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Manifesto: Reshaping humanities and social sciences: A Vygotskian perspective

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3 Vygotsky already described the split-up psychology rooted in the post-cartesian dualism which leads to expansio-
nalism of local explanations and to silence about lan-
guage. The reunification of psychology necessitates a
moment and historical-cultural perspective in human/social
sciences in general, and in psychology in particular, and
a serious consideration of the status of language, contrary
for instance to the perspectives developed by Skinner and
Piaget. The position proposed in the article is socio-dis-
cursive interactionism based on the principle that human
behavior is the result of the appropriating and interioris-
ing of socially and historically produced semiotic instru-
ments. On this background, the place of psychology in the
reshaping of the human/social sciences is at the same time
nodal, in that all these sciences are concerned with topics of
representative nature, and second in so far as psycho-
logical functioning is socially produced. The broad meth-
ology of the presented approach is related to under-
standing, the researcher being always confronted with
interpretation of actions or texts.

I. Human Beings are the Issue

1.1 We start out here with the common sense statement that human beings differ from other
living organisms in four different ways:
- especially efficient behavioral abilities;
- linguistic abilities, organised into natural
languages;
- mental abilities organised in operations of
thought, presenting self-reflexion (also called
consciousness) as a distinctive feature;
- complex and diversified forms of social and
cultural organisations, giving rise to social
and cultural productions, that are passed on
and transformed in the course of History.

This statement stands at the roots of a questioning
that was central to Western philosophy in the
past but remains basic, in our view, for all hu-
man/social sciences: what is the status of these
different human abilities, and what is the process
by which they were established?

1.2 As expressed particularly in Aristotle’s An-
alytics, the standpoint of ancient philosophy
relied upon the distinction of two orders of phe-
omena. On the one hand, a pre-existing and a
pre-organised world (or cosmos as opposed to
chaos) and on the other hand, a logos, that is hu-
man, universal, logical and linguistic, whose
propositional structures were considered as “nat-
urally” reflecting the structures of the cosmos.
Renaissance philosophy, later on, became more
sensitive to the varieties of natural languages,
and altered this initial view. The French Jansen-
ist group of Port-Royal introduced, between the
objective structures of the world and the exter-
nal structures of natural languages, a middle

1 In so far that language comprises only one of the cer-
tified semiotic systems of mankind, we ought to relate
here to semiotic abilities. But we oppose this logical
inclusion assertion with a genealogical assertion: lan-
guage is the root of every semiotic system. Lacking in
space to debate this resolutely logoscentric position, for
the rest of the text, we will mention “semiotic abilities”
when commenting the general position of social inter-
actionism, and “linguistic abilities” when expressing
our own position.

2 Instead of “Humanities and Social Sciences”, we pre-
fer the expression “human/social sciences”, which des-
ignates all the sciences concerned by the organisation
and the functioning of human beings. For us, as a mat-
ter of fact, there is one and only one “human science”,
which can be divided into sub-disciplines; the human
science, as its many sub-disciplines, are necessarily “so-
cial” (see Section III).

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term: reasoning or mental operations. Assuming
that these operations were cognitive, universal
but non directly observable, they were only par-
tially and non readily reflected in language struc-
tures which, in turn, were considered as depend-
ant also on the living conditions of different hu-
man groups. In line with Port-Royal’s viewpoint,
Descartes introduced the notion of conscious hu-
man being (sujet conscient) as source and regu-
lation of these mental operations. The classical
philosophical-psychological debate opposing empiricists (human knowledge reads out the log-
ic of the pre-existing world) to rationalists
(knowledge consists in attributing the properties
of the human mind to the world) was based on this
idealistic assumption. Kant put a (provision-
ally) end to it through his well-known synthesis,
until Hegel built his own philosophy on the same
idealist grounds. He introduced a constructive and
dimensional history to dialectical interac-
tions and maintained that all human productions
(economic, social and cultural) derived from this
“original power” called human consciousness.

