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**Vygotsky’s Legacy Questioned. A Review of his “Analysts” and a Challenge to his “Emulators”**

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**Abstract**

*This article first proposes a literature review on the questioning of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934)’s legacy. Four main points of disagreement are distinguished:*

*(1) the authenticity issues of Vygotsky’s published work; (2) the unreflective use of concepts and ideas attributed to the Russian psychologist; (3) the story telling of a mythical Vygotsky-Leontiev-Luria school; and (4) the assimilation of his works with major currents of North American developmental psychology. The underlying divergence on what constitutes Vygotsky’s core theory is then highlighted, namely the role of meaning in mental development. Finally, a study of the dissemination of his conceptions within the scientific community is proposed, based on the reconstitution of two networks of authors: Vygotsky’s “analysts” and “emulators”. This study demonstrates that the revision of Vygotsky’s legacy may be understood by the very play of scientific production processes. Major Vygotskian scholars have emulated his ideas within mainstream but possibly incompatible intellectual frameworks.*

**Keywords** Vygotsky • Cultural-historical psychology • Educational & developmental psychology • Consciousness • Educational research

# The Questioning of Vygotsky's Legacy

The discrepancy between Lev Vygotsky’s conceptions and those developed in his name is a problem that has been the subject of considerable literature. Nicolai Veresov (2020, p. 108) sternly notes in this regard that, while a scholar’s theses must be developed to continually enrich our understanding of phenomena, one condition is that the original ideas be “correctly understood, at least in first approximation.” Margaret Gredler and Carol Shields (2004) have already attempted to alertthe scientific community by asking, in a provocative title if “no one read Vygotsky’s words”, while Felix Mikhailov (2001, p. 10) remarks that it is a well-known fact that Vygotsky’s work has been “substantially distorted by commentators, disciples, and users to meet their own needs”. It is thus not a surprise to read that “radically opposite readings of Vygotsky’s texts and different interpretations of Vygotsky’s legacy have emerged” (Dafermos, 2016, p. 20). Anton Yasnitsky, an author who, as we shall see, leads a struggle against the inappropriate use of Vygotsky’s work, evokes in various texts the strangeness of the interest aroused by the Russian psychologist, whose contemporary popularity is not associated with in-depth studies of his work, but rather dominated by a lack of true understanding.

The complaints about Vygotsky’s legacy point to a superficial exposition of his psychology based on a number of ready-made ideas. This is true for the central themes of the social formation of mind, mediation, and zone of proximal development, or “ZPD”. These notions are used as slogans or “buzzwords” (Toomela, 2015; Yasnitsky, 2019), while neither educational practice nor scientific research benefits from Vygotsky’s true contribution to psychology (Bulle, 2019; Gredler, 2012). The literature critical of the mainstream use of his work very generally testifies that a new orthodoxy has developed in his name, using his terminology, while the underlying concepts are “distorted” and some, such as consciousness, even “ignored” (Miller, 2011, p. 7).

The few statements reproduced above come from a part of the scientific community, a small minority but not negligible because, as we shall see, it is more specifically devoted to understanding his work. This questioning of Vygotsky’s legacy brings to light an inappropriate, even contradictory use of his ideas and a fabrication of his image, oscillating between victim and guru, in the service of purposes other than the scientific development of his work. This raises suspicions as to the authenticity of the available texts, given the many problems of editing, translation and interpretation (see, for instance Barrs, 2017; Dafermos, 2016; van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2011, 2016; Yasnitsky, 2012, 2019) and, in addition, given the difficulties raised by the very evolution of his conceptions and their unfinished state at his death, knowing that Vygotsky “kept revisiting his ideas” (van der Veer, 2008, p. 21; see, for instance, on the central issue of consciousness, Zavershneva, 2014).

It is the normal fate of a theory to be adopted, disseminated, and in some way adapted, but not at the expense of its very contribution to the science of its time. The genuine contribution of Vygotsky, whose important works in a few years of intense professional activity earned him the title of “Mozart of psychology” (Toulmin, 1978) seems, however, to be mostly ignored and contradictions with its founding principles are in question. We may then wonder what is the bias in the process of the functioning of psychological research in particular, and even scientific research in general, that may explain the large-scale production of misconceptions about the original foundations of a theoretical corpus.

Let us first discard some tempting but inadequate diagnoses. According to the points of view taken on a field of science, certain approaches, which are antagonistic in some respects, can be brought closer together in relation to a common adversary. This may explain the proximity often assumed between Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget in the secondary literature, despite Vygotsky’s long critical developments of Piaget’s work (especially in *Thought and Language,* the second chapter being devoted to Piaget’s theory), or between Lev Vygotsky and John Dewey. Vygotsky and Piaget sought to propose alternatives to behaviorism, while Vygotsky and Dewey based their conceptions on the developmental role of the social dimension in human development against purely genetic theories. These partial kinships should not lead to any confusion of the scientific meanings of theories almost a century after their emergence. But this is the case for the Vygotsky theory. The symbolic force of the positioning of his work, against behaviorism, at the head of active conceptions of intellectual development,[[1]](#footnote-1) and against genetic naturalism, at the head of the theories of social mediation of the human mind, appears to have the perverse effect of obscuring his original contribution. Another hypothesis, according to which these conflicts of interpretation would not be an oddity, but the normal and necessary role of debate and controversy in science, can also be dismissed. On the one hand, we do not observe discussion among scholars supporting different conceptions of Vygotsky’s legacy on the meaning of his work. On the other hand, even if this meaning represents an important scientific issue, it would be an exaggeration to believe, as is the case with genuine controversies (Freudenthal, 2000, p. 126), that it is not possible to resolve this issue by the standard means of the discipline involved.

In short, we are not dealing with mere differences of perspectives, nor are we dealing with a scientific controversy. The very nature and causes of the disagreement about Vygotsky’s contribution to developmental psychology constitute the enigma that the research presented in this article proposes to address. To this end, I will study the main problems raised regarding Vygotsky’s legacy and certain modes of its dissemination within the scientific community. My aim is to shed light on the processes at the origin of the paradoxical situation where, according to a group of researchers who focus on the analysis of his work, the great renown of the psychologist is combined with ignorance of his original contribution.

In the following, the main points of disagreement about Vygotsky’s legacy are firstly detailed: (1) the authenticity issues of Vygotsky’s published work; (2) the unreflective use of concepts and ideas attributed to Vygotsky; (3) the story telling of a mythical Vygotsky-Leontiev-Luria school; and (4) the assimilation of his works with major currents of North American developmental psychology. The underlying divergence on what constitutes Vygotsky’s core theory is then highlighted. Finally, a study of the dissemination of his conceptions within the scientific community is proposed on the basis of the reconstitution of two networks of authors: Vygotsky’s “analysts” and “emulators”. This study dem­ onstrates that the revision of Vygotsky’s legacy may be understood by the very play of scientific production processes: The most visible Vygotskian authors have emulated his ideas within mainstream but possibly incompatible intellectual frameworks.

