

BEFORE THE “BOOM” Readings and Uses of Vygotsky in Argentina (1935–1974)

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This article analyzes, from the standpoint of reception studies and transnational history, the different ways Lev S. Vygotsky’s published work in Spanish, English, and Russian was read, discussed, and used in Argentina from 1935 to 1974. This “early” reception primarily involved 2 groups: writers affiliated with the Argentine Communist Party, and individuals without political affiliations who engaged in discussion with Communists. The article argues that Communism, as a cultural tradition and political organization, played a key role in the reception and diffusion of Vygotsky’s work. The ideas of the Soviet psychologist were applied in 3 different areas: the psychophysiological theorizing of consciousness, the diagnosis and treatment of dyslexia, and the study of psychiatric phenomena. This article partially reconstructs the circulation of Soviet psychology in Argentina in order to provide a critical approach regarding the inclusion of certain figures in the psychological canon, the methods by which these authors have been researched in the past, the means that enable the circulation of psychological knowledge, and the ways in which the political and intellectual milieu of reception define the productivity and relevance of an author.

Keywords: reception studies, transnational history, Communism, psychopathology

How does an author achieve canonical status? The standard narrative of Lev S. Vygotsky’s rise to international recognition combines aspects of both the “old” and “new” approaches in the history of psychology, following a standard distinction in historical studies of psychology (e.g., Lovett, 2006; Vezzetti, 2007) in which “old” approaches emphasize originality and personal initiatives, and “new” approaches focus on collective efforts and contextual circum-

stances. On the one hand, Vygotsky’s ideas, developed in harsh circumstances, as he struggled with both political turbulence and chronic illness, won recognition for their innovations in developmental, cognitive, and cultural psychology. On the other hand, his diffusion beyond the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) depended on the end of Stalinism as well as the initiatives of his close collaborator Alexander Luria and scholars from the United States such as Jerome Bruner and Michael Cole. The outcome of his colleagues’ efforts was the publication of two books under the name Lev Vygotsky—*Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 1962) and *Mind in Society* (Vygotsky, 1978)—and these books have become the main references in the explanation for how and why Vygotsky’s “boom” occurred in the “West” (e.g., Doise, Staerkle, & Clémence, 1996; Gillen, 2000; Tul’viste, 1989). Although this narrative does not reproduce the rhetoric of an isolated genius whose work reached world recognition by the sheer force of its epistemic virtues, it remains a very limited account, as it assumes a linear transmission from the USSR to the United States without considering the marked

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This article is part of a 3-year research project, UBACyT 20020130200134BA, “Psychological, Psychiatric and Psychoanalytical Circulation, Reception and Transformation in Argentina (1900–1993),” directed by Dr. Florencia Macchioli. This research was funded by a postdoctoral scholarship from the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Argentina.

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variations that interpretation of his work assumed in different contexts (e.g., [Ageyev, 2003](#); [Matusov, 2008](#)). Certainly limiting oneself to those names and locations is unacceptable for an examination of how Vygotsky's ideas circulated and were "rediscovered" in the West. Such research requires not only a critical interpretation, but a particular historical approach.

Vygotsky's incorporation into the canon would not be possible without those who initially included him—and kept him—in a canon. This assertion may seem trivial, but it calls for a strong shift of focus in research, as it situates mediators as historical protagonists—middle-range researchers, intellectuals, professionals, publishers, and other figures typically overshadowed by the insistence on canonical authors, despite the fact that they are the ones responsible for actively constructing the canon itself ([Schaffer, 1996](#)). What is at stake is the history of the groups and conditions in specific settings that prepared Vygotsky's "boom" in the 1980s, and the historical formation of an audience that considered him important for its own specific practices and intellectual objectives.

This article examines the reception of Vygotsky in Argentina by a network of intellectuals, psychiatrists, and pedagogues affiliated to the Argentinian Communist Party (ACP). As a reception study, it focuses on the specific readings and uses of an author made by local agents, who "concretize" knowledge in particular contexts ([Hohendahl & Silberman, 1977](#); [Jauss, 1982](#); [Thompson, 1993](#)). Psychological knowledge is relevant and useful only if there are local agents who adapt it to the needs and legitimacy criteria of each situation. There are no inherently "correct" interpretations of an author's work, but rather productive appropriations and alterations of it according to specific aims. Vygotsky himself or some intrinsic value of his body of work matters less than how and by whom he was made significant at a certain juncture. In a complementary manner, the conceptual tools developed within the framework of transnational history are useful in analyzing the routes and means of circulation of an author's body of work in different places ([Heilbron, Guilhot, & Jeanpierre, 2008](#); [Raj, 2013](#)). In conclusion, the combined approach of reception studies and transnational history can permit a deeper understanding of the dynamics of how psychological knowledge circulates, as well as

revealing new authors, sources, and problems for consideration.

The involvement of Communist members beyond the boundaries of their own country required a transnational stance, as local Communist agendas and policies were always bound to an international Communist organization. Certainly, western Communism was not homogeneous ([Dreyfus et al., 2008](#), pp. 9–14). In some countries, Communist parties played an influential role in national politics, such as in France and Italy (e.g., [Lazar, 1992](#)). In Argentina during the 1930s, members of the ACP assumed relevant positions leading some workers' unions ([Camarero, 2007](#)), but the following decade lost the support of workers to Peronism, which has remained—to this day—the main workers' movement, whereas ACP grew as an urban middle-class party ([Altamirano, 2011](#); [Amaral, 2008](#)). Although it had a small number of supporters, the ACP was the official representative of the USSR, and so it remained an important party in political discussions, government diplomacy, and anti-Communist propaganda (e.g., [Campione, 2007](#)). The ACP also held a strong position in the intellectual field, as it succeeded in organizing the intellectual antifascist movement during the 1930s and 1940s, and had an important presence in public universities during the 1950s and mid-1960s (e.g., [Pasolini, 2013](#)). After that, the rigid politics of Brezhnev, the emergence of a radical Latin American "New Left," highly critical of Communism, and mounting military repression of the Left in Latin America led the ACP to a severe crisis in the 1970s from which it never recovered (e.g., [Burgos, 2004](#); [Casola, 2015](#)).

