
A Critique of Vygotsky’s Misapprehension of Marx’s “Phenomenal Forms”*

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ABSTRACT: A concept originally formulated in the context of Karl Marx’s sociological investigations — the *Erscheinungsformen*, or phenomenal forms — plays a key role in relation to a number of educational inquiries, and has important heuristic value for them. Lev Vygotsky saw the concept of phenomenal forms as central to the original Marxian paradigm, and he deployed it as he developed his account of cognitive development in humans. Full development of the concept, however, shows that its integration into cognitive psychology by Vygotsky was incomplete in crucial respects, and pedagogical flaws were the result. The phenomenal forms may prove useful in explaining the transition between Vygotsky’s socio-constructivism and the subsequent developments led by Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy.

Introduction

DESPITE THE MANY EDUCATIONAL FIELDS that Karl Marx’s contribution has impacted — most obviously sociology of education, but also educational psychology, particularly thanks to the work of the early-Soviet scholar Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) — this influence has never been examined, to the best of my knowledge, from the specific vantage point afforded by Marx’s account of the *Erscheinungsformen*. When Marx employed this concept (which is rendered into English equally well as *forms of manifestation* or *phenomenal forms*) his line of reasoning progressed through similar paths to

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those followed in his analyses of *ideology* and *fetishism*, two terms which, unlike *Erscheinungsformen*, have received much more attention, both from the Marxist bench (Althusser, 1970; Kofman, 1999) and within the various fields of knowledge influenced by Marx's thought. This tendency also manifests itself in education-related areas, where reference to the Marxian theory of forms of manifestation is markedly absent, but not the theory of ideology (see, for example Camangian, 2013; Giroux, 1983). In the domain of educational psychology, on which this article focuses, the same state of affairs prevails, as proven by the fact that most accounts of Vygotsky's work have chosen not to resort to the *Erscheinungsformen* at any point in their argument. This absence is manifest even in those sections that are explicitly devoted to describing its articulation with salient features of Marx's theory — whenever this point, of course, has been considered worthy of attention. When this has been the case, authors have preferred to illuminate the Marxist connection by resorting mainly to two ideas: either to remnants of dialectical thought in Vygotsky's work (Moll, 2013, 5–6; Lake, 2012, 16–17) or to his emphasis on the external determining impact of social reality on psychic phenomena, as befits his socio-constructivist inspiration. The latter remains a commonplace in Vygotskian literature (for example, Wertsch, 1988). “In our conception,” Vygotsky (2012) says, “the true direction of the development of thinking is not from the individual to the social, but from the social to the individual” (38).

These perspectives are appropriate and do justice to the nucleus of Marx's thought as well as to the coherent development that the latter underwent in Vygotsky's hands, once it was projected onto psychology. The second issue mentioned, furthermore, is inextricably intertwined with this article's main goal, which is none other than to heighten awareness of a specific way in which society influences — negatively, in this case — cognitive development. The adverse determination I am referring to appears as a necessary consequence of the phenomenal forms which Marx identified in every mode of production, the generative mechanism of which will be analyzed in the following section. Stemming from this approach, the article will then attempt to demonstrate how, despite being familiarized with Marx's treatment of the phenomenal forms, the Soviet scholar failed to integrate their presence into his developmental psychological argument. Thus, he was prevented from foreseeing the pedagogical problems that this fact raised, rendering it impossible for him to overcome them. There are four theoretical

issues that I hope will become clearer through rigorous analysis of the *Erscheinungsformen*, and the article will cover them in this order: 1) the essence of Marx's sociological framework, 2) the latter's influence on Vygotsky's socio-constructivist psychology, and 3) an appreciation of the limits of Vygotsky's educational paradigm. Concerning this third point, Marx's theory of the phenomenal forms will reveal a theoretical blind spot in Vygotsky's pedagogy which, I argue, it is in the interests of progressive educational scholars and practitioners to resolve. Finally, 4) some indication will be provided as to how contemporary critical pedagogy has attempted to overcome this problem.

Tools, the Key Variable in Marxian Sociology

This first section will offer a brief and systematic account of the backbone of Marx's sociological theory. Hopefully, it will allow the reader to understand the place assigned to the phenomenal forms in it. I start with the idea that the whole corpus of Marxian sociology rests on a basic *anthropological* thesis found in *The German Ideology*. The key quote is well known: "Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. [But] they themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence" (Marx and Engels, 1978, 150). Marx and Engels soon added that this anthropological fact "is conditioned by their physical organization," admitting thereby that the biological realm sets the context for the development of this basic anthropological feature — its *active adaptation* (Stetsenko, 2012, 148) — as well as for the economic activity that actualizes it. Economic activity becomes, thus, the key variable in Marxian sociology. From the moment it is established, human beings' relationship with nature (*i.e.*, with the biological *habitat*) and the entire scope of their sociability become altered. On the one hand, they no longer have to *immediately* adapt to nature, since, thanks to economy, they can somewhat transform it (Vygotsky, 1978, 60; Engels, 1940, cited in Cole and Scribner, 1978, 7; Marx and Engels, 1978, 156). On the other, human sociability takes place henceforth within a mode of production, *i.e.*, a framework characterized by different *social classes*.