# Main Issues Raised by Vygotsky's Legacy

***The Emergence of a Revisionist Movement Challenging Vygotsky's Legacy***

The so-called “revisionist” movement, strongly impelled by Anton Yasnitsky, an independent researcher specialist of the Vygotsky-Luria circle, develops a strategy to deconstruct Vygotsky’s legacy in order to bring about a form of rebirth based on a complete reconsideration of the Russian psychologist’s work. This strategy includes extensive critiques and revisions of publications and translations of his texts, the translation and edition of as yet unpublished works, and, above all, the dismissal of any belief in the obviousness of Vygotsky’s contribution to psychology. In this regard, the revisionist attitude aims to fight a form of dogmatism which, through the sacralization of an author and his work, cuts short any discussion and questioning. Yasnitsky (2011, 2012), and Yasnitsky and van der Veer (2016) evoke “the Vygotsky cult” as spreading worldwide on the basis of typical attributes, the story of a founding Father, the construction of a canonical legacy, and the recognition of derivative schools as an orthodox continuation of the work. In the case of Vygotsky, these attributes especially involve the Stalinist banishment, the pseudo-narrative of the Vygotsky-Leontiev-Luria school and the assimilations with certain dominant currents of developmental psychology in North America, namely sociocultural approaches, cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) and other associated conceptions. It is clearly a question of putting all things in order and allowing Vygotsky’s legacy to develop on new, healthy bases. The revisionist movement is likely to include all critical works on Vygotsky’s mainstream use and interpretation, allowing them to gain a relative visibility which, as we shall see, they have largely lacked. But the strategy is not without flaws. Its provocative stance and desire to “demystify” (Akhutina, 2019; Kozulin, 2016) involve rhetorical tactics, including deliberately excessive statements on the truth of the legacy and the story of its author. Moreover, it tackles a delicate terrain where it is difficult to claim a position of greater authority than another. In this context, the revisionist undertaking has chosen an empirical and open approach, and is especially devoted to the authenticity of the work.

***Issues of Authenticity of Vygotsky's Published Work***

The published work is flawed, with considerable problems that skew the understanding of Vygotskian conceptions. First, some of it was published posthumously, without Vygotsky’s supervision. It is well known that his writings were censored two years after his death, to reappear only 20 years later while, in the political climate of the Soviet Union under Stalin, his followers revised his theses, either freely or for a better adaptation to the Marxist ideal of “objective science”. On this subject, Alex Kozulin (1984, 1986), Vygotsky’s translator and commentator offers, as we will see, some interesting explanations to understand the unfortunate fate of his ideas after his premature death in 1934, especially through Alexei Leontiev’s criticism and modification of his theory. Most of his followers developed their research within the scope of what is known as “activity theory”, which revises his basic ideas. However, the various works of Vygotsky’s students and collaborators are not unified and can be seen to represent various trends within the broad framework he laid down (Yasnitsky & Ferrari, 2008). Moreover, his work was disseminated with a substantial time lag to the rest of the world, in different scientific, intellectual, and ideological contexts. These divergences justified the particular liberties taken by his editors, who tended to “translate theoretical positions for contemporary audiences” (Glick, 1997, p. vi; Veresov, 2010), aiming also at the rapid circulation of his works in the United States.[[2]](#footnote-2) This explains why major texts have been published in revised and truncated versions. The case of *Thought and Language* (the title of which is an imperfect translation of the original 1934 masterpiece, *Myslenie 1 rec’ "Thinking and Speech)* is significant. The 1956 Russian edition - the source of multiple translations all over the world — had modified the 1934 text without notice, with various cuts, changes of style and substitutions of terms. The same is true of the 1982 edition, and this pattern was reproduced in the Western editions from the first translations in the 1960s (the 1962 edition reduces by two-thirds the Russian text). The new English edition by the MIT Press published in 1986, with Kozulin as translator, remains highly redacted, somewhat expanded in a revised 2012 version.

Moreover, in the composition of certain works from scattered texts, the major evolutions in Vygotsky’s theory are obscured by mixing references without chronology, and free adjustments by the editors. The most notorious case is that of *Mind in Society* published in 1978 which is known to have had a high impact for decades, even greater than the impact of *Thought and Language* (Glick, 1997; Gonzalez Rey, 2014). Not only is *Mind in Society* composed of texts from various sources and various periods, but in their introduction, the American psychologists Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner (1978) explain that they have taken significant liberties and that the book is “not a literal translation” of Vygotsky, but rather their own edited translation, with (redundant) material omitted or material added (with the aim of clarification). For instance, the original version of chapter 6 on ZPD was nearly 2000 words longer and more pedagogically oriented (Barrs, 2017). The notion of ZPD is defined by the discrepancy between a child’s actual developmental level and the level he or she can reach in solving problems with assistance. Therefore, it relies on the role that formal instruction plays in the potential for intellectual development. A corollary is that if the teaching is situated either too far ahead, or not far ahead enough, the individual does not develop (Vygotsky, 1934/1986, p. 187). Vygotsky (1934/1986, p. 189) used this notion to explain the failure of the “complex” system of instruction in the Soviet Union between 1923 and 1931, which provided students with problems they could handle without help and involved the removal of a systematic study of subject knowledge they needed. In the 1978 text, this notion is emphasized with the idea of the social origin of development and without the passages explaining its instructional meaning (Clara, 2017, p. 50; for other various critiques relative to the inadequacies of this text, see Chaiklin, 2003; Glick, 1997; Gredler, 2012).

No published writings seem to be problem-free, so that their reliability is taken as questionable (see van der Veer & Valsiner, 1988, 1991; van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2011; Yasnitsky, 2012; Yasnitsky & van der Veer, 2016). Ronald Miller (2011, p. 2) remarks that the *Collected Works* oblige the reader to grasp Vygotsky’s texts through the eyes of his commentators. Yasnisky (2019, p. 12) evokes the “overinflated and exaggerated” references to secondary notions by Vygotskian interprets (e.g. the metaphor of ‘internalization’ or ‘interiorization’). Van der Veer and Yasnitsky (2011, p. 480) note, in addition to the mentioned issues of authenticity of the published work, its abridged versions, compilations, and inadequate annotations, the basic problem of translation errors and even names.

***Concepts and Ideas Dubiously Attributed to Vygotsky***

Another major subject of criticism is that some ideas and concepts are usually imputed to Vygotsky without any depth or analytical relevance with regard to his proper insight. Among these concepts and ideas, we find especially the social formation of mind, the notion of ZPD, and the idea of mediation, or more precisely, semiotic mediation.

First, Rene van der Veer and Jaan Valsiner account for the important literature that conveyed the idea of the social formation of mind upstream of Vygotsky’s work and, above all, the role (recognized by Vygotsky) played by the conceptions of the French psychologist, Pierre Janet, on this subject. Janet explicitly proposed a “law of psychological development”, which involved the role of memory, thought, and language, and fundamentally claimed that “all higher, typically human forms of conduct have a social origin: They exist first between people, as social, interpsychological acts, and only afterward become transformed to private, intrapsychological processes” (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1988, 2000, p. 122).

Second, the ZPD notion, which did not appear before 1933 in Vygotsky’s writings, was acknowledged to have not come from him. The ZPD gives, according to Vygotsky (1934/1986, p. 187) “a more helpful clue than mental age does to the dynamics of intellectual progress.” Even if his theory offers a rationale for it, he mentions investigations from the American psychologist Dorothea McCarthy and others as being the basis for his conception (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 338; 347)

Third, the idea of mediation, which characterizes the processes of social formation of mind, is not a typical Vygotskian notion. Yasnitsky (2019, p. 3) remarks its wide use by a behaviorist and psychologist such as Frederic Skinner, who could familiarize American scholars with it before the emergence of Vygotsky’s works in the Western world. Especially, Skinner (1957, p. 2) defines “verbal behavior” as “behavior reinforced through the mediation of other persons”, so that the term mediation, used in different meanings by the two scholars, may serve, as Yasnitsky notes, a confusion in favor of Skinnerian conception, with its emphasis on ideas of personal activity of the subject and improvement supported by the “knowledgeable other” and the “social situation of development.”

