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The Eternal Return to the Issue of "Primitive Thought": L. Vygotsky and N. Marr looking at L. Lévy-Bruhl

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Abstract In this article, L. Vygotsky's and N. Marr's ideas on thinking and language are analyzed in the light of their reflections about L. Lévy-Bruhl's theories of "primitive thought". Not only were Lévy-Bruhl's ideas and facts related in his books used by both Vygotsky and Marr to constitute theoretical grounds and important conclusions of their theories, but the French anthropologist often served as an author of common interest between Vygotsky and Marr. This tendency was particularly evident in their reflections on a "crisis" in psychology and linguistics in the first third of the 20th century, on a "diffuse" nature of primitive thought and language and on verbal and gesture languages.

Keywords L. Vygotsky, N. Marr, L. Lévy-Bruhl, thinking, language, primitivity, "law of participation", "crisis" in linguistics and psychology, verbal and gesture language, history of ideas

One of the most evident common points in the works of L.S. Vygotsky (1896-1934) and N.Y. Marr (1865-1934) consists in their interest in so-called primitive thought. To a large extent, this interest was determined by reflections on this topic that were proper to the general intellectual context of the early 20th century in Russia, and which were considerably stimulated by the works of L. Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939); both Vygotsky and Marr wrote about the French anthropologist.

There was a good reason for their interest. The issue – are there qualitative differences between the ways "we" and "the other" think – was of great interest in the European intellectual circles at the turn of the 20th century. The discourse was unabashedly self-centered – the "we" of course was a European intellectual in a café chatting with his/her peers, while "they" were the exotic South-American tribes who claimed to be red parrots, or the ever-dancing dark-skinned Africans who were somewhere "out there", beyond the borders of "cultured" Europe. In the 21st century, that "other" may live next door to us – and the issue of the "we"/"they" relationships is as important as ever.

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Lévy-Bruhl's ideas reaching Russia

In the Soviet Union, Lévy-Bruhl became very well known especially after 1930, when the Russian translation of his *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (Lévy-Bruhl 1910) was published, together with some passages from *La mentalité primitive* (Lévy-Bruhl 1922) (*Pervobytnoe myšlenie* [Levi-Brjul' 1930]). Of course, Russian intellectuals had been acquainted with Lévy-Bruhl's theories much earlier already.[1] Lévy-Bruhl's works on primitive mentality influenced various fields of knowledge in Russia: ethnography, psychology, linguistics. Moreover, it was while analyzing Lévy-Bruhl's theories that some Soviet scholars, often representing different domains of social sciences, began (sometimes implicit) intellectual conversations with each other, looking for traces of (lost) primitivity in the phenomena of their own epoch.

In this paper, we shall demonstrate this tendency analyzing a number of theories elaborated by psychologist Lev Vygotsky and linguist Nikolaj Marr. While both Vygotsky and Marr spoke about Lévy-Bruhl and occasionally referenced him, sometimes using his theories and even simple facts related in his books (such as the ethnographic evidence he made available) to constitute theoretical grounds or important conclusions of their own theories, Vygotsky and Marr seldom referred to the works of one another.[2] Vygotsky was generally very inconsistent in his referencing – if he were alive today he would probably be accused of "plagiarism". Of course such accusations would be absurd – especially if we bear in mind that Vygotsky's primary mode of communication was oral, not written. Most of his texts – now published – come from the stenograms of his eloquent speeches that captivated the intellectually hungry audiences in the developing Soviet Union.

Fates change. The fascinated audiences were replaced by suspicious groups of young communists who were relentlessly critical of the "cosmopolitan" ideas that characterized the intellectual sphere of the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Starting in the early 1930s, and especially after his death (1934), Vygotsky's ideas were criticized because of their borrowings from the "non-marxist" tendencies in psychology, and, interestingly, because of his supposed "non-Marrism": Marr's theories dominated in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, even after his death (also in 1934). Vygotsky's final publication – *Thinking and Speech* (*Thought and Language* [*Myšlenie i reč'*], 1934) was criticized, in particular, in 1936, because of the fact that its chapter on the different roots of thinking and speech was deemed – in the usual jargon of Soviet official discourse – "scientifically worthless".[3] For Marr, on the contrary, speech and thought were interconnected from the very beginning (sometimes, in Marr's theories, language simply *equals* thinking [cf. for instance MARR 1933-1937, vol. III, p. 3]) and therefore Vygotsky was accused of not being sufficiently knowledgeable in the

[1] Already in 1915, V.N. Xaruzina's positive review of Lévy-Bruhl's theory was published in *Ètnografičeskoe obozrenie* (№1-2, pp. 134-136). The long and complicated history of the reception of Lévy-Bruhl's ideas in Russia deserves particular study.