Yet although geographical and political differences between western Communist parties were substantial, and their positions changed drastically through the period analyzed here, the relevant issue is that their philosophical base and organization were strongly rooted in an internationalist ideology. This was the foundation for a worldwide network of Communist parties, which provided a vast circuit for the exchange of scientific ideas, literature, and technologies. Western Communists actively spread in their countries the scientific knowledge produced in other socialist countries. For the ACP's psychiatrists and pedagogues, Vygotsky was, above all a *Soviet* scientist, and their main scientific references were the USSR and French

Communism. Communism was not only an Eastern European political order, but a global culture. This cultural and political aspect of the circulation of psychology by Communist and Soviet scholars has seldom been addressed (Harris, 1995; Mecacci, 1996; Ohayon, 2006; Vezzetti, 2016), but they determined scientific relations between the West and the Eastern Bloc, and within the West itself, for most of the 20th century.

Research on Vygotsky's life and times has increased during the last decade, resulting in innovative interpretations and new and productive sources (e.g., González Rey, 2014; Maslov, 2015; van der Veer, 2007; Yasnitsky & van der Veer, 2016). However, in general, scholars still consider Vygotsky to have been censored or misread in the West because of a lack of reliable information about his life, body of work, and historical setting; they have assumed a "correct" comprehension of his work and context will provide a key to an adequate understanding of his theories (e.g., Blanck, 2005; Elhammoumi, 2001). Research on Vygotsky and his context is important, but does not solve per se how he was received beyond the USSR. This article does not pursue the reconstruction of a "true" Vygotsky, but analyzes how it was possible to read him in the first place. From this standpoint, "misreadings" are unavoidable in the historical process of the circulation of knowledge, because of the different disciplinary agendas and historical conditions in each context. In the case of Vygotsky, even with detailed reconstruction of his life and milieu, and with appropriate editions and translations of his work, the geographical and historical relocation of his ideas will still produce different interpretations, appropriations, and uses of his figure and ideas, according to the specific conditions and debates of local contexts. The literature about the international dissemination of Vygotsky's work has been growing (e.g., da Silva & Davis, 2004; García, 2015; Ghassemzadeh, 2009; Mecacci, 2015), but it is still scarce, unconnected, and usually lacking a defined or innovative historiographical framework for the issue of knowledge circulation.

This article briefly presents "early" Argentine readings and uses of Vygotsky's ideas in three contexts: first, philosophical readings during the antifascist period; second, clinical uses of his work during the Cold War linked to dyslexia as

a learning disability; and third, also during the Cold War, studies of psychiatric disorders. The topics and time periods discussed are connected by the fact that most of the figures involved were members of the ACP, who questioned the appropriation of Soviet scientific knowledge by non-Communist authors. As such, this article is also partly a history of the Argentine leftist *intelligentsia*.

Vygotsky and the Psychophysiology of Consciousness (1935–1953)

Vygotsky was first published in Spanish in Kornilov's compilation *Problems of Contemporary Psychology* (Instituto de Psicología Experimental de Moscú; Vygotsky, 1935), translated by Andreu Nin I Pérez (1892–1937), one of Spain's most important Marxist and republican figures. The volume quickly arrived in Argentina and was read within the anti-fascist movement, which brought together politicians, scientists, professionals, and artists against philo-fascist and fraudulent governments from 1930 to 1945 (Cane, 1997). Local anti-fascism was modeled after the French *Comité de Vigilance des Intellectuels Antifascistes* [Anti-fascist Intellectuals' Vigilance Committee], which had many Communist and philo-Soviet scientists, such as the physicist Paul Langevin (1872–1946), psychologist Henri Wallon (1879–1962), biologist Marcel Prenant (1893–1983), and sociologist Georges Friedmann (1902–1977), among other intellectuals (Gouarné, 2013). These figures were followed by philo-Communist physicians and psychiatrists responsible for organizing Argentine anti-fascism, such as Aníbal Ponce (1898–1938), Jorge Thénon (1902–1985), Gregorio Bermann (1894–1972), and Emilio Troise (1886–1976). Troise was a well-known intellectual on the local Left. Initially a syndicalist socialist, he was attracted by the Russian Revolution and Bolshevism, becoming a fellow traveler of the ACP until he affiliated in 1943 and became party leader. In 1936, Troise gave a course on historical and dialectical materialism at the *Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores* [Free College of Superior Studies], an antifascist institution of informal but highly academic studies. Troise presented Marxism-Leninism as a scientific conception of nature and society based on the mutable properties and interactions within

and between matter and human action. According to this conception, thought was a material activity of the brain, in turn modified by experience; hence, “consciousness is an inner synthesis of our general organic activity and our specific brain activity. . . . It is, as Bukharin puts it, ‘an introspective expression of physiological processes’” (Troise, 1938, p. 75). This psychophysiological approach was based on Pavlov’s thesis on higher nervous activity, and Marx’s ideas on the structural relationships of social action. Mental life was thus the imprint of social interaction left on the nervous system through conditional mechanisms. From this standpoint, Troise rejected the philosophical idealism of Descartes, Kant, and Bergson. He asserted that the dialectic and historical materialism of Engels, Plekhanov, and Lenin was confirmed by the scientific research of Pavlov, Prenant, Wallon, and Langevin. It was within this framework that Vygotsky was first read. Troise stated that sensation was the basis of consciousness, and that Pavlov provided “the foundation of higher nervous activity with which we may enter the intimate processes of thinking” (p. 85). Interestingly, this statement is based on Vygotsky’s 1924 article, “The Methods of Reflexological and Psychological Investigation,” included in Kornilov’s volume (Vygotsky, 1935). In that text, Vygotsky criticized the physiological reductionism of the theories of Pavlov and Bekhterev, while considering that the physiological evidence they provided was strong and had to be considered. He proceeded to adopt a “more Pavlovian than Pavlov” position and proposed experiments based on verbal stimuli, in which reflexes were amplified into linguistic reactions and regulations. This approach enabled the objective study of human consciousness as an instance of registration, transmission, and production of reflexes upon other reflexes. Vygotsky thus offered a link between neurophysiological evidence and Marxist social theories through the problem of consciousness. Troise’s course quickly became a sort of manual for intellectual training in the ACP, and the reference to Vygotsky was kept in the re-editions of 1950 and 1953. This “Pavlovian” Vygotsky was the first to circulate in Spanish, with his authority tied to the Nobel neurophysiologist, by then one of the main figures of Soviet propaganda. The affiliation with Pavlov is important, as it shows Vygotsky’s reception

was linked to the development of a Marxist-Leninist ideology in Argentina.

