

## From where did Vygotsky get his Hegelianism?

Anyone familiar with the biography of Lev Vygotsky will tell you that Vygotsky read Hegel while still at school, even leading a Hegel study group in some accounts and studied Hegel throughout his life, and on one account prefiguring Alexander Kojève's reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology* by more than a decade.

But I doubt this. Below I will review the evidence of Vygotsky's Hegel scholarship. I want to say at the outset however, that in my opinion, Vygotsky was by far the most perceptive and creative inheritor of Hegel of his day; the question mark is only over the extent to which he arrived at his interpretation of Hegel by means of reading him in the original, and the extent that he appropriated Hegel through dialogue with other writers.

### **The testimony of Vygotsky's school friend**

So far as I know the source of all reports of Vygotsky's childhood scholarship originate from the testimony of his school friend Semyon Dobkin. Alex Levitin has translated and reproduced Dobkin's recollection in full in his biographical history, "One is not Born a Personality. Profiles of Soviet Educational Psychologists." The relevant sections read as follows:

"We wanted to find answers to such questions as 'What is history?' 'What distinguishes one people from another?' 'What is the role of the individual in history?' In other words, we studied the philosophy of history. Vygotsky was at the time very enthusiastic about the Hegelian view of history. His mind was then engaged by the Hegelian formula 'thesis, antithesis, synthesis', and he applied it to analysing historical events.

"The circle met regularly for two years until Lev went to Moscow to study at the University. But I can safely say that not only the members but also Vygotsky had gained much during that period. In order to conduct the seminars, he had to do a lot of reading and some deep thinking." (p. 17)

Firstly, let us deal with the observation that Vygotsky was taken with the "Hegelian formula 'thesis, antithesis, synthesis.'" Despite widespread convictions to the contrary, Hegel never used such a formula, and anyone who had read Hegel would know this. After Hegel's death the German populariser of philosophy Heinrich Chalybäus (1796-1862) imputed it to Hegel, and is generally regarded as the source of the myth. Via Chalybäus, the founder of anarchism, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, for example, took up the formula in lieu of actually reading Hegel. In his critique of Proudhon's "Philosophy of Poverty," Marx ridiculed Proudhon for his idiotic use of this formula, and the quotation from Proudhon which Marx uses as the butt of his criticism is the only occasion in which the formula appears in Marx's works. The English Hegelian W T Stace used it in "The Philosophy of Hegel," as did John McTaggart, thus infecting the English-speaking world with this myth. Kautsky, the leader of international Social Democracy up to the eve of World War One, used the formula in his highly formulaic approach to 'dialectics'.

The leader of Russian Marxism up until Lenin's rise, Georgi Plekhanov, did not use the formula, although he wrote a considerable amount on Hegel and was without doubt the chief populariser of Hegel in Russia prior to the Revolution. He does however play with the formula in the process of ridiculing N. K. Mikhailovsky (1829-1904), the liberal anti-Communist who used the formula as the butt of his attacks on Hegel and Marx.

This play with the formula is found in Plekhanov's widely read "The Development of the Monist View of History" (1895). Another well-known work of Plekhanov's to which people in Vygotsky's home town of Gomel would have had access to was "The Role of the Individual in History" (1898). Presumably the school children of Gomel were not alone in their interest in these questions! Plekhanov was also someone apt to use the phrase "laws of history" though this conception only became widespread under Stalin. Certainly, it was not a term that Hegel ever used.

In summary then, Semyon Dobkin's evidence is that Vygotsky had not read Hegel in those days, but his interest in Hegel may have been sparked by his reading of Plekhanov, and Semyon Dobkin's memory was affected by terminology current at later times.

Nonetheless, the myth of Vygotsky having studied Hegel at school flourished. Yaroshevsky's biography says that while still in school he started a debating society: "Hegel became his idol in philosophy; under Hegel's impact, he attempted to apply the general schema of thesis-antithesis-synthesis to explanations of the course of historical events" (p. 34).

Jaan Valsiner refers to Vygotsky's method of "thesis-antithesis-synthesis" but so far as I can see all he means by this is that Vygotsky critically appropriated the work of other writers, a practice Vygotsky may or may not have learnt from Hegel or Marx, but so far as I know, no Marxist ever used the term "thesis-antithesis-synthesis" in the sense of critical appropriation.

