

Early attempts at cross-cultural communication between the USA and the USSR

This is the text of a letter from Michael Cole to Vladimir Posner. A chronology of the context in which the letter was written is found in "[Moscow Calling](#)." Vladimir Posner was a Soviet journalist who had used satellite video links while acting as a Soviet spokesman on the US ABC network. Mike Cole had met Posner 20 years earlier while an exchange student in Moscow. Headings have been inserted to improve the accessibility of the letter.

July 19, 1983

Dear Volodya [Vladimir Posner],

It seems like an appropriate time to put down some of my experiences in attempting to implement a simulcast between UCSD and the Moscow Film Festival. I need the record for my own understanding, and in so far as my experiences are relevant, your understanding as well.

Getting support in the US

In each case it is understood that this project fell as an abominable extra load at a bad time; I will leave all the context out. The story has a lot of parts without the context, which I leave to your imagination for the present. Upon reaching New York I picked up the phone and called Dimitri [Devyatkin]. Sheila [Cole] pointed out that he was the one person I knew. She also suggested that I get in touch with Howard Weinberg (the CBS man to whom I introduced Dimitri long ago and the man who I want to have do a show on you). Howard was very helpful. He also thought highly of Dimitri's work. Sadly, no Dimitri. He was in Moscow. I got a phone number from Dimitri of a man in Washington who was friendly, sort of, but mostly protective. He was busy building his own space bridges and didn't want the waters muddied; dead end. But Howard had given me some other leads, which I started to work on.

In the morning, I started making phone calls and visits. Sheila and I also started working with our editor. [Fritz Mosher](#) at Carnegie was interested in the broadcast idea because Carnegie has started to worry about world salvation from war and I eventually met with his boss, [David Hamburg](#), who was positively disposed toward my stories, of which this venture was only one. He told me to drop everything and go for it ... and left for Mexico. I called Unison¹ hoping to contact [Steve] [Wozniak](#), but no dice. Very luckily, [Richard] Lukens was at Unison that day. So I made that contact. Friendly, but no help; Lukens and [Jim] Hickman were (are) busy on peddling a half hour of the original space bridge. I would say that the old pros in the business were tired and discouraged by the failure to get as big a reaction here as you got there. They were also busy protecting turf and influence. My one positive response was from Children's Television Workshop². If I could come up with the money, perhaps we could run the program out of their New York studios plus an expert with some film. Not bad, but too tough and expensive.

I called UCSD. People here were terrific. In a couple of hours I knew that I had not been bragging in Moscow – just stretching a bit. We can do such broadcasts right from home; all we need is one extra microwave link totally standard. At this moment we have created a small sensation simply because we have proved to everyone's satisfaction that we can do it technically from our campus. The significance of a university entering the game seemed pretty clear to everyone.

¹ The Unison Corporation, a philanthropic organization in California.

² A US non-profit which had been responsible for the production of *Sesame Street*.

Back on the phone I got on the trail of film people on the West Coast who could help. At this point I also got a hold of Helene Keyssar³, my colleague who immediately started her own phoning around to film people she knew. I was out of time and on the plane for home. We got here Thursday, June 30 very tired.

Friday morning Helene, our administrator, Jane, and I met and started making calls. I worked the East Coast, calling foundation people and enlisting their help. One person led me to another. Meantime, Helene had made contact with the Center for Film and Children (or some such) in the person of a woman named Shanta Herzog.⁴ An amazing lady. We thought the idea was terrific and pitched right in. She and Helene have juggled together an amazing, volunteer program with really talented people. If this works I think you will like it.

Unbelievably, by Friday afternoon we were propped up enough to send off the first telegram. That meant I had a guarantee of support to cover technical costs, sort of. I also had a foundation head give me \$5000 minimum backup and people in Hollywood nodding in a friendly way.

Now it is Friday evening a week later. I have only a plebian request in for a call, and the operator says probably no dice. So I also have a call in to Jim Hickman because he knows how to get a non-plebian line. I have done a lot of thinking about [Esalen](#)⁵, EST⁶, and the USSR. More of that later. At this moment I have two official "No's in hand and two unofficial "yeses." Mr. [Joseph] Goldin is in the middle of each "yes." A man from Esalen was in the second "yes" call. Now, assuming I don't reach you, this will continue to simmer until Monday when we see if there is written word of a positive sort. I can only fantasize what it might be.

People here have been put out by the dillydallying after we delivered the impossible. The edifice is very shaky. If we get positive word on Monday it will take shape quickly. If we get negative word we will have egg all over our faces, but contact with a lot of sympathetic people who really pulled for us. As usual, the payoffs and the costs are still pushing at each other. It is agreed that if we have to accept "no" for an answer, we will do so in the form of an appropriate counterproposal. In point of fact, there is tremendous interest here in making such activities happen on a regular basis.