In contrast, the mediation of thought at the heart of Vygotsky’s theory is ensured by the *sign,* a cultural and artificial construction that justifies its being called semiotic. Nevertheless, the idea of sign or semiotic mediation, whatever the specific terminology, has itself a long intellectual history. Its origin has rarely been noticed, especially since Vygotsky does not refer to it. Yet when the very idea emerged, its author, the French philosopher Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, clearly recognized it as a discovery, and inspired a school of thought, that of the *“Ideologues”,* a term that did not then have a pejorative connotation, but designated the new science of ideas inspired by the discovery of the essential role of signs in the formation and mastery of thought (Hardcastle, 2009; Leitch, 2011; Sinha, 1989). It is the subject of Condillac’s largely ignored work, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge,* presented as a revision of the Lockean theory of knowledge (see de Condillac, 1746/2001).

The notion of semiotic mediation also plays a central role in Charles Sanders Peirce’s philosophy of pragmatism, involving the triadic relationship between a sign (which by definition stands for something else), an object (or what the sign stands for) and one “interpretant”, the effect of the sign produced in some interpreter. This effect is a habit in Peirce, which explains the idea developed in pragmatism according to which meanings are habits pointing to sequential bonds, that is, consequences (see, for instance, Fitzgerald, 1966): These habits or dispositions constitute knowledge based on connections with things through experience. The function of the concept signified by the sign is thus not to mentally represent any reality, but to establish instrumental connections, that is, schemes of action. In this regard, the idea of evolution developed in the nineteenth century seemed to allow habits-based notion of meaning to underpin functional systems, without presupposition of consciousness (Wilson, 2016, p. 325; Watts, 2008, p. 191). The behaviorist turn in psychology was thus well within the same Zeitgeist as the philosophy of pragmatism (van der Veer & Valsiner, 2000, p. 223), whereas the Vygotskian notions have a different meaning.

Neither ZPD, nor mediation nor semiotic mediation are specifically Vygotskian terms. Nevertheless, what makes the original contribution of a work is not the words but the meaning of the concepts, and in this respect, the system they constitute, as Vygotsky argued. The claims of nonpaternity of terms in Vygotsky’s case are accompanied, as we shall see later, by the idea of a distortion of the very meaning he gave to these concepts, especially in his mature theoretical system.

***The Story Telling of a Mythical Vygotsky-Leontiev-Luria School***

An important disagreement on Vygotsky’s legacy concerns the belief in the existence of a “Vygotsky-Leontiev-Luria” school, which would be the origin of activity theory in psychology (Gonzalez Rey, 2014; Yasnitsky & Ferrari, 2008; Yasnitsky, 2011). The historical and intellectual circumstances behind the social construction of the links that combine Vygotsky and Leontiev’s contributions in the same theoretical perspective have been well analyzed, and are interesting to report briefly here. As Alexander Luria (1979/2010) evokes it in his intellectual autobiography, in 1924 Vygotsky joined the young staff of the Institute of Psychology in Moscow, which had been reorganized with a view to reconstructing Russian psychology. He took the lead of the working group already constituted by Luria and Leontiev, which they used to call the “troika.” In a few years, their isolation came to an end, and the concepts then developed by Vygotsky gained a wide academic role within Soviet psychology. In 1931, they took the opportunity of setting up a psychology department in the Ukrainian Psychoneurological Academy of Kharkov, so that several of Vygotsky’s collaborators, including Leontiev, left Moscow, while Luria commuted between Moscow and Kharkov.

During these years, Vygotsky developed a new theory of consciousness as a semantic system, where the dynamics of action derives from the dynamics of meanings or else, “sense”, so that a polemics with Leontiev “grew fiercer” (Zavershneva, 2010, pp. 35, 42). Leontiev continued to avoid investigating consciousness according to Vygotsky’s program in favor of practical action as the central theme. Yasnitsky (2018) explains that at the end of 1932, the disagreement with Leontiev and his other associates was about Vygotsky’s call for a new psychological theory of consciousness (understood as a dynamic system, with a “semantic structure”). Leontiev preferred to focus, with his research team in Kharkov, on “practical intelligence” and children’s actions involving instruments and physical objects. Therefore, this geographical bilocation was quickly coupled with an intellectual distancing, more or less exacerbated by the political conditions. Kozulin (1984, 1986) relates the criticism of the Vygotsky-Luria cross-cultural analysis of consciousness for its alleged “eclecticism”, mistakes and its inspiration by “bourgeois” authors. In this context of severe political control (under Stalin’s “Great Break”), pedological studies - then covering most of the child and educational psychology area - were banished by a 1936 decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and, with them, the works of Vygotsky, who sometimes used the term.

The importance of these circumstances should not be underestimated in the attempt to understand the development of the works of Vygotsky’s disciples: Those who “took risks to develop his theories under those unfavorable conditions, abandoned some of the essential ideas of their teacher” (Kozulin, 1984, p. 204). In particular, a group of his students and followers including Pyotr Zinchenko and Alexei Leontiev elaborated what represents a revised version of the concept of activity. In this version, the issue of the mediation of thought by cultural artefacts, with consciousness interpreted as a semiotic system, has been transformed. It gave way to the idea of mediation of mental operations by external activities of the child, a problem identified as “internalization” and supposed to engender the higher mental functions. In essence, practical activity was substituted for conscious semiotic activity as the central process of mediation between the individual and reality, and was placed at the core of the theory then developed in the name of the genuine achievement of Vygotsky’s research program. Even in his preface to the 1956 edition of *Thinking and Speech,* Leontiev argues that Vygotsky’s emphasis on signs was only temporary. In this revised framework of the theory, the role played by signs, meaning, and consciousness in the cognitive mastery of a situation, and more generally, in human intellectual development, remained on the margin. As Kozulin explains, the role of signs as chief mediators “was not a peripheral but a central notion of the cultural-historical theory that was attacked by the Kharkovites.” Zinchenko’s criticism (1939, pp. 66-67) is worth citing to clarify this basic disagreement involving the revision of Vygotsky’s theory of the mediation of thought by organized systems of signs: “Vygotsky understood the Marxist perspective idealistically. The conditioning of the human mind by social and historical factors was reduced to the influence of human culture on the individual. The source of mental development was thought to be the interaction of the subject’s mind with a cultural, ideal reality rather than his actual relationship to reality.” What became known as Leontiev’s activity theory later succeeded Pavlov’s theory of conditioned reflexes to represent the official Marxist psychology still seeking an ideal of objective science. At that time Leontiev, who won the Lenin Prize for scientific research in 1963, appeared to have corrected Vygotsky’s mistakes (Kozulin, 1986, p. 272). But the core of the “narrative” about the “school of Vygotsky” only formed in the late 1970s, partly with the celebration of Luria and Leontiev after their death (Yasnitsky, 2011, p. 423).

Certain interesting circumstances surrounding the construction of this narrative in the West involve the role played in the Soviet Union and in North America by the criticism of the behaviorist paradigm then dominant in both countries. Jerome Bruner is a special protagonist of this story for having, after a first visit to Moscow, compared the battle against Pavlov of the young scholars he had met there with his own battle against the Skinnerian approach. Bruner, Fernando Luis Gonzalez Rey (2014, pp. 62, 74) explains, “mistakenly presented the group of Leontiev as fighters of the ‘battle of consciousness,’ a thing that, at that time, was reduced by that group to a mere epiphenomenon of the concrete external practical operations with material objects.” The context of criticism of Skinnerian behaviorism and the rise of cognitive psychology, with the natural sciences as a model, may account for what happened in the following decades: Vygotsky, Leontiev, and Luria were equated, through different labels, as part of the same theoretical paradigm centered on mediated action. The continuation of the story puts into play the specific roles played by Michael Cole and James Wertsch in supporting mainstream trends in developmental psychology — the sociocultural approach and cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) — which they attribute to the shared legacy of Vygotsky, Luria, and Leontiev.

***Assimilation with Major Currents of North American Developmental Psychology***

One significant issue underpinning the misrepresentation of Vygotsky’ legacy involves, finally, the faulty assimilation of Vygotsky’s conceptions with major currents of North American developmental psychology.