There was another author who read the “young” Vygotsky, but with a different agenda. Konstatin Gavrilov (1908–1982) was a Russian-born, Czech-trained zoologist who arrived to Argentina just before World War II. He had a deep interest in psychoanalysis and frequently participated in events organized by the Argentine Psychoanalytical Association, founded in 1942. With an anti-Bolshevik family background, Gavrilov read Vygotsky detached from Marxist ideas. He was well informed on Pavlovian research and believed it offered an objective foundation for psychoanalytical theories (García, 2014). He proposed a unified theory of “subjective and objective life,” matching Freud’s thanatic and erotic drives with Pavlov’s inhibition and excitation processes. Gavrilov affirmed that the ego, id, and super ego are “not only psychological but also meta-psychological or neurological,” and that, as a result, “there must exist only one doctrine, psycho-neurology or neuro-psychology” (Gavrilov, 1944, pp. 20–21). However, both theories stressed the unconsciousness or automatic aspects of the psyche, hardly examining complex psychological functions such as consciousness. Gavrilov then cites Vygotsky’s 1924 article:

According to Vygotsky the psyche is a contained movement. Mental activity is reduced to the group of nonexteriorized reflexes and consciousness results from the interaction, from the repercussion and reciprocal excitation of different reflex systems. . . . Consciousness is therefore a reactive mechanism, “a reaction of the organism to its own reactions.” (p. 28)

Vygotsky was read as a means for the unification of Pavlovian and Freudian theories, and as such, enabled new areas of research.

Although Troise emphasized a Marxist interpretation of consciousness, Gavrilov overlooked its political tradition, even though Kornilov’s volume explicitly called for the construction of a Marxist psychology. This shows that Soviet physiology and psychology could be a scientific resource relatively independent of political stances. However, the political climate soon changed and this rift was no longer tolerated. From 1946 onward, the USSR hardened its political line in science and culture with the infamous Zhdanov Doctrine, which sharply distinguished between knowledge and culture compatible with the Stalinist version of Marx-

ism-Leninism and those that were not. The first were the “true” socialist culture for the proletariat; the latter, typically Western sciences and arts, rejected as inherently flawed and persecuted as bourgeois ideology (Krementsov, 1997). Communist psychiatry in France, Italy, the United States, and Argentina adopted the stance condemning psychoanalysis as an idealistic theory and imperialistic ideology, and promoting Pavlov theories as the basis for a truly scientific and socialist psychiatry. In the Argentina of the 1950s, Communist psychiatry was one of the main psychiatric schools, alongside psychoanalytical and phenomenological approaches, and its proponents held influential positions in some of the most important psychiatric local organizations, such as the *Federación Argentina de Psiquiatría* [Argentine Psychiatric Federation], the *Comisión Asesora de Salud Mental* [Mental Health Advisory Council], and the *Instituto Nacional de Salud Mental* [National Institute of Mental Health], which organized mental health in the country. In addition to this, they were praised in the ACP as exemplary intellectuals and militants. For example, in Héctor Agosti’s (1911–1984) report at the First National conference of Communist Intellectuals of 1956, the leading figure in the ACP on cultural matters and director of *Cuadernos de Cultura* [Culture Notebooks] stated that “it seems only just to call attention to the work of our medical comrades in the dissemination of Pavlov’s doctrine . . . a concrete example of the realization of the ideological struggle in the field of superior culture” (Agosti, 1956, p. 154).

Starting from these political premises, Gavrilov’s ideas about the unification of Pavlov’s and Freud’s theories were severely criticized by Communist psychiatrists. Gavrilov (1953) later published a new book, *El psicoanálisis a la luz de la reflexología* [Psychoanalysis in the Light of Reflexology], which received two harsh reviews. The first was published by Miguel Sorín (1917–2002) in *Revista Latinoamericana de Psiquiatría* [Latinamerican Journal of Psychiatry], at the time the most important journal of psychiatry in Argentina, where he was managing editor. This journal, directed by Gregorio Bermann, a well-known psychiatrist in Latin America linked to the ACP, was modeled on *La Raison* [Reason], the journal edited by French Communist psychiatrists and psychologists, directed by Henri Wallon (Vezzetti, 2016, pp.

137–192). In accordance with the Communist editorial line of the journal, Sorín rejected the whole attempt to draw a connection between psychoanalysis and Soviet neurophysiology, and alleged that Gavrilov’s proposal had an “indubitable biological mechanism,” as it could not distinguish between “biometaphysical drives” and “normal and pathological human psychological activity” (Sorín, 1953, p. 66). A second review was published in *Cuadernos de Cultura*, the official journal of the ACP for intellectuals and artists and one of the main publications in local leftist culture (Burgos, 2004, pp. 45–59). There, Juan Enrique Kusnir (1916–2000), a psychiatrist trained in Pavlovian theories by Jorge Thénon, wrote that Gavrilov’s efforts were “outmoded” attempts to “unite what has been largely demonstrated: that there is not, there cannot be, any relationship between I. P. Pavlov’s doctrine and the so-called psychoanalytic school” (Kusnir, 1953, p. 139). Both reviews bear witness to the politically driven discussions on psychiatry and psychology, and the resurgence of the figure of Pavlov in Soviet propaganda after the joint session of the USSR Academy of Sciences and the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences of 1950, where his work was canonized, along with the “creative agrobiology” of Lysenko, as a model for “proletarian science” (Windholz, 1997). Local Communist psychiatrists sought to monopolize the references to Soviet neurophysiology as a means of opposing and disputing the leadership of the discipline by psychoanalysis. In those years, psychoanalysis was taking on a greater presence in the medical field, and Pavlovians sought to counteract the growth of what they considered “irrational” trends in medicine. Psychoanalysis was already one of the most influential psychological approaches in psychiatry and had a significant impact on the arts and general culture (e.g., Plotkin, 2002), but it had still not yet become the hegemonic intellectual and professional tradition in psychology and psychiatry it would be from the late 1960s to the present in Argentina. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Communist psychiatrists were in a position, with the support of the ACP, to compete for leadership with local psychoanalysts (Dagfal, 2009, pp. 311–347). A few years later, Gavrilov replied to these critiques; for him, the development of Pavlovian ideas “pursued freely, without ideological pressures” would

