

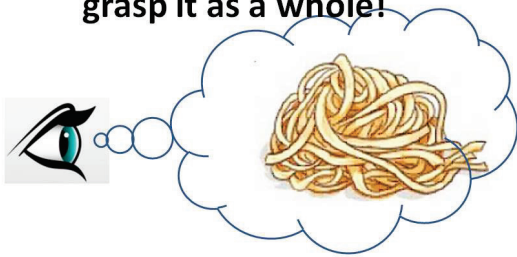
Understanding complex processes

Talk by Andy Blunden, for Seminário Internacional de Pesquisa: Vygotsky e Mudança Social, Brazil, 1 April 2021

LET ME SAY at the outset that I agree with what Mike Cole said last week: that we are living at a *singularity* in world history. The American century is over. But what happens now is indeterminate. It is up to us.

THE SUBJECT of my talk is more *analytical* and a very general one: how to understand complex processes. By 'complex process' I might mean the social and political situation of an entire country, like Brazil, or, I might mean the current state of a science, such as Cultural Psychology, or, I might mean a single person, maybe a friend or a patient.

We need to grasp
what is right here and now
But we study history to better understand it.
(not for its own sake) and we have to
grasp it as a whole!

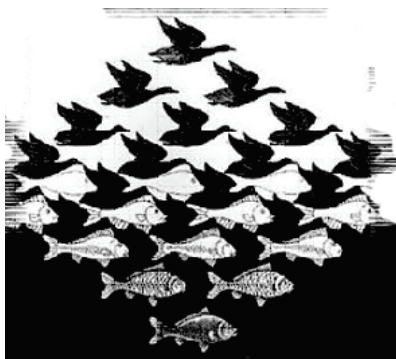


This is a very general topic, but I take it that we have a *practical* interest, that is to say, we are really not interested in the *whole history* of it – the history of Brazil and what the Portuguese did and who did what to whom – but how things stand *right now*, as we can see them before our very eyes and which we want to change. But we will have to look into the history of the thing to *understand* how things stand at the present moment. Our interest in the past is for a *purpose*, to shed light on the present moment, not to gain some perfect

knowledge of an infinitely long and complex past history.

Also, we want to understand the thing *as a whole*, that is, the whole country, not just this leader or this pandemic, not just the political system in isolation from the economic system, for example.

But what does it mean to understand something *as a whole*? Very easily said, isn't it? But how can we? Does this mean understanding every last little fact and detail, what the population is or the price of eggs? No. Grasping something as a whole, means forming a *concept* of it, as whole. The German language tells us this: *begriffen* means to grasp, and the word for concept is *der Begriff*. To grasp the present moment is to form a concept of it, which is different to trying to explain every little detail. We want to get a handle on it, grasp it as a *whole*, and that means forming a *concept* of it.



How do we do that?

THE GREAT GERMAN poet and naturalist, Goethe, the philosopher, Hegel, the Communist, Karl Marx, the Soviet psychologist, Lev Vygotsky – all agree on the answer to this question: we have to discover that *concrete simple something* which typifies the whole process, and which we can see in the present *crisis*, the relation on which the present moment rests and is the key to practically grasping the thing as a whole and changing it. Marx, for example, grasped bourgeois society as the commodity relation – selling in order to buy, and capital as buying in order to

sell, at a profit. And out of that insight he wrote *Das Kapital*, a work which is still studied today, 160 years later. Just like biologists see the cell as the basic unit of every organism, and politics is making collective decisions.

The point is then: how do we find this concrete simple something and what is its nature?



AT THIS POINT let me bring in another aphorism that sounds profound but can be misleading. It is said that *everything is a process*, or must be understood as a process. But this is not quite right. Sure, everything is in a constant state of change, but how do we *understand* a process, its motor force. Wages may be falling, but how do we know that next minute wages might not suddenly

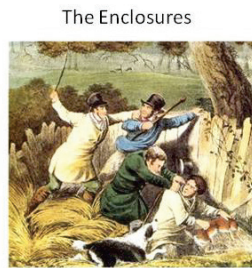
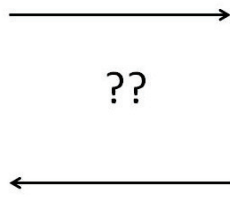
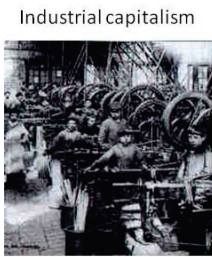
start rising. You have to know the contradiction which is at the root of the process. We can't simply project something forward. We have to know what is *driving* that change. And this means understanding the thing, the concrete simple something as a *contradiction*. And that is what 'concrete' means, in fact. When we say a 'concrete simple something' the 'concrete' means a unity of two distinct determinations. So that is why Marx took a commodity as a unity of exchange value (the labour time needed to produce it) and use value (its usefulness) – two *different standards* of value each with their own roots. Just like Vygotsky took thinking as a unity of speech and intellect, each of which had independent roots in a child's development *before* intelligent speech arises as a unity of sound and meaning. If you understand the contradiction, the conflict underlying a process, then you can see why the process is going like it is and how it might change.

So when we say: 'concrete simple something', the 'concrete' means a contradiction, and the 'something' is some relation or action. It's an unsolved problem of some kind. Like a political party which needs to get elected but its policies are unpopular with the electorate. What's it going to do? Or a worker who discovers that their skill has been taken over by some new technique and they can no longer earn a living in their trade. Those are examples of contradictions – they drive change and development.