It should be noted that Michael Cole and James Wertsch, whose roles in the dif­ fusion of Vygotsky’s work in the West have been central, both undertook postdoctoral studies at Moscow State University, the former at the beginning of the 1960s and the latter at the end of the 1970s. The determinant impact of the publication of *Mind in Society* at the end of the 1970s has already been evoked. Vygotsky’s fame in the West developed in the following years, notably through the works of these two well-known scholars who attached their research to that of the Russian psychologist. The problems raised by this positioning have been broadly commented on (see for instance Dafermos, 2016; Derry, 2008; Spinuzzi, 2019; Toomela, 2015). Ronald Miller (2011) offered the most thorough critical analysis of it. Miller observes that the approaches Cole and Wertsch respectively promoted, which fall under the two closely related titles of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, or CHAT - as coined by Cole - and sociocultural theory, provide the largest amount of secondary Vygotskian literature (Miller, 2011, p. 19). These approaches have much in common, including, in particular, the focus on practical activity and social interaction as mediating the development of human higher functions. Their link to Vygot­ sky’s work raises in substance the same problem as Leontiev’s alleged continuation of Vygotsky’s research program. What is removed, or even corrected, from the theory is the crux of the matter. Wertsch (1985) himself has openly developed criticisms of Vygotsky’s theory, which are similar to Leontiev’s.

In his introductory and methodological chapter, Vygotsky (1934/1986, pp. 5-6, 10-11) explains that to understand a phenomenon such as higher forms of thought, you have to resort to a type of analysis defined as the decomposition of a holistic whole into basic units, which are further unanalyzable and possess all the fundamental properties of the whole. By choosing the “word meaning” as the basic unit of analysis of verbal thought, Vygotsky thus starts from conscious properties and not from brains processes to understand the phenomena proper to the higher forms of thought. Especially, the word meaning connects thought and speech by representing “a generalized reflection of reality” (in consciousness). In this regard, Vygotsky (1934/1986, p. lxi) ends his preface by inscribing his work in the project of a science of consciousness: “We feel that in uncovering the problem of thought and speech as the focal issue of human psychology, we have made an essential contribution to progress. Our findings point the way to a new theory of consciousness, which is barely touched upon at the end of this book,” and he ends his whole work by stating: “A word relates to consciousness as a living cell relates to the whole organism, as an atom relates to the universe. A word is a microcosm of human consciousness” (Vygotsky 1934/1986, p. 256).

These fundamental principles developed in the last years of the elaboration of the work are rejected by the activity theories. In particular, Wertsch (1985, chap. 7) questions Vygotsky’s choice of basic unit by referring to a model of consciousness conceived of as a system of secondary connections between higher psychological functions, or else, as an interfunctional organization, which is not that of the last period (1932-1934), especially that of *Thinking and Speech* (see, for instance, Zavershneva, 2014, p. 73). The American psychologist argues that language only mediates the relationship between the mind of a speaker and the world, but not consciousness itself. He invokes the revision of the theory, including that of the unit of analysis, by Vygotsky’s followers, and the revival by Zinchenko (1985) of Leontiev’s ideas, replacing word meaning by “tool-mediated action” as the appropriate unit of analysis of consciousness. Miller (2011) highlights the reversal of Vygotsky’s conceptions at play, particularly the assimilation of the sign, a psychological tool referring to ideal forms of culture, to the material tool of labor. Wertsch’s repeated use of the example of pole vaulting illustrates his instrumental conception of mediated action: “For Wertsch, mind is an overrated conceptual tool in a world where thought is an attribute of artefacts and action does the trick” (Miller, 2011, p. 229, 280). Therefore, the conflation of psychological tools with material tools operated in Wertch and Cole’s activity approaches does not differentiate the specific mental role of the sign, directed inward, from the physical role attributed to the artefactual tool, directed outward. However, Vygotsky’s criticism of this conflation is particularly clear when he defends that his instrumental method has nothing in common with Dewey’s instrumental logic: “It is impossible,” Vygotsky writes, “to assimilate the role of the work tool, which helps man subject natural forces to his will, with that of the sign, which he uses to act upon himself. The tool is externally oriented whereas the sign is internally oriented. Attempts to equate the sign with the external tool, as it is the case in John Dewey’s works, lose the specificity of each type of activity, artificially reducing them into one” (Vygotsky 1930-1933/1978, p. 53).

The divergence with the Vygotskian conception spreads to the various approaches of the mind interpreted as situated, embodied or, more recently, distributed, which have emerged and are welcomed as instances of the sociocultural theory or of the activity theory. In this regard, the distribution of psychological functions over different individuals is criticized for having no sense from a Vygotskian perspective (Toomela, 2015). Moreover, the generic, universal connotation of culture in Vygotsky, is opposed to the particularist and relativist stance in cultural psychology and sociocultural theory (Dafermos, 2016; Papadopoulos, 1996; Veresov, 2010). However, the fate of the Vygotskian heritage, is definitively sealed to that of activity theory in the characterization proposed by Yrjo Engestrom (1996, 1987/2014) of the three generations of “cultural-historical activity theory” or “CHAT”. The first one, “centered around Vygotsky”, is supposed to have created the idea of mediation by implying the triad of subject, object, and mediating artifact, with a unit of analysis remaining “individually focused”. The second generation, rooted in Leontiev’s work, is described as having focused on the relationships of the individual with his social environment. For its part, the third generation, rooted in the work of Engestrom (1987/2014), extended activity theory to interacting activity systems.

The revision of Vygotsky’s theory in sociocultural and other associated approaches involves latent divergences in the underlying meaning of terms and, more broadly, in the epistemological perspectives put into play. The meaning of the central concept of mediation changes fundamentally from meaningful signs to material tools, or from mental-mediated activity through word meaning to tool-mediated action. The very meaning of meaning is in question. In this regard, while Vygotsky (1934/1986) specifies throughout his work that a relation of meaning refers to a relation of generality, Wertsch (1985, p. 196) equates the notion of word meaning with the “sign-type-sign-type relationships of concepts”, which refers to Peircean semi­ otic mediation, of which some principles are recalled in Engestrom (1987/2014).

As David Leitch observes: “Wertsch characterizes language as a designative system, in which words are signs designating certain socially-conventional meanings (...) [in Vygotsky] Language does not simply mediate between an existing mind and the objective world around it; instead, linguistic interaction serves to constitute the mind itself (Leitch, 2011, p. 316; see also Arievitch & Stetsenko, 2014).

Finally, while Cole (1998, p. 36) put Vygotsky, Luria, and Leontiev together in the filiation of Dewey, the points of view, methods and concepts formed in the wake of naturalism, empiricism or else pragmatism in North America stand in deep contrast to the roots of Vygotsky’s theory in continental philosophy and the associated body of thinkers and scientists from whom Vygotsky took inspiration (they cannot be listed here; see, for instance, Bakhurst, 2007).[[3]](#footnote-3) On the epistemological level, Aaro Toomela (2014, 2015) distinguishes two forms of explanation, one (on the side of activity theories) that involves efficient causality with linear cause-effect relationships, and (on the side of Vygotsky) a “structural-systemic” interpretation of causal relationships. Whereas Wertsch early described his scientific project as aiming to understand how higher psychological processes emerge out of social interaction (Wertsch, 1979, p. 21), Vygotsky’s methodological approach does not involve such bottom-up types of causal effects that are supposed to create new psychological properties. He takes it for granted that consciousness and specific human capacities have appeared in the course of evolution, so that the development of higher intellectual functions is based on these capacities, and does not emerge from lower, independent processes. This explains that the word meaning, as the basic unit of the Vygotskian psychological analysis, presupposes consciousness and represents the key factor in the development of higher mental functions.