### **The Psychology of Art**

We know from Alex Kozulin that when Vygotsky attended University in Moscow, 1913-1917, he moved in a milieu of intense ideological struggle between Symbolists and Formalists and others schooled in the philosophical problems of aesthetics. It was during this period, before returning to Gomel and involving himself in teaching and teacher-training, that Vygotsky wrote "The Psychology of Art." Now here one would have expected Vygotsky's love of Hegel to come to the fore; Hegel, after all, lectured in Berlin on Aesthetics and his books on Aesthetics sell in bookshops across the world to this day.

But the only reference to Hegel is the following:

"... Rosenkranz, author of *The Aesthetics of Ugliness*. A faithful follower of Hegel, he reduces the role of ugliness to a contrast (antithesis), whose purpose is to set off the positive element (thesis). But this view is basically wrong because, as pointed out by Lalo, the ugly may become an element of art for the same reasons as the beautiful." (*Psychology of Art*, p. 233)

So insofar as Hegel is mentioned at all, the reference is negative, though to be precise the target of Vygotsky's criticism is the well-known Hegelian Rosenkranz whom he ridicules for his use of the formula "thesis, antithesis, synthesis," which Vygotsky was supposed to be so taken with. There is no other reference to Hegel. However Vygotsky does quote Plekhanov's views on art 10 times, six times in the first chapter alone (Goethe six times). So it is clear that Vygotsky's authority in matters of aesthetics is Plekhanov not Hegel.

### **Mind In Society**

1. "as Hegel would phrase it, a transformation of quantity into quality."

It was Engels in *Dialectics of Nature*, and not Hegel who popularised this idea. Nonetheless, few people would have questioned its attribution to Hegel. But Hegel never used such an expression, and there is absolutely no doubt that Vygotsky read *Dialectics of Nature*.

2. "That concept, quite justly, was invested with the broadest general meaning by Hegel, who saw in it a characteristic feature of human reason: 'Reason', he wrote, 'is just as cunning as she is powerful. Her cunning consists principally in her mediating activity which, by causing objects to act and react on each other in accordance with their own nature, in this way, without any direct interference in the process, carries out reasons' intentions.' Marx cites that definition when speaking of working tools, to show that man 'uses the mechanical, physical, and chemical properties of objects so as to make them act as forces that affect other objects in order to fulfil his personal goals.'"

Here Vygotsky quotes verbatim footnote 2 to Chapter 7 of Marx's "Capital," which there is absolutely no doubt Vygotsky read closely.

### **References to Hegel in Vygotsky's Mature Works**

#### **Volume 1 of Vygotsky's Collected Works (*Thinking and Speech*, 1934)**

3. "In his notes on Hegel's *Logic*, Lenin discusses ... [quoting LCW v 38]" (Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky (LSV CW) v. 1, p. 88)
4. "In clarifying the meaning of Hegel's distinction between reason and intelligence, Engels wrote ... [quoting *Dialectics of Nature*]" (LSV CW v. 1, p. 116)
5. "In Hegel's view, the word is existing, vitalised thought. ... [going on to quote Goethe's *Faust*]" (LSV CW v. 1, p. 284)

§§1-4 are actually quotes from Engels, Marx or Lenin, §5 may suggest a reading of Hegel.

#### **Volume 3 of Vygotsky's Collected Works (*Crisis*, 1929)**

6. "Lenin's remark [Lenin's Collected Works (LCW) v. 38, p 160] on Hegel is interesting" (LSV CW v. 3, p. 100)
7. "In his time Hegel considered history the privilege of spirit and denied Nature this privilege. He says that 'only spirit has history, but in nature all forms are simultaneous'." (LSV CW v. 3, p. 125)
8. "... what Engels, in the words of Hegel, says [in *Dialectics of Nature*] about zero ..." (LSV CW v. 3, p. 249)

