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Vygotsky, Neoliberalism and Post-structuralism: A Response to Jacob Klitmøller and Two Further Reviews of my Book “Neoliberalism, Pedagogy and Human Development” (Routledge, hardcover 2012, paperback 2014)

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Abstract

The paperback edition of “Neoliberalism, Pedagogy and Human Development”, which was published in 2014, almost coincided with the publication of two book reviews; one kindly written by Fabienne Gfeller (2014, in French for Cahiers de psychologie et éducation) and one by Jacob Klitmøller (2014, in Outlines: Critical Practice Studies). A third review of “Neoliberalism, Pedagogy and Human Development” has recently been published with Power and Education (by Matthew Connolly, 2015). As a first response to the discussion, which the book provoked, I try to briefly explore below a central question: Is linking post-structuralist thinking and Vygotskian scholarship meaningful?

Neoliberalism, Pedagogy and Human Development

If one would ask in a conference, whether Vygotsky was a cognitive scientist, an interaction analyst, a psychoanalyst, a constructivist or a critical realist, the discussion may be long with plenty of disagreement – given that different internationally renowned scholars have promoted different interpretations of Vygotsky over years and years.

However, all attendants will probably agree in one point: Lev S. Vygotsky was definitely not a post-structuralist!

My book “*Neoliberalism, Pedagogy and Human Development*” (Kontopodis, 2012) has provoked much discussion in this frame – and occasionally even confusion – among students, friends and valued colleagues since it was first published as a hardcover edition in 2012. The book builds on process philosophy and post-structuralism, as well as on Vygotsky’s psychological theory and differentiates between two discrete modes of human development:

- Development of concrete skills (potential development) and;
- Development of new societal relations (virtual development, which is at the same time individual and collective).

Through case studies of young people from urban and countryside marginalized populations in Germany, USA and Brazil, the book investigates emerging educational practices and takes a critical stance towards what can be seen as neoliberal educational politics.¹

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Fabienne Gfeller (2014) focused more on the fourth chapter of the book, which explores the links between human development, pedagogy and social movements in the case of the Landless Rural Workers’ Movement in Brazil. Jacob Klitmøller (2014) kindly reviewed the whole book while relating it to my previous publications (Kontopodis, 2007, 2009, 2011a, 2011b). Matthew Connolly (2015) discussed the book as situated within a broader stream of relational approaches, which have been developed in and beyond psychology by scholars such as Bruno Latour, Steven Brown and others in the last ten years. These reviews also echo my informal discussions with colleagues in the UK, the Netherlands, Greece, Denmark, Germany, Brazil and US about the book, as well.

For different reasons in each case, all reviews were generally favourable – for which I would like to kindly thank the reviewers.² At the same time a wide range of issues and open questions were raised by the three reviewers, such as:

- How to closely investigate by means of qualitative methods an educational project or a broader social movement *while* maintaining a critical distance from it?
- How to define novelty in relation (or in opposition) to meanings and practices that already exist?
- How to move between different levels of analysis (such as intra-individual, inter-individual, inter-group, intra-group, societal) etc.

¹ For videos & films that can be used as additional teaching materials to the book see: <https://mkontopodis.wordpress.com/2014/04/07/neolib-ped-dpment-paperback/>.

² The reviews are available through the link: <https://mkontopodis.wordpress.com/reviews/>

Addressing all these issues would not only necessitate a long text – it may require the writing of another book. As a first step in this direction, I have recently edited a special issue of the *European Journal of Psychology of Education* in collaboration with Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont, on “*Educational settings as interwoven socio-material orderings*” (Kontopodis & Perret-Clermont, 2016). This special issue aimed at addressing the complexity of moving in between different levels of analysis by combining thick ethnographic descriptions and theory-dense analyses in and across a variety of educational and developmental contexts, such as a Japanese nursery, a Danish primary school or an indigenous Mexican Mazahua community. Furthermore, I reflect on the challenges and the possibilities of combining critical social research with participation in social movements in “*Facing Poverty and Marginalization: 50 Years of Critical Research in Brazil*” – a co-edited volume that is going to appear soon with Peter Lang (Kontopodis, Magalhães & Coracini, 2016).

There is however one central issue – that underlies everything else – which I aspire to briefly explore below: Is linking post-structuralist thinking and Vygotskian scholarship meaningful? Establishing links between post-structuralist thinking and Vygotskian scholarship is exactly what Matthew Connolly praised yet Jacob Klitmøller criticized my book for. Jacob Klitmøller is neither critical of post-structuralism in general nor of my post-structuralist analysis as such, but as he pinpoints:

I have difficulty seeing what Vygotsky contributes that is not already available in other (post-structuralist) authors that Kontopodis uses (Klitmøller, 2014, pp. 99-100).