**Vygotsky Forgotten: The Core of his Contributio****n**

***The True Scope of Cultural-Historical Psychology***

The various criticisms evoked here, whether they refer to the editions of Vygotsky’s works, the superficial use of his concepts, the absence of a Vygotsky-Leontiev-Luria school, or the error of defining activity theories in developmental psychology as Vygotskian, are prompted by a deep disagreement about what constitutes the core of his theory. The disagreement is so fundamental that Vygotsky’s own expression, used to qualify the Freudian theory deprived of the doctrine of sexuality after its merging with Marxism, is sometimes recalled to account for the Western revision of the Vygotskian legacy, that is, “Christianity without Christ” (Miller, 2011, p. 53).

Even if the analyses of Vygotsky’s work, which oppose his dominant interpretation, do not constitute a unified body of insights, they present relative forms of consensus when it comes to identifying what constitutes the basis of his contribution to psychology. First, the true title and subject matter of the theory, are disclosed by Veresov (2020, p. Ill) in reference to a recent republication of Vygotsky’s preface to Leontiev’s book “The development of memory.” Vygotsky writes (the original source dating before 1931, according to Veresov): “In its essence the... theory of the historical (or cultural-historical) development in psychology means the theory of the higher psychological functions (logical memory, voluntary attention, verbal thinking, volitional processes, etc.)—nothing more, and nothing less”. Therefore, Vygotsky’s “cultural-historical psychology” is devoted to higher psychological functions as specifically human psychological systems. In accordance with this whole project, analyses of Vygotsky’s work reveal a rather significant theoretical development, prepared in the years of maturation and search for the right conceptual tools, but which is only achieved in the last period with *Thought and Language* as the center of gravity. In general, they conceive of Vygotsky’s entire research as aiming to overcome the “crisis in psychology” based on a split between its subjective and objective trends, wrongly maintained by onto­ logical prejudices. Such overcoming involves an epistemological refoundation of psychology that legitimizes the scientific study of mental phenomena, and involves the phenomena of subjectivity and inferiority.

In addition, the literature in question highlights certain ideas that are claimed to be at the core of Vygotsky’s neglected legacy: the constitutive role of signs in thought through conscious meanings, the constitutive role of scientific concepts (that is, organized into systems) in the very mastery of thought, and the constitutive role of formal instruction in the appropriation by students of scientific concepts and the development of their higher intellectual functions. Other main topics put into play open research avenues, especially the role emotions play with intellect in human psychological development.

***Consciousness and the Mediation of Mental Processes by Signs***

First, mediation is understood as semiotic to the extent that it involves consciousness and internal meanings. Discussing the renaissance of Vygotsky’s psychology in North Atlantic academic psychology, Dimitris Papadopoulos (1996) notes that the strict information processing trend and the computer metaphor within cognitivism is inconsistent with his theory based on the two “basic categories” which are consciousness and the mediation of human mental processes by signs. For his part, Felix Mikhailov (2001, pp. 18-19), notes that in Vygotsky’s latest works, the sign plays without ambiguity a “strictly mental (intimately subjective)” role in the genesis and development of the child’s consciousness: It cannot be considered as a mediator between subject and object, or between stimulus and response, as is the case in empiricist philosophy and psychology involving the pure senses and physically external links: “We have nothing ‘from without,’ for it is ‘outside’ for us precisely by virtue of the fact that we experience it, and it acquires meaning as such ‘within.’” David Bakhurst explains that Vygotsky recognized mediation as undermining the whole reflexological framework because mediational means are not mere intermediary devices but have an effect by virtue of the way they are understood by human subjects, that is, by virtue of their internal significance: “By the time Vygotsky wrote his masterpiece, *Thinking and Speech,* mean­ ing had become his fundamental ‘unit of analysis,’ the key to the relation of thought and speech and, thereby, the essence of the whole system of higher mental functions” (Bakhurst, 2007, p. 54). Miller (2014, p. 9) also considers the human capacity to signify by using signs (e.g., words) in consciousness to be at the heart of Vygotsky’s cultural-historical psychology: “This bundle of interconnected human attributes that include meaning, understanding, and explaining is what we commonly call conscious­ ness (or self-consciousness) and it is this distinctive human quality that Vygotsky designated as the object of study for the discipline of psychology.” Toomela (2015, p. 320) maintains equally that most of Vygotsky’s work is, in one way or another, devoted to language and word meaning development.

***Scientific Concepts, Formal Instruction, and Intellectual Development***

Second, Vygotsky assigned a central role to the acquisition of “scientific concepts” which play the role given in Piaget to the supposed development of general structures of thought through the subjects’ interaction with their environment and an internal “equilibration” dynamic, van der Veer and Valsiner (1991, p. 288) note the increasing importance taken by the scientific concept in Vygotsky’s work in explaining various psychical phenomena: “While cognitive development was dominated by the *development* of genuine (scientific) concepts, various clinical syndromes — such as Pick’s disease and schizophrenia - were shown to be connected to a *loss* of genu­ ine conceptual thinking”. The central role allocated by Vygotsky to the acquisition of such systematic, hierarchically structured concepts is acknowledged throughout this literature (e.g., Clara, 2017; Gredler & Shields, 2008; Karpov and Haywood, 1998; Karpov, 2003; Lima, 1997, p. 201; Gillen, 2000, p. 194; Schmittau, 2003; Zavershneva, 2014; Toomela, 2016, p. 59). Gredler (2012, p. 123), referring to Vygotsky (1930-1931/1998, p. 57) explains that the formation of scientific concepts is for the author of *Thinking and Speech* and, in his words, “the key to the whole history of the child’s intellectual development”: “Logical thinking ‘is not added to concepts as something standing above them and developing after them-it is the concepts themselves in their action, in their functioning’.” Vygotsky’s central hypothesis, Miller (2014, p. 21) explains, relates conscious awareness and the presence of a conceptual system so that only within a system can the concept acquires a voluntary nature: “Conscious awareness and the presence of a system are synonyms.” Cognitive duality distinguishing two components of knowledge, one denotative and intuitive, and the other one culturally constructed, with recursive properties, “reflects the essence of Vygotsky’s contribution to modern developmental psychology and revives the idea of logical harmony between knowledge and thought” (Bulle, 2017, p. 271). In this sense, the underlying logical role played by scientific concepts is highlighted by Vygotsky (1934/1986)’s remark that the need to avoid contradictions requires a hierarchical structure of concepts so that two contradictory ideas can be assessed against a unique general concept (Vygotsky 1934/1986). Therefore, scientific concepts systems involve different levels of generalization and structure the logical links that allow the mind to manipulate ideas, to think thoughts: “abstract, scientific or else, theoretical concepts drive the processes of thinking and development characterizing higher forms of thought” (Bulle, 2019, pp. 63-64).

Hence, a leading role is played by formal instruction (in a broad sense) in Vygotsky’s developmental psychology. According to Bakhurst (2007, pp. 70-71), Vygotsky’s Western critics often look for agency in the wrong place, wanting the child to develop knowledge through negotiation instead of forms of active assimilation. Marc Clara (2017, p. 55) explains on this subject that what is “absolutely central to conceptual development” in Vygotsky is the driving role played by the adult’s meanings that the child is unable to conceive on her own but can imitate intellectually, that is, meaningfully, so that a nonspontaneous meaning is formed even if “the meaning formed by the child is not like the adult’s meaning but rather a functional equivalent” (Clara, 2017, p. 55). Therefore, learning models should not focus more on behaviors (or skills), than on knowledge per se, so they should specifically involve neither hands-on learning nor passive assimilation, but meaningful internalization of scientific concept systems (Bulle, [2019](#_bookmark15)).

