysis did serve a vital role in shaping our course" (1979, p. 43).

Vygotsky's second goal after 1924 was to develop concrete ways for dealing with some of the massive practical problems confronting the USSR—above all, the psychology of education and remediation. Typically the USSR has had great faith in scientific solutions to practical problems. At the time Vygotsky was working, the practical problems for psychology included massive illiteracy (which has been almost completely overcome today), cultural differences among the peoples who were all eventually supposed to become Soviet (as opposed to Uzbek, Ukrainian, and so on), and an almost total absence of services for those who were mentally retarded or otherwise unable to participate in the new society. While working at Kornilov's institute, Vygotsky expanded his horizons in practical issues by examining problems of defectology (*defektologia*).<sup>7</sup> In particular, he was concerned with children who were hearing impaired, mentally retarded, or (in current terminology) learning disabled. In 1925 he began to organize the Laboratory of Psychology for Abnormal Childhood in Moscow. In 1929 this became the Experimental Defectological Institute of Narkompros (People's Commissariat for Education), and after Vygotsky's death, the Scientific Research Institute of Defectology of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. Vygotsky was the first director of this institute and continued to be heavily involved in its workings until his death.

In addition to carrying out the work needed to create a new institute (the difficulty of which was exacerbated by the relative chaos that still existed in the USSR), Vygotsky conducted empirical research. Levina (May 3, 1976—conversation) recalls that she and other students of Vygotsky searched the neighborhood of the institute for children who could serve as subjects in their studies. They temporarily used this method of "subject selection" because it was unclear which bureaucracy had the power to give them permission to enter the kindergartens.

Besides his administrative activities Vygotsky also lectured and wrote. In 1925 he produced the written version of his 1924 presentation at the Second All-Russian Psychoneurology Congress; between November of 1925 and the spring of 1926, while in the hospital with another

attack of tuberculosis, he wrote a major philosophical critique of the theoretical foundations of psychology, "The Historical Significance of the Crisis in Psychology"; and in 1926 he published *Pedagogical Psychology*, which derived from his earlier lectures in Gomel.

Beginning in the late 1920s Vygotsky traveled extensively in the USSR to lecture and help set up research laboratories. In the early spring of 1929 he went to Tashkent (Uzbekistan) for several months to give a course and train teachers and psychologists at the Eastern Department of the First Central Asian State University. In early 1931, at the request of the newly formed psychology sector at the Ukrainian Psychoneurological Institute, Vygotsky and several colleagues moved many of their activities to the city of Khar'kov. Although this move severely disrupted their personal lives, the group readily accepted the invitation to set up a new base of operations. They viewed Khar'kov as providing a supportive atmosphere that would foster the growth of a new approach to psychology. They felt they needed a few years' respite from the hectic environment of Moscow in order to develop their ideas. Among the members of Vygotsky's school who moved to Khar'kov were Luria, Leont'ev, L. I. Bozhovich, and A. V. Zaporozhets. They were joined by such figures as P. Ya. Gal'perin and P. I. Zinchenko, who had already been living there.

Vygotsky himself did not move permanently to Khar'kov but visited this outpost of his followers on a regular basis. In addition to lecturing, writing, and organizing research during these visits, he undertook studies in medicine, especially neurology. He entered medical school and attended lectures in both Moscow and Khar'kov. His interest in medicine seems to have stemmed primarily from his interest in neurological disorders of speaking and thinking, which was manifested as early as 1929 in his writings on aphasia.

Besides his work in Khar'kov during this period, Vygotsky pursued several of his activities in Moscow with colleagues such as Levina, L. S. Slavina, and N. A. Menchinskaya. He gave lectures at the Department of Social Sciences at Moscow State University, the N. K. Krupskaya Academy of Communist Education, the Institute for Child and Adolescent Health, the Pedagogical Department of the Moscow Conservatory, and the K. Libknekt Industrial-Pedagogical Institute. Furthermore, he commuted regularly to Leningrad to work with D. B. El'konin and S. L. Rubinshtein and to lecture at the A. I. Herzen Leningrad Pedagogical Institute. Vygotsky also began to visit Poltova fairly regularly to guide the research of a group headed by Bozhovich,

who had moved there from Khar'kov. He not only gave lectures in all these places but conducted clinical work and organized research activities as well. Anyone familiar with the distances between these cities and the primitive means of Soviet transportation in the 1930s can appreciate the time and energy such travel demanded. Nevertheless, like many of his cohorts, Vygotsky viewed it his duty to help build the new Soviet state.

