**Attempting a Socio-cultural-historical Analysis of the Development and Applications of Socio-cultural-historical Approaches in Greece**

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**Introduction**

According to Daniels, Cole and Wertsch, studying *Vygotsky in context* means that we should define two different historical eras and multiple social milieus – the context of Soviet Union in the first half of the twentieth century and different parts of the world of the twenty-first century (Daniels, Cole & Wertsch, 2007). We also need to emphasize a ‘third space’ often involved in what can be seen as *translation* work – and that is the space where researchers who now work in Greece, Spain, Brazil, Japan etc. have received their training (for example Anna Chronaki works with theories that were produced in the Soviet Union, was trained in UK and now works in Greece). The situation becomes more complex given the internalization of research (as a distinct part of our work) played out in international conferences and symposia (as well as through the English publications of post-vygotskian research).

In this frame, we will try today to analytically study the “Greek case” of translation and transformation of socio-cultural-historical approaches. According to L.Vygotsky (1997), the development of ideas can be scientifically explained by these three aspects: 1) the general socio-cultural context of the era; 2) the general conditions and laws of knowledge; 3) the objective demands upon scientific knowledge that follow from the nature of the phenomena that are studied in a given stage of investigation. From our point of view, the investigation of the development of ideas includes also a study of the particular subjects that are involved in the production and application of scientific knowledge. We are not thus going to perform such an analysis from a ‘neutral’ standpoint: we understand ourselves as engaged or critical social scientists and are also interested in the self- or meta- critique of our own critical account. We also do not represent anybody than ourselves and will focus more on self-critical, non-positivist and reflective socio-cultural-historical approaches that have been developed in Greece. The interested audience is also advised to participate in the following presentations by other Greek colleagues: …
Greece
Greece can definitely not be considered a typical developed country of Western Europe. It is located in Southern Europe, and has been an important crossroad for different cultures. According to Liakos (2007), Greece could not be regarded in isolation from transnational contexts and cultural exchanges which transcend the territorial and intellectual space. During the Post-World-War II period Greece was transformed from an agricultural to an urban society (Epitropoulos & Roudomet, 1998) while at the same time a lot of migrant workers moved to Western Europe and all over the world. Athens collected half of the whole country’s population. From 1967 to 1974 Greece experienced a military dictatorship, which was followed by social movements that slowly transformed the dominant political scene from right wing to social-democratic. Several scholars argue that a Southern welfare model, has dominated in Greece – characterized by a strong commitment to preserve traditional family hood and maximize dependence on the family (Esping-Andersen’s, 1990; Kalogeraki, 2009). At the same time, Greece as a semi-peripheral state depends on the major EU and global capitalist centers. In this context, a so-called “modernization” has taken place in Greece in the context of European Integration over the last 30 years. The official policies of this modernization can be characterized as neoliberal and technocratic (the best example of which are the current “measures against” the debt crisis).

University education in Greece
The social movement against the military dictatorship of the 70s began inside the university. For this reason the university in Greece has since then been explicitly considered to be the institution that safeguards democracy and ensures the free development and circulation of ideas. In this context:

“Education at university level shall be provided exclusively by institutions which are fully self-governed public law legal persons. […] The establishment of university level institutions by private persons is prohibited” (THE CONSTITUTION OF HELLENIC DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC, 16 article, 1975, translation by M. Dafermakis).

As it becomes clear from the citation above, private universities are not recognized by the Greek constitution. What is more: each university is responsible for the standards and the quality of its academic programs, although in practice Greek Universities “do not have significant administrative and financial independence” (Mattew & Saiti, 2005, p. 5).

Following the constitutional change in the 70s a grant reform of Higher Education took place in 1982 in Greece. The institution of the professorship was abolished and
replaced by the Department that represents a specific scientific discipline. The Departments are the basic organizational units of University. They are responsible for planning and implementing educational programs. This democratization of the Greek university system opened the university to scientists from various theoretical and research trends and traditions and the heterogeneity of departments increased. Nowadays’ Greek university professors have been educated in countries as diverse as: US, Canada, UK, France, Germany, Russia/ Soviet Union, Poland etc. The Greek university is thus far more heterogeneous than in most countries of the world. Without this democratization of the Greek university in 1980s the emergence of the socio-cultural-historical approaches as non-mainstream views and theories within the realm of scientific production would have been literally impossible.

