

**Discussion on David Olson's book "Psychological Theory and Educational Reform", Cambridge University Press, 2003.**

**a) Points I have in common with David Olson:**

- It is necessary to develop a theory of schooling. It is necessary to explain the specificity of this form of education. School education is intentional, explicit and systematic. This theory isn't merely an application of psychological or sociological theories. Psychology is important, sociology is important, history is important but it is necessary to go beyond the idea of education just as a practical application of theories generated in others fields of human sciences.
- Schooling has to work with Knowledge (scientific knowledge) and it is a mistake to make school like everyday learning (as in the home, as in local culture).
- It is also a mistake to recriminate the "bookishness" of school education. The initiation of the new generations through written culture is one of the most important aspects of schooling.

**b) Points for discussion:**

- 1) The Trojan horse inside Olson's conception on Knowledge and on schooling;
- 2) Our differing interpretations of Vygotsky's psychological theory, its foundations and its connections with others theories.
- 3) Our differing evaluations of "child-centered" pedagogies.

***1) The Trojan horse inside Olson's conception on  
Knowledge and on schooling***

Olson's explanation about the differences between school knowledge (scientific knowledge) and everyday knowledge ("personal beliefs") is limited to the formal (normative) aspects of knowledge. From my perspective, the difference between everyday knowledge and scientific knowledge isn't just formal, it is substantive; it is related to passage from the empirical and pragmatic knowledge to the discovery of the essential dynamic of natural and social phenomena. As Karl Marx has written, *scientific knowledge* is the passage from "the chaotic conception of a whole" to the comprehension of reality as a "rich totality of many determinations and relations" through the mediation of abstraction (highly abstract concepts). Scientific knowledge is the appropriation of natural and social reality through human thought. For example, the analysis of commodities made by Marx in the first chapter of *Capital* isn't just a more formalized thought than the empirical knowledge that people use when they buy and sell commodities on the market. The difference is that Marx explains the essence of this social object (commodity). Marx goes beyond the fetishism of the commodity. That's the mission of the science.

To understand Olson's conceptions on scientific knowledge and on schooling it's necessary to analyze his conception on democracy, which is limited to the liberal (capitalist) idea of democracy, that means *the formal* democracy, the *contractual* democracy. It isn't by accident that Olson makes analogies between schooling and the legal system. When Olson uses the concept of "bureaucratic societies" he is addressing schooling with the aim of teaching people how to participate in a formal democracy.

As Marx explained, the formal democracy works with the alienated division of the human person in two opposite sides: on one hand each human being is a citizen and must participate in state institutions and collaborate to the collective welfare; on other hand the individual is the a private person, the egoist individual, who participates in the market, in which the central word is competition. Olson, as Richard Rorty did, accepts as natural this division of the human individual and defines schooling merely as learning how to participate and improve the formal democracy:

“Contrary to the dream of Enlightenment, education does not civilize human beings. So much for the perfectibility of humankind (...) What has replaced the hopefulness of Enlightenment, I suggest, it is the view that it is institutions, not persons, that are perfectible. (...) In a sense this is the old Marxist view but with an important difference. The Marxists hoped to kill two birds with one stone, namely, perfect the institutions and in that way perfect the individual as well. That is, for the Marxists, the Enlightenment goal of the perfection of the individual was to be achieved through social, institutional means. (...) The new view abandons the Enlightenment hopes altogether. People are just fine as they are; they do not need to be changed in any basic way. What they need to learn is to participate in the institutions, not just achieve personal goals, but also to contribute to the perfection of those institutions, to make them more effective in achieving their specialized goals. Ideally, they need to learn not only to participate effectively in those institutions but also to criticize them, to make them more accessible, more just, and more humane. In such an institutional context it is no more realistic to address questions of personal beliefs independently of the society’s knowledge and its

institutions than it is to address questions of personal virtue independently of the courts and respect for law. The personal is completely embedded in the institutional.” (Olson, p. 9-10)



This is the foundation stone of Olson’s theory of schooling and this is the perspective from which he makes a distinction between “institutionalized knowledge and personal beliefs” and defends that school works with Knowledge (scientific knowledge, institutionalized knowledge).



Does this distinction mean that Olson considers Knowledge truer than personal beliefs? No. The difference is just that Knowledge is constituted by institutional beliefs. But why does society need to institutionalize knowledge? Olson’s answer is: “These institutional structures put constraints on what is taken as known in a society” (p. 69)



That is the point: Adopting the separation between the nature of the individual and his participation in social institutions, Olson is forced to adopt an epistemological relativism because in such a perspective there is no substantive criteria for comparing different kinds of knowledge and deciding which one is better, which one truer. That is the explanation for why Olson has adopted the neopragmatic (constructivist, postmodernist, relativistic) epistemology (Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Richard Rorty, Nelson Goodmann, Jerome Bruner).



“Recall that we need not claim that the truths so preserved and transmitted are absolutely true so much as that they are what is taken as true

by the legitimate institutions of the society, in particular the “taken as truths” embodied and employed in the knowledge institutions, including the school. The concept of taken as true is borrowed from the pragmatists, including Dewey, who claimed that knowledge was always shaped by human concern. As mentioned earlier, in my view the blind spot of the pragmatists was their failure to recognize what we may call the normative dimension of institutions and, consequently, of the distinction between belief and Knowledge. What is taken as known by an individual may be appropriately construed as assumption but when taken by an institution becomes simply Knowledge, that is, what is known in science, law, or any other legitimate social institution, including the school.” (Olson, p. 77)

“It is the institution that upholds the stricture on presuppositions, acceptable methods, valid inferences, replicability, and finally ‘truth’, and more realistically, what is taken as truth.” (p. 75)



In my opinion this relativistic and merely formal conception of Knowledge is a Trojan horse that Olson put inadvertently inside his theory of schooling.

