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Vygotskian Parallels with Thomas Jefferson & John Dewey

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In this analysis, I consider Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1896-1934) and the cultural-historical approach alongside two American (U.S.) thinkers--Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) and John Dewey (1859-1952). The point of this comparison is neither to venerate nor to denigrate Vygotsky's contribution. Instead, by exploring some general similarities and subtle dissimilarities, I hope to increase understanding of the cultural-historical approach and identify its parallels with touchstones in American educational thought. Perhaps, too, the exercise will suggest new socio-educational possibilities. Sometimes my analysis sets Vygotsky alongside Jefferson and Dewey, using semi-parallel treatment. At other times, Vygotsky is present as the lens through which the other two are viewed.

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Judgement-Enabling Education

My interest in juxtaposing Vygotsky, Jefferson, and Dewey grew out of multiple visits to Moscow in the last ten years-the first visit occurring when the country was still the Soviet Union. After the fall of the Soviet government, several of my Russian colleagues-all of them academic grandchildren of Vygotsky-hastened to infuse Vygotsky-inspired pedagogy into Russian kindergartens and schools. Although Vygotsky-inspired pedagogy had been cautiously tolerated by the Soviet government in laboratory schools, it had not been widely influential. My colleagues seized the opportunity to widen its influence; and, the concertedness with which they did this made it evident to me that their engagement with Russian schools went beyond a scholarly interest in cultural-historical optimization of pedagogy. They regarded their work as teacher-empowering, and they saw Vygotsky-inspired pedagogy in the hands of empowered teachers as fostering socio-political reform. Their scientific interest was in how mind is socially formed, but their socio-political interest was in how well-educated minds would diminish future risks of authoritarian governance and help to consolidate movement toward democracy. The linkage between school practice and democracy had also concerned Jefferson and Dewey, and I found my Russian colleagues' reflections on their visions of educational reform reminiscent of Jefferson and Dewey. My recognition of that similarity inspired this analysis.

This comparison mainly concerns three loci of phenomena: (1) the locus of "societal" or "social institutional" phenomena (Wertsch, 1985, p. 60); (2) the locus of "interpsychological" or "interpsychic" phenomena[1]; and (3) the locus of the child's mind as a cultural-historical, sociobiological being. Jefferson, Dewey, and Vygotsky varied in how much they said about these respective loci.

1 John-Steiner, Souberman, Cole, and Scribner translated interpsikhicheskii as "interpsychological" in Vygotsky (1978). As Wertsch (1985, p. 235, note 2) has noted, "interpsychic" or "intermental" would have captured more closely the Russian word that Vygotsky used.

"Societal" or "Social Institutional" Phenomena

Jefferson Jefferson, as principal author of the American Declaration of Independence, governor of Virginia, and third U.S. President, was deeply engaged with social institutional phenomena. He is obviously subject to historical criticism for his involvement in slavery, in practices injurious to Native Americans, and in continuing 18th century European habits of disenfranchising women and propertyless males. Those faults noted, he still stands out in U.S. history as the founding father most concerned with giving common citizens a voice in government. Socio-moral principles that were later used as a basis for broadening participation in government often can be traced to Jefferson's pen.

Jefferson's personal experience as an insider in government made him all the more concerned about the temptations for abuse of power. He copied the following quotation from Montesquieu into his personal book of memorabilia: "Constant experience shows us that every man invested with power is apt to abuse it, and to carry his authority as far as it will go... To prevent this abuse, it is necessary from the very nature of things that power should be a check to power" (Spirit of the Laws, XI, c.4). Jefferson believed that an alert and empowered electorate was ultimately the best check on the power of government officials. As he confessed in 1787, "If once [the people] become inattentive to the public affairs, you and I, and Congress and Assemblies, Judges and Governors, shall all become wolves. It seems to be the law of our general nature, in spite of individual exceptions" (Letter to Edward Carrington). Anticipating Abraham Lincoln's famous saying, Jefferson wrote that the people "will err sometimes and accidentally, but never designedly, and [never] with a systematic and persevering purpose of overthrowing the free principles of the government" (Letter to M. Coray, 1823). Lincoln later said, "You can fool some of the people all the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all the time."