Between 1931 and 1934 Vygotsky produced manuscripts for reviews, articles, and books at an ever accelerating pace. He edited and wrote a long introduction for the 1932 Russian translation of Piaget's volume *Le langage et la pensée chez l'enfant* (1923). His introduction was later to serve as the second chapter of his posthumous volume *Thinking and Speech* (1934).<sup>8</sup> Vygotsky also wrote many other pieces, including "The Diagnosis of Development and Pedagogical Clinics for Difficult Children" (1931a), "The History of Development of Higher Mental Functions" (1931b), "Lectures on Psychology" (1932), "The Problem of Instruction and Cognitive Development during the School Years" (1934b), "Thought in Schizophrenia" (1934c), as well as critical reviews and introductions to volumes by Bühler, Köhler, Gesell, Koffka, and Freud.

Among his research activities, Vygotsky attended a seminar in Moscow together with Luria, the linguist N. Ya. Marr, and the cinematographer S. M. Eizenshtein. Eizenshtein subsequently wrote that he loved "this marvelous man with his strange haircut" . . . From under this strange haircut peered the eyes of one of the most brilliant psychologists of our time who saw the world with celestial clarity" (Ivanov, 1976, p. 66).

During Vygotsky's last few years of life, he lectured and wrote at an almost frenetic pace. His daughter, Gita L'vovna (October 16, 1981—conversation), recalls his Moscow schedule as one that required him to be at work from early morning until late evening. He often did his writing after 2 A.M., when he had a few quiet hours to himself, and during the last months of his life he dictated his output to a stenographer, which is how the last chapter of *Thinking and Speech* was produced.

Throughout this period Vygotsky's bouts of tuberculosis became increasingly frequent and severe. His protracted, terrifying spells of coughing led to exhaustion for several days, but instead of resting, he tried to reach as many of his goals as possible. In the spring of 1934 his health grew much worse. His doctors insisted that he enter the

hospital, but he refused because of work he needed to complete by the end of the school year. One May 9 he had a very severe attack at work and was brought home. At the end of May his bleeding began again, and on June 2 he was hospitalized in Serebryanii Bor Sanatorium. Shortly after midnight on June 11 he died. He was buried in Novodevichii Cemetery in Moscow.

A few of Vygotsky's writings were published shortly after his death, but for political reasons a twenty-year period ensued when his work was for all practical purposes banned in the USSR. This resulted partly from the 1936 decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party against pedology, a discipline roughly equivalent to educational psychology, especially as it concerns psychometrics. The decree was aimed at aspects of this discipline that Vygotsky himself had criticized (see Cole and Scribner, 1978), but certain of his works (for example, Vygotsky, 1935) clearly were associated with it, and so all his writings became a target of criticism. Other factors in the demise of Vygotsky's official position were the conflict between some of his claims and those found in Stalin's 1950 essay on linguistics, and the rise in the late 1940s of a form of dogmatic Pavlovianism (Tucker, 1971) that is now referred to in the USSR as "vulgar materialism."

These factors were overcome only after Stalin's death in 1953. The publication of Vygotsky's works resumed in 1956 (Vygotsky, 1956) and continues today in the USSR with the publication of six volumes of his collected works (Vygotsky, 1982a, 1982b, 1983a, 1983b, 1984a, 1984b). In all, Vygotsky produced approximately 180 works. Of these, 135 had been published in one form or another prior to the six volumes of his collected works. Several are appearing in these six volumes for the first time, but some, especially those dealing with pedology, will not appear even then.

