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Between the Scylla of Naturalism and the Charybdis of Technicism

Vygotsky and the Third Way (Path) of Psychology:
Writings of A.A. Puzyrei

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DOROTHY ROBBINS

Guest Editor's Introduction

While sitting in a car during the summer of 1999, with Lev Kravtsov in Rostov-on-Don (Russia), I was asked whether I knew about Andrei Puzyrei and his 1986 book, *Psychology, Psychotechnics, Psychagogy* [Psikhologīia, psikhotekhnika, psikhagogika] (republished in 2005 by Smysl). Since then, many people in Moscow have also asked the same question; and, in 2004, I had the opportunity to attend some of Puzyrei's lectures on psychology at Moscow State University. His lectures were fascinating, revealing a deep understanding of psychology, often nurtured with thoughts from world literature, music, Eastern philosophy, the Greeks, aesthetics, poetry, and so on. His style of lecturing and writing take time to understand, and one must be willing to read this issue in its entirety, before being able to dissect the parts. It has often been stated by many that he could not be translated into English, and it is a pleasure to congratulate Liv Bliss on her success. The style of writing in this issue remains the same in English (for the most part) as in Russian, with some words not being translatable and with many neologisms remaining, such as *acculturalizing*, *aptitudinizing*, *praxes* (plural of praxis, which would normally be translated as practical situations), *sociotechnical*, *mnemotechnical system*, *psychotechnical action*, and so on.

The purpose of this issue of the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* is to recreate a new approach to understanding L.S. Vygotsky's methodology and holistic framework of a unified psychological system. Vygotsky wanted to create a new ("general") psychology that would stand on equal footing with the scientific method used in the natural sciences. It is important to note that his *height* psychology (i.e., the potential of human development) was intended for the creation of a new person, one who con-

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sciously wants to change and master his/her course of mental development. This person must be engaged in the process of change within a higher consciousness, and this process returns to deeper values of intention, will, intuition, and so on. This understanding is not represented as an externalized absolute reality (noumena), but is understood as an internal spark of divinity, which is activated through intuition generated by catharsis, displacement, and so forth. To be more specific, Puzyrei uses the example of Plato's *maieutic psychagogy*, or dialectical transformation. *Maieutic* is derived from *maieûtikos*, meaning midwife, one who helps in the delivery of a new being; *psychagogy* (*psuchagôgê*, from Greek, *psûchê*, soul, and *agogê*, transport to or lead out of) means the science of "helping to bring out (give birth to) new elements (ideas, beings) from a person's soul or to bring into (transmit to) a person's soul, elements from a higher level of being."¹ The transformative tool used is the (Socratic) dialectic, where a competent interlocutor is present to help guide the dialogues, and there is no attempt to try to "prove one's point," but to allow the discourse to be creative, aiming to expand one's higher consciousness. Although one can write about this type of dialectic, it can be truly experienced only individually, with the feeling of catharsis that Vygotsky so aptly described. "The mystical aspect of [the] dialectic is evidenced by the sudden flash that shines forth, the light that is kindled in one soul which leaps to another and then sustains itself."² This entire process is one of learning by doing, or learning through action. To summarize so far: "Through what we have been able to discern of the essence of [the] dialectic, Plato's statements become clear. Dialectic is an *interpersonal activity* in which the leader and participants enter a higher state of consciousness, allowing psychic material to flow through them . . . they do not follow a script. They gain union with their Higher Self and create new understanding by the interaction and coalescence of ideas from all active participants in the interchange."³ Within Russian cultural-historical theory, Puzyrei continually points out the connection between research/praxis and praxis/research, which together must always go hand in hand. This nonclassical psychology is not built upon the experimental method of the natural sciences (upon which most psychology stands today), but upon real life situations, and the images offered are metaphors comparing the natural sciences with a telescope, and cultural-historical theory with a thermometer (not to be confused with Peirce's index, also using a thermometer as an analogy). This new psychology broadens rationality with new nonclassical situations, where the test subject and experimenter form a unit, and the object being studied "must be represented in its natural state not only during the research but also outside of the research" (p. 69). A basic key in understanding the process of human development is that

the human psyche possesses no developmental laws of its own, hence it is non-natural. In other words, "development" within the natural sciences means a natural development, while development within the higher mental functions is something non-natural, it is the result of an artificial component of a specific *psychotechnical action* (equated to the understanding of specific, artificial semiotic tools [which Puzyrei sometimes refers to as *machines*], and which Puzyrei takes as a unit of analysis in Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory). The term *psychotechnical action* is difficult to understand, but is sometimes labeled as *practical/instrumental action, significative operation/act*. "The object of study of cultural-historical theory is not the natural functional processes of the mental apparatus but, rather, the systems of psychotechnical action . . . action to transform the psyche using specific artificial semiotic tools that have been historically generated and culturally consolidated" (p. 64).