Here lies Jefferson's interest in the cultural-historical development of children. He believed that a modicum of education among the common people would be needed to make sure that their collective decisions as voters were prudent ones. I conclude this overview of Jefferson's social institutional claims with some chronologically ordered examples. These illustrate his conviction that social institutional

features of a republic depend on an educated public. In 1789, he wrote, "Whenever the people are **well-informed**, they can be trusted with their own government" (Letter to Richard Price). In 1816, he wrote, "**Enlighten the people generally**, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like spirits at the dawn of day" (Letter to Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours). In 1820, he wrote, "...if we think [the people themselves] **not enlightened enough** to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but **to inform their discretion by education**" (Letter to William C. Jarvis). In 1823, he wrote, "The people, especially **when moderately instructed**, are the only safe... depositaries (sic) of the public rights" (Letter to M. Coray). (Perhaps Jefferson's acceptance of moderate instruction was a necessary but still insufficient political compromise. He failed to persuade his native state of Virginia to fund public education.)

According to Jefferson, did the mere existence of education suffice to meet the needs of a republican democracy, whatever the form of the education? Or, were certain features of the educational experience important for the purpose? Dewey, of course, had a great deal to say about the importance of fitting the type of education to the needs of a democratic society. But what about Jefferson? It is worth noting that Jefferson did record some opinions on what one could call his **curriculum for a republican democracy.** He pointedly addressed his interest in the socio-cultural fit between schooling and American society in a letter written four years after the American Revolutionary War: "The consequences of foreign education are alarming to me as an American... Cast your eye over America. Who are the men of most learning, of most eloquence, most beloved by their countrymen and most trusted and promoted by them? They are those who have been educated among them and whose manners, morals and habits are perfectly homogeneous with those of the country" (October 15, 1785, Letter to John Banister, Jr.). [This sounds xenophobic, but recall that most of the foreign-educated Americans then had been educated in England, from which independence had only recently been won.]

Early on, Jefferson apparently aspired to have his own historical erudition reproduced in the citizenry. He wrote in 1782, "reading [should] be chiefly historical. **History**, by apprising them of the past, will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify

them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views" (1782, Notes on Virginia). I've found no further record of Jefferson's desire to give curricular primacy to history. There were, however, several occasions when he argued for the importance of **science** (1795, 1805, 1810, 1821, 1822) for maintenance of freedom, protection against a foreign power, and "its identification with power, morals, order and happiness." In 1805, he hoped that, "Such a degree of learning [should be] given to every member of the society as will enable him **to read, to judge and to vote understandingly on what is passing**" (Letter to Littleton Waller Tazewell). In 1824, he wrote, "In a republican nation whose citizens are to be led by reason and persuasion and not by force, the **art of reasoning** becomes of first importance" (Letter to David Harding, 1824).

Jefferson's writings reveal his intimate acquaintance with the processes and needs of governance. From that perspective, he identified societal needs, which he hoped could be met through his dream of public education. He had little specific to say about how social institutional processes would affect individual development, being interested instead in how individual development would affect society.

Dewey Dewey lacked Jefferson's activity in government, but he shared Jefferson's conviction that the social institutional features of a democracy depend on the education of its children. As Dewey wrote in a chapter titled, "Education as a Social Function," "We have seen that a community or social group sustains itself through continuous self-renewal, and that this renewal takes place by means of the educational growth of the immature members of the group. By various agencies, unintentional and designed, a society transforms uninitiated and seemingly alien beings into robust trustees of its own resources and ideals" (1916, Democracy and Education, Chapter 2).