According to Marxian sociology, the one trait that distinguishes human beings from the rest of biological species is economic activity. This phylogenetic hypothesis becomes transparent the moment *tools*

are brought to the fore, as Engels did in 1876, in *The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man*. As the title conveys, labor seemed to play for him an instrumental role in this critical evolution in biology. At the same time, Engels (1934) affirmed that “labor begins with the making of tools,” and, furthermore, that the “tool specifically symbolizes human activity, man’s transformation of nature: production” (cited in John-Steiner and Soubberman, 1978, 132). Let us recall that, as is well known, according to Marx the *means of production* consist of *raw materials*, *human labor*, and *tools*, and that it is only in contrast with the latter that nature itself becomes a raw material to be acted upon in a fully economic process. This is to say that the aforesaid ability of humans to produce their own means of subsistence finally comes down to the making of tools, of instruments of labor, which stand out as the key and original factor in this critical transition, which is biological as much as it is anthropological — the first economic phenomenon, in point of fact. Other hominids make use of certain objects to help themselves, in the fashion of tools (Engels, 1940, 291; Vygotsky, 2012, 78–85; cf. 96), but no other biological species, apart from human beings, devotes a constant and specific share of its social time and energy to the making of tools.

The previous ideas may be rephrased with the help of a term like *mode of production*, Marx’s principal subject matter. Actually, the mode of production was Marx’s way of referring to a social milieu when analyzed in the light of the many consequences that stem from social tool production. The most important of them is — as we know — *class division*, which encompasses a number of features and specific variables in itself. *Social classes* are essentially the groups human societies are divided into according to who produces, possesses and works with those tools. According to a well-known definition by Lenin (1965),

classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated by law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labor, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it. (421.)

We may conclude that, whenever there is tool production there are social classes, and that, in so far as any human individual lives in a mode of production, s/he will belong to a social class.

This section only requires an additional reflection before we proceed to introduce Lev Vygotsky's work. The new point to be borne in mind is that class division — *i.e.*, the precise interplay of *relations of production* and *productive forces* in a given mode of production — *overdetermines* (Althusser, 1962) every single fact occurring inside society. Actually, class division extends its diverse effects (economic, political and ideological) to all the corners of a social milieu. Certainly, the most important consequence that stems from a class-ridden society is the distribution of *value* among the different classes in ways that, in the end, lead to general economic crises.

Despite the actuality of this idea, I desire to focus on a different kind of consequence. In consonance with two recent texts that freshly re-enact the need to articulate a Marxist pedagogy (Au, 2007; Lewis, 2009), the aim of this article — its real *raison d'être* — is to contribute a strategy capable of counterweighing and compensating for the educational consequences that crystallize in a class-ridden society, the effects of which are felt — though with different outcomes — by all its members, irrespective of the social class they fall into. Needless to say, this goal partakes of a more general pedagogical desire rooted in the tradition of the Enlightenment, the desire to remove whatever obstacles may come in the way of rational thinking and learning. Indeed, one such obstacle is posed in every class-divided society, and its consequences impinge on the cognition of its individuals. It has to do with the fact that the place they occupy in a given social milieu *vis-à-vis* the means of production conditions their ability to reach an appropriate representation (a scientific understanding) of the social phenomena that surround them, and of which they form part. Although this effect has commonly been analyzed from the angle of *ideology* (as one of its byproducts), the truth is that, against the grain of Marxian thought and of its contribution to sociology and psychology of education, I deem it more productive to approach this pedagogical challenge by resorting to a somewhat unknown Marxian concept: the *Erscheinungsformen*, the forms of manifestation or phenomenal forms.

Marx's Theory of the Erscheinungsformen

As claimed in the Introduction, notwithstanding its similarity to other terms present in Marx's sociology, I find a series of analytical advantages in resorting to Marx's developments on the

Erscheinungsformen. The theoretical benefits I am referring to mainly have to do with the fact that the term unambiguously conveys the material, objective — and hence necessary — quality of the distortion that takes hold of people’s mental representations of their social environment. In contrast, this aspect is all too often neglected by approaches to ideology, especially those arising from within the educational sciences, that exaggeratedly tend to emphasize the subjective dimension of the phenomenon. Henry A. Giroux (1983) criticized Pierre Bourdieu’s model precisely on account of his drift towards subjectivist and idealist understandings of the ideological problem. Bourdieu, Giroux claimed, “appears to have forgotten that domination has to be grounded in something other than mere ideology, that it also has a material foundation” (273). And it is apropos of this material foundation that Marx’s theory of the phenomenal forms has an important contribution to make. Whereas both viewpoints are present in Marx’s writings and do not necessarily contradict each other, the truth is that studies of ideology tend to explain the functionality of false and oppressive representations in society as a result of a conscious effort, made by the ruling classes, to impose the former on the rest of the population, through the ideological apparatus they control. The paradigm of the phenomenal forms, on the contrary, tends to give priority to the material basis due to which these false representations crystallize in the first place. According to this more sophisticated view, ideological representations should not be considered as either arbitrary or totally subjective, but rather as bearing witness to an objective process whereby the socioeconomic dynamics of society are spontaneously experienced and conceived from within it in a deformed way. A valuable epistemological thesis sustains this claim, one totally foreign to naive empiricism: the daily impressions that supply us with a spontaneous scope of experience are no guarantee of scientific understanding. We will return to this idea.