Several open questions raised by Fabienne Gfeller (for example the issue of establishing continuity or ruptures between the past, the present and the future or the role of school with regards to encouraging novelty) can also be traced back to the positioning of my work in-between Vygotskian scholarship and post-structuralist thinking. The different views between the reviewers reflect their diverse backgrounds and are representative of the different stances distinct audiences have manifested towards my book since the day it was published. What is indeed the “added value” of bringing Vygotsky and post-structuralist authors in dialogue? Why is this necessary, could this be meaningful, and is this possible?

“*Neoliberalism, Pedagogy and Human Development*” presents qualitative research that explores how mediating devices such as CVs, school reports, school files, photos and narratives shapes the ways in which marginalized students reflect about their past as well as imagine their future. Vygotsky’s conceptual toolbox is pivotal in understanding the developmental effects of employing such mediating devices in everyday activities with reference to students who experience developmental (and broader societal) *crises*.

This was for example the case of Felix (pseudonym) – a student from chapter 1, who had been deviant, had a failed school career, and was placed at a German experimental secondary school specially designed for students like him, when I began my research. Felix did not want to be the “parents’ terrible boy” any more, he wanted to be an “adult” (his own words) and made an intensive effort to give *sense* to his *dramatic experience* and gain *control* of his behavior by appropriating available *meanings* and *mediating devices* such as CVs, school reports, and narratives. He was supported by the schoolteachers, e.g. during consultancy sessions, until he could “stand on his own feet”. It would be difficult to

micro-analyze this case just by means of post-structuralist thinking without the conceptual and methodological tools elaborated by Vygotsky such as *crisis, experiencing, mediation, sense, social situation of development* etc.

Yet, even if Vygotsky was very critical of the capitalist political economy, he did not provide us in his short life with specific tools how to evaluate *youth development* in terms of its qualitative characteristics, entailed values or broader socio-political dimensions. Felix's development, as I explain in detail in the book (esp. chapter 1 and *interlude*), was well aligned with neoliberal *technologies of self-reflection, self-control and self-management*. These technologies favoured a certain understanding of individual *success* that went together with (others') *failure* while they undermined broader socio-political engagement and viewing oneself as part of a community.

Development took place in quite different ways in other cases explored in the book, e.g. in the case of the anonymous female student of Chicano background, who was expected because of her gender, ethnicity and class-background to get pregnant and drop out of school in Long Beach, California (see chapter 3). As part of a broader innovative school project, this student developed in a very different way than it has usually been the case with students with similar ethnic, gender- and class-related characteristics. She did not only pursue an unexpected personal trajectory beyond binary dilemmas such as “pregnancy vs. schooling” or “failure vs. success” but also contributed to broader change on school and community levels.

As I explain in the book, micro-analyzing and understanding certain procedures and developmental arrangements in terms of Vygotskian theory was crucial as an analytical step in exploring such cases of youth development. It would however be quite difficult to evaluate the qualitative differences between these cases through the conceptual tools elaborated by Vygotsky (and relevant post-Vygotskian scholars) without employing at the same time post-structuralist notions such as *technologies of the self, power relations, potentiality vs. virtuality*. Deconstructing the notion of *development* in post-structuralist terms (cf. Burman, 1994) is a very important analytical step, as well – as important as the Vygotsky-inspired analysis briefly presented above. Approving of certain procedures, mediating devices and developmental procedures over others and establishing criteria for this (e.g. whether they reproduce established power relations or not) is a third analytical step, which follows from the previous ones, linking individual development to broader socio-political change.

This third step is fully deployed in the fourth chapter of the book with reference to the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (“*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*” or “MST”) i.e. one of Brazil's most radical and successful socio-political and educational movements of the last 30 years. As the analysis reveals, this step requires a complex combination of conceptual and methodological tools that cannot easily be reduced to one or the other approach. Linking individual development to broader socio-political issues and vice versa with regard to concrete cases and contexts of human development brings to fruition both Vygotskian theorizing and post-structuralist analysis.

Obviously Vygotsky is not a post-structuralist – given that he was long dead around 1968, when scholars such as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and others argued for epistemological uncertainty while exploring the interplay of power, difference and Otherness in human and other-than-human relationships. Vygotsky indeed never raised concerns with regards to epistemological uncertainty, to the microphysics of

power or *difference* – let alone *différance*. Yet, both post-structuralist scholarship and Vygotsky's thinking were considerably influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy and psychoanalysis *as well as* by Marxism – a resemblance, which has so far been rather unexplored in the relevant literature, and which informs the twofold approach outlined above and in the book.

I can neither claim that my book "*Neoliberalism, Pedagogy and Human Development*" explored all issues related to these theoretical legacies and approaches – nor can I claim that linking Vygotsky to post-structuralism is straightforward and would not require further work. Yet, I hope that my book presents an innovative relational account of learning and human development, which can prove to be of particular importance for the education and development of young people – especially the marginalized ones.

I hope that this brief response adds clarity to the relevant discussions and once again would like to thank the reviewers Fabienne Gfeller, Jacob Klitmøller, and Matthew Connolly for taking time and engaging in such a helpful and fruitful way with topics and issues that have been imperative to me for about a decade. The fact that much work yet remains in this area is both exciting and a challenge.

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