Since Dewey devoted a book (Democracy and Education, 1916) to meshing educational practice with life in a democratic society, I will not attempt to cover all of it. Drawing a distinction between societies "based on custom" and "progressive societies," Dewey claimed that progressive communities "endeavor to shape the experiences of the young so that instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society be an improvement on their own" (1916, Democracy and Education, Chapter 6: Education as Conservative

and Progressive).[2] Celebrating individual variations, he wrote, "A progressive society counts individual variations as precious since it finds in them the means of its own growth. Hence a democratic society must, in consistency with its ideal, allow for intellectual freedom and the play of diverse gifts and interests in its educational measures" (1916, Democracy and Education. Chapter 22: The Individual and the World). While claiming that "**intellectual** individualism... in observation, imagination, judgment, and invention are... agencies of social progress," Dewey denied both the possibility and value of "**moral** and **social** individualism" (1916, Democracy and Education. Chapter 22: The Individual and the World).

Dewey described a two-way flow by which societal phenomena affect individuals' cultural-historical development, and vice-versa. As such, his account was more complete than Jefferson's.

Vygotsky To this audience, Vygotsky is well known for what Mikhail Yaroshevsky (1989, p. 138) termed his supertask: To grasp the nature of relations between the individual and the culture. Exactly how Vygotsky related individual development to a society's major political and moral commitments (e.g. Marxism) is not well understood by most in the West. There are ongoing disagreements over the centrality of Marxism to Vygotsky's psychology (Jorvsky, 1987; Kozulin, 1990; Yaroshevsky, 1989; Wertsch, 1985, pp. 10-11). I am quite prepared to believe Luria's assertion, quoted by Wertsch (1985, p. 11), that "Vygotsky was ... the leading Marxist theoretician among us." What I lack, however, perhaps for want of English translations, are parallel explications to those I've cited from Jefferson and Dewey: Namely, elaborations of how Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology could be seen as modifying pre-Soviet educational traditions so as to foster the development of children who would be better matched to life in Soviet society. Paradoxically, today one is more likely to find elaborations of Vygotsky's psychology can be seen as modifying Soviet educational traditions so as to better match children to reformist visions of post-Soviet Russian society.

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2 "An intelligent home differs from an unintelligent one chiefly in that the habits of life and intercourse which prevail are chosen, or at least colored, by the thought of their bearing upon the development of children. But schools remain, of course, the typical instance of environments framed with express reference to influencing the mental and moral disposition of their members." (Dewey, 1916, Democracy and Education, Chapter 2).

In any case, Vygotsky provided greater psychological detail about the development of the child as a cultural-historical, sociobiological being--and the interpsychological processes by which that happens. It is in this area of Vygotskian detail that Jefferson has comparatively less to say.

Interpsychological Phenomena

Jefferson Jefferson was not altogether silent on interpsychological phenomena. Partly anticipating both Dewey and Vygotsky, Jefferson described humans as being naturally disposed to fit themselves to the societies in which they are situated. Faulting the socioeducational program of Rousseau's Emile, Jefferson wrote, "I am among those who think well of the human character generally. I consider man as formed for society and endowed by nature with those dispositions which fit him for society" (1799, Letter to William Green Mumford). In language strikingly close to Merlin Donald's (1991, pp. 168-177) recent description of mimetic skill as a precondition for social sharing of knowledge, Jefferson wrote, "Man is an imitative animal. This quality is the germ of all education in him. From his cradle to his grave he is learning to do what he sees others do" (1782, Notes on Virginia). Jefferson's account is nonspecific; but, so far as it goes, it is consonant with Vygotsky's idea of interpsychological phenomena. In 1822, Jefferson diagnosed an educational problem in a sketchily Vygotskian way. He claimed that a problem was a counterproductive outgrowth of parentally mediated activity. Quoting from 1822, "The article of discipline is the most difficult in American education. **Premature ideas of independence, too little repressed by parents**, beget a **spirit of insubordination** which is the **great obstacle to science** with us and a principal cause of its decay since the Revolution" (Letter to Thomas Cooper).