To the extent that the dominant Western phi-
losophy subscribed to Descartes’ creationist dogma
(God has endowed the sole human beings with a special conscious thinking abil-
ity), it never considered as relevant to tackle
the question of the status of consciousness, as
being “upstream” from the issue of knowledge
construction. It has missed out all together on
the status of human behavioral abilities, and es-
pecially linguistic abilities. At last, with the not-
iceable exception of Hegel, it did not take into
consideration the problem of the origin of
mankind’s socio-cultural productions.

1.3 Therefore, if classical philosophy broadly
sustained an idealistic position, Comte’s ap-
proach worsened the situation furthermore.
Through rejecting all metaphysical issues the fa-
ther of positive philosophy contested the exis-
tence of specific human abilities and, in a more
obvious way than his forerunners, he abandoned
the idea of a genealogical or historical questioning:
the world is stable, in order, and science’s task is
to discover its permanent laws. In the fa-
mous 45th lesson of his Course, Comte (1975)
subsequently denied dawning psychology its
status of positive science; to be more precise, he
considered that most problems, dealt with by the
discipline, are metaphorical or non-scientific,
some of them comprise sub-topics of biology
("physiological phrenology") and others sub-
topics of sociology (or "social physics"). Despite
this anathema, scientific psychology however
proceeded to develop but, justified to a certain
extent Comte’s reticence, it hasn’t been able to
endow itself with an unique or unified subject-
matter. Straightway it developed into discon-
ected and antagonist schools that dealt out the
analyses and interpretations of the human abili-
ties mentioned under I.1: some schools concen-
trated only on behaviors, analyzing their inter-
nal determinism (psycho-biology, reflexology)
or external determinism (behaviorism); other
schools concentrated only on mental abilities, con-
scious or subconscious (introspectionism, cogni-
tivism, psychoanalysis); others yet still
concentrated on the terms of the social or lin-
uistic functioning of human beings.

It is this plight of spliced up psychology that
Vygotsky soundly described and denounced in
The Crisis (1982), the author emphasizing in par-
cular its deep roots and two of its consequen-
tes.

At the root of this situation we find the affini-
ty of most schools of psychology for post-cari-
tesian dualism, in other words the thesis accord-
ing to which physical phenomena (behaviors and
their neurophysiological substrates) and psycho-
logical phenomena (mental operations), while
both being established in humans, nevertheless
proceed from two different substances, and
therefore subsequently require separate scientif-
ic approaches. For Vygotsky, on the contrary,
human behaviors are behavioral social linguis-
tical mental "complexities", and their scientific study
therefore implies that the question of the genea-
logical relations existing between these differ-
ent dimensions should be asked, and, in partic-
ular, the question of the role that social construc-
tions and linguistic productions play in this inter-
action.

The first consequence of this adhesion to du-
alism is the expansionism that characterises the
different schools. On the grounds of revealing
scientific facts related to a limited field (reflex
mechanism, learning processes, disclosed ef-
facts of events having happened in childhood,
etc.), each of them proposed an explanatory
paradigm, that may have been relevant locally, but

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that was then abusively extended to all fields of psychology. Breaking away from their field of validity, these paradigms in fact loose their scientific nature and turn into "ideologies totallantes", as the French have it.

The second consequence is related to the objective difficulty psychology comes up against in the field of practical interventions (educational or others). Divided up and ideologically laden paradigms are of no use and inapt for human interventions, because the latter require that all dimensions of their functioning (social, mental, behavioral, linguistic) should be taken into consideration. And paradoxically, rather than admitting to see this pitfall, as an evidence of the weak validity of their theorisation, the supporters of these paradigms just restrict themselves to packing these problems of application off to the boggy field of non-theorised praxis (i.e. the contempt of certain psychologists regarding educacional issues).

1.4 Obviously, Vygotsky’s diagnosis remains relevant for contemporary psychology. The current dominant paradigms are based on a position that remains mainly idealistic, even when they seem to reject dualism, and they still keep on splitting human behavior into many "false subject-matter". The discipline could remain as such. It would hence be assured of an easy academic self-reproduction, each trend analysing, with apparently acceptable methods, the positivty of behavior, the positivty of language, the positivty of social facts, the positivty of mental operations, and yet still the positivty of subconscious.

