

BOOK REVIEW

Alexander Luria and the Cultural–Historical Activity Theory: Pieces for the History of An Outstanding Collaborative Project in Psychology

Alexander Romanovich Luria, A Scientific Biography, by E. D. Homsкая, New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2001, 190 pp., \$49.50.

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This book's appearance is extremely timely—it coincides with the 2002 centennial of Alexander Luria's birth. The life and scientific heritage of this Russian scholar have been widely celebrated, with several international conferences held to commemorate Luria's achievements, including one in Moscow organized by his many students and followers, now renowned scholars themselves, working in various institutions in Moscow and around the world.

The book that is now available for the English-speaking readers in translation from Russian (the original was published in 1992), is written by Evgenija Davydovna Homsкая—one of the closest students and colleagues of Luria who came to be a prominent neuropsychologist herself, having authored a number of important publications (both with Luria and on her own) and taught many generations of students at the Moscow State Lomonosov University (including the author of this review). Homsкая, who continues her work and teaching today, wrote this book, in her own words, to honor the memory of her beloved teacher, colleague, and friend. The book by Homsкая represents a valuable source of information about this prominent scholar of the 20th century and a unique addition to the existing literature in that it provides a glimpse at Luria's life and work from within the immediate context of his investigative project and scientific path as it unfolded during the many years of a close collaboration between Luria and Homsкая.

The book should be of interest to a broad audience of psychologists for several reasons. First, Alexander Luria's life is remarkable in and of itself. He represented a rare breed of scientists with a uniquely broad, almost encyclopedic, knowledge and expertise in fields as diverse as biology, psychiatry, anthropology, medicine, physiology, neurophysiology, psychology, forensic science,

and linguistics. His achievements are remarkable in most of these fields and in this breadth of interests and achievements Luria can be compared to the most brilliant scholars in the history of civilization. It is remarkable that he achieved so much against the many odds and hurdles brought about by the cultural-historical circumstances of his life time. Indeed, Luria's life coincided with the most dramatic and often tragic events in modern history. He was only 12 when Russia joined the World War I in 1914, followed by the Bolshevik revolution that dismantled practically all existing societal institutions and unleashed a brutal civil war, soon to be followed by a repressive totalitarian regime. As if this wasn't enough, Luria also lived through the most devastating years of the World War II that caused enormous troubles and demanded almost inhumane sacrifice from all citizens of the Soviet Union (including a sacrifice of 20 million people who perished in the fight against fascism). It is only after Stalin's death and with the end of mass repressions, when Luria was already in his mid-50s, that certain degree of normalcy has been achieved in the Soviet Union, and Luria enjoyed some peaceful and productive 20 years of his later career. He died in 1977, only 10 years before another dramatic turn of events that his country again would go through with the advent of the Gorbachev's perestrojka. Luria no doubt would have welcomed the changes toward openness and intellectual freedom instigated by perestrojka, and moreover, he was one of those many Russians who had themselves prepared and made possible the peaceful transformation of the Soviet Union. Luria was also a talented and inspiring teacher, beloved by many generations of his students who are now proudly continuing his approach in psychology. Quite remarkably, Luria was, by all accounts, a person of a robust vitality and great ambitions that he employed in the interest of science that he selflessly served all his life. He was also an optimist at heart, full of enthusiasm and joy (it is hard to come across Luria's photo without this beaming infectious smile of his), in one word, a happy man—something obvious even to those who, like myself, had a privilege of knowing him only very briefly. I personally believe that Luria's exceptional accomplishments and high spirit in the face of adversity were made possible by the fact that he had devoted his life to a meaningful and socially significant goal—the goal that became embodied in the *leading activity* that organized and underpinned both his life and scholarly work. It is this puzzle of how a human being can withstand and even thrive, to an extraordinary degree, in the face of seismic changes and often catastrophic events that makes the book about Luria so fascinating, I would expect, for a rather wide readership. Indeed, a look at life and work of a scholar of his rank and his fate reminds us of the limitlessness of human potential. It also reminds us of how trivial are those theories and views that link human well-being and happiness to the selfish pragmatic of any sort, or to the benevolence of life circumstances as a prerequisite for happiness. I think that Homskey's book very convincingly conveys this baffling paradox of Luria's outstanding scholarly feat and challenges many preconceptions about human creativity and life.