On a more general plane, I have elsewhere contended (Villacañas de Castro, 2013) that these outer forms of manifestation offer a springboard to bridge the gap that separates Marx’s sociology from the mainstream of scientific thought. They may provide a strong theoretical basis to counteract the tidal waves of resistance that deny any fruitful articulation between Marx’s theory and institutionally sanctioned science. I believe that at the core of the phenomenal forms there is a concern for the interferences that obstruct a learning process

when the scientific observer wants to understand the same object s/he forms part of. This concern is not foreign to science, as everyone should know. Observations by C. H. Waddington (1991, 747) regarding Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, or even by Stephen Hawking concerning contemporary physics, indicate that natural scientists also identify this difficulty at the base of the revolutionary character of the fundamental discoveries of their disciplines. The same is true for Marxian sociology, in which we know how this complication is normally translated: individuals spontaneously experience their own society from the standpoint of a specific social class, which makes it extremely difficult for them to move beyond their individualistic viewpoint. Accordingly, they are barred from inferring the causal instances that determine society in general, let alone how these might affect them as part of a bigger structure, the basic dynamics of which develop unbeknownst to them. Furthermore, in line with the analysis initiated by Lukács in the third chapter of his *Ontology of Social Being*, one might even argue that this misconception is not caused but only intensified by class division, and that phenomenal distortions would actually be related to the general epistemological difficulty of having to understand a given reality at the same time as one forms part of it. If this were the case, phenomenal forms and ideology would linger even in fully classless societies, if they were someday to exist.

Some dazzling fragments in *The German Ideology* — the reference to the *camera obscura* (Marx and Engels, 1978, 154; Camangian, 2013, 1203), for instance, which Kofman (1999) brilliantly developed into a book — already foreshadowed the polished expressions one finally comes across in *Capital*. Volume I, Chapter XIX, for example, defines ideological concepts as “imaginary expressions” which

arise, however, from the relations of production themselves. They are categories for the phenomenal forms of essential relations. That in their appearance things often represent themselves in inverted form is pretty well known in every science except Political Economy. (Marx, 1991, Ch. XIX, 265.)

Chapters XII, XVIII, XLVIII, from the third volume of *Capital*, offer us a more detailed treatment of this concept. For example:

The final pattern of economic relations as seen on the surface, in their real existence and consequently in the conceptions by which the bearers and agents of these relations seek to understand them, is very much different

from, and indeed quite the reverse of, their inner but concealed essential pattern, and of the conception corresponding to it. (Marx, 1959, Ch. XII, 146.)

There can remain no doubt of the “real,” objective, and material nature of the distortions brought about by the phenomenal forms. As expressed by Balibar (2007), they don’t constitute “a subjective phenomenon or a false perception of reality, as an optical illusion or a superstitious belief would be. [They] constitute, rather, the way in which reality (a certain form or social structure) cannot but appear” (60). Osborne (2005) insists on the same idea by describing the process as “an ‘objective illusion’ that remains even after it has been comprehended” (16). And likewise, in a sentence that Vygotsky would not fail to integrate into his own arguments, Marx (1959) suggested that it was precisely the “work” of science to identify, understand, and dissolve the reflexes begotten by these phenomenal forms, that is to say, “to resolve the visible, merely external movement into the true intrinsic movement” (ch. XVIII, 208). No wonder that this notion was sometimes described — including by Vygotsky, particularly in his definition of the term *geneticheskii* (Kozulin, 2012, xliii) — by resorting to the cause *vs.* effect dichotomy. In the light of this distinction, forms of manifestation consisted of effects which did not seem to betray or translate (at least in any obvious way) their true causes. Hence the understanding of the scientist as he who, as a detective, retraces this causal link.

Tools and Signs, Key Variables in Vygotsky’s Account of Cognitive Development

The ideas developed in the previous section already explain the instrumental role of education in obtaining an improvement in the lives of the working classes. At the end of the day, education should help us fight against the ideological misconceptions caused by the *Erscheinungsformen* in our capitalist society, which affect both the working and the ruling classes (Marx, 1991, Ch. XIX, 266; Milios and Dimoulis, 2006; Fine and Milonakis, 2011, 16–17). Not only do they lead to false cognitive representations of the social environment, but — combined with the ideological propaganda issued by the ruling classes, itself affected by its own intensified distortions — they erase any trace of the true underlying causes of crisis, poverty and discomfort.