But such a status quo has a set of correlations that we consider impossible to accept. And adding on to the two harmful consequences identified by Vygotsky, we will adjoin two other gaps, less clearly argued by the author. The first is the difficulty in taking into consideration the linguistic dimensions of human functioning. If, as many people pointed out, the "silence about language" in Kant’s and Piaget’s work is impressive, the scientific paradigms that seem to give it a status (behaviorism and mainly cognitivism), only do so by setting aside its radical social bases (despite Saussure and Wittgenstein having clearly emphasised their importance), and by setting aside their active or discursive properties.

Strongly connected with the previous gap, the second one lies in the silence concerning the social historical basis of all behavior. Of course the dominant paradigms do not dispute the existence of social questions as such, but they perceive them as branching off from universal cognitive: social questions are only secondary products of psychological issues (Piaget, 1965). These paradigms therefore ignore the objective variety (both historical and cultural) of social mechanisms, as well, of course, as their role in the constitution and the diversification of types of psychological functioning.

Concerning the “state” of human/social sciences in general, we have to admit that the “division of labour” proposed by Comte is not only confirmed, but has increased. In one century, one could assist at a demultiplication of sub-topics and sub-sub-topics which are sometimes in savage competition. We will defend the thesis that this splitting up of human/social sciences is directly related to the internal splitting up of psychology, and, consequently, that the reunification of psychology is necessarily linked to the reshaping of all human/social sciences.

1.5 In order to undertake the reunification of psychology as Vygotsky wished it, we consider fundamental to revive the following lesser and continually repressed aspect of Western thought that de Mauro (1969) presented with a specially clear view.

a) First of all by breaking off from the Cartesian dualism and by subscribing to monism as proposed by Spinoza. Generally speaking the first position implies that every entity accessible to human beings is, in fact, a product of thought or, according to the contemporary neuro-cognitive reformatting, a product of the brain. “Self-centering delirium” according to Spinoza which position imply that thought, just as much as all certified phenomenon, is only the product of a unique matter in continual activity. And via this complete radical reversal of perspective, Spinoza also states the genuine paradoxical questions of human/social sciences: Under what conditions can this product of the matter in activity, which is the human mind, understand the world from which it proceeds and understand itself? Under what conditions can this other product of the matter in activity, which is human being, act upon the world and transform it?

b) Then, by really accepting the evolutionistic perspective3 as the framework of natural sciences in general and the historico-cultural perspective as the specific framework of human/social sciences. And, subsequently, by adopting an emerging monist questioning: from the unique matter how did the various forms of life emerge (as regards biology)? Through what mechanism were mental abilities added on to the behavioral ones of living organisms? Finally, how did social abilities emerge within human beings and, in particular language abilities, at the same time as active mental abilities (thought) and self reflexive abilities (consciousness)?

c) Finally, within the setting of this questioning, by seriously considering the status of language. The dominant paradigms still subscribe to the classical thesis that language is founded by nature, whereas the radical impossibility of such an assumption was foreseen by certain empiricists as from the end of the Middle Age, later confirmed by certain empiricists (including Locke), and finally demonstrated by Sausure and Wittgenstein. These authors clearly indicated that language only proceeds from a social convention of designation: signs and discourses only emerge as products of a collective activity of negotiating world representations; as supported nowadays by Habermas (1987), an activity simultaneously generative of the social question itself. Considering language seriou-sly automatically means to considering social questions first; in so far that language only exists in the form of various natural languages, endowed with their own semantics, considering social questions also means to considering their miscellaneous variable semantics, in other words their cultural variability.

1.6 Because they are partly connected with the position we have just mentioned, Skinnerian behaviorism and Piagetian constructivism make up two important and enlightening paradigms (see Bronckart, 1995b).