9. “Engels did not even consider [in *Dialectics of Nature*] the purely logical classification of judgments in Hegel to be based merely on thinking ...” (LSV CW v. 3, p. 256)
  10. Half a page review of Engels’ assessment of Hegel in *Dialectics of Nature* (LSV CW v. 3, p. 266)
  11. “Each [sense] organ takes the world *cum grano salis* - with a coefficient of specification, as Hegel says, ...” (LSV CW v. 3, p. 275)
  12. in reference to the barrenness of ‘Marxist Psychology’: “Hegel’s triad and Freud’s psychoanalysis” (LSV CW v. 3, p. 329)
  13. Hegel mentioned in a list (LSV CW v. 3, p. 367)
- §§6,8,9,10 are quoting Engels or Lenin. §7,12,13 are accurate, but general knowledge. §11 reflects a possible reading of Hegel.

#### **Volume 4 of Vygotsky’s Collected Works (1931)**

14. “in the words of Hegel, ... something is what it is because of its quality, and losing its quality, it ceases being what it is, ...” (LSV CW v. 4 p. 39)
15. “With full justification, Hegel used the concept of mediation in its most general meaning, seeing in it the most characteristic property of the mind. He said that the mind is as resourceful as it is powerful. In general, resourcefulness consists in mediating activity that, while it lets objects act on each other according to their nature and exhaust themselves in that activity, does not at the same time intervene in the process, but fulfils only *its own proper role*.” Marx refers to this definition ... [in *Capital*] (LSV CW v. 4 p. 61)
16. Hegel indicates that we must remember ...” going on to explain the meaning of the German word *Aufhebung* along the lines Lenin explained in LCW v. 38. (LSV CW v. 4 p. 81)
17. “All cultural development of the child passes through three basic stages that can be described in the following way using Hegel’s analysis.” (LSV CW v. 4 p. 104) Vygotsky describes the development of a gesture as (1) reaching for an object, (2) a reaction arises, but not on the part of the object, but another person, who completes the grasping for the child, and in being directed towards another person, the gesture becomes contracted, and (3) becomes a gesture for oneself.
18. “Freedom is, for [Engels] as for Hegel, understanding necessity.” (LSV CW v. 4 p. 218)

§§15,16,18 are quoting Marx, Lenin and Engels. §14 is quoting Hegel, but with words which would be fairly widely known. §17 reflects substantial knowledge of Hegel.

#### **Volume 5 of Vygotsky’s Collected Works Child Psychology (c. 1934)**

19. In a review of Lewin, whom he cooperated with in 1932, he says: “The structural theory proceeds along the path marked out by Hegel. Hegel says that whoever manifests activity with respect to anything is not only interested in the thing, but is also stimulated by it. Together with inclination and needs, interest is a tendency that stimulates activity.” (LSV CW v. 5 p. 10)

20. Quoting LCW v. 38 on Hegel vs. Kant. (LSV CW v. 5 p. 79)
21. Recapitulates Lenin's explanation of the word *Aufhebung* in Hegel (LSV CW v. 5 p. 84)
22. Quoting Lenin: LCW v. 38 on basis of logic in activity (LSV CW v. 5 p. 119)
23. Again quoting Lenin: LCW v. 38 on basis of logic in activity (LSV CW v. 5 p. 147)
24. Quoting Engels on Freedom and Necessity (LSV CW v. 5 p. 148)
25. "Using Hegel's well-known distinction, we can say that in the area of visual thinking, we are dealing with the product of common sense, and in the area of abstract thinking, with the product of the intellect." (LSV CW v. 5 p. 160)
26. Making reference to Deborin's *Introduction to the philosophy of Dialectical Materialism*: "This concept corresponds to the pattern of development that we find in Hegel's philosophy. In contrast to Kant, for whom a thing in itself is a metaphysical entity not subject to development, for Hegel, the concept itself "in oneself" means nothing other than the initial moment or stage of development of the thing. Specifically from this point of view, Hegel considered a seedling as a plant in itself and a child as a man in himself. All things are in themselves from the beginning, Hegel said. A. Deborin considers it interesting that in formulating the question in this way, Hegel justifiably pointed to the fact that the 'I' serves as the closest example of "life for oneself." 'It can be said that the man differs from the animal and, consequently, from nature in general mainly by the fact that he knows himself as "I"' (LSV CW v. 5 p. 176)
27. "Hegel cites a similar situation, the sense of which is that animals, unlike people, are slaves to their visual field; they can look only at that which catches their eye." (LSV CW v. 5 p. 277)

§§20,21,22,23,24 are quoting Lenin or Engels. §26 is well-known from LCW v. 14. §§19, 25 and 27 seem to reflect a reading of Hegel, but §19 could be via Lewin.

