Chapter 7

A Sociological Response to Stetsenko

Regina Smardon*

At the start I should say that I tend to agree with Stetsenko that one must embrace the implications of a dialectical worldview and method in order to fully comprehend the Vygotskian project. I also have to agree that the Vygotskian project has been largely overlooked outside of the field of educational psychology, where Stetsenko argues it is still marginalized in comparison to other, more dominant theoretical models. Furthermore, Marxist psychology has never been a part of American sociology, a discipline that has instead focused on macrosociological Marxist models, including Immanuel Wallerstein's (1980) "world systems theory" or Theda Skocpol's (1980) "theory of revolutions." Thus, the Vygotskian project exists at the marginal nexus of both psychology and sociology.

Of course Marxism is a vital foundation for sociological theory. Marxist influences can be found in the Frankfurt School, led by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, as well as the neo-Marxist work of Herbert Marcuse, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, and Karl Mannheim, these theorists have in turn influenced sociology. Importantly, none developed a Marxist microsociological approach comparable to the lineage of the American Pragmatist tradition (including George H. Mead, John Dewey, and Charles S. Peirce) or the phenomenological tradition (including ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, and the work of Alfred Schutz), the rational choice/utilitarian tradition (including George Homans and James Coleman), and what we might call the Durkheimian microsociological tradition (as exemplified by Erving Goffman's conceptualization of interaction ritual).

More contemporary sociological accounts of the micro/macro divide draw from these dominant microinteractionist traditions. Jürgen Habermas's critical theory, which is certainly influenced by Marxism via the Frankfurt school, draws primarily from American pragmatism in his conception of communicative action. Similarly Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration draws on Erving Goffman's view of the

*R. Smardon, University of Virginia

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social situation, as does Randall Collins' work on interaction ritual chains. The work of Pierre Bourdieu with his emphasis on practice and habitus is directly influenced, or at least responding to, Marxism. However, he intended his work to turn Marxism on its head and in truth his work is not microsociological nor does it draw from the Vygotsky project.

In short, I am intrigued by Stetsenko's insistence that traditional psychology has neglected the Vygotskian worldview and I tend to think that my own discipline of sociology has neglected the Vygotskian contribution to a Marxist microsociology. In fact, Stetsenko might say that Vygotsky holds the key to elaborating a sociology that bypasses the need to synthesize micro- and macro-models entirely, by suggesting a worldview and method that reinvent the unit of analysis afresh with each new investigation.

What Is Dialectical Materialism?

Dialectics is the method of reasoning which aims to understand things *concretely* in all their movement, change and interconnection, with their opposite and contradictory sides in unity. To summarize as briefly and concisely as possible, Stetsenko distinguishes a dialectical outlook on reality from the dialectical method of analysis. She goes on to argue that she perceives areas of commensurability between the dialectical outlook and method despite the numerous epistemological pitfalls of knowing about knowledge. According to Stetsenko, both the Marxist dialectical method and the Marxist dialectical worldview are based upon the assumption of infinite movement and interpenetration of any and all aspects of reality including activities of knowing and theorizing. As a materialist philosophy it also assumes the unity of reality. For Marx the base of the material world is constituted of social relations, especially class relations.

Stetsenko then goes on to explain that Vygotsky, and his intellectual circle during the 1920s and 1930s, represent the first attempt to apply the principles of Marxist dialectics to developing a theory of human development and learning. Stetsenko argues that Vygotskian scholars are not simply shifting their unit of analysis from society to the individual. In her words, this is just the "tip of the iceberg" with regards to understanding Vygotsky's larger theoretical project. She redirects our attention to the broader issue of how the dialectical method and outlook are addressed by the Vygotskian tradition and to fill in some of the gaps that exist along these lines with her own interpretations.

Whereas some might view circular reasoning, complexity or lack of closure as weaknesses, Stetsenko actually embraces the circular and multilayered nature of dialectical materialism arguing that this is its strength:

> [T]he dialectical method can be understood as a circular, recursive and self-critical procedure where, (a) observations and analysis of particular phenomena … are complimented and accompanied by (b) the efforts to discern their common origins and developmental transformations based in internal contradictions and inherent contradictions among these

> phenomena, which bi-directionally entails and leads to (c) theorizing these common origins and resulting features by means of concepts of higher (abstract) order … which in turn bi-directionally entails and leads to (d) a novel understanding and concrete conceptualizations of particular phenomena within a given domain of investigation in the form of now more theoretically rich (not to be confused with simple empirical) yet concrete concepts. From these latter conceptualizations, a new cycle begins where new abstract concepts of higher order capturing the totality of phenomena in a systematic way are developed, thus launching the next step in the ongoing (and strictly speaking, never ending) inquiry.