[2] For instance, Vygotsky is mentioned only once in Marr's *Selected Works*, in a text written in 1931 – but even here Marr refers not to Vygotsky's own theoretical works, but to his opinion on W. Köhler's research (Marr 1933-1937, vol. II, p. 270).

[3] Attributing such labels to systems of ideas is in any historical context an effort to censor the flow of ideas after they have arrived in the public domain. It is a form of *post factum* censorship – once the ideas were publicly available, they could be authoritatively (including the authoritarian act) discredited as "nonsense", "non-science", "bad science", "soft science". In the 21st century psychologists taking interest in parapsychology and publishing about it suffer a fate similar to the dismissal of Vygotsky's ideas in the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

field of linguistics (KOZYREV, TURKO 1936, cf. van der VEER, VALSINER 1991 [1994, pp. 384-387]). As for Marr himself, being eager for an interdisciplinary synthesis in the last decade of his life, he did not show much interest in Vygotsky's ideas in his works about the origins of speech. Vygotsky was operating in a field – that of paedology – that was not relevant for Marr. Furthermore, his overlooking of Vygotsky can be partly explained by his "intellectual long-sightedness" in general: Marr referred much more often to the works written in the first half of the 19th century than to those of the scholars who were his contemporaries. It was thus Lévy-Bruhl with his interest in primitive thought who often served as an author of common interest between Vygotsky and Marr.

Lévy-Bruhl in the context of "crisis"

Vygotsky undoubtedly considered Lévy-Bruhl as a great thinker: in *Thinking and Speech*, for example, he places Lévy-Bruhl's ideas and discoveries on the same level as those by S. Freud, C. Blondel and J. Piaget (VYGOTSKY 1934 [1962, p. 10]). In this article however, Vygotsky referred to Lévy-Bruhl mentioning a "deep crisis" in psychology, which manifested itself in a "sharp contradiction" between the "empirical data" and "methodological foundations" of psychological research. This crisis was also acknowledged by his contemporaries – Karl Bühler and Hans Driesch wrote about it at precisely the same time (VALSINER 2012, Chapter 8) – and has in fact continued into the 21st century in psychology.
It was in his essay about the historical significance of the crisis in psychology (VYGOTSKIJ 1926 [1982]) that Vygotsky analyzed this difficult situation in detail. There is at least one point however where he seems mistaken: for him, this crisis was "more acute in psychology than in any other discipline". Drawing parallels between Piaget, Blondel, Freud and Lévy-Bruhl, Vygotsky specifies that

> [f]or all its greatness, however, Piaget's work suffers from the duality common to all the pathfinding contemporary works in psychology. This cleavage is a concomitant of the crisis that psychology is undergoing as it develops into a science in the true sense of the word. The crisis stems from the sharp contradiction between the factual material of science and its methodological and theoretical premises, which have long been a subject of dispute between materialistic and idealistic world conceptions. The struggle is perhaps more acute in psychology than in any other discipline (VYGOTSKY 1934 [1962, p. 10]).

Vygotsky was wrong – in the first half of the 20th century, the crisis was at least as deep in linguistics as in psychology. This "linguistic crisis" had several parameters:
– the necessity to search for new aims of research (comparative linguistics of the 19th century had already carried out its epistemological role connected with the elaboration of historical and comparative grammars of, first of all, Indo-European languages);
– the search for new material of linguistic studies – that is, languages outside the Indo-European family;
– the search for a new definition of objects of study in general: languages as particular objects of linguistic work seemed to disappear right before linguists' eyes at that time. Boundaries between languages were becoming very unclear due to the work of dialectologists, and the invention of more and more sophisticated