lead to the adoption of a “broader globalist concept which surpasses mechanism and includes dialectics—understood in a purely philosophical and scientific sense—completing it with new principles and laws” (Gavrilov, 1960, p. 402). This “globalism” depended on the link provided by the “young” Vygotsky between the consciousness and the nervous system. Communists certainly did not approve of this value-neutral stance, and even less so the overcoming of dialectics. This text, an added chapter in the Spanish expanded edition of Edna Heidebreder’s *Seven Psychologies*, is important for two reasons: First, this translation had a huge circulation in the Spanish-speaking world, with no fewer than eight re-editions in 30 years in Buenos Aires, Barcelona, and Mexico City; second, it shows that the introduction of Vygotsky in Argentina by Communists and non-Communists took place as a complement of Pavlov’s theories. Although their work differed greatly in its political implications, both Troise and Gavrilov saw Vygotsky as a useful thinker to link physiological processes with the subject of consciousness, in order to build a unified framework that could encompass biological, psychological, and sociological topics. However, Gavrilov’s efforts could not match the Communist reception of Soviet science. Imbued in Cold War politics, later readings of Vygotsky were mediated by different Marxist-Leninist interpretations of Pavlov.

Vygotsky and Dyslexia (1948–1971)

Toward the mid-20th century, the problem of dyslexia and its diagnosis reached the public eye in the West, and both physicians and pedagogues were involved, not without tension, in its research and treatment. The topic wove together theoretical and empirical problems to create a psychosomatic approach to medicine, encompassing discussions of the proper methods for teaching children to read and write, and concerns from the authorities and population about failure and dropout rates in school. These discussions made dyslexia a sort of generic pathology of learning problems (Guardiola, 2001). In this niche, Vygotsky’s work was again found useful by non-Communists and Communists alike.

Julio Benjamín Bernaldo de Quirós (1927–1980) was an important local physician and

speech therapist, without ties to ACP. In 1959, he organized a vast research project in schools in the province of Santa Fé, with support from the government. The study showed that about 15% of children might have dyslexia, a number that made the problem relevant for authorities (Quirós & Della Cella, 1959). Following this study, Quirós became one of leading figures on the issue, and was elected president of the Argentine Speech-Language and Hearing Therapy Association and director of its specialist journal *Fonoaudiológica* [Phonoaudiologic]. For Quirós, dyslexics suffered from different kinds of brain injuries or developmental deficits resulting from maturation delays of the nervous system. As such, dyslexia preceded and was independent of teaching methods. Although detection of the deficit occurred at school, the origin of the disorder was somatic, and diagnosis and treatment of the problem therefore belonged to the medical domain. As dyslexia was an elusive disorder, Quirós chose a very eclectic approach to it, combining psychoanalysis, Pavlovian neurophysiology, and concepts from Piaget, Wallon, Vygotsky, and Gestalttheorie to obtain a comprehensive model of differential diagnosis.

For Quirós, a child’s development of language was phylogenetic until the sixth year, when cultural factors took the lead. His or her understanding was a mixture of Pavlovian conditional reflexes up to the age of a year and a half, Piaget’s model of development up to the beginning of school, and Vygotsky’s model until puberty began. In Quirós’s view, the acquisition of internal language was crucial for normal development and cultural exchange, and therefore it was possible to distinguish between those pathologies that affected internal language and those that did not. Thus, Vygotsky’s idea of internal language was predominant in his work, despite the references to other authors. Quirós cited the Massachusetts Institute of Technology edition of *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 1962) and some English texts by Luria and Leontiev. However, as Quirós’s understanding of pathology was supported mainly by the use of a series of tests, the most important Vygotskian production for him was the Kasanin-Hanfmann Concept Formation Test, the version of the Vygotsky-Sakharov Test used in the United States. This instrument was introduced in the United States, where it was devel-

oped by Jacob Kasanin and Eugenia Hanfmann, and gained attention during the late 1930s and 1940s (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, pp. 280–283). It was introduced soon after in Argentina by the Hungarian-born psychologist Bela Székely in the second edition of his manual *The Test* (Székely, 1948), alongside an introduction made from sections of books by Hanfmann and Kasanin (1942) and Rapaport (1945). The book compiled several different tests and went through six editions and multiple reprintings, becoming the reference manual in Latin America for several decades (Hopfengärtner, 2011). Vygotsky's reception in Argentina depended not primarily on his theory of cognitive development, but on his clinical ideas. In fact, in Székely's *Dictionary of Psychology*, a widely known reference book, Vygotsky was presented as "Russian Psychiatrist, famous researcher known for his new concepts on the origin of schizophrenia" (Székely, 1950/1975, p. 592). Quirós used the test according to the "double stimulation method" proposed by Vygotsky: First he proposed a task to the child, who had to solve it alone; then the task was repeated, this time with the help of another person (Quirós & Göttler, 1964, pp. 317–326). He then compared both results for a diagnosis and asserted that "on the foundations already announced by Vygotsky, it is possible to plan a type of immediate reeducation" (p. 340). Although he thought of Vygotsky as a "neo-Pavlovian," the Soviet psychologist provided a unified and ordered sequence of development phases, which allowed him to assess the degree of pathology and the progress of treatments. Beyond the theoretical issues, Vygotsky was useful for practical responses to relevant problems. Again, the reference to Soviet authors was disputed by Communists, as the junction between medicine, psychology, and pedagogy was also important for them.