Dewey Dewey's and Vygotsky's ideas about interpsychological phenomena are not identical. Each of these geniuses situated the notion in his own cultural-historical tradition and theoretic framework. Reading their respective accounts, however, one marvels at the dialogues they might have had. Although I read the 1962 edition of Vygotsky's Thought and Language in the mid-1960s before reading Democracy and Education, I failed then to appreciate parallelisms in their agenda. Now returning to Democracy and Education after reading other works by Vygotsky and other contributors to the cultural-historical and activity theory approaches, I find the parallels stunning.

> *... our problem is to discover the method by which the young assimilate the point of view of the old, or the older bring the young into like-mindedness with themselves. The answer, in general formulation, is: By means of the action of the environment in calling out certain responses. ... The words "environment," "medium" denote something more than surroundings which encompass an individual. They denote the specific continuity of the surroundings with his own active tendencies.*
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> *... Setting up conditions which stimulate certain visible and tangible ways of acting is the first step. Making the individual a sharer or partner in the associated activity so that he feels its success as his success, its failure as his failure, is the completing step. As soon as he is possessed by the emotional attitude of the group, he will be alert to recognize the special ends at which it aims and the means employed to secure success. His beliefs and ideas, in other words, will take a form similar to those of others in the group. He will also achieve pretty much the same stock of knowledge since that knowledge is an ingredient of his habitual pursuits.*
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> *... We conclude, accordingly, that the use of language to convey and acquire ideas is an extension and refinement of the principle that things gain meaning by being used in a shared experience or joint action; in no sense does it contravene that principle. When words do not enter as factors into a shared situation, either overtly or imaginatively, they operate as pure physical stimuli, not as having a meaning or intellectual value.*

(Dewey, 1916, Democracy and Education. Chapter 2: Education as a Social Function)

Neither Jefferson nor Dewey provided the extent of psychological illumination and analytic language that Vygotsky provided. The interest in such comparisons, however, is not in choosing favorites. Rather, it is to recognize resonances and possibly thereby to notice new possibilities for educational practice.

For want of space and time, scant attention is given here to physical encapsulations of interpsychological phenomena. As Michael Cole recently described it, "The special quality of the human environment is that it is suffused with the behavioral

adaptations of prior generations in external form" (1996, p. 59). Jefferson seemed never to have considered this idea. As an inventor of an improved plow and a document-signing pantograph, Jefferson probably shared with most inventors a knack for ascertaining the intended use of a novel object from its form; if so, he would surely have found this Vygotskian idea appealing.

The Development of the Child as a Cultural-Historical, Sociobiological Being

Jefferson. It is doubtful that Jefferson held Vygotsky's view that "the history of child behavior is born from the interweaving of [elementary processes of biological origin] and [higher psychological functions of sociocultural origin]" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 46). Jefferson clearly admitted that biological processes had some influence on development, referring as he did to nonuniversal talents. He clearly also clearly admitted that socioeducational processes had some influence on development, crediting access to education with drawing out talents and forming minds. Jefferson wrote in 1782, "By ... [selecting] the youths of genius from among the classes of the poor, we hope to avail the State of those talents which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as the rich, but which perish without use if not sought for and cultivated" (1782, Notes on Virginia). Thirty-five years later, Jefferson framed a similar discussion in terms of international competitiveness: "The object [of my education bill was] to bring into action that mass of talents which lies buried in poverty in every country for want of the means of development, and thus give activity to a mass of mind which in proportion to our population shall be the double or treble of what it is in most countries" (1817, Letter to M. Correa de Serra). However, as suggested above, Jefferson lacked Vygotsky's conception of ongoing mutual influence, interpenetration, and fusing of biological processes and sociocultural functions, essentially forming "a single thread of sociobiological personality development" (Vygotsky, 1960, p. 47) [Quoted by A. S. Smirnov (1966, trans. 1973)].[3]

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3 "A child's cultural development occurs simultaneously with his physical maturation. The physical and the cultural development concur and fuse. Both series of changes interpenetrate and essentially form a single thread of sociobiological personality development" (Vygotsky, 1960, p. 47) [Quoted by A. S. Smirnov (1966, trans. 1973).]