On the other hand, the institutionalization of science and educational and research policy boundaries tend to strengthen fragmentation of scientific disciplines and specialization of education in subfields – in Greece and all over the Western world. Durkheim (1997) in his The Division of Labor discussed the fragmentation of philosophy into a host of special disciplines and the further fragmentation of those disciplines into narrowed, specialized fields of research. The split between social scientists and the development of sub-specializations within sub-specializations produces a low degree of social cohesion and solidarity (Oren, 2009). The fragmentation of science creates difficulties in studying broad, interdisciplinary and synthetic theories as a sociocultural, historical theory. The narrow division of labor in academia creates fragmented reception of the socio-cultural-historical theory.

What is more: Greek Universities increasingly reproduce the dominant North Atlantic scientific “paradigm”. As in most countries all over the world,

“…overspecialization, unjustified fascination with statistics and quantitative methods of research, and, subsequently, knowledge fragmentation, associated with the American empiricist tradition” dominate. In this context “Vygotsky’s legacy as a collaborative and widely distributed project is a particularly important contribution to the ongoing quest for the integrative human, social and behavioral science” (Yanitsky, 2011, p. XXX).

One of the most important of contemporary social research in Greece is the domination of empiricism and a lack of interest in theory building. The Vygotskian analysis of crisis in psychology and criticism of technocratic approach (“feldsherism in science”), “the separation of the technical, executive function of the investigation from scientific, theoretical thinking” (Yaroshevsky & Gurgenitze, 1997, p. 364) seem to be very timely in the contemporary Greek scientific context and not only.
The current Greek government is also now attempting a radical neoliberal reform of Higher Education:

“The self-government of Universities and the autonomy of academic processes are also being eroded. The processes of knowledge production and acquisition, as well as the working conditions of the academic community, are now governed by the principles of the private sector, from which Universities are obliged to seek funds […] At the same time, public funding for education is drastically decreasing (up to 50% decrease)”

(http://supportgreekacademia.wordpress.com/)

In these circumstances it is very difficult to promote the critical sociocultural approaches and produce new knowledge primarily in the area of basic social research. However, given these circumstances it might be more important than ever before to turn towards a deeper embracing of critical sociocultural studies, in order a) to explain why agendas of progress/development come so easily adopted, b) how people get marginalized in such situations of extreme pressure and c) what possibilities of resistance and empowerment still people have.

**Socio-cultural-historical approaches and Greek academia**

Until the late 1980's the socio-cultural-historical approaches were mostly unknown in Greece. Socio-cultural-historical research was treated with skepticism and even conservative bias against the trends and approaches that came from the USSR. During the years of cold war a lot of prejudice against Soviet Union and soviet science appeared. The introduction of the socio-cultural-historical approaches in Greece has been slowly achieved by scientists who have obtained their training in different foreign countries (UK, Germany, Poland, Russia, etc.) with varied cultural and scientific traditions.

At the same time these scientists were not passive recipients of the versions of socio-cultural-historical approaches in the countries where they studied. They attempted to develop and apply socio-cultural-historical approaches into the specific context of the contemporary Greek scientific research scape as well as in the context of different disciplines (psychology, pedagogy/educational science, anthropology, philosophy, history of art, linguistics etc.). As it has usually been the case all over the world, the discipline or the departments that mainly have been open to socio-cultural-historical research are those of educational science. Psychology has been far more positivist and until 2002 the socio-cultural-historical approaches had not been presented (or had only a minor place) in the curriculum in the Departments of Psychology at Greek Universities.
In 2002 appeared the first course, which was totally devoted to Cultural-Historical Psychology in the Department of Psychology at the University of Crete\textsuperscript{1}. Dafermos’s book *The historico-cultural theory of Vygotsky* was the basis of this course. The students who attended this seminar expressed their surprise about the content and ideas presented in this. The ideas of cultural-historical psychology were completely new and unfamiliar to students. They claimed that cultural-historical psychology was a completely different psychology than the psychology, which until then these students had been taught. At the same time, the course on Cultural-Historical Psychology proved to be considered as difficult for many students and has been preferred by only a few quite open-minded and engaged students.