***Affect and Intellect***

One of the great avenues of research left open by Vygotsky concerns the relationship between affect and intellect. In particular, he based this relationship on the idea of unity of affective and intellectual processes. In the “dynamic system of meaning”[[4]](#footnote-4) in which the affective and the intellectual unite, “every idea contains a transmuted affective attitude toward the bit of reality to which it refers” (Vygotsky, 1934/1986, pp. 9-10) and, as Bakhurst (2007, p. 68) explains, there is no inconsistency between this view and the idea that reason must master the emotions. In fact, this can be linked to Ekaterina Zavershneva’s remarks, based on Vygotsky’s archives and note­ books, that the elevation of affect to conceptual thought involves its liberation, so that “the higher the level of making sense of the world we reach, the more freedom we have” (Zavershneva (2014, p. 76). Vygotsky expresses the unity of the motivational and intellectual dimension of thought by stating that “The will is a concept that has become affect” (Zavershneva, 2010, p. 50). This idea underlies his attempt to resolve the problem of mental causation that he was unable to complete but that drove his work (Bulle, 2021). A concept more widely discussed in this literature in the last decade is that of “perezhivanie” which associates in its proper sense the intellectual and emotional life.[[5]](#footnote-5)

# The Dissemination of Vygotsky Conceptions within the Scientific Community

***The Uncertain Ways by which We Lost Vygotsky***

Explanations for the incomprehension of Vygotsky’s theory are mainly centered, as we have seen, on the unsatisfactory quality and incompleteness of the edition of his work, especially its simplification and the incautious mixing of papers from different periods. Therefore, a renewal is principally expected from corrections and new editions — in progress for several decades — including the publication of many unpublished texts (Gan, 2014; Glick, 1997; Lima, 1995; van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2011, 2016; Veresov, 2020). Such a renewal of Vygotskian studies will only occur if the assumed causes of the misconceptions of his theories are correct. However, we have no way of establishing a direct causal relationship between the defects of the published work and its mainstream interpretation. For instance, an individual reading one of the shortened editions of *Thinking and Speech* could not make any major error regarding the genuine meaning of the theory. The situation is rather different for *Mind in Society,* mainly because the reader would miss the most complete and accomplished work. But who would be satisfied with such a composite publication when aiming to grasp Vygotsky’s theory? The idea here is not to undermine the revisionist strategy of deconstruction/reconstruction, nor is it a question of minimizing the need for completion and correction of the published work, which is already partially satisfied (the publication of archive elements proves to be enlightening, cf. Zavershneva, 2010; Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018), but to claim a broader diag­ nosis of the neglect of his genuine legacy.

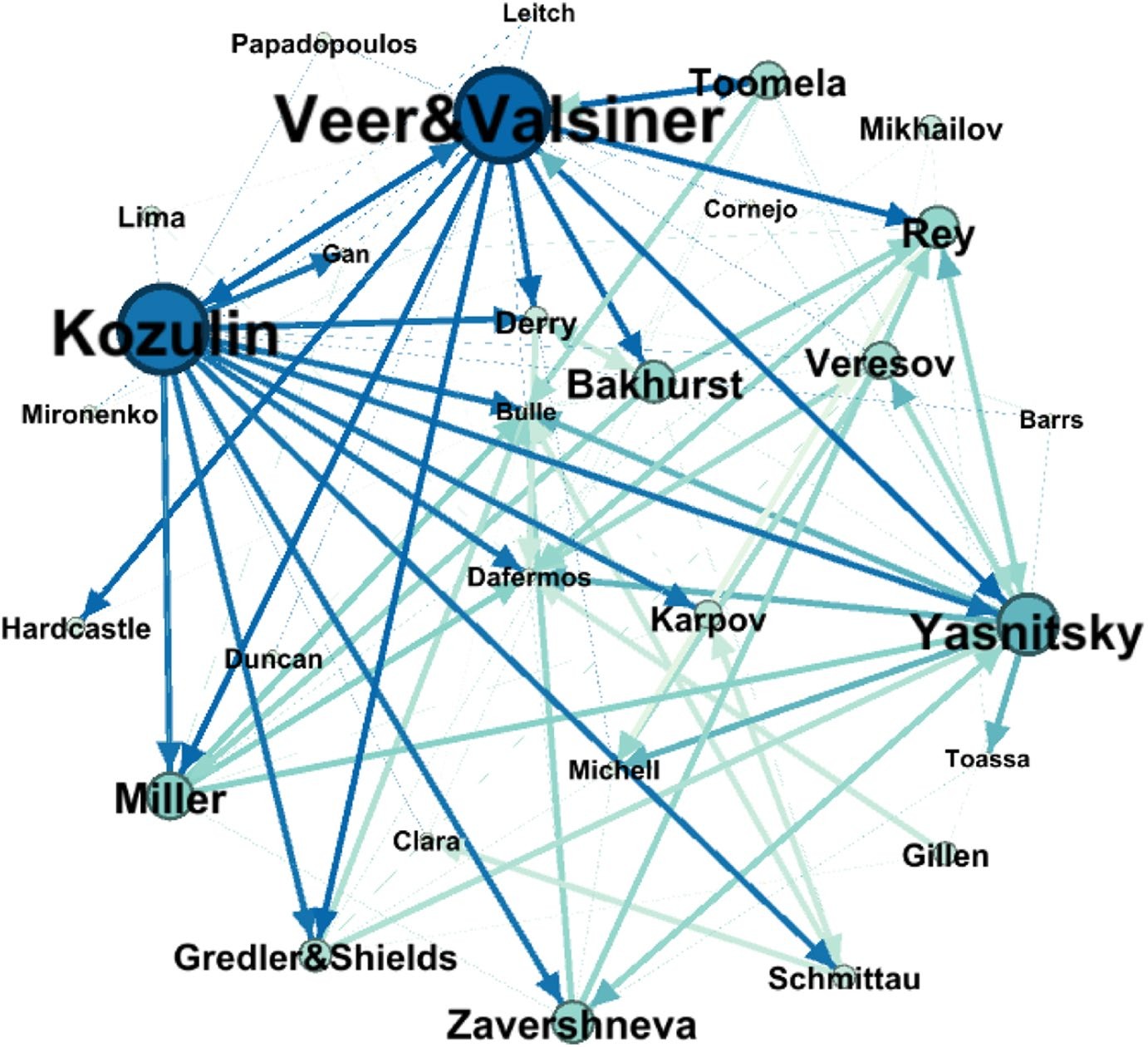
***Investigation into the Networks of Vygotskian Authors***

In order to better understand the situation, it is interesting to study how ideas about Vygotskian theory have been disseminated. In this aim, two major networks of authors have been studied, in line with Miller (2011, p. 5) observation related to the dual nature of the scientific secondary literature developed around Vygotsky’s psychology, with a minor part of it naturally applied to understanding the work, contextualizing it to capture the author’s intentions, analyzing and evaluating it, and another, more major part, going beyond the teachings of the work. The analysis proposed here of the dissemination of ideas on Vygotsky conceptions within the scientific community focuses especially on this second part. With this aim in mind, the articles with the highest visibility were selected from among the articles published between 1960 and 2020, with Vygotsky among their topics. The basis of selection is the Web of Science information platform.[[6]](#footnote-6) Only selected were those articles, chap­ ters, or books that were cited more than 50 times in Web of Science, as well as the authors of articles, chapters or books among their references cited more than 50 times in Web of Science. A network of links between the Vygotskian authors involved (around 110, see the list of associated texts in the Appendix) and their most cited references was then drawn up.[[7]](#footnote-7) These articles and their authors are not the only sources of Vygotsky’s thought diffusion, but they take on an exemplary character for this analysis, which can inform us about certain specificities of this diffusion at the highest academic levels, while the other secondary and derived sources are likely to reproduce these specificities in less scientifically controlled contexts.