***2) About our differing interpretations of Vygotsky's psychological theory, its foundations and its connections with others theories.***

p. 293: Social-cultural theorists “inspired” by Vygotsky  
(cultural psychology)



Culture = locally lived social environment



“It is therefore a mistake to make the school more like the home or to see the school simply as an extension of the home. Rather, school is more correctly seen as resembling courts of law with their statutes, laws, credentialed expertise, modes of discourse, and reliance on documentary practices.” (p. 294)



In my writings, I have been making a clear distinction between the “social-cultural theorists” and Vygotsky. He has not identified culture with local culture and school knowledge with local knowledge. This identification was built by the post modernist and multicultural scholars in North America and Europe. Vygotsky’s psychological theory has been misunderstood by those scholars who are not familiarized with the Marxist foundations of that theory. Like those scholars, Olson connects Vygotsky’s psychological theory with other theories very far from Marxism.

Examples: (1) “...*the work of Vygotsky discussed earlier that had its roots in the writing of Durkheim and Weber*” (Olson, p. 114) or “*Vygotsky was a follower of Weber and Durkheim in stressing the importance of society to personal development*” (Olson, p. 137) → I disagree. The work of Vygotsky is rooted in Marx and Engels, not in Weber or Durkheim. The

importance of society to personal development in Vygotskian psychological theory is derived from Marx and Engels, not from Weber or Durkheim.

(2) *“The Cognitive Revolution saw itself as rooting out the vestiges of a defunct behaviorism (Chomsky, 1957), replacing it by a more generative model of mind. This tradition is represented by the developmental theories of Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner that helped to define the Cognitive Revolution of the 1960s.”* (Olson, p. 111) → I disagree. Vygotsky’s psychological theory isn’t part of the same “tradition” of Jean Piaget. Piaget’s developmental theory is a kind of genetic structuralism and it is a total naturalization of individual development. Of course, Piaget considered that individuals live in society but Piaget applied to the analysis of social life the same biological model that he used to analyse knowledge and the individual’s development. Vygotsky’s psychological theory is based in the Marxist assessment that human nature is essentially social, essentially historical. The social reality (including individual development) can’t be explained by biological theories. In terms of education, Vygotsky’s psychological theory takes the opposite direction of Piagetian constructivism.

(3) *“Much of Dewey is perfectly compatible with later and more recent work on knowing, learning, and thinking, that we associate with such writers as Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner...”* (Olson, p. 125) → I disagree. Vygotsky’s conception on knowing, learning and thinking is very far from Dewey’s Instrumentalism or Pragmatism and equally far from the Genetic Epistemology of Jean Piaget. In epistemological terms Vygotsky was a materialist as Marx, Engels and Lenin. In terms of the history of education,

Dewey and Piaget are connected with the movement called “Progressive Education” in North America and “Active School”, “New School” or “New Education” in Europe. Vygotsky’s psychological theory doesn’t give support to the “child-centered pedagogies”.

### *3) About psychological theories and educational reforms*

*“What is required, then, is an advance in our understanding of school as bureaucratic institutions that corresponds to the advances in our understanding of mind.”* (p. XI) → I am not that optimistic about the advances of psychological understanding of mind. Most of the psychological theories do not consider the importance of an intentional education to the development of mind. **How could those theories lead to really understanding the human mind if they don’t focus on one of the most important aspects of human reality: the intentional transmission of the culture?** At this point the difference between Activity Theory (Vygotsky, Leontyev and Luria) and Piaget (for whom spontaneous cognitive development determines the possibilities of schooling and not the opposite) is very clear for me.

*“The argument through the book is that the modern advances in the study of the minds of learners, as did the liberating perspectives of John Dewey, go awry not because they are invalid but because in both cases they fail to recognize the institutional nature of schooling”*. (p. 291) → In my opinion they fail not just to recognize the institutional nature of schooling, they fail to recognize that human nature is essentially historical and cultural and they fail to recognize the importance of the transmission of accumulated knowledge to new generations.

p. 19: *“Further, progressivist reforms such as those of the child-centered movement, the subjugation of content to method, and the broadening of criteria for judging competence did not necessarily lead to poor achievement.”* → I have here two commentaries. The first is that I spent four years working on a large theoretical analysis of the “Progressive Pedagogy” (“New Education”, “Active School”) and of Constructivism (Piaget, Emilia Ferrero, Ernst von Glasersfeld and others). My conclusion was: these pedagogies are essentially negative about teaching, about the intentional transmission of knowledge by schooling. Independently of the good or bad application of these pedagogies they have an inner tendency to devalue the central task of school: the transmission of the accumulated knowledge. The

second commentary is that since the 1980s, elementary schools in my country have been reforming under the strong influence of Constructivism (Jean Piaget and Emilia Ferrero). The results are visible for everyone: now illiteracy isn't just a consequence of exclusion from school, illiteracy is now being produced inside the school system.