Concurrently with Quirós work, dyslexia was studied and experimented on at the Argentine Institute of Rehabilitation, a clinic for preschool children with mild developmental disorders. It was founded in 1944 by Communist pedagogue Berta Braslavsky (1913–2008) and Communist psychiatrist and intellectual Julio Peluffo (1901–1967), who soon became an advocate of Pavlov's ideas and was a member of the editorial board of *Cuadernos de Cultura*. Braslavsky was trained in psychology in the 1930s by

Aníbal Ponce, one of the leading organizers of anti-fascist institutions and an intellectual model for the ACP. Peluffo was a known activist in the antifascist movement and a member of the Communist Youth.

In 1948, Braslavsky traveled to France as a party delegate and decided to stay for 4 months at the *Laboratoire de psychobiologie de l'enfant* [Laboratory of Child Psychobiology], directed by Henri Wallon, where she specialized in child disorders (Braslavsky, 2008). During the following decade, she treated and studied dyslexic children in the Argentine Institute of Rehabilitation, and published her results in *The Quarrel Over Reading Teaching Methods* (Braslavsky, 1962/1992), which was reprinted many times and made her a well-known pedagogue in South America. She approached dyslexia from the standpoint of pedagogy and considered the main problem to be that teaching methods were not considered in relation to children's difficulties in reading and writing. Without clear criteria to define organic, environmental, or didactic causes, statistics were not reliable, as they attributed a wide variety of reading and writing difficulties to dyslexia. Teaching methods also lacked scientific foundations, impeding conclusions as to what educational techniques were preferable for normal or dyslexic children. Braslavsky's main references were Pavlov, Wallon, Piaget, and Vygotsky, but she rejected psychoanalysis and *Gestalttheorie* [Gestalt theory] as unscientific. She adopted an environmental stance based on Pavlov's idea of language as a "second signal system," and defined reading as "an acquisition, not an innate possibility. It does not arise as a simple emergence of a maturing nervous system, but it is formed thanks to special procedures of the schooling work" (Braslavsky, 1962/1992, p. 256). This was not a simple approach via conditional reflexes, as after 1948, Soviet Marxism-Leninism considered Pavlov a dialectic and holistic author. This interpretation, put forward in *La Raison*, allowed for a somewhat "constructivist" neurophysiology compatible with developmental psychology. Vygotskian theories were then read by Communists through the interpretations of its main representatives in that period, Braslavsky's former colleagues Alexei Leontiev and Alexander Luria, mainly from French translations (e.g., Leóntiev, 1957, 1958; Luria, 1958). Their interpretations supported Braslavsky's idea

that language, as a social product, preexisted the child, determining the whole of cognition, behavior, and personality by means of functional modifications in the anatomy of the nervous system. School is, above all, a space of socialization different from the family home, and it promotes personal growth, friendship, tolerance, and rules of coexistence. In this view, reading and writing provide the child tools for his or her whole existence, not just cognitive functions. The child's mind is able to form social relationships and form ideas through the structuring of an internal language that generates a specific and new psychological dynamic:

The appearance of an *inner language* is the key for the explanation of some of the theories of learning of this decisive automatism [reading], and at the same time, for all learning of an individual, who, in addition to learning what his own immediate experience offers needs to assimilate, develops and transmits all of the social and historical experience of the other men. (Braslavsky, 1962/1992, p. 250, emphasis in original)

Consequently, she rejected all teaching and diagnostic methods that reduced the psychology of the child to internal factors, and criticized Quirós for his biological approach: "It must not be forgotten that the dyslexic disorder is manifested, if not produced, in an essentially pedagogical situation such as the school environment" (p. 156). The pathology was therefore not independent from teaching methods. Braslavsky recognized that didactic procedures did not cover all aspects of dyslexia—which she considered a real entity as severe cases showed—but nonetheless affirmed that "according to the method with which the reading begins, *it will help that intelligence to develop, or it will interfere with its development*" (p. 261, emphasis in original). Quirós and Braslavky participated, along with specialists from several other Latin American countries, in the First Seminar on Dyslexia, organized by the Uruguayan Dyslexia Society in April 1963, where their basic differences were publicly acknowledged. Quirós said that his statistics proved that "heredity seems to be an important factor, much more important than environment"; Braslavky, in turn, stated that "reading is an acquisition, not an innate possibility" (Grompone, et al., 1965, pp. 28, 140).

A third author also participated in this discussion. Juan Azcoaga (1925–2015) was a Communist neurologist who specialized in his-

topathology and was profoundly interested in Pavlov's theories. Azcoaga was devoted to basic research and academic teaching, but the 1966 coup d'état in Argentina cleansed the university of Marxists and left him without a place to work. By then he had studied the works of Vygotsky and Luria available in the West, and was also informed about the Quirós and Braslavky debate. He started to work with learning and developmental disorders and published a series of books aimed at pedagogues. For Azcoaga (1969), dyslexia was not a pathology of language but of learning, which could be reduced to repetition: "In terms of physiological process, what guarantees learning is the reiteration of stimuli" (p. 17). Therefore, differences in teaching methods are irrelevant, and any technique can be effective if it adjusted to psychophysiological processes. For Azcoaga, brain structures were not as important as the functions that resulted from conditioning—the "dynamic stereotypes" in Pavlov's lexicon. This notion allowed him to relate environmental conditions to nervous possibilities, both, again, connected to Vygotsky's idea of inner language. Language learning transformed from mere motor play to a "first signal system" connecting stimuli and words, and then to a "second signal system," in which language was internalized in the form of thinking without perception or motor action. For Azcoaga, dyslexia was the interruption of this process before schooling. Though he admitted that language was not reduced to physiology, he stated that "the starting point of language is brain activity" and that techniques of language learning "have in common the laws of brain functioning" (Azcoaga, 1970, pp. 7, 8). Despite this Pavlovian outlook, Vygotsky offered not only a concept to support the acquisition of the "signal systems," but also a unified framework that integrated society and culture in the formation of the psyche: "The cognitive progress has language as its main vehicle . . . a continuous widening of the 'inner world', that is to say, the formation of a personal consciousness" (Azcoaga, Derman, & Frutos, 1971, p. 24). Given the importance of consciousness in the political ideology of Marxism-Leninism, dyslexia was a phenomenon much more revealing and important than just a schooling-related disorder.