### *Vygotsky's Theoretical Approach*

The multiplicity of intellectual roots and research interests that characterized Vygotsky's career may suggest that any attempt to identify a core set of unifying themes in his work would be misguided. However, I would argue that it is only by identifying general themes that one can understand his approach to specific issues. The three themes that form the core of Vygotsky's theoretical framework are (1) a reliance on a genetic or developmental method;<sup>10</sup> (2) the claim that higher mental processes in the individual have their origin in social processes;<sup>11</sup>

and (3) the claim that mental processes can be understood only if we understand the tools and signs that mediate them.

Each of these themes can be fully understood only by taking into account its interrelationships with the others. Thus the very notion of origins in the second theme points toward a genetic analysis, and Vygotsky's account of social interaction and mental processes is heavily dependent on the forms of mediation (such as language) involved. Indeed much of what is unique about this approach is the way the three themes are interdefined.

While recognizing this thoroughgoing interconnection among the themes, my initial presentation of them considers each in relative isolation. Although this approach entails some artificiality, it is useful to abstract each theme from its overall framework for clarity of presentation. By isolating the themes in Vygotsky's approach, one can also gain insight into the "dynamics" that exist among them. I shall argue that they can be ordered in terms of their analytic primacy in his theoretical framework. Specifically I argue that the third theme, concerning tool and sign mediation, is analytically prior to the other two. This is so because Vygotsky's claims about mediation can generally be understood on their own grounds, whereas important aspects of the other two themes can be understood only if the notion of mediation is invoked. Thus Vygotsky defined development in terms of the emergence or transformation of forms of mediation, and his notion of social interaction and its relation to higher mental processes necessarily involves mediational mechanisms.

In addition, I believe that Vygotsky made his most important and unique contribution with the concept of mediation. At the time he was writing, other scholars had already argued for the need to use genetic analysis in the study of mind and had outlined accounts that viewed the mind as originating in social life. It was Vygotsky's contribution to redefine and extend these ideas by introducing the notion of tool and sign mediation.

During the last decade of his life the notion of mediation (*oposredovanie*) became increasingly important and well formulated in Vygotsky's theory of human mental functioning. By 1933 he went so far as to say that "the central fact about our psychology is the fact of mediation" (1982a, p. 166). L. A. Radzikhovskii has noted that this evolution in Vygotsky's thinking was paralleled by a switch from an account of mediational means closely tied to Pavlovian psychophysiology to one emphasizing meaning and the communicative nature of

signs: "The concept 'stimulus-means,' which in fact always meant only that the means is not a typical stimulus (in a behavioristic conceptualization), disappears [in Vygotsky's writings]. In its place the concept *sign* becomes central for Vygotsky's theory. The term *sign* is used by Vygotsky in the sense of having meaning (1979, p. 182). Vygotsky himself recognized this change in his account of mediation. Thus in 1933 he noted that "in older works we ignored the fact that a sign has meaning" (1982a, p. 158).

It is Vygotsky's later interpretation of signs and their mediational capacities that will be the primary focus of my presentation. In his writings of this last period of his life one can see the full development of an approach that draws on his earlier studies in semiotics,<sup>12</sup> philology, and literary analysis. His insights into the nature of meaning in sign systems (especially human language) laid the groundwork for interpreting the genetic relationship between social and individual processes. His understanding of this relationship is the core of his approach and leads back to the issue raised at the very beginning of this chapter—the isolation of individual and social phenomena in today's social sciences. The way Vygotsky proposed to coordinate these areas of inquiry was to argue that semiotic processes are part of both and hence make it possible to build a bridge between them. This involved invoking ideas from disciplines that lie outside the social sciences as they are understood today. Vygotsky was able to do this partly because of his familiarity with a broad range of disciplines. However, his success at bridging disciplines also had much to do with the exciting social and intellectual milieu in which he lived.

Vygotsky managed to tie various strands of inquiry together into a unique approach that does not separate individuals from the socio-cultural setting in which they function. This integrative approach to social, semiotic, and psychological phenomena has substantial relevance today, a half century after his death.