Skinner’s approach is firmly in keeping with the monist and evolutionist tradition. Skinner perceives human beings as organisms biologically endowed with powerful behavioral abilities, that develop and are altered through the effect of the selective pressure of the environment. Environment shapes behavior and, in particular, makes possible the acquisition of language. And, according to Skinner, mentally labelled behaviors are only interiorised verbal behaviors, which take over the behavioral functioning as such, and which “split it up”.

Piaget’s position is evolutionist and does not clearly choose between monism and dualism (see Bronckart, 1996). For this author the human organism is endowed with innate functional abilities (assimilation and accommodation) that enable it to develop complex forms of practical interaction with the environment (sensorimotor schema) and, therefore, to confer meanings to objects encountered. During this continuous process the child “rediscovers” the meaning of the signs of his environmental language and, while interiorising these signs, the practical structures of interaction are transposed to the mental level, therefore bringing forth the logical operations of thought.

If both Skinner’s and Piaget’s processes differ in their focus on interaction (the first being empiricist and the second more rationalist), all the same they suggest a similar developmental schema (see Richelle, 1993): by interchanging meanings, produced through interaction with the human environment, the capacity of thinking is brought forward.

However, in both cases, the objective social properties of the human environment are ignored, the latter being thought of in a universalist perspective, or yet still a physicist perspective, which doesn’t give any status to historical cultural variability and its effect on the meanings of objects. Yet again in both cases, the social basis of language (the radically arbitrary status of signs) is underestimated. In Skinner’s and Piaget’s work, social facts comprise secondary products of psychological abilities which – as a
matter of fact – leads to the postulate of the precedence of psychology on human/social sciences. In so far that social questions are stated as a consequence and not as the cause of psychological issues, the only determinations of the latter are ultimately biological. This explains the current tendency of confluence (and dissolution) of behaviorism, as well as of constructivism in cognitivism and neurosciences.

II. An Appeal for a Socio-Discursive Interactionism

Our monist and historical evolutionist position (see note 3) quite obviously differs from the previous two insertions, by seriously taking into consideration the role of social issues and language in the constitution of human beings. Generally speaking, it proceeds from social interactionism, which can be characterised by the integration of tendencies mentioned under I.5, within the chief model initially drawn up by Marx and Engels.

- All living organisms interact with their environment, and have the capacity of keeping traces of psychological “traces”: with superior species of animals this interaction is carried out within the setting of collective activities, and the traces, that the organism keeps track of, are therefore those of an environment mediated by activities.
- On account of the power of their behavioral abilities, human beings alter their environment; they introduce tools, collective constructs and semiotic instruments of co-operation; produced in groups placed in various contexts, these human productions are forthwith different, and these differences grow bigger in the course of History, bringing forth a differentiated environment, in other words a social cultural environment.
- This leads to reappropriating, and then interiorising, within the organism, the properties of this so transformed environment (socialised and semiotic laden) that brings forth the superior psychological abilities that are human thought and consciousness.

The general thesis of social interactionism therefore declares that the specific properties of human behavior are the result of a particular socialisation enabled through the historical emergence of semiotic instruments.

We suggest that the reshaping of human/social sciences, that we will argue under III, should be discussed within this general framework (the equation “mankind is social” having been stated, the distinction between these two qualities looses all relevance). Since, dating from Durkheim and Saussure, it is admitted that social facts, as well as linguistic facts, are, by nature, fundamentally various kinds of representations, the issue on the conditions devising representations becomes nuclear for all sciences. And according to this, the re-evaluation of the issue of psychology comprises one of the main conditions of their reshaping.

Socio-discursive interactionism proposes such a re-evaluation (see Bronckart, 1994, 1995a, 1996; Schneuwly, 1987, 1988, 1994b), that we will now summarise under six main theses.