Summarising the above 27 references to Hegel (c.f. Goethe 35), we have 18 references which are references to the readings of Hegel by other writers, 4 reflect general knowledge not implying a reading of Hegel. We are left with 6 allusions to Hegel which imply a reasonably deep familiarity with Hegel. These 5 observations are:

- §5: the word is existing, vitalised thought.
- §11: Each [sense] organ takes the world *cum grano salis* - with a coefficient of specification.
- §17: All cultural development of the child passes through three basic stages that can be described in the following way using Hegel's analysis: object-oriented, other-directed, self-directed.

- §19: Whoever manifests activity with respect to anything is not only interested in the thing, but is also stimulated by it. Together with inclination and needs, interest is a tendency that stimulates activity.
- §25: We can say that in the area of visual thinking, we are dealing with the product of common sense, and in the area of abstract thinking, with the product of the intellect.
- §27: Animals are slaves to their visual field, humans are not.

These 5 or 6 observations, in my opinion, do reflect an appropriation of Hegel for the purpose of a Marxist Psychology, and they could have come from a reading of Hegel's Psychology in some version of the Encyclopaedia, but the possibility that Vygotsky acquired these ideas without a reading of Hegel has to be kept open.

On §5 above: "the word is existing, vitalised thought", Marx said in an oft-quoted passage in the *German Ideology*:

"the start the "spirit" is afflicted with the curse of being "burdened" with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men."

and in the 1844 Manuscripts he says:

"element of thought itself – the element of thought's living expression – language – is of a sensuous nature."

So it is clear that whether or not Vygotsky knew Hegel's views on language, he knew he was echoing Marx's view. Lewin could be the source for §19, and Lewin collaborated with Vygotsky in 1932. Deborin's supporters, Fingert and Shirvindt, Marxist-Hegelians with whom Vygotsky collaborated in 1930, seem the most likely source of Hegelian insights.

§17 above, the concept of development from object-oriented to other-directed to self-directed requires some special attention because of the interpretation placed upon it by Alex Kozulin.

### **Alex Kozulin on Vygotsky and the Master-Slave Dialectic**

In his Biography of Vygotsky Alex Kozulin explained the above appropriation of Hegel by Vygotsky as follows:

"Vygotsky explicitly acknowledged his dependence upon the Hegelian system of reasoning at least twice. On one occasion, while discussing the issue of psychological tools, he mentioned that mediation (*Vermittlung*) is considered by Hegel as a central characteristic of human reason. The cunning of reason is in the mediating activity which, by causing objects to act upon and react to each other in accordance with their own nature, carries reason's intentions without any direct involvement in the process."

This is in reference to §15 above, which is directly appropriating Marx, *Capital*, Chapter 7, footnote 2. Kozulin continues:

“On another occasion Vygotsky revealed his acquaintance with Hegel’s dialectics of historical development cased in terms of the interaction between Master and Slave. The primitive form of the division of labor presupposes the division of the function of supervision and that of practical execution between the supervisor and the worker. In more advanced systems these two roles are integrated in one individual who is the Master and the Slave at one and the same time, that is, someone who makes a decision and implements it as well. Similarly, human mental processes undergo a transition from the ‘external’ form when they are supervised from ‘outside’ and are only executed ‘inside’, to their internalised form when the moment of decision making and execution are integrated inside the psychological apparatus.” (p. 119)

Now at the very least one would have to say that Kozulin is pulling a long bow to read all that into §17, a paragraph about the use of cultural products through three stages from object-directed to other-directed to self-directed. But there is more to it.

