No dawdling!

Patrick Yarker

The Vygotsky Anthology: a selection from his key writings

Myra Barrs and John Richmond (eds), London, Routledge, 2024.
198pp, paperback, £29.99, ISBN 9781032581842; hardback, £108, ISBN 9781032581859; ebook, £29.99, ISBN 9781003448938

In 2022 the distinguished teacher, researcher and writer Myra Barrs brought out *Vygotsky the Teacher: a companion to his psychology for teachers and other practitioners* (reviewed in *FORUM* 65.1). This new book, edited with clarity and scrupulous care by Barrs, who died in 2023, and John Richmond, is an anthology of Vygotsky's writings from across his working life: a companion for that earlier companion. Fittingly, Routledge's design for the hard-copy version of the anthology complements that for the earlier text.

The anthology offers substantial samples of Vygotsky's writing across 11 chapters roughly equal in length. It's surely no mean feat to have managed such a balancing act while addressing the chief areas of Vygotsky's intellectual engagement: the psychology of art; creativity, imagination and play; 'defectology' and 'pedology'; child development (including seminal moments in the debate with Piaget); thought, language development, speech and consciousness.

In her Introduction, Barrs declares that the editors aimed to present 'the best texts available in English, in the most-up-to-date versions' (pxiii), and to represent adequately not only the chosen texts but also the 'intellectual brilliance … humour and humanity' (pxiii) of Vygotsky's authorial voice. Readers who are parents or early years practitioners may attest to the humour. Reflecting on the way the intensity of very young children's desires is inevitably accompanied by lack of patience, Vygotsky notes: 'No-one has met a child who wanted to do something a few days hence' (p108).

Barrs briefly reviews the complex and troubled history attending the publication of Vygotsky's work in his own country and in translation, and acknowledges the cuts, distortions, insertions and suppressions to which some of his writing was subjected. As in the previous volume, the editors punctiliously trace and record the provenance of all source material, and have interesting things to say about the merits of certain English (and Italian) versions of what Vygotsky wrote. They offer concise helpful notes about those authorities in his field whom Vygotsky cites or alludes to, and the ideas he engages with, and deftly identify how Vygotsky's work expanded the scope of psychology and refined its ability to reach towards the human.

It is true that offering a selection from across Vygotsky's entire *oeuvre* will mean a degree of fragmentation and 'busy-ness' in the way material appears on the page. I

was helped to navigate confidently among the different kinds of text by a variety of typographical features, such as dividing lines, emboldening and differently sized fonts. The status of any particular text – whether editorial link or frame or Vygotskyan extract – is always apparent. At the start of each chapter the editors set the scene for the given topic or area, and connect it to the stages of Vygotsky's career as well as to the development of his ideas. Short editorial passages bridge between the extracts, explaining the direction of the argument being made or crystallising what is most important out of it. Notes and references are handily placed at the end of each chapter.

Such a disposition of material, coupled with the serviceable index, means that a reader can raid the anthology to track down an idea or trace a constellation of concerns, or read in a sustained way and so become more familiar with the range, intricacy, density and trajectory of Vygotsky's thinking.

For the editors, Vygotsky is pre-eminently a psychologist of consciousness, and always concerned in his investigations to value the holistic as against analytically decompositional approaches. The anthology's last two chapters are given over to extracts from *Thinking and Speech*, Vygotsky's final book, in order to honour the importance the author accorded these domains.