The problem of dyslexia was a heterogeneous niche for the reception of a "clinical" Vygotsky, but the authors mentioned have some points in

common: They all paved the way for the introduction of Vygotsky in the educational field, through the study of the abnormal child and developmental pathologies. The Kasanin-Hanfmann test was instrumental for the practical use of Vygotsky's ideas in diagnosis, in addition to its function as a theoretical support for the characterization of cognitive development and language acquisition. The notions of "inner language" and "interiorization" show the need for psychological concepts in order to address all possible instances involved in pathology, from the physiological to the pedagogical and social. All three authors assumed that Vygotsky's ideas were compatible with those of Pavlov, Wallon, and Piaget. His reception was isolated, but related to specific problems, in close relation to already accredited authors.

Vygotsky and Psychiatry (1962–1974)

The process of Vygotsky's reception and accreditation also involved specific discussions in Communist psychiatry. In 1949, a circle of Pavlovian psychiatrists was formed in the ACP with the ambition of renewing their discipline through Soviet neurophysiology and political activism. Following the *La Raison* group, they exercised their partisanship in psychiatry. This circle was composed headed by Peluffo and Jorge Thénon, both with prominent trajectories as intellectuals in the antifascist movement and the ACP after 1945, when they affiliated. Thénon, in his double role as leftist intellectual and psychiatric expert, provided the theoretical basis for the group. From a Marxist interpretation of Pavlov's environmentalism, he argued for the importance of political views in society: "No psychology can disregard, in a critical study of man in the era of capitalism, his character of worker, wage earner, intellectual or owner without characterizing the social norms that with their relative persistence create mental habits" (Thénon, 1954, p. 30). Moreover, he stated that "the research and doctrine of Pavlov and his school constitute the natural-scientific basis of Marxism-Leninism" (p. 34). Soon after Thénon's article was published, Soviet psychologist Boris Teplov wrote a pamphlet in which Vygotsky and the entire working team formed by Kornilov were criticized. As they had "not yet mastered Leninist reflection theory and Stalin's theory of the role of ideas in history, Soviet

psychologists could not find a correct solution regarding the nature of consciousness" (Teplov, n.d., p. 24). These were the coordinates by which Vygotsky was read within the Communist psychiatry; the induction of Pavlov in the Communist canon—along with Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin—allowed for the constitution of a Pavlovian orthodoxy which claimed a "correct" interpretation of Soviet science. According to this view, every scientific difference also meant a political difference, and vice versa.

However, this highly politicized stance was too tied to the course of international Communism, which became very turbulent after 1956, when Stalin's repression and authoritarianism in the USSR was officially acknowledged during in the 20th Congress of the Communist Party. The next decade saw a sequence of political and military events that led to a deep crisis in international Communism. First, there was the military intervention in Hungary because of the civil uprising against the Communist government, regarded as a continuation of Stalinist politics; second, there was the growing conflict between the USSR and China from 1956 to 1970, which altered the power relationships in the Eastern bloc and with the United States; third, there were the denouncements of anti-Semitism before and after Stalin's death within the USSR and Soviet support to Egypt and Syria during the Arab-Israeli conflict in the 1960s; fourth, there was the Cuban Revolution in 1959, which provided a new model of revolutionary action—*foquismo* [focalism]—in the southern hemisphere, based not on the organization of a centralized political party and workers mobilization, as Leninist theories proposed, but on guerrilla warfare that led general insurrection in a national context; and fifth, there was the rise of the "New Left" in the West, which heavily criticized soviet positions and supported Cuban and Chinese models of socialism (e.g., Artaraz, 2009; Di Maggio, 2013; Dreyfus et al., 2008; Golan, 1990; Lüthi, 2008). In Argentina, these events translated into continuous criticism of the ACP from the rest of the political spectrum, active repression from the military and police, and a major splitting off of the youth movement, which began to support Chinese Communism and organized a new party in 1967—the Revolutionary Communist Party (e.g., Campione, 2007; Torti, 1999).

In those years, one of the most active members of the Pavlovian circle was José Itzigsohn (1924–), a psychiatrist descended from Russian Jews. He was strongly committed to Zionism and affiliated with the ACP after the USSR supported the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Itzigsohn had a close relationship with Thénon and they opened a private clinic to implement Pavlovian therapies. But at the beginning of the 1960s, as a result of the aforementioned international events, and external and internal criticism of the ACP in Argentina, Itzigsohn distanced himself from the Pavlovian orthodoxy. During the Second Argentine Conference on Psychotherapy in 1964, Itzigsohn and other psychiatrists from his clinic proposed a “personality psychotherapy,” as opposed to the “rational psychotherapy” proposed by Thénon and most Soviet psychiatrists (see Lauterbach, 1984, pp. 61–69). For Itzigsohn, Pavlov provided basic data but no instruction for practicing therapies, which left Communists at a disadvantage compared with psychoanalysis (Itzigsohn, Paz, Lestani, & Torres, 1966). His proposal was based on Sergei Rubinstein’s idea that social factors operated on the individual through his or her internal conditions. Rubinstein was a well-known author among Communists, as most of his work had been translated into Spanish by Mexican, Argentine, and Uruguayan Communist publishers. In order to connect psychological processes to physiological conditions, Itzigsohn had used the notion of “interiorization” from *The Development of Psychological Functions*, a compilation of Vygotsky’s works published in 1960 in the USSR. Itzigsohn, who had grown up speaking Russian with his family and had traveled several times to the USSR, was informed about the “rediscovery” of Vygotsky thanks to references to his ideas in the journal *Voprosy Psikhologii* [Problems of Psychology], launched in 1955. These references enabled him to support the social origins of personality, stressing individual psychological traits without biological or sociological reductionism. Itzigsohn advocated for a fully autonomous psychology, not reduced to a by-product or complement to Pavlov or Lenin. Itzigsohn showed an open heterodoxy, as he used ideas from authors condemned by the ACP such as Harry S. Sullivan, Melanie Klein, Roland Fairbairn, and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. He also cited Piaget, Wallon, and Vygotsky

to promote the inclusion of infantile experiences in the understanding of the formation of the personality and pathologies, as psychoanalysts did.