Until Alexander Kojève gave his lectures on Hegel to students at the Ecole des hautes études in Paris, 1931-1939, no-one had made any interpretation of the Master Slave relation at all. Marx mentions it in 3 words in a table of contents of the *Phenomenology* in his 1844 Manuscripts, and that is as far as anyone went in “interpreting” these 18 paragraphs in the 808 paragraphs of Hegel’s earliest published work. Hegel himself drastically reduced the depth of the narrative in the mature *Encyclopaedia*. It was absolutely unknown until Kojève’s lectures were published in 1947. All the attention of Hegel scholarship had previously been directed at the *Logic*, the *Philosophy of History*, *History of Philosophy*, *Religion*, or the *Aesthetics*. Almost no-one read the *Phenomenology*. But the French had been handicapped by a very poor translation of the *Encyclopaedia*, and it was only with the appearance of Hyppolite’s excellent French translations that Hegel caught the interest of French-speakers, and with Kojève’s brilliant lectures, suddenly everyone wanted to read the Master-Servant narrative.

This is not the place to go into this highly eccentric passage which is very uncharacteristic of Hegel, but since 1947 it became the touchstone of French philosophy, and then spread to the world, to an extent that today, even many educated people think that Hegel was a person who had a theory about a Master-Slave relationship. Hegel scholars know this is a myth, but the strength of the myth is such that it is difficult to do anything about it.

And the mythology does not stop at Hegel. Thanks to Marcuse and others, the idea established itself that Karl Marx had built *his* theory on the Master-Slave dialectic. This is utterly untrue. Marx hardly knew the passage existed. But the myth has become hardened into fact in the milieu where people don’t actually read Hegel or Marx but read and write *about* them endlessly.

Now Kojève came from Moscow, but he left in 1920 at the age of 18 and had written nothing on Hegel at this young age, and would have been 15 if he had met Vygotsky. So the description of Vygotsky’s interpretation of the master-servant dialectic is an invention. The interesting variation on Kojève’s idea belongs to Alex Kozulin in 1990.

This just leaves the question of where Vygotsky got the idea about three stages of development of cultural activity: object-directed, other-directed and self-directed. In Hegel's *Outline for the Phenomenology* published after Hegel's death based on the *Philosophical Propaedeutic* Hegel used in his lectures in 1808-1811. here we find:

“Self-Consciousness has in its culture, or movement, three stages: (1) of Desire in so far as it is related to other things; (2) of the Mediating relation of master and servant (dominion and servitude) in so far as it is related to another self-consciousness not identical with itself; (3) of the general Self-Consciousness which recognises itself in other self-consciousnesses, and is identical with them as well as self-identical.”

This material is covered in §329-§362 of the Encyclopaedia, of which two paragraphs, §355 and §357, concern the master-slave. But in Vygotsky's appropriation, we see nothing of masters and slaves at all. He has taken Hegel's schema in a different direction.

So what we find is that wherever he got the idea, Vygotsky did appropriate a three stage process of development from Hegel, but it is not the same one as Kojève appropriated and which most people think belongs to Hegel.

### **Summary**

Vygotsky made no reference to Hegel in writings prior to 1929. Leaving aside generalities, 16 of 21 times where he makes specific allusions, he is directly citing the observations by Marx, Engels or Lenin.

The most compelling evidence for the source of Vygotsky's Hegelianism is that when he published “Ape, Primitive Man and Child” in 1930 he thought a set was a concept and a concept was a set. By the time he wrote “History of the Development of the Higher Mental Functions” in 1931, he correctly distinguished a set and a concept, something he could only have learnt from a Hegelian. (See this author's study of Vygotsky's development in “[Tool and Sign in Vygotsky's Development](#), 2015). It was in 1930 that he collaborated with supporters of Abram Deborin, B. A. Fingert and M. L. Shirvindt in writing a book on General Psychology. I believe it was at this time that Vygotsky learnt his Hegelianism.

I think it is impossible to say how much Hegel Vygotsky read. He is remembered as a prolific reader, so it seems inconceivable that he did not read Hegel at all. He also uses Hegel's philosophy brilliantly. But the evidence above I believe points to Vygotsky having appropriated Hegel in and through his interaction with other writers, not through private study, probably in 1930, and certainly not as a youth in Gomel.

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(2009, amended 2015)