Dewey. Dewey, like his fellow pragmatists George Herbert Mead and Jane Addams, regarded human experience (cognition included) as developmental, historically dependent processes. In its sociocultural outline, little separates Dewey from Vygotsky.[4] Dewey, however, seems to have been less of a sociobiological interactionist than Vygotsky. However much Dewey preferred to emphasize the positive possibilities for any biological starting point, his conception was that the biological processes themselves did not respond in an enduring, reorganized way to sociocultural activity.[5]

Decontextualization

The following is a postscript that strays to a tangent. Jefferson, Dewey, and Vygotsky all regarded the decontextualizable, idealized forms represented in theoretical generalizations as important achievements of human culture to which education provides access. Theoretical generalizations-their tenability and worth-are regarded by many today as problematic.

The postmodern challenge to the quest for theoretical generalizations denies or at least problematizes any foundationalism or referential basis for the truth claims of scientific theories (Foucault, 1980; Hassan, 1987). The foundationalist scientific sentiments of Jefferson are certainly jeopardized by the postmodernist

4 "In a word, we live from birth to death in a world of persons and things which is in large measure what it is because of what has been done and transmitted from previous human activities. When this fact is ignored, experience is treated as if it were something which goes on exclusively inside an individual's body and mind. It ought not to be necessary to say that experience does not occur in a vacuum. There are sources outside an individual which give rise to experience." (Dewey, 1938, p. 39)

5 "Education must take the being as he is; that a particular individual has just such and such an equipment of native activities is a basic fact. ... Obviously he cannot utilize what is not there; neither can the educator. In this sense, heredity is a limit of education. Recognition of this fact prevents the waste of energy and the irritation that ensue from the too prevalent habit of trying to make by instruction something out of an individual which he is not naturally fitted to become. But the doctrine does not determine what use shall be made of the capacities which exist." (Dewey, 1916, Democracy and Education, Chapter 6)

challenge. Dewey's pragmatism, claiming that any epistemic criteria by which truth could be determined are themselves inseparable from goals sought and values instantiated, anticipated this aspect of the postmodern turn. As Wertsch (1985, p. 229) argued, Vygotsky's theory can be adapted to the postmodern turn with Bakhtinian extensions (such as the appearance of neutrality that occurs when a speaker indexes a sociohistorically situated axiomatic belief system).

Vygotsky's work, in particular, may yield some interesting implications for another type of present-day challenge to the quest for theoretical generalizations. That challenge asserts that many systems are too complex to be modeled with mathematical tidiness and parsimony. Quoting David Berlinski (1995, p. 307), "To say what mathematical science cannot do is promptly to redeem a second intellectual strategy, one in which depth is traded for adequacy of description. ...everywhere in biology there is an indifference to ultimate causes and irreducible constituents--no biologist would think of explaining the metabolism of a bat in terms of quarks--and in place of this concern [is] a passionate curiosity about connections, patterns of influence, the ways in which a biological systems works." Berlinski goes on to note that the dense web of dependencies that interests biologists has heretofore been too complex to be cognitively tractable. Berlinski's optimistic projection is that computers (using neural nets and other pattern-finding tools) may solve this problem of observational tractability by coordinating manifold biological observations "directly, with no mediation of theory, no appeal to abstract concepts" (p. 308). Though arguably naive in his optimism, Berlinski has taken the cultural-historical step of adding the computer--not as a number-cruncher but as a **connectionist prosthetic**--to Vygotskian tools of thinking.

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