Thus the goal of the dialectical method is richness and dynamism rather than elegance or testability. However, Stetsenko does not view dialectical materialism as simply the reverse of positivism. She reserves this harsh judgment for post-modernism saying that the Vygotskian project can be contrasted with a post-modernist notion of theory being a, "commentary or an extension of its own history, existing exclusively within the realm of discourse." From a sociological perspective, this offhanded comment is actually a key theoretical move that distances the Marxist dialectic from the Hegelian dialectic associated with post-modern and poststructural thought. In Stetsenko's hands, the Marxist dialectic avoids drifting towards idealism while maintaining self-reflection and the flux and flow of cultural and social movement. The Vygotskian project, she tells us, is grounded in the material reality of political-practical strife and struggles. In Stetsenko's view, a Marxist dialectic entails *movement* across levels of analysis. It also entails *movement* across and among concepts; from abstract to concrete. In fact she takes great pains to explain the importance of abstract and concrete concepts. She sees abstract and concrete concepts as *complementary levels*. She tells us that, "The unit of analysis, therefore, has to be elaborated as a confluence of both abstract and concrete concepts in which the *motion* of phenomena and processes in a given field of inquiry become represented and embodied." Thus a researcher must track down the inner contradictions of a phenomenon by breaking it into manageable parts without losing sight of the interconnected unity of reality that a materialist stance presupposes. This compatibility between method and worldview prevents reifying or essentializing analytic abstractions into static, a-historical forms.

Stetsenko's Critique of Traditional Psychology

Stetsenko sets the stage for discussing the grounds of Vygotsky's intellectual project by taking psychology to task for neglecting the social. By social she appears to mean the importance of social interaction and cultural context. She cites two big frameworks as dominating psychology, and by extension educational psychology, both explicitly and implicitly—the computer model and the cognitive structure model (e.g., Piaget's model of cognitive development). Stetsenko sees these big frameworks—which she also refers to as meta-level foundational frameworks—as

providing answers to questions about the nature of knowledge and overarching ideas about human nature.

She informs us that the computer model of the mind is an empiricist framework in which humans know the world through input generated by stimuli. Here information passes from the environment into the brain via sensory organs in a unidirectional, linear fashion. Thus thinking can be reduced to the functioning of neural networks and neurotransmitters. By contrast, the cognitive structures model is based in a rationalist metaphysics in which the mind imposes pre-existing mental structures on sensorial input. According to Stetsenko, "Piaget can be credited with formulating the most well-known rationalist theory of cognitive development and today's educators are still powerfully swayed by the stage-based interpretations of his theory." Educational practices based in this approach try to promote engaging children's natural propensity for exploration. Like the computer model of learning, the cognitive structure model tends to view learning as an activity that transpires within the individual.

Stetsenko introduces sociocultural theory as a third framework for thinking about methodology and epistemology. This approach has its roots in Hegelian and Marxist philosophy and is much less widely adopted within psychology. She states that

> among today's educational approaches even those that go under the title of sociocultural theories, de facto, uncritically adhere to one of these two frameworks (or, sometimes combine their elements), while merely adding emphasis on the role of social context, social interaction, cultural tools and other environmental aspects understood as outside factors influencing development and learning merely in an extraneous way.

Among the reasons proposed by Stetsenko to explain why the sociocultural framework remains marginal to psychology are: (a) the approach is insufficiently articulated and (b) various approaches within this camp are currently competing for a leadership position. Having criticized some psychologists for ignoring the social dimension, including attention to context, social interaction, and cultural tools, she then goes on to criticize some sociocultural theorists for going too far in rejecting the notion of the individual. This approach serves to weaken the sociocultural argument especially with regards to addressing concerns about teaching and learning. In Stetsenko's view those who adopt this radical sociocultural approach often find themselves unable to refute the power of reductionist and eliminative approaches grounded in the computer model or the cognitive structure model. Therefore, she sees the task of theorizing the individual person and human subjectivity as especially urgent for the growth of the sociocultural or sociohistorical framework. Stetsenko then turns her attention to uncovering what she sees as the core worldview level premises of Vygotsky's theoretical project. For Stetsenko, the path to a stronger sociocultural theory lies in returning to Vygotsky's concern for providing an account of human development and learning on fully relational, dialectical premises, while not excluding the phenomena at the individual level from this account.

