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## Problems of the Theory and History of Psychology *Crisis in Psychology*

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The Russian edition of Vygotsky's collected works actually began with this volume, probably in keeping with Russian/Soviet assumption that fundamental theoretical issues should come first. Characteristic Western interests in practical problems, it would seem, demanded earlier publication of the volumes on psycholinguistics and "defectology" (special education), and they brought out the writings on history and theory as the third volume.

The complete Volume 3 of Vygotsky's *Collected Works* (1997) contains many of his articles on theory and history of psychology, as well as some prefaces to works written by others, and these prefaces are all devoted to theoretical matters. The very first article, though not included in the present volume, is worthy of some comment, because it foreshadows issues that emerged in the fuller work that we reproduce here, *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology*. That first article is the published version of what is often called Vygotsky's debut, his celebrated talk at the Combined Session of the Psychological and Neurological Sections of the Second All-Russian Congress on Psychoneurology in Petrograd (Leningrad), January 6, 1924 (published 1926). Entitled "The Methods of Reflexological and Psychological Investigation," it was apparently the vehicle that carried the young provincial scholar to the high stage of Soviet scholarship, because it caught the attention of K. N. Kornilov. (Veresov and others argue that this was probably not a debut, that as a university student Vygotsky was already well known to Moscow psychologists.) In the year previous to the Petrograd conference, Kornilov had started agitating for a Marxist psychology, and by November of 1923, G. I. Chelpanov, the founding director of the Psychological Institute of Moscow University, was ordered to turn the leadership over to Kornilov, whose program of "reactology" attempted to represent such a Marxist approach.

One thing that must have impressed Kornilov was Vygotsky's courage, there on the spot, to criticize the Petersburg school of reflexology (Bekhterev and Pavlov) and to call for a new, unified psychology to investigate consciousness. Actually, Vygotsky's comments show appreciation of the achievements of reflexology (he is more complimentary to Pavlov than to Bekhterev), but he insisted that the reflexological approach did not provide sufficient

foundation for psychology, the study of both mind and behavior. A fundamental dualism in psychological thought was the major problem of the moment, Vygotsky asserted: "Psychology is experiencing a most serious crisis both in the West and in the USSR". Whether Kornilov imagined that this brilliant young Jew from Belarus could help him promote the Moscow program in reactology is not clear. In any case, it did not happen that way.

Once he arrived at Moscow, Vygotsky hit the ground running, starting many projects with a group of collaborators who soon became his adoring disciples. His earliest research and publications concentrated on "defectology" (see the introduction to the previous section), but he was moving on all possible fronts and did not neglect the broad theoretical issues that had marked his entrance to the center of Soviet psychology. In fact, his first full-length book, though he could not publish it, was *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology: A Methodological Investigation*, written 1926–1927, when the tuberculosis that eventually killed him flared up and forced him to bedrest. Unable to continue the clinical and educational work, he still could not waste his time, so he deepened his reading from the Institute's library. The present volume offers this book in full for several reasons.

First, this important book was almost doomed to oblivion. *Crisis in Psychology* has a curious publication history, mostly a history of nonpublication. Vygotsky was a young man in a hurry and was usually not shy about publishing as quickly as possible. Yet this completed manuscript, apparently ready for publication, did not appear in print until the Russian edition of *Collected Works* in 1982, fifty-five years later. The delay surely resulted from the political climate, and that climate may even have altered the text. David Joravsky (1987, 1989) has argued that the original manuscript must have included quotations of Trotsky, Bukharin, and Kautsky. Soviet editors in the early 1980s may have purposefully omitted those references, and Joravsky suspects that they even fiddled the text some. Vygotsky's critical discussions of Marxist writers are still extensive, though critical notes by the Soviet editors correct the author whenever he ventures outside the realm of Soviet orthodoxy. Since Vygotsky composed this theoretical work during the period from 1924 (when Lenin died) to 1927 (when Trotsky was exiled), it makes sense that publication at the end of that period would have been problematic at best, and likely it was simply repressed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (1978) has called the period 1928–1931 a "cultural revolution" in Soviet history, indicating that Marxist enthusiasts suddenly became very tough with anyone who would compromise with non-Soviet philosophy, even though full Stalinist repression was still a few years away.

A second reason for including the *Crisis* in full is that it is the one writing in which Vygotsky fully exercises his impressive powers as reviewer and critic. Although all six volumes of *Collected Works* contain prefaces, critiques, and other review writings, no other single work of his addresses so many authors, psychological doctrines, and philosophical positions as *Crisis* does. The most wide-ranging access to Vygotsky's own reading material is found in *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology*, although this work is certainly no easy key to Vygotsky's thought and its development. Scholars will argue the details for many years, and this may be one case where an authoritative text will really be needed, one that has been verified with original manuscripts.

One intriguing analysis, an interpretation of the overall development of Vygotsky's thought, is offered by Veresov, who calls *Crisis* "one of the most important and most significant works

by Vygotsky." This work, he insists, "presents Vygotsky not only as founder of a certain psychological theory, but as a methodologist of science" (1999, p. 145). It was in this theoretical work, coming after several years of practical work with learning-impaired children, that Vygotsky made the crucial steps toward his famous cultural-historical theory of psychological development. *Crisis* is "the watershed between early Vygotsky and Vygotsky the creator of the cultural-historical theory" (p. 29). Before Vygotsky wrote this work, Veresov claims, he was using reflexological and structuralist assumptions in psychology and even behaviorist methods while working with the children he studied, although he was characteristically critical of all these methods.