Following suit from Lenin, Lukács, or Gramsci (Lewis, 2009, 438–40), who soon became interested in the political effects of the gap that separated scientific knowledge from the common sense of the majority classes, educationalists have intermittently engaged with the challenge of integrating Marx's insight into the phenomenal forms into their pedagogical concerns. The results, as one can imagine, have varied in quality and nature. Since this is too wide a topic for this article to develop, in the following sections I will limit myself to the hypothesis that Lev Vygotsky was one of the first researchers to fully commit himself to this aim. On this issue, Au's (2007) discovery and analysis of the parallelisms that hold between "Lenin and Vygotsky's theoretical explorations of social and individual development" (275) implies a fruitful advance in the direction which this article wants to pursue. Though fragmentary and problematic in the way it was published (a topic repeatedly studied by Anton Vanistky) and also interpreted (Miller, 2011), the echo and amplitude of the reception of Vygotsky's work continues to grow day by day, as demonstrated by unremitting editorial novelties; hence the need for this article to address it from a very concrete angle. I make no pretence of offering a complete overview of his psychological theory and of its educational consequences; my purpose is to interpret and evaluate Vygotsky's work from a perspective that, to the best of my knowledge, remains yet unexplored: the vantage point offered by what we already know about Marx's theory of the *Erscheinungsformen*.

I believe this line of examination is not arbitrary, for two reasons. The first one concerns the intellectual tradition in which Vygotsky inscribed his own reflections. In this regard, it remains true that, notwithstanding the Stalinist censure his work underwent from his death until 1956 (Kozulin, 2012, lviii–lix; Hyman, 2012, 474; cf. 479–80; Zavershneva, 2010; Rosa and Montero, 1992), Vygotsky was undoubtedly a Marxist thinker. "A strong case can and should be made that Vygotsky was indeed part of the Marxist–Leninist tradition" (Au, 2007, 294). Any serious account of his psychology acknowledges this conscious inscription (Vygotsky, 2012, 204–5), and so will this article, especially when, in the following paragraphs, I organize the Vygotskian paradigm around a variable I have already used to explain the Marxian framework: tools. More important to the aim of determining the appropriateness of my approach, however, is the fact that Vygotsky explicitly echoed the epistemological concerns that Marx raised in

relation to the phenomenal forms. This issue will be explored in the fourth section, so let us tackle the first one at once.

Vygotsky's theory qualifies as a sophisticated account of what a Marxian psychology should be, *i.e.*, one that approaches human behavior and cognitive development from similar variables to those outlined by Marx to characterize the way human beings survive and become organized in different modes of production. According to the argument I have developed so far, this should mean that Vygotsky's analysis resorts to *tools* in order to determine the influence of the social dimension on human cognition. And this is just the case. In the following paragraphs, the reader will have the chance to discover how Vygotsky's psychological framework revolves precisely around the use of *tools* and *signs*. We already know what the first term stands for in Marxian sociology, so what is needed is for me to make explicit the articulation between the two. While Vygotsky distinguished between the use of tools and verbal signs — one should bear in mind that his research on signs formed part of his general analysis of verbal thought — he encompassed both terms through the concept of *mediation* (Miller, 2011, 281–316; Wertsch, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978, 54). This was the function that both of them had towards reality. Through signs, Vygotsky (1978) suggested, human beings offered a mediated response to stimuli arriving from the natural or social surroundings (39). These stimuli, of course, could consist of verbal signs themselves, yet their defining trait *vis-à-vis* mediation resided in that, despite the indirectness of any signifying or symbolic chain, their response was devised to answer the original stimuli and, moreover, to cause a reaction in it. The same logic characterized tools, which offered another kind of mediated — albeit this time directly material — response to stimuli which arose from the social or natural contexts, those which, again, tools aimed to transform (Kozulin, 2012, xxxix). As Cole and Scribner (1978) suggest, “the individual actively modifies the stimulus situation as a part of the process of responding to it. It was the entire structure of this activity which produced the behavior that Vygotsky attempted to denote by the term *mediating*” (13–14). The latter can therefore be best understood as a broadening of Marx and Engels' anthropological thesis that systematic tool use, on the part of the human species, isolated it from the rest of the biological realm. Through it, humans were able to *transform* the world rather than *adapt* to it in the Darwinian fashion. Taking after tools, signs insisted on this ability and amplified it.

The “linkage between tool use and speech” (Vygotsky, 1978, 31) received ample emphasis in his writings. The Soviet scholar proposed that tools and verbal thought enter into a dialectical relationship; that, supplemented by tools, human signs are able to affect the world materially; and that, conversely, supplemented by signs, human tools achieve incredibly complex and efficient achievements, and transform reality in ways unimaginable to any other biological entity — such as apes, for example, among whom tool use was “independent of symbolic activity” (23–4). Therefore, the degree of sophistication realized by either kind of mediation advanced parallel to the other, giving shape to a reciprocal form of determination. The heuristic potential of this dialectics was projected onto all four spatial–temporal planes of reality that J. L. Lemke (2002) helped to rephrase more conveniently by underscoring their intersections. I am referring to the phylogenetic, the sociocultural, the ontogenetic, and the microgenetic levels. In this series, the focus is placed, first, on the evolution of the human species as against other biological species; second, on the different modes of production human history has gone through; third, on children’s diachronic cognitive development and the distinct planes of verbal thought that are built along it; and, fourth, on the purely synchronic progress that children may undergo at any given educational site, depending on the features of the instruction they receive. It goes without saying that this last plane of reality involves the specifically educational dimension, consisting of the “development of complex structures and abstract concepts from moment to moment, during ongoing discourse” (cited in Song and Kellog, 2011, 591).