Marxist Microsociology

It is difficult to identify the big frameworks that dominate current sociology as Stetsenko has done for psychology, but such a task has been attempted by leading theorists nonetheless. Randall Collins (1994) divides sociology into four sociological traditions: the conflict tradition, the rational/utilitarian tradition, the Durkheimian or consensus tradition, and the microinteractionist tradition. These divisions reflect the dominant strains of sociological theory as Collins sees them within mainstream American sociology. He groups Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Max Weber into the conflict tradition and he credits this tradition with a sophisticated view of the macrostructure of society. Collins includes pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and the work of Erving Goffman in the micro-interactionist tradition. Within Collins' four traditions Vygotsky's legacy might fit best somewhere between the conflict tradition and the microinteractionist tradition because Vygotsky could be interpreted as Marxist microsociologist.

Michael Burawoy and Eric Olin Wright (2002) describe periods in American sociology when Marxism has been completely marginalized. In fact, until the era of the Cold War American sociology almost completely ignored Marxism. Briefly during the 1960s sociologists who wanted to reject the status quo in American society as well as Communist totalitarianism rejuvenated Marxism. Burawoy and Olin Wright argue that there is a renewed effort on the part of some sociologists to bury Marxism today by discounting the importance of class analysis because they believe the category of social class is no longer relevant in contemporary society. Conversely, there are a small number of sociologists who continue to argue that class is at the core of capitalist reproduction. For example Annette Lareau and Dalton Conley (2008) recently assembled a group of sociologists around the topic of class analysis. For their part, Burawoy and Wright see many possibilities for building sociological Marxism without embracing Marxism as an ideology. Although they do believe that Marxist sociology entails a commitment to social change and social justice.

Rather than simply mining Marxism for inspiring ideas Burawoy and Wright want to build the theoretical possibilities of Marxism. Many sociological analyses of labor processes and social reproduction and change borrow conceptually from Marxism without being self-consciously Marxist. One prominent example not cited by Burawoy and Wright is Arlie Hochschild's (1983) *The Managed Heart*. This book elaborates a theory of emotional labor that borrows directly from Marxism but does not aim to contribute to the theoretical project of Marxism so much as it aims to describe and explain a particular phenomenon. Interestingly, Burawoy and Wright do not devote sustained attention to dialectical materialism as a worldview or a method in their discussion of what they view as the core ideas of Marxism. Not surprisingly, Vygotsky is not mentioned.

For a variety of reasons the Vygotsky tradition is so marginal in American sociology that it cannot be said that it constitutes a framework at all even among sociologists who are committed to Marxist class analysis. Within the sociological subfield of social psychology—not to be confused with the psychological subfield

of social psychology—Vygotsky is rarely mentioned. Although sociological social psychology has borrowed from psychology on occasion it lays claim to a long, if uncertain, history of its own. Stolte and colleagues (2001) trace the history of social psychology within sociology to a textbook written in 1908 by sociologist Edward A. Ross. According to Stolte and colleagues, psychological social psychology ultimately embraced the laboratory experiment and sought to explain individual behaviors and attitudes as a function of an external reality. In contrast, sociological social psychology has been more diverse in its methodological and theoretical approach. Stolte and colleagues suggest that its primary contribution can be called sociological miniaturism. Sociological miniaturism is not a methodology or a theory but rather a way of interpreting social processes and institutions; specifically, the examination of large-scale social issues through small-scale social situations. In fact, Stolte and colleagues actually prefer the term micro-sociology rather than social psychology.

Within Stetsenko's interpretation of Vygotsky the distinction between micro- and macro-levels exist purely as analytic constructions. She insists that the Marxist dialectic assumes the unity of reality and that the dialectical method does not privilege the micro- or the macro-scale of analysis for explaining one another. Thus it makes little sense in her view to talk about a small-scale social situation leading to insight about large-scale social issues because the entire activity system must be taken as a unity within which contradictions must be uncovered. Still, the notion of miniaturism captures the importance of the small-scale social situation within the dialectical method. Although the micro-scale in this tradition might be called praxis—by which I refer to social action constrained by time. As Roth and Lee (2007) point out, praxis in the Vygotskian tradition refers to the moment of real human activity whereas practices are patterns that characterize actions that can be reflected upon outside of the time demands of praxis.

Stetsenko's Interpretation of Vygotsky's Project

Two central concepts are often cited that distinguish Vygotsky's (1978) perspective on learning: (a) The notion of a zone of proximal development that conceptually draws a line around the dynamic relationship between learning and development and (b) the genetic law of cultural development that conceives the natural course of the development of culture in the individual as leading from the social to the psychological level, that is, it exists first between people as an intermental category and then within the child as an intramental category. In my own work I have argued that Valentin Voloshinov (e.g., 1973) further develops the sociocultural model using the concept of "inner speech," to explain how individuals negotiate contradictory cultural codes that have been internalized (Smardon 2004). (See also the points the editor makes in the introductory text to this Part A.) I see this as the primary strength of the sociocultural model of the mind. Unlike American interactionism, it does not assume internalizing norms to

be adaptive and unlike Freudianism it holds the power of explaining intramental conflict as an outgrowth of intermental conflict, not the inherent structure of the personality. Most importantly, the sociocultural model of the mind allows for the resolution of inner conflicts as a potential source of creativity and change.