The very first chapter also highlights Vygotsky's conviction, one he arrived at early on, that consciousness and social experience are what distinguishes the behaviour of humans from that of non-human animals. Barrs suggests this conviction impelled Vygotsky to look beyond the dominance in contemporary Soviet psychology of 'reflexology' or behaviourism. In staying true to what Barrs calls his 'bold' impulse, Vygotsky followed a path which had political as well as academic risks, and played out importantly at the level of method. Chapter 4 opens with a sketch of the two positions, demarcating the relatively new field of psychology in the even newer Soviet state. On one hand, a reflexology 'materialistic and scientifically rigorous' (p38); on the other, 'idealism … a more subjective and descriptive approach to psychology, derived from philosophy' (p38). Vygotsky, the editors say, wanted the best of both. They imply that he looked for some dialectical synthesis of what he called 'two fundamentally different constructions of systems of knowledge' (p49), all the while convinced that 'psychology really should rest upon universal laws' (p45). In his reflections during the mid-1920s on the meaning of the 'crisis' in psychology which the tension between 'materialist' and 'idealist' perspectives engendered, the editors say Vygotsky ultimately endorsed 'materialist experimental psychology'. And yet much of what Vygotsky was writing and would go on to write, for example about the importance in a child's development of using tools and symbols, or about word meaning and the development of consciousness, seems to show thinking not uninformed (indeed, strengthened) by those currents deemed philosophically 'idealist'.

My knowledge of Vygotsky has been much enhanced thanks to the choice of extracts

made by Barrs and Richmond, even if the man himself appears here a tad less dashing than expected. This is not to say the editors don't succeed in communicating Vygotsky's brilliance. Many pages of the anthology attest to it, and offer insights and extended passages of direct benefit to those who help children and young people learn. Vygotsky claims, for example, that it is the child's interest which most powerfully motivates behaviour, and therefore 'the fundamental rule demands that the entire education system, the entire structure of teaching, be constructed on the foundation of children's interests, taken into account in exact fashion' (p4). He warns against 'recourse to repetition, to memorization and assimilation of knowledge … [for here] the fundamental rule of interest is violated and, consequently, repetition turns into mere dawdling' (p6).

Later, thinking about the significance of play for the development of young children's use of symbols, Vygotsky writes penetratingly: 'symbolic representation in play and at a very early age is, in essence, a unique form of speech that leads directly to written language' (p84). When he examines the role of imagination in a child's understanding (and hence children's agency in meaning-making, as against their apparent mere receptivity) he suggests that: 'No accurate cognition of reality is possible without a certain element of imagination, a certain flight from the immediate, concrete, solitary impressions in which reality is presented in the elementary acts of consciousness' (p115). And again: 'The potential for free action that we find associated with the emergence of human consciousness is closely connected with imagination' (p116). Vygotsky's resonant assertions, and the lines of argument they bolster, resource a conception of the work of learning and teaching which retains its illuminating power.

At the same time, the anthology brought home to me Vygotsky's commitment to founding psychology on 'universal laws', and to discovering 'laws of behaviour' – including laws 'governing the operation of the imagination' (p120). This positivism, no doubt reflective of its time, cast a new light on Vygotsky's characteristically self-confident and assertive expressiveness. How does such a perspective sit today, after a century of damage caused to young people, and to teachers, by educational approaches, structures and attitudes certified by overly rigid typographies and classifications of 'mind', and supposedly well-founded scientific laws governing the periodisation and normalisation of children's development?

This book and its predecessor re-confirm Vygotsky's writing as a necessary resource for arguments against teacher-centric pedagogy and the imposition of drill and instruction-focused methods, aspects of the educational behaviourism of our day. But the value of Vygotsky's writing is much more than instrumental. Education students, and practitioners concerned to think more carefully, keenly and extensively about how young people learn, whether in early years settings or throughout formal schooling, will find much to occupy and engage them. Anyone who wants to keep the classroom hospitable to imagination, play and shared talk between students, the better to enable

everyone to learn, will find in Vygotsky a kindred spirit.

The social constructivism with which Vygotsky is associated remains anathema to those in the DfE and elsewhere for whom learning is fundamentally a matter of 'working memory' and 'cognitive load'. This accessible selection from among Vygotsky's classic writings is a reminder, by contrast, of the infinitely complex intertwining of child development, learning and teaching. It seems to me indispensable.