Regarding the publication of socio-cultural-historical works some turning points in the introduction and expansion of the socio-cultural-historical approaches to Greece were the following:

- **Without a date**: A.N. Leontiev’s *Activity, consciousness, personality* was translated and published in Greek.
- **1990**: K. Levitin’s book *One is not born a Personality* was translated and published in Greek. In that book profiles and works of major soviet educational psychologists are presented (Vygotsky, Leontiev, Luria, Meshcheryakov, Davidov).
- **1993**: The book *Thought and language* was translated and published in Greek. This translation of some Vygotsky’s works in Greek contributed to promote the sociocultural-historical research.
- **1995**: Luria’s *Cognitive Development* was translated and published in Greek. According to A. Kostadidou-Eukleidi (1995), evidence that Piaget’s theory of cognitive development is inadequate has been accumulated and Vygotsky’s theory has provided a new theoretical framework to explain the cognitive development in terms of the cultural-historical approach.
- **1997**: Vygotsky’s *Mind in society* was translated and published in Greek.
- **2000**: Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s poetics: polyphony and unfinalizability* was translated and published in Greek.
- **2002**: Luria’s *The Man with a Shattered World* was translated and published in Greek. This book illustrates Luria’s concept of “romantic science”.
- **2002**: M. Dafermos’s *Cultural-historical theory of Vygotsky: Philosophical, Psychological and Pedagogical Aspects* [in Greek]. That is the first systematic

\textsuperscript{1} Single lectures on Vygotsky and socio-cultural-historical approaches have previously been given mainly by M. Pourkos and A. Marvakis and their invited guests in the same Department. General referencing to Vygotsky – but no single course – has also often taken place in the Educational Science Departments all over Greece. One of the most active professors to mention here is S. Vosniadou, previously employed in different Departments of Educational Science and now working at the Department of Methodology and History of Science at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.
investigation of Vygotsky’s theoretical legacy in Greece. This book offers a philosophical, historical and epistemological analysis of the development of cultural historical psychology.

- **2003:** An anthology of soviet writings on psychology with the title *Soviet Psychology and child development* [in Greek] is published (by E. Vagenas, Ed).
- **2007:** M. Kouvelas book *Dialectical psychology. In the footsteps of Vygotsky* [in Greek] was published. The author of this book argues that Vygotsky is the founder of dialectical psychology as an open-ended system of psychological knowledge that reflects the reality. The application of dialectical materialism in psychological research is the foundation of general psychology.
- **2009:** The book *General Psychology. Dialectical-materialistic approach* [in Greek] is published (by M. Kouvelas, Ed). That is a handbook of works of different soviet psychologists on crucial psychological issues (development of mind, activity theory, personality, cognitive functions, etc.).
- **2009:** K. Papadopoulou’s book *The zone of proximal development in theory of Vygotsky* [in Greek] was published. Papadopoulou argues that the zone of proximal development is connected with the development of psychological functions and not the acquirement of knowledge or learning skills.
- **In press** is a special issue of Greek journal “Utopia” on Soviet psychology. This issue includes the contributions of several Greek researchers about some aspects of the cultural historical psychology and activity theory.

These works vary in quality – a few of them are translated from English (or German), other directly from Russian. It should also be noted that translations have often not been edited by specialist academics but by intellectuals who were interested in the political aspects and applications of socio-cultural-historical approaches. Almost none of these works emerged in funded research programs.

The same is true for the greater part of a series of edited volumes that present original research by Greek and international scholars who have been inspired by socio-cultural-historical approaches. These volumes resulted from an equivalent number of conferences that took place in a particular dialogical atmosphere at the University of Crete and a few of them include also Greek translations of original Vygotsky’s works that had not yet been translated in Greek. The volumes include summaries of all chapters in English:


The list renders visible that the label “socio-cultural-historical” approaches in Greece does not only refer to Vygotsky (as often the case in UK, or to Leontiev – as initially has been the case in Germany and elsewhere). The reception of socio-cultural-historical approaches is also much broader and more complex than it has been in USA. Local scholars have tried to develop socio-cultural-historical approaches in various directions or alternative perspectives – often in dialogue with other theoretical frames, such as: constructivism, feminism, postcolonial critique, ecological thinking, post-structuralism, multimodality research, critical realism, dialogism, logical-historical methodology.

They dealt with different theoretical and empirical problems in fields as diverse as: learning, moral education, mathematics education, music education, inclusion of Roma children etc. Contents and themes also include: metaphors, religion, carnival, locally produced story-tails and poems, discussion of broader methodological issues, embodiment in cultural-historical perspective, education of ethnic minorities (Chronaki, 2005), cognitive change (Vosniadou, 2007), multiliteracies (Katsarou, 2011). The audience and readership consists mostly of local students and (future) teachers (as opposed to articles written in English in international journals).