Furthermore, in order to reveal the links existing between the authors whose views were previously reported, that is, the authors 1/ more specifically devoted to understanding Vygotsky’s work and 2/ who have developed criticisms of his dominant interpretation, a similar procedure was applied, involving these two selection criteria, with the two additional conditions 3/ to have published at least one article (in English) with Vygotsky as the topic (according to title, abstract or keywords) and 4/ to cite at least two other authors in this network and/or to be cited by at least two authors in the network. These conditions allowed the identification of around thirty authors attached to this virtual network, but the list is not intended to be exhaustive. The results are presented in Figs. 1 and 2.

As the conditions of selection of the two groups of authors are not mutually exclusive, these networks have authors in common selected, respectively, on the basis of possibly different texts, but always having Vygotsky among their topics.[[8]](#footnote-8)

***Analysts" and "Emulators": Two Scientific Sources of Dissemination of Vygotsky's Ideas***



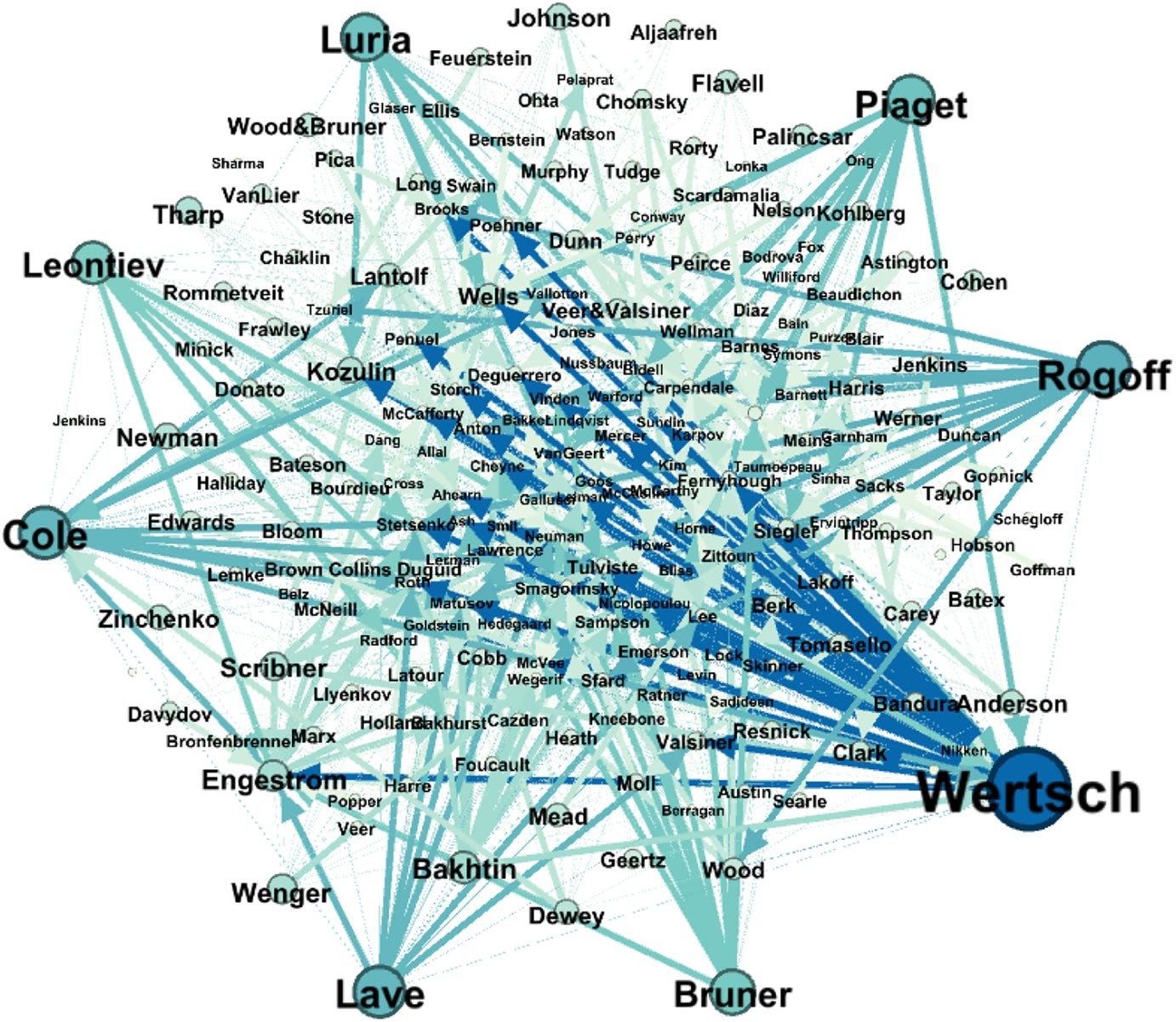
**Fig. 1 Network of Vygotsky “Analysts”**

Figure 1 reveals an interconnected — but relatively “scattered” — network of authors with four dominant figures at the head of a significant amount of research devoted to Vygtosky’s work, those of Alex Kozulin, Rene' van der Veer and Jaan Valsiner, and Anton Yasnitsky, respectively. Kozulin played an important and early role in explaining the revision of Vygotsky’s legacy by his own followers. Van der Veer and Valsiner, for their part, worked extensively on the understanding of the Vygotskian work, notably through the analysis of some of its major intellectual sources. Yasnitsky, as we have seen, is a central actor in putting an authentic Vygotsky back at the center, not only as the leader of the so-called revisionist movement, but also as the author and editor of major texts and works on Vygotsky’s thought, notably the *Handbook of Cultural-Historical Psychology* (with Rene van der Veer and Michel Ferrari).

Figure 2 highlights the major role played by eight authors in the dissemination of the ideas that inspire the most visible scientific works related to Vygotsky. These authors can be associated two by two for their role in the history of Vygotsky’s legacy: Alexei Leontiev and Alexander Luria, Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner (Bruner famously took inspiration from both Piaget and Vygotsky), Jean Lave and Barbara Rogoff (who published together and promoted models of “situated” learning and cognition), and finally Michael Cole and James Wertsch, the latter dominating all the others by the presence of some of his texts in the vast majority of reference lists, *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind* (Wertsch, 1985), being his most cited work. We may note that in two out of three reference lists, at least one work from Wertsch, Cole or from Engestrom is cited. It is worth noting also that *Mind in Society* appears as often as any edition of *Thinking and Speech,* also in two out of three reference lists.

The star configuration of the figure also reveals the multiple connections between these reference authors of the selected Vygotskian researchers. This rather great homogeneity of the conceptual frameworks at play is the expression of the dominant influence of sociocultural and other associated approaches on this ensemble. In general, these leading articles in their field of expertise directly apprehend Vygotsky through the sociocultural filter. For instance, Wertsch and Tulviste (1992, p. 549) explain that, as Vygotsky conceived mental functioning as a kind of action, “his view is one in which mind is understood as ‘extending beyond the skin’” and that “agency is denned as ‘individual(s)-operating-with-mediational-means’”. Penuel and Wertsch (1995, pp. 85-87) state that, for Vygotsky and the others who followed him, action has been taken as a unit of analysis for psychology. Wells (2000, p. 24) does not contradict these assertions by attributing to Vygotsky’s theory of learning and development the “core concept of artifact-mediated joint activity”, neither do Roth and Lee (2007) when stating that Vygotsky “formulated practical human labor activity as a general explanatory category of psychology”. Cross (2010, p. 440) considers that “the tool remained Vygotsky’s primary unit of analysis in his own work” and that “his contemporaries expanded the concept by shifting the emphasis away from the tool itself, to the purpose for which the tool was used (Leontiev, 1981)”. Engestrom and Sannino (2010, p. 45), themselves explain with reference to Zinchenko (1985) that the first generation of activity theory, “based on Vygotsky’s work, centered on mediated action as a unit of analysis.”

