Chapter 9

Vygotskian Collaborative Project of Social Transformation: History, Politics, and Practice in Knowledge Construction*

Anna Stetsenko and Igor M. Arievitch

In this paper, we contest the currently prevalent portrayals of Vygotsky's work that present it from the viewpoint of traditional – cognitivist and individualist – notions of knowledge and science. These portrayals typically exclude analysis of moral, practical, and political dimensions and relevance of knowledge. In this sense, Vygotsky, not unlike Paolo Freire after him (cf. Glass, 2001), can be said to have been domesticated to suit the politics-neutral ideology that dominates psychology and education today. An alternative view offered in this chapter is that the Vygotsky's project represents far more than a set of neutral theoretical principles and instead, goes beyond the confines of a mentalistically understood enterprise of science. This alternative view has been initially inspired by observations of a uniquely collaborative history of the Vygotskian project and the impossibility to interpret it outside of the broader context of collaboration and practice (e.g. Stetsenko, 1988, 1993).

Indeed, from its inception by Vygotsky and his colleagues in the early 1920s, this project has defied the traditional individualist and mentalist (and ultimately idealist) notions of science. Instead, evolving as a value-laden collaborative project immersed in the sociopolitical and cultural-historical practice of its time, it came to embody this practice, and ultimately contributed to it through an active participatory stance and civic-scholarly activism by its participants. Moreover, the Vygotskian project stretched beyond the confines of science as such (in its traditional mentalist guise) and instead blended the dimensions of theory and practice in its history, life, and products. A further constitutive feature of this project is its liberating potential rooted in ideals of social justice, equality, and transformation. Perhaps the most striking and unique feature of this project, launched by Vygotsky almost 100 years ago, is the close rapport between the history of how it has been conceived, brought to life, and carried out, on the one hand, and the core principles advanced and

propagated by it, on the other. The social collaborative nature of the human mind, the paramount role of social context and history in the production of psychological processes and outcomes such as knowledge, the embeddedness of knowledge in practical transformative engagements with the world, and the inextricable link between practical and theoretical, material and mental, political and intellectual, social and individual – all of these principles characterize both the real life history of the Vygotskian project and the very gist of a theory developed in it. In this sense, the congruence between the creation of the Vygotskian project and the foundational principles developed in it provides a living proof of a direct connection between intellectual constructions and the practice of which these constructions are a part.

Revealing and reflecting upon this mirror congruency between the real life of the Vygotskian project and the knowledge produced in it can be beneficial for a deeper understanding of both of these dimensions of science. First and foremost, such an analysis can help to better understand that theory and science at large are not separate from life in all the complex unity of its dimensions such as practical goals, conceptual tools, political agendas, moral challenges, and ideological commitments. Such analysis can also help to strengthen and further advance the newly emerging trend in social studies, feminist anthropologies, and history of science that reject rote positivism and instead capitalize on science as a socially determined and historically contingent practice or culture. The potential contribution of the Vygotskian project to this line of reasoning is that it laid foundations for and itself embodied the notion of knowledge as a form of active transformative engagement (=meaningful activity) of people with their world – aimed at changing this world (including oneself), conducted in view of social goals and agendas, while making use of and contributing to culturally evolved cultural tools and practices.

Paradoxically, there is little evidence that the newly emerging trends in understanding theory and science are in any way informed by ideas and ideals developed by the Vygotskian school. There is equally little evidence that the Vygotskian heritage is being approached from the standpoint of the new culture and practice-bound understanding of science and theory. This paper aims to make up for these unfortunate gaps by highlighting a number of core principles that guided the history of Vygotsky’s project and by revealing the congruency between its history and its core principles. Specifically, Vygotsky’s approach (and the respective notion of knowledge and science) will be revealed as (a) a direct outcome of and contributor to social practice, (b) entwined with the practical, political, and value-laden contexts of its creation, (b) embodying this practice in the very fabric of its knowledge,