It is difficult to tell whether these works can be seen as representative of a more general trend – or rather as isolated attempts to escape dominant (scientific) discourse and politics. It is also difficult to set the borderline between what can be seen as critical and reflective research and more ‘mainstream-like’ interpretations of socio-cultural-historical classics. We consider however that this research deserves special attention because it differs a lot from recent socio-culturally-historically oriented works produced in other contexts, regarding its heterogeneity, variety, openness to different fields, disciplines and traditions – and to a great extent, its political aspirations.

At the same time it should be noted that the majority of researchers in Greece have until recently referred to only two books by Vygotsky: Thought and language, and Mind in society. Many educators and psychologists praise the benefits of Vygotsky’s theory, but actually they know very little of his work. Many researchers accept only a few fragmented Vygotsky’s ideas, taken out of context his works. In this case Vygotsky’s ideas are used
only for the illustration and legalization of theories of their authors – mainly of cognitivist orientation. Multiple interpretations and applications of sociocultural theory have appeared but the systematic theoretical research of development of the research program of Vygotsky has not been enough promoted.

To some extent one could argue that the North Atlantic context of translation and reception of socio-cultural-historical approaches dominates also in Greece, however at the same time others traditions of translations and understanding exist (critical traditions in "western" psychology and pedagogy, Russian and Eastern Europe traditions, German tradition, etc.). We consider that the wide range of theoretical frameworks of interpretation produce not only confusion and misunderstandings but also new challenges for the further development and applications of socio-cultural-historical approaches in the current circumstances for the solution of new problems. Unfortunately the reflection and dialogue about these transformations of meaning of socio-cultural-historical approaches in different contexts has not yet been much developed in Greece. This situation fits well into the current use of Vygotsky as a “chewing gum” for educational policy, as we will see below.

**Vygotsky as a “chewing gum” for educational policy**

Last years in the English-speaking regions of the Western world a transformation of Vygotsky into “a ‘chewing gum’ for everybody, everyday, and every occasion” takes place (Dafermos & Marvakis, 2011, p. 95). Following this trend, in recent years, attempts to integrate Vygotsky’s theory into the Greek national educational policy have taken place. The former president of the Greek Pedagogical Institute which determines the national education policy argued that

“‘The art to teach and to learn - is an adaptive constant reflection on the following parameters: the learning environment, learning methods and pedagogical principles - this be applied for example on verbal, audiovisual learning in accordance with the conclusions theory of the programmed learning of behaviorist approaches (Skinner), the active and constructive learning and the sociocultural context (Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner)”’ (Allahiotis, 2007, pp. 108-109, translation from Greek by M. Dafermos).

The point is that different learning theories can be combined to organize the educational process. However, it was exactly Vygotsky in his work “The historical meaning of the crisis of psychology” (1997) who criticized the eclecticism, the borrowing of the variety of theories with different epistemological and philosophical background and mechanical combining them.
Following EU guidelines, the Greek Ministry of Education and Research has implemented a version of Vygotskian theory in order to educate teachers as Informational Communication Technologies trainers (“ICT is at the very core of the knowledge-based society”, European Commission, 2011). The objective of the ICT program is to improve the competitiveness of the European industry. This ongoing modernization of the Greek educational system includes a gradual process of transformation of learning theories: from passive to active memorization, from behaviorist to constructivist development of learning using the mediation of teachers, school and out of school educational resources (Hallak, 1999). In the context of this official educational policy and modernization of the school curriculum a few ideas of Vygotsky have been employed, especially the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development.

Vygotsky’s theory is presented in this frame as one of the major psychological theories that can be used to help to achieve those objectives. According to the coordinators of this program, Vygotsky’s theory has two important applications in the field of education. The first application is the cooperative learning among groups with different skill levels. The second one is an application of the principle of reducing the participation of adults and the gradual assumption of responsibility of children.

In our view, the “Informational Communication Technologies” program is an attempt to incorporate Vygotsky’s theory into an official technocratic discourse about the “knowledge-based society” and “technological progress”. This official dominant discourse emphasizes the computer-mediated communication, the new ways of distributing and consuming media texts that are characterized by interactivity and hypertext forms, virtual reality etc. (cf. Chronaki & Matos, under submission). It is a type of technocratic imperialism which “claims to be value-free and therefore the goods are deemed appropriate for all countries” (Sampson, 1984, p. 21). The theory of contextualized learning is then transformed into its opposite, an entirely decontextualized asocial, ahistorical theory.