Great process of change

Patrick Yarker

Returning to the Long Revolution: the crisis of recognition

Stewart Ranson, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2024.
233pp, hardback, £70.99, ISBN: 1-0364-1156-7

Stewart Ranson's new book revisits vital questions of public governance. In it, he deepens arguments he has long made in favour of a thoroughgoing reconfiguration of the public space and for renewal of democratic citizenship. His claim is that half a century of neoliberal assault has demolished the social settlement arrived at in the aftermath of World War Two, arguably enforced on Attlee's government by the refusal of the mass of the population, and notably the trade union movement, to return to the status quo ante of the 1930s. Ranson characterises this settlement as a 'social democratic prospectus … valuing the capabilities of each and providing opportunities for all' (pix).

What Ken Jones has called 'the long counter-revolution' overthrew that settlement. Today, 'predatory competition … [legitimises] the few to accumulate their advantage above the needs and well-being of the many' (pix). Competitive individualism, social exclusion and the cossetting of privilege have weakened the public space for democratic decision-making.

Unwilling to accept that things must be this way, Ranson's purpose here is to 'understand the conditions for remaking … a society … in which all can become makers of meanings and values that shape their lives and work' (pxvi). His central argument is that 'the key to motivating change now lies in a radical re-imagining of our democratic citizenship, empowering citizens to participate in and take responsibility for remaking the communities in which they live and work' (pp159-60). To reconfigure the public space requires citizens to 'reconfigure themselves … to become active citizens, makers of the worlds in which they live and work, rather than merely detached voters in a polity' (p160).

Ranson dedicates his book to the memory of Raymond Williams, whose *The Long Revolution*, published in 1961, is recalled in its subtitle. That book, Williams said, was 'an attempt to think through the idea of revolution in a society with substantial levels of cultural development and democratic practice'.[1] It conceptualised the struggle for the establishment of full legal, civil and political rights which has unfolded since the bourgeois revolutions of the late 18th century. A struggle which was, in Williams' words, not only a great process of change but 'a genuine transforming of men and institutions; continually extended and deepened by the actions of millions, continually and variously opposed by explicit reaction and by the pressure of habitual forms and ideas' (quoted px).

Particular emphasis is laid by Williams on the transformation in communications which led to the extension of literacy, and hence of learning, beyond particular privileged groups eventually to everyone. At the heart of this long historical process is an increase in thoroughgoing democratisation, whereby 'ordinary people' have struggled to free themselves from a sense of inferiority and dependence in order to attain the status of makers of the polity. They have done so in the face of disdain and resistance from what Ranson terms 'an elite culture' (pxi), which has denied them proper recognition and equality of regard, and continues to do so.

In the first of the three overarching sections which structure his book, Ranson outlines the history of this 'long revolution' from the 1770s to its apparent demise two centuries later. He addresses the nature of 'community' and the common good, the struggle to establish civil, legal and political rights, the conditions for universal citizenship, and 'the educating of democracy' (p46). Ranson particularly applauds the work of Eleanor Marx, William Morris and Ernest Bevin. But the revolution is as yet incomplete. Institutions of privilege remain.

In the second part, Ranson explores the barriers to progress. Chief among these are enduring structures of exclusive power, and class prejudice expressed as 'misrecognition': the disdain the middle class express and enact towards the impoverished working class. Misrecognition matters because '[c]itizens are alienated when denied recognition of their sense of identity while social cohesion is fractured' (p78). The concept of 'misrecognition' is examined in depth across three dimensions: physical, legal and social, and illustrated by contemporary examples.

In the course of his unfolding analysis, Ranson says he has revised his thinking, in particular about reforms to education and democracy. These need to be understood, he says, '*together* as responses to periods of structural change, conjunctures, that generate crises and lead to political settlements which expand but regulate participation and opportunity in order to preserve as far as possible prevailing traditions of power' (p102, my emphasis). Such an understanding reveals that 'the reform of education lies at the centre of the regulation of democracy' (p102). Drawing on the work of Brian

Simon, Ranson offers a theory of periodisation in which educational reform from the mid-Victorian period is indicative of the ebb and flow of democratisation and the expansion or contraction of opportunity. This lens reveals that 'the embryonic era of comprehensive [school] expansion can be witnessed only as a period of exception in the long and continuing trajectory of class-based caging of aspiration and opportunity' (p110). Ranson counts it a notable error that the Labour Party failed to abolish public schools (along with the House of Lords) after 1945.

