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Two conceptions on the crisis of psychology: Vygotsky and Bühler

CSABA PLÉH

At the time of the rise and increasing influence of the great schools of psychology, several attempts were made to give a conceptual analysis of the divergent and divisive forces underlying the multiplicity of schools. It is Karl Bühler's (1927) analysis, *Die Krise der Psychologie*, which has become by far the best known of them, with its non-partisan attitude towards the schools coupled with a characteristic and very committed theoretical proposal for a way out of the crisis situation. Only very recently has a previously unpublished monograph written with a similar aim by Vygotsky around the same time become available. This 150 page essay entitled "The historical meaning of the crisis in psychology" has now appeared as the most substantial paper in the first volume of the new Russian-language *Collected works of Vygotsky* series (Vygotsky, 1982).

The monograph, as the editors of the volume, Jaroshevsky and Gurgenidze (1982) duly note, presents Vygotsky as a metatheoretician of psychology *before* he has outlined his own instrumental, genetic-historic and systemic theory of the origin and nature of higher psychological functions. The work shows Vygotsky halfway through formulating his version of objective and Marxist psychology: already beyond the early stage where he described consciousness in functionalist terms as an internal reflection of reflections (or double representation), but before the integration of the core concepts of tools and of the interpsychic-intrapsychic developmental sequence in the formation of higher psychological functions.

As Jaroshevsky and Gurgenidze also point out, there are many interesting parallels between Vygotsky's views on science as a social institution presented in this monograph and his later views on the working of the individual mind. (Such a parallel between theory of science and psychology is,

of course, not unknown in the history of psychology; consider Bacon, Descartes or J.S. Mill among the classics). The "systemic theory of scientific knowledge" is followed by a systemic theory of individual consciousness in which "... he has seen in the child a young researcher acting according to the same laws as the adult investigator". (Jaroshevsky and Gurgenidze, 1982 : 456). Theory and empiria, concepts and words, practice as the moving force and criterion of knowledge as well as other key concepts and issues familiar from Vygotsky's model of child development and psychology in general are first presented here within the context of a historical analysis of science making.

The present paper has a rather limited aim: to introduce some of Vygotsky's ideas in the form of a comparison with those of Bühler without the ambition to present their ideas in their entirety. Two philological comments are necessary before going into the comparison. Although in his later works Vygotsky does refer critically to Bühler's *Krise...*, in this monograph there is no sign of it having been written with Bühler's parallel work in mind. The two other underrepresented names in the essay are those of Köhler and Piaget. Although Köhler is referred to several times (Piaget not at all), he is mainly treated as an exponent of the Gestalt theory with no detailed comments on his ape research. This fact clearly shows what an important role the critical analysis of Köhler's research on problem solving in chimpanzees played in the formation of the "instrumental conception of psychology" in the later stage of Vygotsky's thinking. Similarly, the analogous fermentative role of Piaget in the development of the idea of inter-intrapsychic sequence is also apparent. In his earlier period Vygotsky's work is dominated by critical conceptual analysis, and, while following this intellectual influence, critical analysis becomes a positive program, as *Thought and language* (1962) and *Mind in society* (1978) clearly indicate.

Some Parallels

An optimistic view of the crisis

Although both authors interpret the proliferation of schools as a symptom of crisis, neither of them consider this as being catastrophic for psychology, nor do they show a partisan optimism within the framework of one of the great schools. Bühler's optimism is aphoristically expressed in his characterization of the crisis as an *Aufbaukrise*, an *embarras de richesse*.

Vygotsky, in line with his Marxist methodology, is optimistic in a Hegelian sense: he is convinced that a new scientific psychology will emerge preserving the past while at the same time abolishing it. For him, crisis is a symptom of the search for a new methodology and synthesis which is not available yet but which will arrive by necessity.

Methodology: theory and data in science

The two authors agree that both the empirical and the rational are necessary poles of thought in psychology. (For an analysis of the metatheoretical views of Bühler see Kamp, 1984, and those of Vygotsky see Jaroshevsky and Gurgenidze, 1982). Vygotsky describes this as the necessary duality of induction and theory, Bühler as induction and intuition. They diverge in the details, however. Bühler is moved by the idea of an axiomatic propaedeutical science, while Vygotsky, as shown by his criticism of similar ideas put forward by Binswanger (1922), believes in continuity between different levels of generalization in science. However, in their own way, they both fight against the intuitionist ratiomorphic one-sidedness of *geisteswissenschaftlichen* (mental science) psychology and against the flat empiricism of some part of traditional "empirical psychology" and their behaviorist contemporaries.

Meaning ("sense") and the social aspects of mental life

There are also parallels in the positive programs the two authors propose, although in the case of Vygotsky these are not yet articulated in the crisis monograph.