The beginning section of this issue (pp. 8–42) is devoted to an explanation of the problems of using the natural scientific method applied to psychology, and here the discussion takes *creativity* (and aesthetics) as its focal point. Puzyrei analyzes the path of the psychology of creativity, which often uses the natural scientific method, and in this respect he calls for a new maiuetic psychagogy, stating: "Indeed, for a given piece of art to be received in general and to be received as a piece of art especially, the mind—or, more broadly, the soul and spirit—of the one receiving the art needs to be organized in a certain way. Only relative to that organization can a given piece of art survive" (p. 35). It is a return to the spirit of an externalized background (including noumena) that is internalized via the process of catharsis, disobjectivation, and so on, where the key element of mental development is the process of *transformation*. Puzyrei speaks about Boris Pasternak's translation of Hamlet, which was not a word-by-word technical translation, but, rather, "Pasternak reveals in Shakespeare the conditions that render our own spiritual life, our own spiritual development, feasible. He broadens the horizon of our own consciousness and 'amplifies' it" (p. 37). Indeed, it is the living dialectic that is used as the artificial/non-natural means to achieve a transformation of our consciousness. However, this description still leaves us with a subjective view of the new psychology, and Vygotsky was intent on creating a new ("general") psychology that would be on an equal and objective standing with the natural sciences.

From here Puzyrei speaks of defectology, and how "every handicap is a social construct." Indeed, the basic components of cultural-historical psychology can be derived from the *Psychology of Art* and Vygotsky's thoughts on defectology. He believed in "extracerebral connections" that "close the

circuit between the child and the world not directly but through another person" (p. 45), to compensate for the defective organ. Again, the word "amplification" (or "strengthening," or "rounding out") is a very important part of the development of *functional organs* (which are just as real as morphological organs, comprising collective memory, volition, skills, etc.). Here, Puzyreï views the theory of a *crisis*, which should offer a historical analysis (= genetic), and a methodological analysis of the crisis (what stands behind the crisis). But, in order to do this he viewed the crisis *teleologically*, beginning with a "positively formulated goal," which leads to a new method. Remember that within maieutic psychagogy, "truth" can only be discovered through a state of higher consciousness, which is always connected to a concrete human consciousness, with an attempt at *self-regulation, self-mastery, free will of action* (in the Spinozian sense). In other words, general (new) psychology should be based on the *potential* of mental development, according to its feasibility. This method also requires a critique of the history of psychology, establishing a new psychology, akin to *Das Kapital*. Within this nonclassical approach, there is unity within diversity between the subject and object, and a *zone of fusion*⁴ between the individual and social, praxis and research, defectology and "normalcy," sense and meaning, dialectic and monism (Spinoza), personality and consciousness, and so forth, all of which translate into a new rationality. So, "the 'new psychology,' being, to Vygotsky's way of thinking, a 'psychotechnical' methodology or 'a philosophy of practice' [praxis] capable of responding to the requirements of praxis and of 'mastering' it, is expected to produce a fundamentally new . . . type of psychological knowledge" (p. 53). This new thinking represents a new "objective science," a science of consciousness and personality, and it is a concrete psychology. The purpose of this new psychology is not to test or research the subject's mental psyche, but to restructure and transform it. The subject within this nonclassical psychology is always working on him/herself, within a process of continual transition, through a structural/functional reorganization (from science to praxis), also using the experience taken from this reorganization (from praxis to science). The understanding of *direct experience* (internal or external) should not be viewed as the only valid source and boundary of scientific cognition; within cultural-historical theory there is a move toward an *indirect* method of cognition. At this point the metaphor of the thermometer is used to learn how to "exteriorize" (objectify) mental reality, through "regularities." The thermometer *replaces* (amplifies) a natural approach by measuring the temperature; in other words, it compensates for an inadequacy. In fact, cultural-historical theory could be called "the method of productive amplification" (p. 70). From here, Puzyreï speaks of memory, and how Vygotsky memorized a list of the greatest writers from antiquity to his present

time, and he could memorize long lists of words by affixing that word to the name of a great writer. Listing single words by memory was not of primary importance for Vygotsky, but rather the transformation of the *functional interrelationships* of the human psyche, found inter alia within semiotics and sign structuring (remember that there is only a *sign system*, never a single sign). “The sign is always an instrumentality used to organize an action whereby man ‘masters’ his own psyche (his consciousness, his personality)—that is, an instrumentality used to organize a ‘psychotechnical action’ (or ‘significative operation’ as Vygotsky himself called it)” (p. 58). Puzyrei states that Vygotsky’s study of the higher mental functions was not his primary focus; he placed much emphasis on the process of their genesis and formation. It needs to be understood that when the higher mental functions are formed, it is not possible to study them through direct observation, and this is where the method of dual stimulation becomes important. Puzyrei then goes on to speak about “inventions of consciousness” and “inventions of nature.” He actually used the term “trap” or “snare” in Russian, which does not convey the same meaning in English. He speaks about the aspect of exteriorization/externalization, but makes it clear that “research in cultural-historical psychology is always ‘internal’” (p. 76). In closing, he uses the metaphor of comparing Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory with a city.

We are pleased to introduce English-speaking readers to the original, and sometimes provocative, thoughts of Andrei Puzyrei. He is one of the few Vygotskian psychologists who attempts to create an original approach to the entire framework of cultural-historical theory. He sets the stage for each of us to envision our own Vygotskian system of nonclassical psychology. At the same time, he offers a specific mindset in proceeding toward the creation of a truly new, cultural-historical, scientific psychology.

Notes

1. Taken from www.hermes-press.com/platonic_dialectic.htm.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. A term coined by Andy Blunden on the xmca listserv discussion group in October 2000.