In 1964, Itzigsohn was unanimously elected as director of the psychology department of the University of Buenos Aires, which had the most prestigious and populated degree program in psychology in Argentina. There he became the main promoter of the works of Wallon, Piaget, Pavlov, Leontiev, Rubinstein, Luria, and Vygotsky. It was in this context that he published the Spanish translation of *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 1964/1986). It reproduced the abridged version published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and included Piaget’s response to Vygotsky’s critics, but Itzigsohn replaced Bruner’s prologue and wrote one of his own. He embedded Vygotsky’s figure in the discussions about Stalin’s heritage, the core of the criticism directed at Communism. And he openly denounced the interference of Zhdanovism in science, something no other Communist intellectual or scientist had previously done in Argentina:

It seems that the work of Vygotsky, or at least elements of it, should have been accepted by the whole of the Pavlovian School. This did not happen and it is worth considering this aspect of the recent past to help dissipate its consequences. . . . One fundamental reason for this detachment was the double interpretation, already mentioned, of the concept of the higher nervous activity. On one hand, let’s remember, it is a superior adaptation function of man, and on the other, the activity of the superior areas of the nervous system, which are its base. Some authors reduced the concept to this last understanding, and also reduced psychology and its specific questions to the question of brain physiology.

This error, which had severe consequences, was aggravated by the weight of the social phenomenon known as the cult of personality that impacted some concrete aspects of scientific development in the USSR, such as agrobiological and psychology. One of the manifestations of this phenomenon in science was to prematurely assume many complex phenomena as resolved, adopting as sole valid experience only one of many competing currents, the one that gave, at least in appearance, the sensation of immediate control over the studied phenomena, immediately rejecting alternatives and considering them, many times unfairly, as opposed to dialectical materialism or the reflection of

capitalist ideology in the ideas of Soviet thinkers. This tendency was quickly felt in the work of Vygotsky, which was relegated from 1936. . . . This situation, which involved a destructive criticism of the whole work of Vygotsky, ended in the joint session of the Science Academy and the Medicine Academy of the USSR in 1950, which marks the public peak of the negative tendencies mentioned. . . . The situation began to modify from 1955, and we should not be surprised that the work of Vygotsky took on greater importance in the USSR at the same time, coinciding with the reappearance of psychology journals and the reconsideration of psychology as an independent science. (Vygotsky, 1964/1986, pp. 10–12).

Itzigsohn refers here to the “pedagogical decree” of 1936, an administrative ban on mental testing as a method of research and psychological assessment and on pedagogy as a scholarly discipline, which affected Vygotsky and his team’s research. He also refers to the “joint session” of 1950 previously discussed (Yasnitsky & van der Veer, 2016). This period of “negative tendencies” and the “cult of personality” directly critiqued Stalinism, and entailed a distrust of the canonization of Pavlov and the value of his work for psychology. Vygotsky was thus instrumental to a critique of Communist dogmatism and party interference in science. Itzigsohn’s prologue made the reception of Vygotsky more than a mere contribution to psychological science: It was a critique of the ACP’s ideological orthodoxy, a political intervention that aligned Itzigsohn to the perspectives of the “New Left.” Itzigsohn never stopped citing Pavlov, and for him, Vygotsky was less important than Rubinstein; he simply wanted to avoid reductionism and excessive partisanship. His Spanish translation was very successful, and it was reprinted no less than 15 times by seven publishing houses in Argentina, Mexico, and Cuba.

However, this critique of political orthodoxy did not impede more dogmatic Pavlovians from considering Vygotsky a useful author. Thénon, who represented the hard line in Communism, as well as psychiatry, tried to integrate Vygotsky’s ideas into his theoretical and ideological outlook. In his book *Image and Language* (Thénon, 1971), he offered a theory of hallucination and delirium as the effect of pathological relations between perception and language.

Like Azcoaga, Thénon stated that inner language was the formation of “dynamic stereotypes,” but acknowledged that the formation of images and concepts were not a mere association between objects and words; images detach from what is perceived, just as concepts detach from words and objects. He then used Vygotsky’s theses to understand the process of how “children’s language is at the beginning a means of Communication that later becomes a means of orientation in reality, acquiring a function in mobilizing the relations between past experience and the regulation of his or her own activity” (Thénon, 1971, p. 82). From this interpretation, he analyzed hallucinations; for him, the image was a product midway between perception and abstract conceptual thinking. Therefore, hallucination is a sensorial product that depends on delirium, that is to say, on an erroneous judgment of reality. The genesis of hallucinations is not sensorial, but dependent on upbringing and culture. Thénon found Vygotsky very productive for understanding one of the most classic topics in psychiatry, but that did not mean he agreed with Itzigsohn’s political perspective. In the revised second edition of *Dialectical Psychology* (Thénon, 1974), his most important book, he praised Luria’s idea of the formation of “functional organs” in the brain, as it supported his Pavlovian understanding of Vygotsky. This interpretation was not a detached reflection, but rather a reply to Itzigsohn’s introduction in *Thought and Language*:

In assigning the word the value of sign or symbol, Vygotsky moves away from the Pavlovian concept of the word as a signal of signals, at a high level of generalization. He notes this significant difference with Pavlov, which reveals that his theoretical defeat in the great debate of 1950 was not precisely because of the cult of personality, as stated in the prologue of the Spanish edition. (Thénon, 1974, p. 231)

The reception of Vygotsky and his relation with Pavlov was heavily interwoven with political tensions.

