

THE TRANSFORMATIVE MIND: EXPANDING VYGOTSKY'S APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION¹

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Stetsenko, A. (2017). *The transformative mind: expanding Vygotsky's approach to development and education*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

The book *The transformative mind: expanding Vygotsky's approach to development and education*, by Anna Stetsenko, published by Cambridge University Press, NY, 2017, discusses the Soviet Psychology that lies its theoretical matrix on Lev Vygotsky, including its rereading and its theoretical-practical advancements and deployments. The book also covers themes like Developmental Psychology, Critical theory, Education and Philosophy. It approaches the transition away from the worldview based on a socio-political genetic-adapted *éthos* to a transformative view based on solidarity and equality, notions stated by Vygotskian conceptions. The focus of this transition and transformation is linked to the idea that people create the society and history together while they are interactively co-created by their own transformative agency. About the author, Anna Stetsenko is a Professor at Center of The City University of New York, USA. She is worldwide recognized by her contributions related to Cultural-Historical Psychology studies, to socio-cultural theories and the Activity Theory. She has worked in universities and research centers in the U.S., Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Russia. Also she studied and in some cases also collaborated with several key representatives of this approach, including Alexander R. Luria, Alexey N. Leontiev, Alexey A. Leontiev, Daniil B. Elkonin, Vassily V. Davydov, and others. Her work has been published in different languages. Her professional expertise is interdisciplinary including Psychology, Philosophy and Education.

The book is organized in the following manner: introduction; five main parts, each one divided in subchapters –eleven in total –; conclusion; references [this review does not show a linear view of the book, as a summary]. The book includes 'index' (name 'index'; subject 'index').

The whole work of Stetsenko emphasizes the broad idea of social and political composition as a central theme in the theorization of human development. The author points

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out that although ‘mind’ is a word that draws attention in the title of the book, the focus of the study is centered “[...] on the broader dynamics of human development and social practices of which the mind is an integral part and an inherent dimension. Yet the title is chosen to intentionally challenge those increasingly powerful approaches that understand the mind in starkly internalist, individualist, and reductionist terms – as a strictly individual” (Stetsenko, 2017, p. 10). One of the central ideas with sociopolitical implications is as follows:

[...] the key premise of a political-ideological nature is that all individuals are endowed with equal potential for social achievement, intelligence, creativity, and other capacities and faculties. That is, all individuals are truly considered equal, not just in their legal and moral rights, nor only in opportunity, but in their fundamental capacities and abilities – albeit only as these can and have to be brought to realization within shared collaborative practices of communities, through individually unique and authorial contributions, and with the support of collectively invented, and continuously reinvented, cultural mediations and tools (Stetsenko, 2017, p. 27).

This ‘key premise’ might be better understood with the theoretical basis discussed within the chapters ‘Vygotsky’s project: methodology as the philosophy of method’, ‘Vygotsky’s project: relational ontology’ and ‘Vygotsky’s project: from relational ontology to transformative worldview’.

Her book was written within the Vygotskian tradition, but goes further, criticizing and re-evaluating this position, adapting it to the present time. Therefore, it uses the approach that she calls ‘the transformative activist stance’ (TAS), which contains dialectical premises of Vygotsky’s project and its broader foundations in Marxian philosophy, criticizing and expanding these theoretical conceptions, which is considered fundamental for a better practical and theoretical application of these conceptions, to invigorate them, especially using their fundamental premises located in the current political context. TAS is deeply discussed in chapters ‘Ontology and epistemology’, ‘Transformative activist stance: agency’ and ‘Encountering the future through commitment to change’. Stetsenko proposes an expansion of teaching-learning propositions in Vygotsky based on TAS. The author argues that the students and teachers commitment to social transformation are very important elements for both teaching and learning, a characteristic that sets subjects in relation to their current position, in relation to the past and future – in the world that is shared with others.

In ‘Concluding remarks: toward democracy and a pedagogy of daring’, the author argues that TAS proposes that social change depends on every action of people and that each human being contributes to such change. She highlights the fundamental role of education as a transformative practice, the necessity of a “[...] ‘pedagogy of daring’, which could complement pedagogies of hope and desire, is perhaps the shortest expression of what can be drawn from the discussion as the main conclusion” (Stetsenko, 2017, p. 262, authors emphasis).