In the final section, 'A new beginning: imaginaries', Ranson looks at ways in which democracy can be remade through practical action on the part of citizens. Following Williams, he restates the fundamental importance for the 'long revolution' of 'citizens acknowledging their essential equality in a common culture' (p132). He writes: 'The issue of our time is where is the motivation to come from to undertake this learning community of mutual recognition that is the precondition for remaking the long revolution to social democracy (p132). How are citizens to learn? The answer seems to be through enhanced practices of local participation. Local democracy must be remade in practice.

Ranson mines the work of Hannah Arendt, as well as a host of current theorists, including Mark Bevir, John Stewart and Erik Olin Wright, to offer arguments and examples that explain and buttress this position. In so doing he deepens his own conceptualisation of what it is to 'make' – that is, to constitute, or reconstitute – a polity. He argues that a variety of small-scale local initiatives and projects, such as citizen juries, consensus conferences and extended panels of local representatives, offer practical means which can relay foundations for 'empowered participatory governance' (p185). For all the potential of these bottom-up initiatives, the concluding sentence in Ranson's book acknowledges that: 'If a just civil society is to be realised the power of government and the state will be needed to create the conditions for local social equality, parity of participation and cultural plurality' (p189).

Ranson is at home across a wide array of secondary reading. He marshals arguments and evidence from the domains of history, sociology, governance and philosophy (that of Hegel, Gadamer and Habermas as well as Arendt) to underpin and resource his thesis. Now and again he takes issue with positions staked out by peers. At times the high level of abstraction in which arguments can be couched makes for a demanding read, but his book will be of especial interest and service to students of governance and politics at degree level, and all the more if the publisher adds an index to any second edition. Sixth form students of 19th- and 20th- century history, and their teachers, will gain much from the illuminating and critically edged survey of that long struggle for the common good based on 'the conception of equal social worth, grounded in common community membership' (p10), which comprises almost the whole of the book's first half.

Ranson's framework is unapologetically social democratic. His focus is the 'citizen'

and 'ordinary people', rather than the working class, its organised bodies, and the absence – as yet – of any viable vehicle through which to express itself independently in politics. Ranson has much to say about the value and potential of broadly participatory forums in empowering communities to solve particular local problems. He doesn't look at contemporary grassroots political organising and outreach, such as is to be found in anti-SATs activism or anti-academies campaigning, or at the quotidian work of unions and trade councils in seeking to maintain and improve the provision and distribution of resources in communities. Here, too, in keeping with that 'extraordinary emphasis on human creativity and self-creation' which Raymond Williams recognised as central to Marxism and which I take to be Ranson's hope, citizens look to meet together, listen, learn and act to (re)make the world.[2]

These days, the world is also a digital world. 'Public space' has seen an extraordinary extension; one which, theoretically, enables the articulation online of almost anyone's views about each and every issue and concern. Yet, paradoxically, the Gadamerian or Habermassian dream of reasoned public debate between rational subjects open to persuasion and governed by a commitment to thinking-through the given issue seems further away than ever. As well as the relentless public expression of hatred, online space would appear rife with misinformation deliberately deployed to manipulate us and thwart the building of that solidarity which can change the world for the better.

Here is an indication of just how much remains to accomplish in that long revolution which is our living context, and by which we transform not just the mode of production of our material existence but what Williams called our society's deepest structures of relationships and feeling.[3] In a word, our entire social relations and our way of living together face to face.

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Notes

1. See Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters; interviews with New Left Review*, London, Verso, 1979.

2. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, p206.

3. See Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy,* London, Chatto & Windus, 1966, p76.