Besides Thénon, there was another representative of “intransigent” Pavlovism who took up Vygotsky’s ideas. Adolfo Lértora (1903–1980) was known for his first-hand reading of Soviet literature, but especially for his aggressive struggle against “irrationalism” in psychiatry, represented by Karl Jaspers, Ludwig Binswanger, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Sigmund Freud. The “rational” basis

for a genuine Marxist anthropology and psychiatry was provided by Pavlovian neurophysiology. Lértora acknowledged that this basis could be enriched, and was enthusiastic of Vygotsky's ideas, particularly his model for the development of higher psychological functions and Luria's theories about the modification of the nervous system by external factors. This is how Lértora defined the relation of mind, brain, and society: "Psycho-ontogeny . . . is not biological in the first place, but social; the humanization that takes place ontogenetically, if anything, is the sociogenetic restructuring of the first [signal] system into the second [signal] system" (Lértora, 1968/1974, p. 43). For Lértora, this thesis was the confirmation of the Marxist-Leninist expectation of the emergence of the "New Man": "Every authentic socio-economic revolution . . . implies a revolutionary change in the mental personality of men: human 'nature' does not oppose this change" (p. 46). Lértora also reconsidered his ideas about schizophrenia following Kasanin (1944/1968) and Vygotsky (1934). For the Argentine, the key for understanding schizophrenia was the alteration of concept formation, directly related to language functions, as Vygotsky argued in *Thought and Language*. But for Lértora, this made Vygotsky a consistent Pavlovian, as his theory confirmed "the dominant function of the second signal system in man" (Lértora, 1969/1972, p. 74).

Despite the interest of Itzigsohn, Thénon, and Lértora in Vygotsky's theory, the fact that the discussion was greatly politicized may have hampered Vygotsky's diffusion in Argentina, as from 1964 onward the ACP became a discredited political organization as a result of the fierce anti-Communism of the military governments and the rejection of Soviet references by the radicalized "New Left." After 1975, most of the authors commented on here were no longer advocates in Argentina of Vygotsky for various reasons: Itzigsohn left the ACP because of the Soviet position on the Six Day War, and exiled to Israel after the new and violent coup d'état of 1976. By then, Thénon was heavily affected by Parkinson's disease and no longer participated in debates. Troise passed away that year, Lértora and Quirós in 1980, and Gavrilov in 1982. Only Azcoaga and Braslavsky remained active during the 1980s, and resumed the local dissemination of Vygotsky after the end of the dictatorship, in 1983. But the international reputation

of Vygotsky in psychology and the Communist scene, locally and internationally, had changed by then, and the reception of Vygotsky in Argentina and the Spanish-speaking world was propelled by other figures (García, 2015).

Conclusion

Vygotsky's reception was linked to a Communist culture and organization, which despite non-Communist appropriations managed to monopolize Soviet references and become its main promoter. In several different ways, the dissemination of his work assumed a collective character, effected through a transnational network of Communist intellectuals, experts, and political parties. Because of this, the Soviet origin and Marxist leaning of Vygotsky's work was unavoidable for local readers, as it defined not only the political conditions of production but also the criteria for circulation. In Argentina, Vygotsky's work has always been politicized, even fragmentary readings of his work.

The itinerary outlined here permits some historiographical conclusions. First, reception and transnational outlooks are useful not only for the study of a particular figure (Vygotsky) but also to restore the weave—or tangle—of authors that accompanied and legitimized that figure (Marx, Pavlov, Luria, Rubinstein, Kasanin, Wallon, Piaget, etc.). In this sense, every reading and use of an author is overdetermined by other authors, by a previous agenda of specific problems, and by local conditions and discussions. The dissemination of Vygotsky's ideas depended not only on his close colleagues but also on middle-range authors who used his ideas, had local authority, and actively disseminated his work. The fact that contrasting interpretations and different uses for Vygotsky's ideas existed not only illuminates several readings of his theories but also allows for the analysis of disciplinary disputes, means of legitimation, and intellectual and political networks. The relevance of Vygotsky's work did not depend on a "close" or "censor-free" reading of the original texts, but on the productivity that his notions were given at a certain conjuncture. A history of these mediations may allow historians and psychologists to understand how the same references can result in different scientific traditions, independently of what happened with the "real" Vygotsky in the USSR. In

other words, the reception history of an author is constitutive of the position by which an author has been successively read and used.

Second, Vygotsky was read with a Pavlovian framework that shifted the emphasis of his reception from the philosophy of consciousness to the study of mental disorders, through the notions of internal language and use of the Kasanin-Hanfmann test. From a reception standpoint, Pavlovism did not mean a “distortion” of Vygotsky’s ideas, but it organized the circulation of them and allowed for the first systematic appropriations. Given the way his work was published in Spanish, and the fact he was a Soviet scientist, it is not a surprise that he was read through a Pavlovian lens, or that the Russian physiologist paved the way for his circulation. In this sense, it is not correct to claim that Vygotsky was ignored or misunderstood before the 1970s. His work acted as a complement or precursor to that of others, serving as the productive methodological foundation necessary to make his work available for the later development of a local Vygotskianism.

Finally, a transnational approach to the Argentine reception of Vygotsky requires one to consider how Communist parties built a network of distribution of ideas, literature, and propaganda, which included scientific texts and materials from East to West, and within the West. The fact that Vygotsky was received through this network shows how nondisciplinary factors impacted the readings and discussions of his work, and also reveals the range of intellectual figures involved. This adds a non-national component to the circulation process. It is a central tenet for transnational history that the nation cannot always be assumed as a central or even relevant criterion for analysis. Therefore, although reception studies allow for the elucidation of particular appropriations in a local context, showing originalities in interpretations and uses, transnational approaches show the nonlocal conditions and means that enable those appropriations. It is thus possible to articulate two different scales of analysis, by which connections and comparisons between two or more local histories can be pursued.

This article has demonstrated the objectives and problems that made Vygotsky a relevant author in Argentina. Marxism-Leninism, the study of consciousness, neurophysiology, mental disorder diagnosis, and learning theories

paved the way for his reception, yet at the same time exceeded Vygotsky’s ideas, published materials, and specific methodologies. The epistemic, internal qualities of his theories and methods were not the main factor for his relevance and productivity, nor did they contribute to a “faithful” interpretation of his ideas. In fact, his importance depended on the collective output of intellectuals, scientists, and professionals positioned within disciplinary fields organized by disciplinary themes and intertwined with sociopolitical factors. These considerations allow for a more sophisticated critical history of the psychology of Vygotsky, examining its transnational circulation through organizations with specific agendas and the different methods by which information was disseminated in multiple conjunctures.

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Received February 25, 2016

Revision received June 30, 2016

Accepted July 7, 2016 ■