Looking for some way to overcome dualism in psychological theory (and occasionally even bewildering pluralism), Vygotsky was impressed by the German Gestaltists. He was not impressed enough, however, to be satisfied with their approach. (Nor were the Gestaltists all that impressed with Vygotsky's work when they visited him in Moscow. See Scheerer, 1980; Harrower, 1983, pp. 135-137, 144-145.) Vygotsky continued to search for his own solution to the dualism that had precipitated the crisis, and the result of that search was his book on the subject. At the same time, interestingly, the Gestaltists paralleled Vygotsky's book with their better-known publications (especially Koffka, 1926; Buehler, 1927/28). Even Ash's monumental work (1995) on German Gestalt has not accounted for the broader impact of this crisis outside of Germany. A contemporary observer (Hartmann, 1935, Chap. 17) put his finger on the reason why Gestalt failed to unify psychology. The Gestaltists who were best known in the United States turned toward a physiological theory of perception based on isomorphic correlations between mind and brain. As Kurt Goldstein and Martin Scheerer continued their work, a schism in Gestalt occurred. In America they found that the classic position by Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka had given short shrift to issues that now concerned them, the role of the individual in society and theories of personality, as well as psychopathology in the individual. Vygotsky, in his time and place, was still concerned with all of these issues, although it is true that he often had difficulty knowing the place of the individual in his system. Out of the philosophical foundations of Marxism, Vygotsky finally steered toward his own celebrated theory.

Although Veresov's account of Vygotsky's development will seem too discontinuous to many readers of Vygotsky (whose own theory emphasized "emerging" and "development" rather than abrupt turns), most will probably agree with the emphasis that Veresov gives to the period during which Vygotsky wrote *Crisis*. It was an important time for Vygotsky and for the history of psychology.

A third reason for careful consideration of this work is that it is probably the best place for scholars, even if the text has suffered some tampering, to gain insight into what everyone agrees was Vygotsky's main effort: to create a Marxist science of psychology appropriate to the new Soviet society. Although Lenin and Trotsky had not shirked from dictatorial tactics during the Revolution and Civil War, for a few precious years in the mid-1920s, young Soviet intellectuals felt as if they were free to explore possibilities for the new world in front of them, a world with few limits, where lives that had long been miserable could be made anew and for the better. For Vygotsky and psychology, as for similar young leaders of literature, arts, architecture, medicine, science, and nearly every other facet of intellectual activity not too closely identified with the Tsarist regime (religion, for example), Marxism continued to be the doctrine of open possibilities, of a new life unfolding. The interesting thing is that Vygotsky could include

such appreciative considerations of “bourgeois” and foreign work in psychology, even as he admitted that he still had only vague outlines of what Marxist psychology should be.

A fourth and final reason to read and think about “crisis” is that many critical observers of the profession of psychology still invoke the term to describe today’s situation. Indeed, Rieber and Wollock (1997) introduce Volume 3 of *Collected Works* with a discussion of this very issue, and David Bakan (1996) tries to get a handle on just what kind of crisis psychology is facing. The crisis today—similar to the one addressed by Vygotsky, in that it is an identity crisis—manifests itself in even more complications in the evolution of its development. For example, many psychologists are currently defecting to the newly emerging fields of neuroscience and cognitive science, notwithstanding the schism between clinical and experimental academic psychologists in the last decades of the twentieth century. The tendency to overspecialize is now the runaway choice. Within that move is a paradox. Psychology as a profession is bigger and more popular than ever, and yet quality control sometimes boils down to a corrupt Darwinian principle of the “survival of the most vulgar.” In the long run this is surely a misdirected solution to the general problems of psychology. Vygotsky, if he were still with us, would surely agree.

The fourteen chapters of *Crisis* are a rich field to mine for illumination of all these issues. In the first two parts, Vygotsky surveys psychologists’ definitions of psychology and its purview, arguing that a unified theory is absolutely necessary for further development of the field. Parts 3 and 4 assess recent efforts for unification (psychoanalysis, reflexology, Gestalt, and William Stern’s personalism) and survey some attempts to establish psychology based on Marxism. Parts 5 through 11 review many psychological and philosophical writers, particularly Germans and Russians. Part 12 tries to explain why the crisis was occurring at that particular time, as psychotechnics and other applications of psychology raced on, but without firm theoretical foundations for the underlying science. Part 13 is the key one, and the longest one; it shows Vygotsky struggling to determine what kind of Marxist approach would eventually fill the need for a unified theory of psychology. He is very critical of those Marxist writers who would take the easy way out, simply using quotations from Marxism’s founders, who were really discussing other things. Part 14, the final one, admits that the task is as yet unfinished, that the needed Marxist psychology is only just developing. As Vygotsky puts it in the final paragraph:

In the future society, psychology will indeed be the science of the new man. Without this the perspective of Marxism and the history of science would not be complete. But this science of the new man will still remain psychology. Now we hold its thread in our hands. There is no necessity for this psychology to correspond [any closer to] the present one as—in the words of Spinoza—the constellation Dog corresponds to a dog, a barking animal.

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