II.1. Ahead of psychology, we suggest that the organism’s behavior is functionally organised into practical collective activities, aiming at the species’ survival (nutritive activities, reproduction, etc.). In mankind, activity is carried out under more various and complex forms, within the setting of social formations. And the emergence of these formations, like the diversification of practical activities, is indissolubly connected with the emergence of a particular kind of interaction, linguistic activity, as a process negotiating and agreeing upon the contexts within which this activity is carried out. The linguistic activity itself is assigned to a variety of communicative forms, in other words, a variety of texte genres4, adapted to the motives and stakes of the social formations. These socio-historical produced forms are available in an intertext (see Bakhtine, 1979) and are permanently open to transformations, oriented by new social goals.

II.2. Activity is the setting through which all organisms have access to environment, keeping psychological traces of it, or representations. In mankind, practical activity being mediated through linguistic signs, the context is not established by the environment as such, but by a set of forms of semiotisation issued from the environment, in other words, by represented worlds (see Habermas, op. cit.), or configurations of “social representations” (see Durkheim, 1898). And it is therefore the appropriation of these socio-represented worlds by human organisms that gives rise to the “individual representations”.

II.3 If individual representations are a psychological kind of phenomenon, they do not however proceed from a direct interiorising of the sociocological dimensions we have just mentioned; their making up is the consequence of the construction of actions, as mental behavioral units of functioning, from which the agents or the human beings are made up.

Linguistic activity, as we have seen, appears as a permanent negotiation process5, regarding the properties of the context of practical activity, but, as a matter of fact, it also establishes a process through which this practical activity is conducted and evaluated. The linguistic productions of a group, involved in a activity, assess the relevance of the acting out, as regards the context of the represented worlds, and this assessment, in particular, bears on the clauses of the participation of individuals in this social activity. And through this process of evaluating the role that the various human beings play in social activity, actions are defined, in their first and external status, in other words as bits of social activity attributed to a human organism.

But in the process of “defining” actions, the social evaluations ascribe to “others” action abilities (a likely “can-do”), as well as purposes (a more or less sincere “want-to-do”) and motives (more or less convincing “reasons-of-acting”), and they therefore endow them with this unique responsibility in active intervention, from which arises the status of agent. Besides, from the moment individual human beings contribute to these evaluations, and that they know the criteria codified by language, they end up by knowing that they themselves are evaluated according to these criteria, and they become capable of applying them to themselves. From this second point of view, individual human beings grasp action abilities, social positioning and self-image, in other words representations of themselves as agents responsible for their actions. And this self-representation of the agent’s status defines action in its second or internal status: a knowledge, available within the active organism, of the various aspects of its own responsibility in the carrying out of bits of social activity.

II.4 By interiorising the properties of social linguistic evaluations of actions, the human agent is endowed with the capacity of thought and consciousness. Technically speaking (Bronckart, in press), the active dimension of language (its mediating relation with practical actions), as well as the discrete and radically arbitrary character of the signs it carries alter the elementary psyche of living organisms (a set of non-organised representations unattainable to themselves) into a psychic functioning, relying on defined and structured units, and presenting these active and self-reflexive properties that shape the thought and consciousness. Since language signs do not take over all representations available in the human organism (see Sapir, 1953), we can therefore also consider that the subconscious is partly made up from this representational residue of the “world experienced”, that is not discretised and organised, and that is continually knocking at the door of language.

II.5 Bearing this in mind, educational interventions (or training interventions) appear as one of the explicit languages of social evaluation, through which human actions are brought forth. By aiming to alter the compass of learners’ action, and consequently by altering the representations they have of themselves, these interventions are therefore one of the main factors of development; and the analysis of their features is hence an intrinsic part of psychology. As asserted by Vygotsky (the very essence of (…) development is (…) the conflict between the evolved cultural forms of behavior with which the child comes into contact and the primitive forms which characterise its own behavior” (1974, p. 190). And according to this same author during this process “education can be defined as being the artificial development of the
child,...) It fundamentally restructures all functions of behavior" (1985, p. 45). In this perspective, educational processes aim at identifying and taking advantage of the learner’s "zones of proximal development", in other words the psychological self-reorganising steps of the process, into which the social interventions can efficiently introduce new contents, and therefore propose a re-orientation of development (see Schneuwly, 1994a).