Vygotsky contributed to the definition and better understanding of all four planes but, notwithstanding the interest of the argumentative parallelisms that his psychological paradigm traced among them, I wish to concentrate on his idea of how the ontogenetic and the microgenetic levels articulated themselves. It was on the common ground shared by both of them that Vygotsky based most of his discoveries concerning education. These can be summarized through two main claims. The first has to do with *how* education takes place; that is, with the way human beings transmit their accumulated knowledge to the younger generations (cultural heredity), a transfer on which the future of the species depends. Vygotsky’s seminal contribution to this issue differs significantly from that of the other major developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget (Lourenço, 2012, 284–5); against the latter,

Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that, from the dawn of the human species, *both tool and sign use had been taught in and through social interaction*. “Human learning,” he claimed, “presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (88). Vygotsky believed in the dominant influence of social interaction on learning, as conveyed by one of his most popular statements: “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (*interpsychological*), and then *inside* the child (*intrapsychological*)” (57). This claim was fully illustrated and borne out by Vygotsky’s (1978, 89) seminal description of the gradual transition taking place in the child from *social speech*, to *egocentric speech*, to *internal thought*, which marked the final endpoint when the entire scope of a child’s thought processes adopted a verbal form.

The second major thesis that can help us summarize Vygotsky’s (2012) essential contribution to educational thought focuses on the relationship between the ontogenetic and the microgenetic planes, since it was precisely at this crossroads (where the rhythms of children’s cognitive and educative processes intersect) that he put forward the following thesis: “By and large, instruction precedes development”; “development,” he said, “unfolds in a continuous interaction with the contributions of instruction” (195–6). The corollary to this idea — fully consistent with his key discovery of a *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) (198–207; cf. 1978, 84–91) — was formulated thus: “Good learning is that which is in advance of development” (89).

Vygotsky’s Problematic Integration of Marx’s Social Erscheinungsformen

Just as Marx considered that the variables inherent in tool production afforded the dominant element in the understanding of the phylogenetic and sociocultural development of the human species, so Vygotsky believed social interaction to be the dominant factor *vis-à-vis* the ontogenetic and microgenetic levels of cognitive development. However appropriate and compatible I find both orientations, in the present section I will try to prove that Vygotsky’s analysis of social interaction lags behind Marx’s sociology, and that, as a result of this, negative consequences derive. The latter somewhat question the complete adequacy of Vygotsky’s account of cognitive

development, and also the form of pedagogical instruction that he devised after it.

I will go directly to the point: I consider Vygotsky's analysis of *tools* to be incomplete. While his theory attributes a key psychological role to tools in relation to children's cognitive development (like signs, they enable mediated action), he does not link or explore their use *vis-à-vis* the effects of *class division* that Marxian sociology, as we have seen, necessarily associates with the social production and management of tools. On account of this sociological blind spot, when it is time for him to analyze educational interaction within a social milieu (the locus where learning and cognitive development are supposed to take place), Vygotsky's argument does not integrate what we already know about the *Erscheinungsformen*. Yet the truth is that, according to Marx, in any class-ridden mode of production phenomenal forms inevitably result from the specific scheme of social production and ownership of tools. This means that Vygotsky's theory only integrates tools in relation to the positive cognitive effects that result for the individual who uses them, but not inasmuch as negative ones also stem from their social management. The inconsistency of this argument becomes obvious from a temporal standpoint, since tool use in the hands of any individual necessarily requires their previous social production. This factor generates social classes and specific *Erscheinungsformen* in the social environment as much as this generation entails that the exchanges between the teacher and student, adult and children, or experienced and inexperienced members of the culture (the means through which learning is supposed to occur) will be initially exposed to the deformations of the phenomenal forms. Pedagogy must take heed to counteract them.

We saw earlier on in the article that tools and verbal thought are dialectically connected. Now it seems, though, that the social dimension of tools ends up affecting verbal thought by forcefully begetting in it deformed signs, distorted mental representations. It is precisely at this point when Vygotsky's notion of the ZPD may be profitably recalled, to make my uncertainties more explicit. Given Vygotsky's shortsightedness regarding the class-determined quality of any concrete instance of social interaction, my concern is directed at whether the pedagogical framework that he articulated around the ZPD will actually be able to surmount the whole scope of negative cognitive effects that, from a strict Marxian perspective, must be attributed to

the phenomenal forms. In other words: can Vygotsky's pedagogy guarantee this learning goal, without which no cognitive development is satisfactorily completed? Is his pedagogical framework sophisticated enough to make sure students will cut through superficial, sensory phenomena and reach a deep understanding of the underlying processes of which they themselves are a result? This is the question we will have to decide from now on. In order to do so, Vygotsky's own treatment of the *Erscheinungsformen* must be analyzed first, for my previous theoretical concerns do not imply that the Soviet psychologist did not integrate the existence of the phenomenal forms into his own reflections and psychological studies. He did, and insistently so. Let us see how.