But when we look at the present moment – a nation in crisis or a person suffering anxiety or a science which seems to have lost its way – we can see it. We feel it in our gut. It is right there before us, and we are part of it, unlike the past, which we only know by the records and traces left by the past, which we have to somehow piece together. But the present situation is *so complex*. It has a million different sides to it. That's exactly why grasping a complex process is a problem in the first place. You look at the situation in Brazil and a thousand different problems and potential solutions, and manifestations of crisis strike the eye. Everyone argues about what to do, what is the reason for things, which section of society is to blame and which can solve the problem. Too much information.

Here is where we need to look at the past. You make a *first guess*. Maybe the problem is a charismatic leader who deceives the people? Maybe the problem is the endemic corruption of officialdom? Maybe it's habits originating in the colonial settlement of Brazil? I don't know. Let me be clear about that: *I don't*

know. And maybe you don't either. But maybe you can form a concept of a concrete simple something which you *think* encapsulates the present crisis.

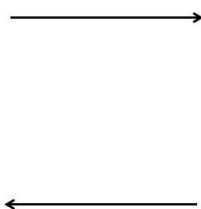


AT THIS POINT, we have to turn to history. We see a country in crisis before us, and there are certain obvious features, symptoms of disease, but to diagnose the problem you have to enquire into the past to learn where

the problem comes from. And of course you know that whatever the historical record tells you is not an objective image of past reality, but is itself an expression *produced by* that past.

What takes place now is a *back and forth movement*. You look back to find when the 'germ cell' you have in mind first appeared. You are particularly interested in the *conditions under which the cell* first arose. You are interested to see what it was in that environment which makes sense of the formation of this first concrete simple something. What problem was it solving? You can then start the reverse movement, coming forward from the past to the present, watching how the cell develops in response to and in unity with the conditions. You are specifically looking for a cell which *reproduces itself by reproducing the conditions which gave rise to it* in the first place. The chances are that your first guess won't turn out to be correct. Let me give a couple of examples.

Marx saw in his youth poor landless peasants who were being mistreated by the landed aristocracy. The British had the most highly developed form of modern industry. So Marx looked back through British history and he found in the Enclosures of the 17th and 18th century the roots of capitalism: peasants were driven off the land to leave room for sheep which were now more profitable than farmers. This created an atomised mass of impoverished vagabonds, alongside a wealthy farming elite. But this was *not a self-sustaining process*; robbery could not explain the on-going expansion of capital. Nor could the invention of new machinery. If this were the case, capitalism would have arisen centuries ago in China where technology was more advanced. Marx found that this mass of



labourers with no access to their means of production, gathered together in the towns and desperate for work became a *proletariat* and anyone who had capital to purchase land and materials enough for one cycle of production could hire these workers and keep them on the poverty line so they could *never* get

enough money to own their own means of production, and in this way capital could reproduce itself *and* reproduce the mass of impoverished proletarians it needed to exploit. This relation – cheap labour power bought and sold on the market as a commodity – was the key, the germ cell which grew into modern capitalism. Once this was in place, machinery could be used to increase the productivity of labour.

I'll give you another example. Workers in Iran currently suffer under a theocratic regime which uses terror to suppress all opposition. As a first guess,

you'd say that the origin of this regime was in the 1979 Islamic Revolution which overthrew the Shah. But this turns out to be a mistake because that revolution was led by the young intelligentsia and was supported by almost the entire nation – the organised workers, the urban poor and the peasantry. The mullahs were just figureheads really, ensuring the support of the poor who were otherwise sympathetic to the Shah.

A closer look shows that the Revolution was followed shortly afterwards by working class uprisings which seized control of the factories and enterprises and placed them under the control of *Shuras* – the Shia muslim form of a commune. But the cultural level of the workers was not sufficient to run the economy, and the government needed to bring back the factory owners to run the basic units of the economy. But they had to be protected from the workers, so the mullahs, who managed to seize central government control by defeating the young intelligentsia who had led the Revolution, used religious doctrine to raise a militia from amongst the poor, and protect the bosses from their workers, but ultimately robbing the bourgeoisie of their wealth. Thus the regime *balanced* between a wealthy but weak bourgeoisie and fragmented working class by resting on militias raised from the expatriot and rural poor, secured by their religion. When the poor at last broke from the hold of the mullahs in 2019 the true relation of forces came to the surface. The *Shura*, terrorised into submission to a powerless bourgeoisie by militias raised from the poor and disciplined by religion – this was the germ cell of the whole development of the Islamic State since 1981, when the Shuras were formed. On this basis, the outbreaks of struggle in 2019 could be made sense of.



LET ME REPEAT THEN: we search back and forth in history to discover in clearest outline the concrete simple something which grasps the present situation in a nutshell so to speak, which throws the present relations in the proper light so that we can understand the dynamics at work. The concrete simple something, the *germ cell*, always rests on a contradiction, a *temporary solution* to some problem which we find in conditions which arose in the past, but a solution which *reproduces itself* and its conditions so that it becomes a relatively permanent contradiction.

It's a back and forth movement between the present and the past, and between the part and the whole, between each episode of the movie and the overall story. Each makes sense only in the light of the other, so we go back and forth. It's a 'hermeneutic circle'. Once you've grasped the situation as a whole you can fill out the details. Once you can see the place of the present moment in the whole unfolding crisis and the conditions which sustain it, then you can figure out what to do next.

This is how the ideas brought to us by Vygotsky help us understand our social and political situation, practically.