Our narrative began with Vygotsky in 1924, but the ideas which are crucial to our analysis of the story of cultural psychology could not be described in clear outline without an excursus into their nineteenth century German origins. This is particularly true not so much of their sources in nineteenth century psychology, but rather in the whole notion of science which makes Vygotsky’s work so important for us today, well beyond the boundaries of psychology. So before returning to the Congress of Psychoneurology in 1924, let us summarize what we have learnt from Goethe, Hegel and Marx.

The key insights for a critical appropriation of Hegel’s philosophy Marx learnt off his early teachers, Ludwig Feuerbach and Moses Hess. Instead of throwing out Hegel’s absolute idealism and opting for an anthropological materialism such as Feuerbach’s, Marx was able to interpret and appropriate Hegel’s Spirit through the notion of activity: “All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice” (1975g). And instead of taking history to be the work of Spirit, Marx took as his only premises: “the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity” (1975i), and “men make their own history, . . . but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (1979). This is how Marx understood Hegel’s Spirit. As a result, we can read the work of Hegel in a thoroughly modern way, without appeal to an extramundane spirit or Hegel’s arcane idealistic terminology.

Marx affirmed that the comprehension of a complex whole, such as bourgeois society, had to begin with a simple concept, but not just any concept. As Goethe has proposed, the foundation for the understanding of a complex whole is the discovery of its ‘cell-form’, its Urphänomen. The great philosophical significance of the Urphänomen is that it is not just some abstract principle or law or mechanism, but an empirically observable unit of the whole, and the logical prototype of the whole phenomenon. The Urphänomen is thus simultaneously a
sensuously given thing and an explanatory principle. With this idea, Goethe cut the Gordian knot of Kant’s dichotomous philosophy.

As Hegel further showed, this cell-form from which the subject matter of an entire domain of phenomena unfolds, itself originates from outside the science in question, and in that sense, while being the prototype of the complex whole it is also ‘antediluvian’. Marx explicitly acknowledged his debt to Goethe in the Preface to the first edition of “Capital,” in which he described the commodity relation as “the economic cell-form of bourgeois society.” Although exchange of commodities is something which rarely happens in modern capitalist society, Marx was able to show that money, credit, shares, capital, etc., and even wages were species of commodity, and unfolded his entire theory of political economy out of the concept of the commodity relation. Vygotsky would later characterize his task as to write ‘the “Das Kapital” of psychology’ (1997b: 320–330), taking Marx’s lead on the problem of making a beginning in a science.

In his focus on the commodity relation as the cell-form of bourgeois society, Marx understood that the social and political problems of his time had to be approached through the understanding of bourgeois society as a ‘social formation’, and definite species of activity, and for this purpose he appropriated Hegel’s idea of a ‘formation of consciousness’.

Goethe had insisted that Nature and its organisms had to be understood as a whole, as Gestalten, and his notion of Urphänomen was the crucial step in working out how to do this. It is to this day somewhat of a cliché to say that processes have to be understood ‘as a whole’ or holistically—the point is: how to do this? The notion of the single cell or unit which contains in embryo all the properties of the whole organism provided a conception of the formation, but it was left to Hegel to develop this idea philosophically, so that it could form the basis for the development of theoretical science. The Urphänomen which Goethe took to be a product of Nature, Hegel took to be a concept within some formation of consciousness, and in Marx’s materialistic interpretation, this became a system of consciousness, within some social formation.

It was Hegel’s understanding of concepts which made the real breakthrough here. Mostly, a concept is seen as simply something identified with a name, or as a collection of attributes characterizing something. With such concepts, a complex process cannot be grasped as a whole, it can only be named or described. The structure of the concept in