At another level, the book by Homskey is clearly of interest to anyone concerned with the history and major principles of neuropsychology—a discipline that Luria founded by bringing the study of the brain and the psychological processes together. Luria's unique approach to the problem of how mind and brain are related was based on the innovative ideas that brain mechanisms (a) serve as an instrument for carrying out meaningful goal-directed activities, (b) are formed in the real life context of each individual's development in response to the demands of this real life context, and (c) are shaped in important ways by cultural artifacts such as language. Although seemingly simple, these ideas de facto signified a completely new path for studying the old mysteries of mind, enabling Luria to make a whole array of important discoveries about how the brain works and to formulate many ground breaking principles of its development (e.g., the principle of

the dynamic systemic localization of brain functions). To this day, these discoveries and principles constitute the cutting edge in neurosciences; in fact, they considerably presaged what has been recently widely disseminated in the media as the greatest discovery of the 20th century, namely, that brain functioning can be sustained, even in very old age, and new brain cells can grow in response to individual's active engagement in activities, thus likening the brain to a sort of a "muscle," the strength and vitality of which depend on how much it is made use of (e.g., Kolata, 1998). Careful reconstruction and insightful explanation of Luria's achievements in neuropsychology constitutes perhaps the strongest feature of Homszkaya's book, reflecting her own exceptional expertise in this field.

However, as Homszkaya rightfully emphasizes in her book, Luria's contribution is not limited to neuropsychology. Instead, the real significance of Luria's studies is much broader in that they constitute an insightful and creative expansion, especially into the brain-and-mind area, of the cultural-historical school of thought with its broad implications for practically all significant matters in psychology. Homszkaya, like most of her colleagues in Russia but only few authors in the West (with few notable exceptions, such as Michael Cole and James Wertsch, e.g., see Cole & Wertsch, 1996), regards Luria as the founder of the Vygotsky-Leont'ev-Luria approach in psychology. In several places throughout the book some important interdependencies and continuities in thinking among all of these three scholars are highlighted and discussed.

In this respect, the book about Luria should be of interest to anyone who wants to better understand the history of psychology at large, and thus to better grasp the present state of this discipline as well as the possible directions for its future growth. Although Vygotsky's heritage has now become an integral part of contemporary psychological discourse, the cultural-historical school of thought *as a whole*, represented by several generations of psychologists such as Luria, who participated both in its inception and its development and expansion during the many decades after Vygotsky's death, still remains insufficiently understood and reflected upon in today's psychology. Vygotsky is often portrayed as a scholar who alone created the cultural-historical approach in a solitary pursuit of abstract theoretical principles, and his close collaboration with Leont'ev, Luria and other members of his very close team is, for the most part, only briefly mentioned in the literature devoted to Vygotsky (e.g., Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000; van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). Yet attempts to understand cultural-historical approach are incomplete if one disregards the complex dynamics of how this approach emerged and developed as an essentially *collaborative investigative project* that entailed truly collective efforts of a number of scholars committed to the same ideals and goals and set on the same agenda of developing psychology as an objective science capable of making a difference in the real world. In that sense, the cultural-historical theory represents an example of a genuine school in psychology, clearly rooted in a shared philosophical background and committed to common ideological, theoretical, and pragmatic ideals.

The reason why the collaborative and ideologically driven nature of the cultural-historical theory is so often disregarded in its contemporary accounts is the old, essentially mentalist, approach to the history of psychology as a *history of ideas produced by isolated individuals in their lonely pursuits of abstract truths* (even if intellectual interdependency among the ideas and "voices" of various scholars is admitted). This conception of history as a history of ideas that constitute a separate mental (ephemeral) reality isolated from much more palpable processes of *doing* science, inevitably, and unwarrantedly, excludes a host of other than mental processes from the scope of what is considered as belonging into the body of science and knowledge. Excluded are ideological and political influences, collaborative and participatory processes, and the *sociocultural context*

at large (even if its impact, in an extraneous way, on the knowledge production is admitted) as legitimate constituents of the very fabric of science, as they become transposed into particular investigative projects and define its direction and its very nature. This conception of history follows on comfortably from the centuries old views on (a) science as a politics- and value-free enterprise separate from the practical and tangible processes of real life (if even applicable, at some points in time, to certain practical areas); and (b) knowledge as produced “in the heads” of individual scientists and belonging to the mental realm that is separate from (if even not completely unrelated to) the realm of practical transformative processes in the real world.