apparatuses showed that everybody produces different pronunciations, which implied that collective languages… did in fact not exist, and only individual ones did;
– among all levels of language description, semantics had the worst reputation in linguistics: with some notable exceptions (such as H. Paul), the Neogrammarians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries took a profound interest first of all in phonetics and in morphology, leaving semantics to the periphery of their research;
– finally, a linguistic crisis of methodological foundations was becoming ever more evident: the Neogrammarians were reproached for their positivism, their love for empirical and inductive research and their lack of any general conclusions – theoretical conclusions which would have concerned philosophy of language (*langage*, in Saussurean terms) more than linguistics as such (Saussurean *langue*).
Like Vygotsky, Marr (whose "New theory of language" was created as a very particular reaction to this crisis) also praised Lévy-Bruhl implying at least three parameters of this crisis: a) the crisis of material (anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl was describing the so-called "exotic" languages, which was rare for linguists and linguistics of that time); b) the crisis of semantics (Lévy-Bruhl studied "primitive languages" in connection with the evolution of human thought, reflected first of all in linguistic semantics); and c) the crisis of methodological foundations in linguistics. Unlike many linguists whom Marr severely criticized, Lévy-Bruhl – at least, in his published works – did not fear to come to general conclusions (MARR 1930).
However, in speaking about Lévy-Bruhl in the context of a methodological crisis in psychology, Vygotsky was far from praising the French anthropologist. On the contrary, for him Lévy-Bruhl's works constituted *a part of this crisis*:

> As long as we lack a generally accepted system incorporating all the available psychological knowledge, any important factual discovery inevitably leads to the creation of a new theory to fit the newly observed facts. Freud, Lévy-Bruhl, Blondel, each created his own system of psychology. The prevailing duality is reflected in the incongruity between these theoretical structures, with their metaphysical, idealistic overtones, and the empiric bases on which they are erected. In modern psychology great discoveries are made daily, only to be shrouded in *ad hoc* theories, prescientific and semimetaphysical (VYGOTSKY 1934 [1962, p. 10]).

Vygotsky – a newcomer to psychology arriving from the field of literary scholarship – was obviously somewhat utopian in his evaluation of contemporary psychology. Yet his criticism of Lévy-Bruhl was constructive. It followed the dialectical scheme of the three steps – thesis (outlining the issue), antithesis (critique) and synthesis. If one decides to look only at the antithesis step in Vygotsky's critiques of others – Lévy-Bruhl, Piaget, Berlin Gestaltists, or whomever – one gets the impression of a complete rejection of the opponent. Yet in the synthesis phase the constructive threads of the opponent lead to Vygotsky's own suggestions for solutions to the problems at hand.
Likewise, Marr and Marrists who praised Lévy-Bruhl for his interest in "primitive thought", reproached him for… his lack of interest in the so-called "prehistory": "dressed in a toga of positivism" (NIKOL'SKIJ 1930, p. XXIII), Lévy-Bruhl, according to them, failed to draw all the necessary conclusions from his theory of different kinds of thinking in the history of mankind and he only *described* cultures and societies that still existed in the early 20th century – unlike Marr himself who had

a passion for the prehistoric age and who preferred deductive methods of research to inductive ones.
Therefore both Vygotsky and Marr *criticized* Lévy-Bruhl in the context of crisis of their disciplines while *praising* him at the same time.

The "law of participation": between linguistics and psychology

It was precisely in the "prehistory" that Marr sought evidence for one of his semantic laws, closely connected with Lévy-Bruhl's "law of participation" [*la loi de participation*], which was also of interest to Vygotsky. As Lévy-Bruhl recognized,

> il serait difficile de donner, dès à présent, un énoncé abstrait de cette loi. […] à défaut d'une formule satisfaisante, on peut tenter une approximation. Je dirais que, dans les représentations collectives de la mentalité primitive, les objets, les êtres, les phénomènes peuvent être, d'une façon incompréhensible pour nous, à la fois eux-mêmes et autre chose qu'eux-mêmes (LÉVY-BRUHL 1910, p. 77).

However the opinions of Marr and Vygotsky on the importance of this law of Lévy-Bruhl diverged.
Marr accepted it with much enthusiasm and without any doubt, because it permitted him to "prove" one of his own basic semantic laws (which he had never formulated explicitly and which we can only reconstruct reading his works, cf. VELMEZOVA 2007, pp. 177-180) – the "law of diffuse semantics". According to this law, at the very beginning of human language, there existed only one diffuse meaning (a "proto-meaning"), which could mean everything at once: primitive tribes "used it in all meanings which mankind was aware of at that time" (MARR 1933-1937, vol. I, p. 217). This original polysemantism could be explained by the primitive man's incapacity to differentiate, by the "diffused nature" of primitive thought. Later on, according to Marr, there existed numerous semantic "bunches" [*pučki*], "rows" [*rjady*] or "nests" [*gnezda*] that united several meanings; afterwards, as a result of semantic divergence, they broke up into more concrete meanings. In his works, Marr gives tens of examples of such "nests" (cf. VELMEZOVA 2007, pp. 178-180). However two "nests" are mentioned most often: 'woman – water – hand' and 'sky – mountain – head' (MARR 1933-1937, vol. II, pp. 143, 152-153, etc. – cf. VELMEZOVA 2007, p. 180), while all other "semantic bunches" could be derived from them. In this part of his doctrine Marr was highly influenced by Lévy-Bruhl: the French anthropologist used the term "participation", or "the law of participation" for this capacity of primitive men to see a unity in surrounding plurality (LÉVY-BRUHL 1910, pp. 70, 76, 77).[4] Lévy-Bruhl never met "the primitive man" himself – it was, among others, the observations of the German ethnologist K. von den Steinen (1894) on the Bororó tribe in Brazil, on their strong identity claim "we are araras" (red parrots) while accepting that they are human beings *at the same time*. This conception was contradictory with the classical logic that dominated intellectual efforts at the turn of the 20th century.