Vygotsky came closest to reproducing the original Marxian sense of the term in a series of epistemological remarks. On those occasions, his aim was to define the novelty of the *genetic* method in the sciences, a debate which he tended to illustrate with examples from his own field of study; for instance, by criticizing the methodological recourse to *introspection* as a means to gain scientific insight into the mental apparatus.

Marx commented on the phenotypic approach in a most general form when he stated that "if the essence of objects coincided with the form of their outer manifestations, then every science would be superfluous" — an extremely reasonable observation. If every object was phenotypically and genotypically equivalent (that is, if the true principles of its construction and operation were expressed by its outer manifestation), then everyday experience would fully suffice to replace scientific analysis. . . . In that sense, real scientific analysis differs radically from subjective, introspective analysis, which by its very nature cannot hope to go beyond pure description. (Vygotsky, 1978, 63.)

The original distinction established in *Capital* III between superficial or surface forms of manifestation, on the one hand, and the "concealed essential pattern" of any phenomenon, on the other, is fully maintained in this quote. Nothing more than the manifest familiarity that Vygotsky displays in it with the Marxian vocabulary encourages me to read other fragments in *Thought and Language* in continuity with this discussion. The final chapters of this book, as we well know, were devoted to analyzing the process of concept formation in children. In them, Vygotsky analyzed the way concepts form and develop in the interplay between the ontogenetic plane and instruction on the

microgenetic one. His outline commenced with the primitive phases in children's cognitive development, those consisting of *syncretic images* and *complex formations* (Vygotsky, 2012, 118–43), and finally succeeded in differentiating between *false, experimental concepts*, on the one hand, and *true, academic, scientific concepts* (144–5), on the other. The way these terms were described automatically leads the intuitive reader into thinking that the latter opposition may be related, in some way, to the previous one which set apart the “true principles of construction” from the phenomenal, “outer manifestations” of any given reality. And indeed, this connection was finally made explicit by Vygotsky (2012) himself. A couple of pages later, he resorted to exactly the same sentence by Marx, but this time used it to illustrate the difference between experimental and scientific concepts: “The specific character of scientific concepts was thoroughly defined by Marx,” he stated, “who wrote that ‘if the appearance and essence of things were similar, there would be no need to have science.’ Scientific concepts would be unnecessary if they were reflecting mere appearances of objects, as empirical objects do” (183).

An underlying argument clearly holds together these concepts and quotations, and the key issue to bear in mind is that, insofar as experimental concepts arise within the narrow scope of children's “everyday life” (167) — *i.e.*, in dialog with their immediate, practical experiences — they too must initially suffer from the deformation that Marx attributed to all phenomenal forms, even more so considering that “the child's framework is purely situational, with the word tied to something concrete” (142). This hypothesis is corroborated by subsequent theoretical developments. For instance, just as Marx (1959) described the ideas that inhered in bourgeois, vulgar economy as “estranged,” “absurd,” and involving “perfect contradictions” — all of which, however, did not prevent them from being entirely “understandable to the popular mind” (Ch. XLVIII, 570) — so Vygotsky found false, experimental concepts to be profoundly contradictory, characterized by a total absence of systematization and by arbitrariness — “the absence of system is the cardinal psychological difference distinguishing spontaneous from scientific concepts” (Vygotsky, 2012, 217) — yet, at the same time, he described them as entirely operative and intuitive for the childish mind, “saturated” as they were “with [the child's] experience” (204). In the context of this discussion, I believe the role of school instruction should be defined as that of

aiding children to leave behind their cognitive dependency on an experiential scope that is necessarily contradictory on account of the deformed character of the *Erscheinungsformen* it falls prey to. This idea is not unrelated to the leitmotiv of *mediation*, neither to its phylogenetic nor to its ontogenetic and microgenetic expressions. Just as language development, in the first case, becomes the significant variable in the transition from ape to man by allowing individuals of the human species to go beyond immediate experience (74–6; 1978, 31), as children advance along the various steps of education they distance themselves from the experimental — phenomenal — immediacy of their surroundings and get closer to a scientific — genetic — understanding of their truth (32).

Conclusion: From Socio-Constructivism to Critical Pedagogy

There are two aims that I have attempted to meet in the main body of this article. The first one has been to show that Marx's breakthroughs on the *Erscheinungsformen*, despite arising in the field of sociology and dealing with the mode of production, left a profound and lasting imprint on Lev Vygotsky's developmental psychology. This influence was consonant with Vygotsky's Marxian heritage and was reflected in his work, both through general methodological remarks and through his own analysis of concrete cognitive occurrences. I hope to have been able to justify this first claim. More than this, however, I have also argued that Marx's account of the origin and effects of the superficial forms of manifestation which he found in society provides a critical mirror to identify a generally unacknowledged blind spot in the work of the Soviet psychologist. My argument is that Vygotsky did not devote enough attention to the obstacles that the social *Erscheinungsformen* might pose to the formation of scientific concepts, and that as a consequence, neither did he elaborate a cogent pedagogy capable of overcoming this stumbling block. Maybe he was led by the belief that the Soviet society of his day had already eradicated class division and the effect of the phenomenal forms, and that, accordingly, this was a problem that Soviet educators could dispense with. Not only was this reading as false then in relation to Soviet society as it is false, today, regarding our own; in addition to this, I have emphasized the necessary epistemological character of the phenomenal forms and of its distortions, both of which are somewhat independent of class