The author is constantly emphasizing, with the support of Vygotskian psychology, that the design of our society is given by its organization, which means that we are all involved with everything that the human being does or does not do ‘in’ culture and ‘as’ culture – and in that case, what is considered as positive for human life, such as work, as collaboration with others, etc., but also what is negative, that is represented by the exploitation of labor, by the collaboration that privileges some hegemonic groups to prejudice of others, etc. It is important to point out that this [aforementioned] design of society that we build interferes in the constitution of people’s psyche. Vygotsky already drew attention to this aspect (although, as Stetsenko states, he never explicated it directly), saying that

[...] each higher mental function appears twice in the conduct development process: first, as a function of collective conduct, as a form of collaboration or interaction, as a way of social adaptation, i.e., as inter-psychological category; and, secondly, as a way of individual child conduct, as a means of personal adaptation, as an inner process of conduct, i.e., as intra-psychological category (Выготский, 1983, p. 197, our translation)⁴.

The society of capital has shown that its enrichment is circumstanced by the loss of worker's individual capacities. For example, Marx (2013) discusses the social impact of the technical work of manufacture, highlighting that, as productive force of capital, it causes a series of consequences in workers' lives that are involved in this scenario. One of Marx's findings is that manufacturing production cripples the worker, converts him into a limited human being, artificially promoting his detailing skill by repressing a world of productive impulses and capabilities. Here we see the profound opposition in the formation of the worker under capitalism: as a total human being, we seek an omnilateral formation, which enables him to appropriate his omnilateral being; however, the productive process of manufacture, far from integral developing, fractionates his own being to make him corresponding to the assembly work (Selau & Oliveira, 2017). This is why Marx goes on to explain that "[n]ot only specific assembly tasks are distributed among different individuals, but the individual himself is divided and transformed into the automatic engine of an assembly work" (Marx, 2013, p. 434). From the understanding of the manufacturing division of labor as a specific way of the capitalist production, it is understood that the development of the psyche also depends on those daily occupations of workers: the subject who spends his days performing the same task, repeatedly and mechanically, has hampered the conditions of omnilateral development [including intellectual development capacities] (Selau & Oliveira, 2017).

Stetsenko (2017) understands that the society of capital is the promoter of a number of human damages, yet she does not work with a narrow circle of analysis based on economics [examples: see Vygotsky, 1997, for the discussion in Psychology; see Chayanov (1981), for a discussion in Agriculture and Agronomy]. In this regard, the fundamental aspect of the book that focuses on important theoretical points of Psychology, Education and Neuroscience stands out. At this point, the reader's comprehension effort may represent a contribution that evokes rethinking the pedagogical practice [as well as the psychologist's practice, the neurologist's theoretical conceptions, etc.] as transforming action of the society, aimed towards a fair society, when elements of specific areas should be discussed together with the political situation and context that co-create these areas. In Brazil, this is a fairly widespread idea in Paulo Freire's work [for example, in Education area], although, with the 2019 federal government, there is an unfortunate understanding [by leaders of the ruling party] that Freire would be, through his writings, a doctrinaire and that his work should be removed from school guidelines.

The principles of dialogue between students and teachers, based on a critical pedagogy – that has in Education (and school) one of the main tools for individual social and political emancipation [understanding that the teachers are fundamental for this emancipation] – based on Freire (1987), are in line with Stetsenko's understanding that "[w]e are all actors who contribute to social practices, bring about their historical realization, and

⁴ "каждая высшая психическая функция появляется в процессе развития поведения дважды: сначала как функция коллективного поведения, как форма сотрудничества или взаимодействия, как средство социального приспособления, т. е. как категория интерпсихологическая, а затем вторично как способ индивидуального поведения ребенка, как средство личного приспособления, как внутренний процесс поведения, т. е. как категория интрапсихологическая".

contribute to the future that is to come and, moreover, a future that is always already in the making, by us, now” (2017, p. 22).

The transformative mind: expanding Vygotsky's approach to development and education is essential reading for researchers, students and university professors of Education, Psychology and Neurological Medicine. Costall (2019, p. 2-3) was very competent in pointing out that “[the book's] message is an extremely important one: psychology not as description/re-presentation but a science of the possible. This book is not only a contribution to psychology. It presents a framework for what psychology could itself become”. Professor Anna Stetsenko's book draws an understanding that the contribution of all people within the schooling process (depending on the conception of man and world on which the teaching activity is based and the understanding about the teaching procedure that must go beyond the level of real development of the students, to development zones that are close) can change students' way of seeing and acting in the world, for a vision beyond the present (Marx, 2013), as thinking evolves to thinking with concepts, which is more dialectic than pseudo-concepts, within and beyond the formulations of what Vygotskij (1962) had proposed.

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