

RECLAIMING MIND AND SOCIETY IN MIND

Miller, Ronald (2011) **Vygotsky in perspective**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-1-107-00186-2 hbk. Pages xiii + 466

*Lynne Slonimsky
School of Education
University of Witwatersrand
Johannesburg*

“Great texts, like true lovers do not reveal themselves easily. They require a deep commitment of time, openness, energy and even kindness. The prevalence of the tendency to skim, sample, classify and judge has had unfortunate consequences for teaching ...”

Anne Warfield Rawls (2004: xiv)

In recent years Lev Vygotsky, the author of Cultural-historical psychology has acquired canonical status in the fields of developmental and educational psychology. Yet, there is a fundamental irony that haunts the works of original thinkers – the more their contribution to knowledge development is recognized in the academy, the greater the tendency to selectively de-locate extracts from their oeuvre and recontextualise them into thematic compilations, collections of selected papers or simplified versions in textbooks. In the process, key concepts tend to become so decontextualized and reified that they lose their meaning or significance, and that which was most generative is lost. In **Vygotsky in perspective** Ronald Miller proposes that this has been the fate of Vygotsky’s classical text **Thinking and speech**, in which he offered the most refined and comprehensive exposition of his Cultural-historical theory of consciousness.

A key premise of **Vygotsky in perspective** is that Vygotsky’s ontological and epistemological assumptions have been increasingly misinterpreted and distorted in recontextualised versions of his works. This process of distortion began when Soviet censors excised key aspects of Vygotsky’s Marxist methodology and re-described them in more “politically correct” terms. The re-described versions subsequently informed the publication in 1978 of **Mind in society**, an editorialized “cocktail mix” of Vygotsky’s core concepts appropriated and assimilated into the American cultural-historical milieu. More recently, core concepts from Vygotsky’s oeuvre (including signs as psychological tools, the zone of proximal development, scientific concepts, sign mediation, stages of concept development and culture) have been further re-described as they have been appropriated into Sociocultural Theory and Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT).

What is at issue for Miller is not the fact that that the abovementioned approaches have recruited concepts to further their own projects, but that they purport to introduce, explicate or extend Vygotsky's work yet tout him as the "patron of a kind of extraverted psychology in which explanations of human behaviour are sought on the outside beyond the skin and beyond consciousness, in 'society', or in 'culture', or 'distributed' among tools of various kinds"(p 177). Miller argues that this reading of Vygotsky's theory has transmuted his realist ontology of mind into a relativist theory of consciousness.

In the first section of the book titled "Vygotsky at home", Miller sets out to reclaim Vygotsky's realist ontology of mind. This critical endeavour is developed through a very rigorous, deep exegesis of the last three chapters of Vygotsky's **Thinking and speech** coupled with critical commentary. Miller painstakingly traces the strands of Vygotsky's extended argument for the development of consciousness, excavating the abovementioned concepts and the relationships between them. He cogently demonstrates why, and how, the three chapters must be read together as one extended argument which only comes together in the last pages of "Thought and word", the last chapter of Vygotsky's book.

Miller systematically builds evidence for his claim that Vygotsky advances a theory of the development of the person as "a social individual who is socialized not from the outside but *from within*, a person for whom the other is also me, my-self, a person who does not live in opposition to society but who, by living constitutes society, culture and history" (p 19, emphases added). Thus, it is precisely in and through sign mediated interaction with others that persons become social individuals who develop into *individualized, autonomous selves*. In other words Miller argues that Vygotsky's theory is not a theory of mind in society but *society in mind*. This reading of Vygotsky clearly stands the standard interpretation of Vygotsky on its head.

This first section of the book should be of interest to established Vygotskian scholars and to newcomers to Vygotsky who will be richly rewarded if they are willing to invest the time to follow the very detailed path that Miller paves through Vygotsky's argument.

The first section of the book develops principled grounds for Miller's arguments in the second section of the book, "Vygotsky in America". Here Miller develops a cutting (some might say "vicious"), but scrupulously justified and contextualized critique of Sociocultural theory and CHAT through a close analysis of key texts by Michael Cole, James Wertsch, Yryö Engeström and several other influential, commentators in **The essential Vygotsky** and **The Cambridge companion to Vygotsky**. Miller explicitly notes that he has chosen to focus on these authors' works because they are representative of what he views as the most problematic misrepresentations and misinterpretations of Vygotsky's theory.