Both thought that in order to overcome the crisis constructively one has to deal seriously with the problem of meaning or sense in psychology. Bühler, when he proposes language as a paradigm for the three irreducible aspects of psychology (experience, behaviour and objectivation), claims that a dimension of meaning is necessary in the analysis of all forms of behavior in contrast to the Diltheyan approach which would restrict the relevance of meaning to higher mental phenomena. Vygotsky (1934), as he put it most clearly in his foreword to Koffka's book on mental development, emphasizes that language introduces a new dimension of sense going beyond the immediate givens of the perceptual field. This is almost the same statement Bühler (1934) made on this topic; their difference lies in the

respective emphases. In his two level theory of mental life, Vygotsky stresses the difference between the "lower" and the "higher" meaning dimensions, while Bühler, fighting for the unity of psychology, places the emphasis on the presence of continuity here. The same holds for their treatment of the teleological aspects of behavior: for Vygotsky, the specific human teleology of work will become relevant, while for Bühler in simple forms of behavior teleology is important in the fight against behaviorism.

Qualified similarities show up in their treatment of the *social dimension* in psychology as well. Both share the view that the social aspect of mental life is constitutive rather than merely restrictive in nature. As Bühler (1927 : 38) puts it, clearly with regard to the problem of sense in language, "the origin of semantics should not be looked for in the individual but in the *community*". They also share the view (Vygotsky already in his 1925 paper on consciousness) that the social aspect is primary in the emergence of consciousness, or in Bühler's rather Meadian phrasing, signers and sign interpreters presuppose each other, and Ego and Alter emerge in a correlative way.

In his later work, however, social aspect for Vygotsky tends to mean more and more the society dependent aspect, while Bühler keeps an ethological interpretation of social as the "communal" aspect in the most general sense.

Some characteristic differences

The basic dimensions of the crisis

Both authors agree that the multiplicity of schools should not be interpreted in a simply caleidoscopic way. There must be basic dimensions behind the variety. For Bühler the basic trends are classical associationistic psychology; the Würzburgian *Denkpsychologie*, and psychoanalysis, where the latter two both get rid of associationism by emphasizing hidden aspects of intentionality in thought or, as Pribram (1969) put it, both recognize that introspection does not directly reveal the mechanism of thought. Finally, behaviorism and mental science psychology in the way of Spranger are interpreted as attempts to overcome what Bühler calls the "solipsism" of psychology.

If one would wish to summarize Bühler's approach to basic dimensions one could say that he has abstracted as the three basic parameters of the crisis the problem of mechanistic explanation, the indirect study of hidden processes, and the subjectivity-objectivity issue.

Vygotsky, on the other hand, presents a picture which is richer, while at the same time making his conception more economical. Let us first see where he is more differentiated! First of all, in his view, the problem of applied psychology is central to the crisis, while Bühler is much more "academic" in this respect. Secondly, Vygotsky gives a detailed analysis of the *overgeneralizing aspects* of the new schools. Bühler is also against the imperialism of the schools, but Vygotsky goes beyond this. Taking reflexology and psychoanalysis as "clinical cases" he shows that by becoming overgeneral, the ideas tend to explain nothing while they pretend to explain everything. In this process they gradually cease to be scientific concepts and become *Leitmotivs* of world views thereby entering the socially conditioned fight of world views.

Vygotsky's definition of the *basic parameters* of the crisis is simpler than that of Bühler. He defends the thesis (consonant with standard Marxist accounts of the history of philosophy) that the demarcation line is between idealistic-subjective and materialistic-objective trends in psychology as well as in philosophy. Seemingly "third force" alternatives can always be traced back to one of these poles. The most interesting example of this is his analysis of Gestalt psychology which, in his view, due to the concept of psychophysical isomorphy, is actually a materialistic trend.

How can the crisis be overcome?

Bühler's famous solution, frequently called eclectic, is to take language as a paradigm for psychology and so to consider the three aspects of linguistic phenomena (experience, behavior and objectivation) as necessary conceptual dimensions in the analysis of simple behaviors as well. In all coordination there is sensation, its "semantic aspects" (reflection), and its role as regulator of behavior.

This so-called eclecticism is thus, as is well known, a kind of a semiotic theory for psychology which tries to overcome the division of psychology into natural and mental science by treating all of psychology in terms of signification distinctions.

The solution proposed by Vygotsky in his *later* writings is again similar but bipolar. The concept of sign and the semiotic metaphor is one of the basic paradigms for psychology in his case as well; however, he is using

signs — man made, language like signs — as a demarcation line between man and animal, between natural and social rather than as a common denominator. (See on this Steiner and Souberman, 1978).

In his early monograph Vygotsky does not specifically rely on the semiotic metaphor as yet: instead he draws upon a more general remedy for psychology: *practice*. On the concrete level, applied psychology will be crucial in overcoming the divisive trends since by necessity it has to talk about one model of man rather than two and that one will be a deterministic, materialistic model. On a more abstract level for Vygotsky this hope corresponds to the Marxist theory of truth: practice is the criterion for truth, and that is where Marxism provides for him the basic methodological help for the emerging new psychology. (See Min Hak and Radzhihovskij, 1977).

The "crisis monographs" therefore show clearly the basic similarities between the two important synthetizers of psychology between the wars; while their basic divergencies become especially clear in their later development. For Vygotsky the semiotic metaphor is going to become a key to differentiating between higher and lower levels of mental life, while Bühler has preserved the unifying conception of semiosis of which human language is surely a qualitatively higher form without being separated from the lower forms as elaborated in Bühler's *Sprachtheorie*.

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