division. Be that as it may, I am afraid that, on account of these deficits, Vygotsky's contribution to the microgenetic, instructional level was not as sophisticated and well-founded as were the ideas with which he enriched the arguments on the phylogenetic, sociocultural, and ontogenetic planes. This limitation seems particularly significant for an educational psychology such as his, which places so much stock on instruction encouraging cognitive development.

Other scholars before me have detected pedagogical inconsistencies in Vygotsky's theory, ones related mainly to his description of how scientific concepts should be taught in the classroom for children to gradually achieve their substitution for spontaneous ones. Authors like Karpov and Haywood have argued that "teaching conceptions solely based on Vygotsky's theorizing run the risk of falling prey to the danger of verbalism as a detriment of action, of transmission at the cost of transformation, of passive acceptance at the expense of construction and reinvention" (quoted in Lourenço, 2012, 291). Their doubts focused on Vygotsky's strong emphasis on *systematic instruction* of scientific concepts, which they interpreted as being too similar to formal instruction, despite the fact that the Soviet psychologist himself stated that his words should not be confused with the *direct transmission of scientific concepts* (292). The latter, he considered as impossible as it was fruitless (Vygotsky, 2012, 159). When teachers embraced direct transmission, their students ended up learning only pseudo-concepts, not scientific ones. Contrary to Karpov's and Haywood's stand, my own criticism has been directed at what I believe Vygotsky's psychological and pedagogical theory — and, concerning the latter, particularly his rendition of the ZPD — should have integrated as a coherent offshoot of his original arguments (namely, Marx's account of *Erscheinungsformen*) but failed to include.

Before closing this article, it avails me to explain which pedagogical problems these were, to which Vygotsky remained fatally inattentive, and which weigh down any attempt to build a rigorous pedagogy. The first idea the reader must bear in mind is that the pedagogical obstacle posed by the *Erscheinungsformen* is actually an outgrowth of an originally epistemological one, and that the latter stems from the fact that society is neither external to, nor separate from, the individual who seeks to attain scientific knowledge of it. To say it more rigorously: any attempt to understand scientifically a given social milieu must occur from within, and the trouble lies in that this epistemological

dynamic creates a complex dialectic between the subject and the object of inquiry — between the observer and the subject matter in which the former, however, is also included — which obviously complicates the attainment of the intended goal. As noted above, this dialectic inevitably impinges on the instructional setting where teachers should attempt to facilitate, through their didactic practice, their students' internalization of scientific representations of society. We clearly face one of those circumstances in which, as Henry A. Giroux (2006) says, teachers run the risk of “being theoretically or ideologically correct and pedagogically wrong” (63). Among the many difficulties that may surface as a result of this epistemological conundrum, emotional *resistances* on the part of students are not the least important, since they are but the visible face of a conceptual insufficiency which is most frequently left unvoiced. Hence bell hook's (2010) observation that “professors who work diligently to teach critical thinking often become discouraged when students resist” (10). No pedagogical approach aimed at overcoming ideological bias has ever failed to identify a whole range of student attitudes acting as buffers and defenses against those ideas which question, criticize, or somewhat problematize identity constructions and past experiences, and the *cognitive schemata* which result from both. Should the teacher lack the procedural skills to negotiate this process appropriately, anxiety may directly arise as a final resistance against learning (Lewis, 2009, 449). Hence the need for the teacher to scaffold the students through ways that allow them to negotiate this suffering and orient it towards constructive developments. Vygotsky (1994) himself underscored the fact that the transformation of the child's spontaneous concepts into scientific ones is accompanied by “the most extreme tension in the activity of his own thinking” (365).

Furthermore, the nature of the social *Erscheinungsformen* is such that they cannot be dissociated from individual phenomenal forms through which any student understands, in the same distorted manner, his or her place in society, generally attributing to him or herself negative or positive qualities in the process. Coming through one's own false impressions concerning society also implies coming through previous misconceptions about one's merits or failures, knowledge or ignorance. Frantz Fanon's analytic account of the *colonized subject*, to which Paulo Freire so frequently resorted, or the latter's equally pungent examination of the mirages and phantoms that take hold

of oppressed peoples (Freire, 2000, 60); or even his notion of *class suicide* (119), afford key examples for any practitioner willing to face the challenge it imposes; as do representations frequently attached to members of ethnic and racial minorities (Earp, 2013; Cummins, 1986), or certain social classes. Owen Jones' (2011) recent sociological study of the processes whereby profoundly deformed and *elitist* representations of society have gradually wormed into the common sense of British politics clearly bears out Giroux's (1987) point that the problem we are referring to is not merely "associated with the poor or minority groups; it is also a problem for those members of the middle and upper classes who have withdrawn from public life into a world of sweeping privatization, pessimism, and greed" (5).