Miller's critiques are compelling for several reasons. First, he is very careful to develop exegeses and critical commentaries of extended tracts from the works he is critiquing. He thereby shows the same integrity to those texts as he does to Vygotsky's, and enables the reader to trace arguments under scrutiny back into their contexts. Second, Miller uncovers and persuasively explains how, and why, Vygotsky's ontological and epistemological assumptions have become so distorted in the abovementioned approaches. Part of his critique is that they have systematically distorted key concepts

including *psychological* tools; *sign* mediation; *stages* of concept development, and “the social” as *processes* of sign mediated *social interaction*. Miller systematically demonstrates why these concepts cannot be reduced to tools, mediation, artefact-mediated action or practical activity, and also explains why “the social” cannot be read as a hypostatized entity outside of, or in opposition to, individuals. He also makes the pivotal point that cultural artefacts are functional structures that can have no significance as tools unless articulated by human intentionality. He proposes that the kernel of Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory of consciousness can be formulated as “mind without culture is empty, and culture without mind is unthinkable” (p 415).

The tone in which this section is written also makes for compelling, but often very uncomfortable reading. Few readers will have encountered such open enactment of the cut and thrust of academic battles in peer reviewed academic publications. Proponents of the Sociocultural theory and CHAT are encouraged to read this section of the book (preferably after reading the first section) to make up their own minds whether this is merely a vicious attack, or a substantive critique which points to significant areas of incoherence in both theories. Either way, engagement with Miller’s critique should contribute to knowledge development.

In the third section titled “Vygotsky over the rainbow”, Miller proposes that a theory of the constitutive role of the social in the development of consciousness must enable us to understand the development of cultural-historical forms of understanding. Miller brings the depth of his experiences and years of working with the significance and implications of Vygotsky theory for “the rainbow nation” to make a novel contribution to Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory. He does this through an exploration of the distinction and relation between consciousness and awareness at the heart of Vygotsky’s concept of “conscious awareness”. (An earlier less refined version was published in two parts in **PINS** in 2009.) This illuminating argument, which weaves Vygotsky’s theory together with insights from Ortega y Gasset, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jean Piaget, explores what it means to be human, and the grounds of our sense of “being historical and cultural beings immersed in webs of meaning” (p x).

In this section Miller also develops a generative explanation of the process of developing qualitatively new forms of understanding and competence necessary for true agency. A key part of Miller’s argument is that in the ZPD, performance precedes competence in so far as the mediators’ directives provide learners with reasons for action. However, he argues that reasons-for-action should not be conflated with understandings that ground intentionality (that is, reason itself). The latter can only be premised on the individual’s own actions or experiences which are partially constituted through interaction.

Miller proposes that when someone misunderstands something they do not understand that they do not understand. So, he says, it takes another person who is competent in that context to recognize their confusion. But no amount of telling them that they do not understand can make them shift their understanding without the introduction of interactions which make new forms of action functionally necessary. For Miller, reasoning is something we *do* - it is only in directing others to act as we do that we can explain ourselves. If one accepts this argument then it is possible to read the form, content and structure of **Vygotsky in perspective** as an intentional act by Miller to

direct others to read Vygotsky as he does, and in the process to both dislodge misunderstandings and explain his interpretation of Vygotsky's Cultural-historical theory.

The comments above should make it clear that **Vygotsky in perspective** should be of interest to Vygotskian scholars, developmental psychologists and educators concerned with learning and development, and to proponents of Activity theory in its various hues.

Finally, as it becomes easier and easier to pluck and assimilate information from hyperspace without being truly informed by it, there are fewer and fewer examples of how to read the internal logic of an author's work with integrity to the text, and how to critique and develop texts without simple assimilating into one's own or others frameworks. Miller's exegesis and critical commentary of **Thinking and speech** should be mandatory reading for post-graduate students in developmental psychology, educational psychology and curriculum studies because it offers an exemplary model.

REFERENCES.

Daniels, H, Cole, M and Wertsch, J (eds) (2007) **The Cambridge companion to Vygotsky**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rieber, R & Robinson, D (eds) (2004) **The essential Vygotsky**. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

Warfield Rawls, A (2004) **Epistemology and practice**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.