[4]Another important source for Marr in this part of his doctrine was H. Spencer and his concept of evolution as a development passing from "homogeneity" to "heterogeneity" (Velmezova 2007, pp. 207-211).

Vygotsky, on the contrary, criticized this part of Lévy-Bruhl's theories, drawing parallels between Lévy-Bruhl's pre-logical thinking and the development of children's thought. He formulates his opinion as follows:

> Lévy-Bruhl quotes von den Steinen regarding a striking case of participation observed among the Bororo of Brazil, who pride themselves as being red parrots. Von den Steinen at first did not know what to make of such a categorical assertion but finally decided that they really meant it. It was not merely a name they appropriated, or a family relationship they insisted upon: What they meant was identity of beings. […] Lévy-Bruhl's way of interpreting participation is incorrect. He approaches the Bororo statements about being red parrots from the point of view of our own logic when he assumes that to the primitive mind, too, such an assertion means identity of beings. But since words to the Bororo designate groups of objects, not concepts, their assertion has a different meaning*: The word for parrot is the word for a complex that includes parrots and themselves*. It does not imply identity any more than a family name shared by two related individuals implies that they are one and the same person (VYGOTSKY 1934 [1962, pp. 71, 72]; emphasis added).

Here Vygotsky reproaches Lévy-Bruhl for the same thing for which he had previously reproached representatives of the English School of anthropology, such as E.B. Tylor or J.G. Frazer, in *Ètjudy po istorii povedenija. Obez'jana. Primitiv. Rebenok* (VYGOTSKIJ, LURIA 1930), that is the research in which Lévy-Bruhl's influence on Vygotsky (and A.R. Luria) seems clearest (van der VEER, VALSINER 1991 [1994, p. 207]). In the second chapter of this book, Vygotsky and Luria related Lévy-Bruhl's dispute with the English School of anthropology: "Lévy-Bruhl had criticized Tylor and Frazer for their assumption that the workings of the human mind are identical in every culture […]. He would at least leave open the possibility that the bewildering cultural variety of collective representations corresponded with different mental functions" (*ibid.*). Vygotsky completely agreed with this reasoning of Lévy-Bruhl: because accepting the English anthropologists' point of view "would imply that the human mind had not developed at all during human history. The sole differences between cultures would be in the content of experience but the mechanisms of mind would be identical in every epoch and culture […]. Vygotsky acknowledged that Lévy-Bruhl was the first to claim that the mechanisms of primitive thinking did not coincide with those of the «cultural man». Despite certain inaccuracies Lévy-Bruhl had to be credited for the fact that

> he was the first to pose the problem of the historical development of thinking. He showed that in itself the type of thinking is not a constant unity but one that changes and develops historically. The investigators who had followed the road indicated by him have tried to formulate more precisely on what the difference between the historical types of thinking of cultural and primitive man depends, in what the peculiarity of the historical development of human psychologically resides [VYGOTSK(ij), LURIA 1930, p. 64]" (van der VEER, VALSINER 1991 [1994, p. 207]).