Unfortunately, Homskaya’s book, although full of important insights and information, does not go far enough, in countering these traditional views on science and knowledge. Moreover, Homskaya herself, in those rare instances when she hints at the type of meta-theory that she employed to reconstruct Luria’s heritage, subscribes to the view that, “the history of science is a chain consisting of individual links, histories of particular scientists” (p. 117). In a way, Homskaya focused more on Luria as a “particular scientist” than on “the chain,” that is, the collaborative project that Luria belonged to and that his life and work has come to embody. That this is the case is strikingly clear in that Homskaya herself, as an important colleague and follower of Luria, who spent at least 25 years working closely together with him, is nowhere to be found in the book. How did she come to know Luria; what forms did their collaboration take and how did it evolve; what kind of conflicts (perhaps), disagreements and shared political views (if any), practical agendas and so on, were involved—these are the kinds of issues that are not addressed in the book. Within the traditionally mentalist view on the history of psychology, this clearly is a testament to the author’s commendable desire to stay in the shadow of the giant and timidly conceal one’s own participation in how Luria’s path in psychology evolved. Within this traditional view such matters are simply of no relevance, deserving only a brief mention, because they do not belong into the body of knowledge. However, these omissions, together with the fact that Luria’s collaboration with Vygotsky and other members of the cultural-historical school, as well as Luria’s views on matters beyond psychology (e.g., on politics and ideology) are only sketched, are regrettable.

They are particularly regrettable if one wants to embark on a journey to reconstruct the dynamics of the cultural-historical school as a *collaborative, multi-generational, value-laden, and ideologically-driven investigative project that stretched far beyond the confines of science in its traditional mentalist guise*. The history of this project has still to be written in a way that would reflect and employ the recent breakthroughs in the meta-theoretical approaches to the history of science (e.g., Danziger, 1990; Knorr-Certina, 1981; Morawski, 1994). Even more important, this history is still to be written in a way that would employ the insights of the cultural-historical school itself—insights about the nature of science and human knowledge as forms of essentially practical, purposeful and goal-directed activity that are shaped, at each and every step of their development, by the very goals that they purport to achieve (e.g., Stetsenko, 1986; 1990). Such history of the Vygotsky-Leont'ev-Luria school would have to reveal how the cultural-historical context of their work, specifically the revolutionary project of changing society based on ideals of equality and social justice that these scholars clearly espoused (all the subsequent dramatic failings of this project notwithstanding), instead of being an outside source of influence, became integrated *right into the body* of their work, into its methodology, and the very knowledge it produced. Such a historical account would substantially alter the landscape of what is now portrayed as the history of psychology in the 20th century, as it would reveal how one direction in this discipline

has been developed based on *ideals and goals of human liberation and social transformation*. It is this commitment to the broader transformative—liberational social project that puts the cultural-historical approach into stark opposition to much of alternative developments in the 20th century, be it behaviorism with its overarching pursuit of controlling human behavior or cognitive psychology with its commitment to a value-free science model and related pursuit of universal and often “ameaningful” psychological principles (cf., Koch, 1999; cited in Smith, 2001). It is this commitment of the cultural-historical approach to such radical social project that sheds light on so many of its pivotal elements (e.g., its totally nontraditional view of theory as being a living instrument and form of practice), marks its unique standing in the history of psychology, and ultimately explains its otherwise startling appeal to so many scholars today (especially those scholars, I believe, who feel the urgent need for social changes and want to transform psychology into an instrument of such changes).

Such a historical account is a formidable task, likely demanding also a collective effort by many scholars, and it would be naive to expect it to be resolved in the present book. Homszkaya made a marvelous job at presenting an important, though fractional, piece of the cultural-historical puzzle of how the cultural-historical school in psychology emerged and developed in the great political schisms of ideals and reality of its time. All the above mentioned limitations of the book notwithstanding, they do not undermine its general value and Evgenia Davydovna Homszkaya deserves great credit not only for having written this book but also for continuing and expanding, now into the next century and against the odds of new challenges facing Russia today (e.g., the commercialization of psychology that pushes it away from ideals that the cultural-historical psychology stands for), the project and mission of her great colleague and teacher, Alexander Luria.

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