Stetsenko finds it necessary to rework and reconstruct Vygotsky's project with an eye for highlighting the underlying worldview premises of this theory. Her thoughts on this topic can be better understood when viewed as building upon her ongoing interest in constructing a noncanonical activity theory (Sawchuck and Stetsenko 2008). Stetsenko believes that the generational approach to activity theory does not fully capture shifts in the foundational grounds of cultural-historical activity theory. Ultimately, she sees canonical activity theory as having lost its focus on transformational change and social justice. In previous work she has developed her ideas about the relationship between the individual and collective plane of activity (Stetsenko 2005) and reviewed sociological understandings of conduct for inspiration to further this project. In her contribution to this book, Stetsenko is focused on implications of Vygotsky's project for conceptual development. However, she begins by explaining how individual contributions to collective practice work.

Stetsenko's emphasis on the emergence and unfolding of continuous relations within Vygotsky's worldview has a vague kinship with actor network theory. Stetsenko sounds like Bruno Latour (2005) when she insists that living forms (organisms) are understood to, "exist and come to be through and *as* relations with their surrounds including other living forms, rather than as pre-formed independent entities that develop from within some inner essence and can only come under (and can reciprocally exert) merely extraneous influences on other, also independently existing entities and forms." However, I suspect that Stetsenko would take issue with the way that Latour conceives of agency and distributes it evenly among objects and humans. This view would seem incompatible with Stetsenko's focus on the role of human subjectivity in transformational change. Unlike Latour, Stetsenko remains focused on how goal-directed and purposeful activity leads to new practices emerging,

> [n]ew actions continue on the foundations of past actions, ensuing from these past actions (including achievements and practices of previous generations). However, the latter are never exactly copied within the new ones, instead undergoing continuous transformations as they are included into new actions and transformed in them in order to fit in with the changing realities of the world.

Thus, transformational change is made possible in part through human improvisation that takes place within the constraints of real time with previously existing practices serving as resources, albeit sometimes limited resources. More importantly, this type of change occurs in the context of collective praxis, which I interpret to mean groups of people acting within the constraints and affordances of real time with access to a repertoire of previous practices. The notion of collaborative transformative practices is the backbone of Stetsenko's interpretation of Vygotsky's project. This focus on collective practice does not erase the importance of individual subjectivity. Rather, each person carries out his or

her activities from a unique standpoint and contributes to collective transformation uniquely. Here we can see that the distinction between the individual and collective level is purely analytic because all social action transpires within a social context: with people, for other people, in view of other people and contributing to social practice and history. As Stetsenko points out, even the most narrowly self-interested goals are social in nature. This reasoning would seem circular were it not for the materialist presupposition that all reality is unitary and interpenetrating.

Individual conceptual knowledge in Stetsenko's view becomes reconceptualized as a dynamic process that is a product of collective transformational change. Knowing is something individuals do while interacting with the world rather than something contained within them. It is also always wedded to the project of producing an identity. In Stetsenko's words, "the development of knowledge is also, and simultaneously, the development of the identity and the self." As individuals we are constrained by history but we are also enabled by it. This radical activist stance has been lost to American sociology.

Reuniting the Psychological and the Sociological Perspectives

Due to the marginalization of Vygotsky's project in American psychology and in American sociology—which are, in turn, due to a variety of factors, delayed translation to English being perhaps the most obvious—very little work has been done that integrates Vygotsky's thought with other dominant perspectives. I see the possibility of developing a Marxist micro-sociology that is in dialogue with educational psychology and contributes meaningfully to Marxist debates within American sociology, such as the debate surrounding class analysis. (On this point, see also the discussion in the epilogue concerning the use of the ethnomethodological micro-sociology with Marxist structural analyses.) However, given the marginality of Vygotsky's work in both psychology and sociology much work remains to establish its relevance to the dominant questions addressing each discipline. Stetsenko has begun the work of challenging dominant psychological perspectives. The first step for introducing Vygotsky's project into sociological thought is to develop a Marxist micro-sociology that challenges the dominant microinteractionist traditions within American sociology. Psychologists such as Stetsenko are also beginning an interdisciplinary dialog with sociologists that will strengthen sociocultural theory.

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