II.6 Yet again in this framework, the role of texts is central because they make up the only empirical reality of linguistic activity. Through texts social facts are organised, either directly (myths, laws, rules, etc.) or indirectly (social products comprising art, religion, institutions, etc., only making sense through textual "interpreters"). It is through texts, as a matter of fact, that all learning interventions are organised. And, finally, textual structures, as well as the signs they include, are the objects of the constitutive interiorising of the human psyche, bringing forth this discursive (or action laden) logic, the abstraction of which then makes up the "logical-mathematical" thought. Texts propose reconfigurations of human activities (see Ricoeur, 1986); in their universal mythical dimension they acknowledge and tell of the laws and forbidden subjects that lay the foundation of social structures (see Schurmans, 1990; Schurmans & Dominicié, in press); via the differential and social historical cultural aspect of the various text genres, they propose particular terms of socialisation, and therefore make up the "macro-tools" of human development as suggested by Schneuwly (1994b).

III. An Appeal for a reshaping of Human/ Social Sciences

III.1 Human/social sciences maintain a relation of interdependence with natural sciences and, in particular, with biology which can be established as such.

- Every living organism keeping track of the psychological traces of its interaction with environment, one of the tasks of biology is to study, for each species, the structural and functional characteristics of the neurological substrate of this marker.
- In animals (and in human beings before the acquisition of language) these psychological traces are contracted with the behavioral and environmental conditions of their constitution (lacking in reinforcement, these traces are gradually subjected to "inhibition"). At this level, we suggest that the biological equipment (as regards its structural features) establishes a basis for behavioral abilities, and that the behavior-environment interactions establish a basis for the elementary psychological traces and their functional organisation.
- When in mankind the psychological traces are mediated through language, their dependence regarding the conditions of their constitution disappears, as demonstrated by Pavlov himself. Because they are socially and historically established, the units of representation characteristic of human psyche become autonomous from the causal chain linking biological equipment, interaction and psychic functioning.
- Hence, if the elementary behavioral and psychic abilities of human beings remain dependent on their biological equipment, mental operations, as well as the actions and the language they are connected to, break out from biological determinism. And at this level, rather than "imagining" neurological structures that could determine human behavior, it is a case of analysing to what extent the organisation of psychic meanings, action and language, historically, leads to a functional reorganisation of the human brain.

III.2 This being said, the main problem of the human/social sciences becomes the problem of the relation between psychology and the so-called social disciplines (as sociology, anthropology, etc.). On this we will advocate two theses that are only contradictory in appearance.

The first is that the set of problems of psychology is nodal for all human-social sciences, because they are all concerned with topics that, hindmost, are of a representative nature. And if representations are products of the textuality and activity of groups (therefore related to various disciplines), they are nevertheless at the root of the person. Be they collective, social or individual, and be they objectified in the social productions of the environment, representations have also a material inscription within the human agent. And this agent’s (or person’s) functioning, within actions, forms the main subject-matter of psychology.

The second thesis however states that psychology is second to social and linguistic issues, as we have indicated, in so far that the psychological functioning of the human agent only comes forth as the product interiorising the social and linguistic dimensions of group activity. And we emphasise that only when it dismisses the social and linguistic issues (see Skinner and Piaget, under I.6) can psychology proclaim itself as first discipline of human/social sciences.

For us human/social sciences have as common subject-matter the representations, built in the practical activity of groups, mediated through a linguistic activity. They are differentiated by the level from which this common subject-matter is tackled, according to the schema proposed by social interactionism, which starts off with collective activity and ends up with the person and his thought and consciousness.

III.3 Each discipline within human/social sciences, therefore tackles, with its own methods, a certain level of the threesome activity-language-representation: the level of collective human activity, its properties and products, as regards anthropology; the level of specific modalities of material, mental and social organisation developed by social formations, in their differential features, as regards sociology and ethnology (ensuring the social geographical being inserted at this level); the level of linguistic productions, in their general and differential features, as regards linguistics; the level of integration of these different dimensions within the action and within the person, as regards psychology. Finally, history as science introduces a complementary diachronic dimension into each of these disciplines; at every level, it furnishes a fundamental methodological lighting.