In Greece in order to be employed as a secondary education teacher a candidate must pass a state examination. In the context described above teachers should answer to questions about Vygotsky’s theory as in the following example:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Example of a State examination question</th>
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<tr>
<td>According Vygotsky, the ZPD:</td>
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<tr>
<td>a) Mainly associated with the assessment of teaching for the future academic performance of students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Is a central concept for understanding the links between development and learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
c) Refers to the opportunity estimates for the abilities of the student through the school guidance.

d) Associated with theories of multiple intelligence and strengthen the student's psychomotor skills

[State examination of teachers (ASEP), 2008, translation by M. Dafermakis].

A limited, formal interpretation of cultural psychology dominates in the official pedagogical discourse and ZPD is presented only as a psychological unity and not as socio-historical unity of study (cf. Newman & Holzman, 1993). In the context of the official pedagogical discourse ZPD is presented as fixed, stable cognitive scheme, which can be associated with other schemes from other pedagogical and psychological theories. Formal education does not give the opportunity to understand the different interpretations of ZPD and the variety of approaches in socio-cultural-historical psychology and activity theory. The notion of the Zone of Proximal Development isn’t the most important and original idea of Vygotsky and in isolation from other concepts of cultural-historical psychology it could easily be misunderstood. The incorporation of a new idea into a formal official curriculum is thus a way to destroy the innovate character of this idea and transform it into a formal, ordinary, routine, linear scheme.

Vygotsky’s theory becomes thus a particular didactic model and a recipe for teaching. However, the treatment of the teacher as a passive performer of teaching recipes that have been invented by experts without his active participation is coming in radical contrast to the cultural historical theory. From the perspective of critical sociocultural research the teacher could not be longer a passive consumer of the products and recipes of the intellectual production of “experts” and become active social subject, when he will become interested not only prepared theoretical results (or "successful" teaching recipes), but also for the research process which led to them to produce new knowledge. In particular it is necessary to study the transformations and development of Vygotsky’s research program, and understand his method of scientific investigation (Dafermos, 2002).

**Overview and open questions**

We recently witness an expansion of Vygotsky’s theory and socio-cultural-historical approaches in different fields in Greece (cognitive change, education of gypsies children, teaching experiment, musical education, multiliteracies, etc.). The field of socio-cultural-historical research is characterized by pluralism of perspectives and multivocality which are the fertile source of new ideas. However many difficult and open questions certainly appear, without easy answers: Do all these enterprises are new implications of the Soviet thinkers’ insights or new theories, which have been inspired from their legacy?
What are the benefits and limitation of different perspectives and version of socio-cultural-historical theory? Does a common thread exist between the different perspectives and versions of socio-cultural-historical theory? How do we solve the problem of compatibility between different interpretations of socio-cultural-historical theory? How socio-cultural-historical theory can be contextualized? In which directions are the socio-cultural-historical approaches transformed in the social and scientific context of Greece? What is the relation between socio-cultural-historical theory and its empirical, practical applications?

In our opinion, two different interpretations of the variety of current sociocultural and activity approaches could be formulated. According to the first interpretation, the modern sociocultural and activity approaches could be considered as a further development and applications of the research program of the cultural historical psychology and activity theory.

According to the second interpretation, we should take seriously into consideration the Papadopoulos’s (1996) statement that Vygotsky’s legacy (and the Soviet legacy in general) has been incorporated in paradigmatically different theories. The second interpretation focuses primarily on the discontinuity between Vygotsky’s legacy and current sociocultural and activity approaches, in contrast to the first interpretation which demonstrates their continuity and theoretical similarities.

Socio-cultural-historical approaches have been developed in very heterogeneous ways all over the last 20 years in Greece. It is difficult to claim in this context that socio-cultural-historical psychology and activity theory have been developed in a linear way by quantitative accumulation of new knowledge. It is also difficult to present the one or the other interpretation as the “right” one.

The history of socio-cultural-historical psychology and activity theory in the global and national contexts has not been yet written. It could be useful for a preparation of such a history to take into account some ideas from the Vygotskian analysis of evolution of psychological ideas in his book “The Historical Meaning of the Crisis of Psychology” and also some Voloshinov’s ideas on the development of Freud’s theory: “It can be said of any important discovery in any area, when it transcends the boundaries of that particular realm, that it has the tendency to turn into an explanatory principle for all psychological phenomena and lead psychology beyond its proper boundaries into broader realms of knowledge” (Vygotsky, 1997, p.341). When a new idea (theory or discovery, etc.) transcends the boundaries of its applications by extrapolating to a new realm, not only its possibilities, but also its limitations are revealed. In this way the conditions of its overcoming are created. However, in this case a question appears: what is the next step? The further “development” or the “overcoming” of sociocultural and activity approaches and in which direction?
References