These are the kind of pedagogic hindrances that may result from Vygotsky's incomplete integration of Marx's account of the *Erscheinungsformen*. However, I am able to formulate what I consider to be the next essential questions in rigorous terms: Which pedagogical approach might possibly succeed in encouraging a micro-genetic development that takes children's representations far enough from their familiar surroundings to help them internalize successfully, and not in a parrot-like manner, the deeper causes and genetic processes of reality? What manner of instruction could possibly aid them in taking "their own daily lives as the object of their reflection process" and, as a result, attaining "a perspective that permits them to emerge from that daily routine and begin their own independent development" (Freire, 2000, 152–3)? And, most importantly, how should the ZPD dynamics be provided scaffolding for cognition to progress beyond the representations of the phenomenal forms? Au (2007, 296) showed that these pedagogical interrogations are not disconnected from Lenin's famous political question, What is to be done?

Due to space requirements, full answers will have to be developed in future papers. And yet, if I have summoned the names of Henry A. Giroux or Paolo Freire in previous paragraphs, this has not been by chance. Education has come a long way since Vygotsky met its phenomenal stumbling blocks, and in the meantime no pedagogical school has gone farther in surmounting them than critical pedagogy. I don't wish to conclude this article without at least suggesting how it made this possible. It happened mostly thanks to Freire's project of *conscientização*, a term translated into English as "critical awareness," "critical consciousness," or through the neologism "conscientization."

It has already been stated that human beings, fixed in the immediacy of their daily lives, can only access partial, deformed, unsystematic, contradictory, and ideological representations of reality and of their own place inside it. Against this inertia, Freire's *conscientização* aimed precisely at "the surpassing of the spontaneous sphere of apprehension of reality by a criticist [and scientific] position" (Freire, 1980, 158), a quote which proves the Marxian inspiration of his project. In addition, concerning Vygotsky's failure to give a pedagogical translation to Marx's theory of the phenomenal forms, Freire's essential contribution lay in how he believed the transition between spontaneous and scientific concepts had to take place. It was through *dialog*. But not through any kind, but only through dialog which was democratic and egalitarian. "Dialogue," he said, "is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (Freire, 1990, 76). This clearly implied a step beyond Vygotsky's pedagogy. As opposed to the unilateral and direct transmission of knowledge conveyed by the "banking concept of education" (Freire, 2000, 70–1), but also to the authoritarian gestures which Karpov and Haywood found in Vygotsky's paradigm, the reason why democratic dialog had to be retained by this pedagogy was that the profound cognitive transition Freire devised would only occur if teachers were able to engage the cognitive backgrounds of the students whose viewpoints and identities they had to expand as much as transform. This last step, in turn, implied the paradoxical need for the educators' initial movements to engage the phenomenal forms which shaped the students' frames of mind.

This was the crucial and complex move in Freire's pedagogy, a step which he defined as the "near mystery" of democratic forms of teaching (Shor, 1993, 30). I am alluding to the need for the teachers to "affirm themselves without thereby disaffirming their students" (Freire and Faundez, 1989, 34). Since the task of leaving behind the ideological effects associated with the phenomenal forms always came against solid emotional and conceptual resistances, it was necessary for educators to negotiate very carefully the students' gradual construction of knowledge. Every step of this process had to advance just one inch beyond the learners' level of awareness. "One ought not to teach what one knows without, first, knowing what those one is about to teach know and on what level they know it; and second, without respecting this knowledge" (Freire, 2000, 260; see also 78). As made

clear by this quote, Freire attempted to engage the students' superficial ideas, affects, and daily experiences as a first step towards raising their knowledge above them, well beyond their ideological influx, by integrating this original content into a greater and more complex conceptual whole. Interestingly enough, the only way for teachers to adjust their own practice to these dynamics was by giving priority to the students' participation in the educational process — something which, in turn, asked for dialogic interaction to be placed at the center of the pedagogy. Dialog was the only means through which teachers could attune their didactic interventions to the students' cognitive level, precisely because it allowed the pupils to set the pace of their learning. Building on the students' interventions, teachers might then accelerate the process through challenges which they were sure would fall within the students' grasp.

To the extent that Freire's *conscientização* provided a common frame of reference for many contemporary approaches to critical pedagogy, I consider that, despite the diversity and even contradictoriness that this term tends to bring together (Biesta, 1998; Gur-Ze'ev, 1998; McLaren, 2001; Breuing, 2011), a unitary framework for this diversity may be plotted against the blind spots discussed in relation to Vygotsky's socio-constructivist paradigm. Freire's critical pedagogy integrated precisely what Vygotsky left out, and succeeded in what he could not bring to a good end. While the term *Erscheinungsformen* is still absent from the definition critical pedagogy provides of itself — as is the case with Marxism — I suggest that its essence may lie in how it has reacted against and overcome the effects posed by the phenomenal forms on cognition, teaching, and learning. As a result, it could well be described as the pedagogy of the *Erscheinungsformen*.

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