III.4 The explicans of the human being’s functioning is therefore set within anthropological, social, historical and linguistic facts. How, in these conditions, can we avoid what Vygotsky called in The Crisis "a backward reductionism", in other words the dissolution of psychological facts into the facts of another level?

First of all let’s underline that seeking the psychological explanation in social linguistic issues does not exactly form a reductionism approach (explanation of facts of a certain nature by facts of an other nature), because psychological facts are social linguistic! Let’s then bear in mind that human/social sciences are differentiated by the level at which they tackle subject-matters that are common. Activities, texts and representations have status, properties and meanings that are connected with the level of organisation from which we apprehend them: the level of mankind, of specific social environments, of natural languages, of individual human beings. The classes of anthropological, sociological and textual functioning are only valid at the level in itself from which they are tackled. And if the representations that define them are at the root of human beings, they are not structured or ruled by these human beings, but by the characteristics and the social historical stakes of development of human groups.

The explicandum, that the functioning of the person establishes, is therefore differentiable from its explicans in so far that the supra-individu al social linguistic explanatory dimensions are subjected, within each person, to a reorganisation that is always specific and different, bringing forth new meanings. The person is an experien tial product, in other words a path of life, of which the micro-historicity (irreducible to the history of groups) has conditioned the terms integrating and structuring the social meanings. And on account of this micro-historicity the social linguistic ingredients of common origin are allotted differently, each time, in the person.

III.5 As regards the previous statement, it is necessary to correct the assertion in paragraph II.5: educational intervention does not comprise a specific issue of psychology; it is the main place for validating propositions of all human/social sciences. Or rather, it should be. Our first affirmation derived from the fact that learning and developmental problems are traditionally set aside for the only sake of psychology. But the issue on educational problems should be thought of again, by assigning them to each tackling level mentioned above: as a anthropologi-
cal fact, as a social fact, as a linguistic fact, as a fact aiming to alter certain aspects of the person. In addition, rethinking education also means, as a necessity, to rethink ethics and politics, in other words the general conditions of a possible intervention on mankind (see Hameline, 1985). As we cannot discuss this very wide issue, we will be satisfied with emphasising an additional aspect of the problem (mentioned under I.3), the appropriateness of divided up and ideological laden paradigms. Any scientific fact that is locally validated, when it isn’t integrated within the general set of problems of mankind that give it its meaning, then becomes available, on the grounds of pure technology, for all kinds of interventions, including approaches of domination and violence (i.e. the use of conditioning, sensorial isolation, cerebral modification, etc.). And obviously, if it isn’t useless that researchers in human/social sciences should protest against this type of use, it is without doubt even more useful to bring up the epistemological positions that make them inevitable.

III.6 In our view the epistemological positions of many contemporary researchers are, first of all, an outcome of subscribing to the idea according to which all scientific methodology is necessarily explanatory and experimental. And it’s amazing to acknowledge that the successive “epistemological revolutions” (i.e. from behaviorism to cognitivism) are carried out in perfect methodological continuity: never mind the theoretical frameworks changing as long as they remain compatible with the methods alleged to be inspired by natural science! For all the reasons mentioned in this Manifesto, and as the inevitable correlation of the paradox about the constitution of human knowledge disclosed by Spinosa, we will advocate that the broad methodology of humanities and social sciences is related to understanding. On the background of their pre-knowledge of human activity, in which they participate, researchers are always challenged with interpretations of actions or texts, through which they strive to read the terms organising human representations, and through which they subsequently strive to achieve a greater understanding of themselves.

Within this wide framework, experimental approaches can therefore be developed as local steps aiming at causal explanations or through modelling. These approaches certainly should display all the strictness of procedures administering proof, but their explanatory products are only assured of their true status, through their re-integration into an all including hermeneutic approach; as proposals of new meanings, continually having to be renegotiated within the linguistic activities of human groups.

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