

Books of TheTimes

By John Leonard

THE MAKING OF MIND. A Personal Account of Soviet Psychology. Edited by Michael Cole and Sheila Cole. Introduction and Epilogue by Michael Cole. 234 pages. Harvard. \$15.

WE'RE with the Soviet psychologists. In Central Asia in 1931. The psychologists are trying out some syllogisms on Uzbek peasants. For instance: "In the far North, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zemlya is in the far North, and there is always snow there. What color are the bears there?" A peasant replies: "There are different sorts of bears."

The psychologist repeats the syllogism.

Peasant: "I don't know. I've seen a black bear; I've never seen any others... each locality has its own animals: if it's white, they will be white; if its yellow, they will be yellow."

Psychologist: "But what kind of bears are there in Novaya Zemlya?"

Peasant: "We always speak only of what we see; we don't talk about what we haven't seen."

Psychologist: "But what do my words imply?" and he repeats the syllogism.

Peasant: "Well, it's like this: our Czar isn't like yours, and yours isn't like ours, your words can be answered only by someone who was there, and if a person wasn't there, he can't say anything on the basis of your words."

Psychologist: "But on the basis of my words, 'In the North, where there is always snow, the bears are white,' can you gather what kind of bears there are in Novaya Zemlya?"

Peasant: "If a man was 60 or 80 and had seen a white bear and had told about it, he could be believed, but I've never seen one and hence I can't say. That's my last word. Those who saw can tell, and those who didn't see can't say anything!"

Right Out of Turgenev

It is an exchange that could've been lifted directly from Turgenev, instead of from the notes on a scientific expedition. Ironies cling to it like barnacles. The year is 1931, and still the peasant refers to a Czar. If he refuses to believe in white bears, what will he make of such abstractions as the labor theory of value or the dictatorship of the proletariat? The psychologist, A. R. Luria, conducts his interview during one of the worst phases of forced collectivization, about which he has no comment. And he will return to Moscow to find that the authorities do not appreciate his "negative value judgments," which means that he will switch to another line of research, involving identical and fraternal twins. Twins are not quite so stubborn.

Very Russian, you will say. A. R. Luria, who was 15 years old at the time

of the Revolution and who died in 1977, was certainly very Russian. He and L. S. Vygotsky and A. N. Leontiev were known as the "troika." They sought nothing less than a new Soviet psychology, consistent with Marxist theory, loyal to the social, cultural and historical contexts in which the individual human organism develops its motor and cognitive skills, trying to explain the "higher processes" of thought according to such "mediations" as language and the "accumulated symbols and tools" of society.

They insisted on both nurture and nature. They borrowed at will from the biologists and the physiologists, the psychoanalysts and the linguists, from Ivan Pavlov and from Henry Head. They were clinicians as well as experimenters. In addition to "primitives," and twins, they studied and worked with kindergartners, college students, suspected criminals, aphasiacs and brain-damaged war veterans. Depending on which way the wind was blowing from the Kremlin — anti-Freud, pro-Lysenko — they had to change their jobs or their language. The change of language must have been especially bitter, since Luria believed that speech comes eventually to "organize behavior" and that "goals" themselves alter thinking.

A Strange Memoir

And yet, oddly, Luria's memoir is not very Russian, not when we remember the memoirs of a Herzen or a Trotsky. Moments having to do with peasants and syllogisms are rare. We hear from Lenin on glass and Marx on spiders, and a reference is made to Jorge Luis Borges, but the tone is usually dry and guarded, surprisingly so from a man best known to general readers in this country as the author of "The Mind of a Mnemonist" and "The Man With a Shattered World." He has much to say on perception, memory, attention, speech, problem-solving and motor activity, and very little to say on people. Even Vygotsky, proclaimed a genius, is flat on the page. Stalin's name isn't mentioned.

In his epilogue, the American psychologist who was once a student of Luria's admits his own disappointment with the memoir and brings the man splendidly to life — an expert on Central Asian art, a connoisseur of opera and the theater, "one of the world's most omnivorous consumers of detective novels," the psychologist who sat down with Sergei Eisenstein to discuss how the abstract ideas of historical materialism could be converted into visual images, the victim who never complained, a white bear of science. It would be silly, I think, to deny that he was on the right track. We do change after the age of 3, and if history and culture and the environment had nothing to do with our development, we needn't have bothered at all.

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