These reference articles, selected for their high visibility, are generally not primarily concerned with the analysis of Vygotsky’s theory, but rather with the production of models and scientific hypotheses in the fields of expertise they cover. Some of them propose a specific, more or less theoretically or empirically oriented “Vygotskian” approach involving, for example, developmental mechanisms and the mediation of mental functions, private language, ZPD, identity formation, the role of play, collaborative learning, interactions in second language or other types of classes, etc. (see bibliography in the Appendix). Most of this research falls within the framework of the sociocultural and associated approaches, centered on collaborative activities, distributed, situated, and interactive learning and cognition. Their objective is not the exegesis of Vygotskian texts, but the development of new knowledge and hypotheses. With regard to the Vygotskian work, the finality is not analysis, but one could say “emulation”. In computer science, emulation represents a process of imitation or software simulation of old hardware, or of a program not intended for the hardware on which it is to be run. The emulator, which designates the circuits and programs that imitate the original device, and which will also designate for us the authors of these new models and processes, proposes a form of adaptation of a system to a framework for which it was not designed. The relationship to the Vygotskian theory of these articles appears to be mainly one of emulation.



**Fig. 2 Network of Vygotsky “Emulators’**

***"Emulation" within an Inappropriate Intellectual Framework***

The emulation process implemented by the most visible Vygotskian works represents the adaptation of Vygotsky’s views within intellectual frameworks that are not intended to fit with them. As we have seen, the most visible part of Vygotskian work carried out in the Soviet Union as well as in the Western world under the impetus of leading developmental psychologists involved the substitution of mediated action for word meaning as the unit of analysis, which changed Vygotsky’s specific ambition for psychology, from a science of consciousness to a behavioral science. According to Wertsch (1996, 2000) Vygotsky’s theory shows major inconsistencies involving the relationship between an abstract rationality rooted in Enlightenment traditions mixed with antithetical philosophical commitments, so that the decontextualized forms of thought Vygotsky studied, in connection with the development of scientific concepts, would represent mentalist and dualistic residues that need to be pruned out. What this opposition reveals on the part of Vygotsky’s emulators among sociocultural and other activity theorists, is the assimilation of any reference to subjective mental phenomena, involving abstract, “inner” and “independent”, thought, with a latent dualism. Conversely, Jan Derry (2008) and others (Bakhurst, 2007; Bulle, 2019; Hardcastle, 2009; etc.) defend the relevant role of his Enlightenment inspirers. In Derry, the systematic organization of scientific concepts underlies the development of inferences- based meanings, so that the lack of consideration of this inferential character of concepts would have led to the dominant idea in pedagogical constructivism that “learners” could construct their own knowledge in appropriate environments.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The particular framework of adaptation and emulation of Vygotskian theory in North America is rooted in the philosophy of pragmatism (cf. on this subject Engestrom, 1999; Garrison, 2001), even in the criticized behaviorist psychology, and very generally, in the empirico-positivist and broadly naturalist heritage of Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy. In this context, most of Vygotskian emulators did not base their work on the specific conscious characteristics of the concepts Vygotsky calls scientific, that is, theoretical or postulated, which positivism used to ignore as such. They even manifest no interest with this part of Vygotsky theory and its related links with the child development of thought mastery. Their intellectual heritage and the specific forms of objectivity it inspires to them could prove incompatible with Vygotsky’s project to build a new, comprehensive, approach to psychology based on the properties of consciousness and their relationships with verbal meanings.

Yasnitsky and van der Veer (2016, p. 229) note on this subject the difficulty of evoking problems of meaning and consciousness without being suspected of dualism in North American scientific psychology and academic circles: “Contemporary psychological and educational discourse is very much overloaded with mechanist, behaviorist, and cognitivist phraseology (...) As a result, it is highly problematic to talk about ‘consciousness’ as well as other matters widely discussed, for example, in the European psychological tradition - or, for that matter, in related oriental practices - without giving an impression of being ‘unscientific’, or being grossly misunderstood.”

The rejection of references to mental processes “in the head” is characteristic of the major contexts of revision and adaptation, or else, emulation, of the Vygotskian theory evoked here. This amounts, in the very name of the scientific monism to which Vygotsky adhered - “where reality, nature, and substance are the same”, to rejecting his conception of liberation of human thought through semantic processes of generalizing abstraction and decontextualization, as well as his ultimate definition of consciousness as a dynamic semantic system. Alternatively, equating the subjective with the nonmaterial entails a regression towards dualism, a consequence of which is the adoption of activity and “not consciousness or personality—as the object of psychology” (Toassa, 2019, pp. 5-6).

**Lost in Emulation**

Beyond the problems of Vygotsky’s premature death, incomplete editions, incorrect translations, the delay in (re)discovering his work and the internal evolution of his theory, the misunderstanding of his legacy brings into play the intellectual contexts of its reception (Dafermos, 2016, Dafermos et al., 2020; Miller, 2011; Papadopoulos, 1996; Yasnitsky, 2019). Therefore, Vygotskian analyses may be multiplied, the emerging part of the iceberg of knowledge is made up of research in keeping with the times, conforming to the dominant forms of epistemology and philosophy. It is through such prisms that the meaning of Vygotskian theory takes shape for a wide academic audience. This meaning is not the authentic one, but the one that derives from its emulation within mainstream intellectual frameworks possibly incompatible with it.

Consequently, Vygotsky’s advance on his time has not been specifically exploited until now. His theory has been temporalized and somehow disenchanted, forced to follow the agreed steps of doctrines in tune with their own times. The irony of the situation is that it illustrates the irresolution of the crisis of psychology as described by the Russian psychologist (Vygotsky, 1928/2014, 1930/1997), or rather the victory, in his name, of the naturalistic, scientific, and narrowly objectivist psychology over the subjectivist one, with no overcoming. Consequently, his attempt to build an innovative theoretical system, based on the conscious activity of the mind, responding to a scientific approach to mental phenomena without ontological opposition with other natural experiences, was lost along the way.

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1. It should be noted that psychologists linked to behaviorism, such as Edward Thorndike or Frederic Skinner, were themselves advocates of so-called active learning methods, in which children had to leam mainly by themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lima (1995, p. 492) cites on this subject a testimony from Alexander Luria. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See for instance Wertsch (1996, 2000)’s critique of this subject discussed by Derry (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is translated as “dynamic semantic system” in Zaverchneva (2010, 2014). See also the chapters on consciousness and meaning in Zavershneva & van der Veer (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This concept is especially developed in Vygotsky (1934/1994)’s lecture devoted to the development of the child’s personality (Michell 2016; Gonzalez Rey 2009, 2015; Gonzalez Rey & Mitjans 2017; Veresov 1999,2010,2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This platform provides access to six bibliographic databases: Science Citation Index; Social Sciences Citation Index; Arts & Humanities Citation Index; Conference Proceedings Citation Index; Book Citation Index; Emerging Sources Citation Index. It is interesting to note here that it is to combat “the uncritical citation of disputed data by a writer” (Garfield 1955, in reference to Thomasson & Stanley (1955)’s note on this subject), that easy links between papers though references were made possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Only two kinds of links were traced, simple lines refer to one single reference and bold lines to multiple references. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note that, for co-authors, the two names are associated when the citations generally refer to joint work, otherwise the authors were considered separately. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. These developments, it should be noted, satisfy a structural split existing between the education sciences and the teaching of disciplines, so that the dissemination of Vygotsky’s ideas by the education sciences may have tended to privilege sociocultural interpretations (Bulle 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)