Nevertheless, as we have already pointed out in analyzing his way of interpreting the law of participation, Vygotsky used to criticize Lévy-Bruhl for not being conclusive enough and for making the same mistake as English anthropologists, that is, attributing to "primitive men" the way of thinking peculiar to the modern Western

civilization. This is an example of his dialectical critique style – Lévy-Bruhl went half way, but failed to go the other half.
As he died in 1934, Vygotsky could not know that by the end of his life, Lévy-Bruhl himself would express doubts about his theory of primitive thinking in general and, in particular, about the law of participation. In his *Carnets* written in 1938-1939 (LÉVY-BRUHL 1949 [1998]), Lévy-Bruhl not only accepted the fact that peculiarities of "primitive" thinking are present and therefore can be discovered even in modern societies, but he also reflected upon the vocabulary of modern languages and upon its inadequacy to describe primitive thinking and the law of participation, among others:

> Le point de départ pour une étude un peu plus poussée de la participation me semble être que notre façon de la formuler, ou même simplement de l'exprimer dans notre vocabulaire, avec nos concepts, la fausse, et surtout, lui donne un aspect inintelligible qu'elle n'a pas nécessairement (Lévy-Bruhl, 1949 [1998, p. 1]).

Verbal and gesture language

Another phenomenon in which both Marr and Vygotsky were interested was the so-called gesture language. For Lévy-Bruhl, in primitive societies gesture language coexisted with the oral one:

> Le langage par gestes (*sign-language*) est en usage, au moins dans certaines circonstances, et là où il est tombé en désuétude, des vestiges témoignent qu'il a sûrement existé […]. Il se parle donc, dans la plupart des sociétés inférieures, deux langues, l'une orale, l'autre par gestes (LÉVY-BRUHL 1910, pp. 175, 178).

Marr saw in this statement proof of his own theories about gestures being the origin of human speech in general (MARR 1933-1937, vol. I. pp. 217, 257), after a "revolutionary transformation of animals' herds into human society" (*ibid*., vol. III, p. 104). It also explains the fact that one of the first "words"[5] of the human language (or even *the very first word* [MARR 1933-1937, vol. II, pp. 115-116, 209; vol. V, p. 327]), for Marr, meant 'hand' (cf. VELMEZOVA 2007, pp. 180-186).
With all his evident interest in gesture language, Vygotsky's point of view on the existence of such a turning point in the evolution from animals to anthropoids was different. Some scholars attributed to Vygotsky the so-called critical-point theory – a particular case of the *semiotic threshold theory*, in the terms of modern semioticians. However, Vygotsky's opinion on the existence of such a turning (or crucial) point in the evolution was more complicated (van de VEER, VALSINER 1991 [1994, pp. 199-200]). Even if Vygotsky sometimes formulated views that were very similar to a critical-point theory, stating for example that "apparently the biological evolution was finished long before the historical development of man started" (VYGOTSKIJ 1930 [1960, p. 447]), "at other times he explained that

[5] We use this word in inverted commas insisting on the lack of correspondence between primitive (semantically and phonetically "diffuse") "words", in Marr's theories, and words of modern languages (cf. Velmezova 2007, pp. 197-199).

Man's development, as a biological type, apparently, was already mainly finished at the moment that human history started. This, of course, does not mean that human biology came to a stand-still from the moment that historical development of human society started […]. But this biological change of nature had become a unity dependent on and subordinated to the historical development of the human society [Vygotsk(ij), Luria 1930, pp. 54, 70]" (van der VEER, VALSINER 1991 [1994, p. 200]).

Lost(?) primitivity in language and thinking

As for the material of Marr and Vygotsky's research (modern languages *vs.* children's speech or animals' "intelligence" and the different ways of its expression) and for the conclusions to which both Soviet scholars came, they permitted to state that Lévy-Bruhl's "primitivity" had not been lost forever, but continued to exist in the 20th century, in the same way as Lévy-Bruhl's "primitive peoples". It was one of the reasons that made many Soviet scholars – among others, Marr and Marrists, as we have seen before – reproach Lévy-Bruhl for the lack of any "real" primitivity in his theories. Nevertheless, it also explains the explosion of interest in Lévy-Bruhl's works in the Soviet Union, which sometimes went beyond the academic circles, once again contributing to the collaboration of scholars with representatives of other professions.

Let us refer for instance to V.V. Ivanov who spoke about a circle for the study of the archaic consciousness strata in modern language(s) and in the language of cinema, created by Vygotsky, Luria and S. Eisenstein, in which Marr also participated (IVANOV 1976, Chapter 1, point 4; cf. also KULL, VELMEZOVA 2011, p. 261). But this question is worth further study. In the age of proliferation of mass media and Facebook, the ghost of "primitive thought" is once again present in globalized culture. The replacement of logic with clicking as the main mechanism of thought paves the way. If a contemporary person were to say "I am my web page", the Bororó "participation" in red parrothood is evidenced in our part of identification with computer-generated miracles.

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