I won't go into possibilities now because the present task is big enough and I have a whole different aspect of the problem to bring up. Suffice it to say that *Scientific American* is very interested; the editor will be in Moscow on Sept. 4th, and I suspect you may be called if you are not in Bulgaria. I also want to summarize my impressions of the current state of Soviet psychology and social science in general. The issue of human potential movements and EST or Esalen is mixed in there, or I miss my guess badly. (Here I have to break for context; as I write this the phone rings intermittently; the last one continued to discourage hope that the call will get through. I continued to ask that they try.)

Take this section as a bridge to the second part of this letter. I don't know what kind of a bridge this may turn out to be.

The Soviet Reception

What do you think happened as we were trying to deal with the ambiguous messages from Moscow and the irritation of our contacts here? At the end of the day, [Raz Ingracsi](#) calls to say:

³ Chair of the Department of Communication at UCSD.

⁴ Shanta Herzog was Director of the American Center of Films for Children.

⁵ Esalen – an institute in California, part of the "human potential movement," or "self-help" movement.

⁶ EST – Erhard Seminar Training, the international program of Werner Erhard Associates, of which Charles (Raz) Ingracsi was the Director, also part of the "human potential movement."

Please come teach us how EST can be made palatable to the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. (*Vey ist mir.*⁷) He also said "Tell Posner that we tried but Denver was tied up, Hammer was out yachting, tra la tra la." In short, we had constructed something beyond EST's capacities to match. That surprised me as much as the mindboggling suggestion from Raz. In the attempt to get a critical voice into the telecasts to come, our Department's ability to put it together plus our academic clout will give us a peculiar base of influence. But the peculiar and poorly understood power of Esalen is a very serious issue for us to contend with.

I will enter the telecast activity as a communication theorist, but it will be on a very peculiar basis. It is clear that the act of creating simulcasts has some base of support in the USSR. It has support here. It has great potential for good and equal potential as another cog in two dreary propaganda mills, each looking for new grist. With a large burden of unfinished work and serious scientific aspirations, I will be limited in what I can contribute; I cannot spend a lot of time drumming up money and doing PR.

The only sane thing for me to do is to go with my special areas of competence. Somehow, the problems of human potential and new communication technologies have come together in the present situation to create human potential-sponsored simulcasts that generate lots of interest and good will everywhere. It is a totally new kind of activity. So a communication professor would have to be interested. All the more so because I have serious interest in Soviet theory in this area. But in addition to my conviction that there is good to be had out of UCSD entering as an agent in this interchange, I also see a somewhat frightening phenomenon. To wit: it is a very interesting fact that EST/Esalen have such clout in the Soviet-American cultural exchange process. The simultaneous growth of human potential movements in the US and the USSR among the technological elite is a real problem for students of social change; it is an especially interesting phenomenon for students who study change as a communicative process. It is a certain fact that the social significance of EST in the USSR is not the same as in the US; the entire network of influences into which it is fit run from society to the individual in the USSR. Here it is (ideologically speaking) me first, but society has to be given its due. EST, in a "politically neutral" way makes people more active and intelligent in their dealings with the world. It gives them, loosely speaking, initiative. In the US, that initiative works in the same direction as the ideology, making a lot of EST people into self serving maniacs. But if that kind of change can be brought about in a society that starts "top down," where initiative gets drummed out of people too often too early, maybe the "non-political" nature of the technique is its virtue. It can now assimilated into the existing top down control system and used to infuse initiative into the system.

These are gloomy thoughts, but real ones. If I get involved in a scientific look at EST, it will not be restricted to the system of transforming individual activity. That by itself is method with a cover story that cannot wash as science. I suspect that it is possible to do translation of EST terminology into terms that fit analytic categories in Soviet psychology. In fact, I think that there are Soviet psychologists who have labored long, hard, in some cases successfully, to work out principles of organizing behavioral change that Americans could well learn from (as you know, or I wouldn't bother to work at the exchange). But to do a "local" translation of EST ideas could cause great mischief, no matter what the outcome, but especially if it were over-generalized. It could lead to such wrong conclusions as: there really exist politically neutral ways of changing how people act on their own behalf in the world, or, to the very risky notion that the technique when placed in a Soviet context will be instrumental to creating the New Soviet Man. It is risky for those who think that there is a close link between communism and

⁷ *Vey ist mir*, a Yiddish phrase equivalent to the better-known Hebrew "Oy vey."

humanism and it is a risk for those who believe they can bell that cat. It isn't all that clear. I recognize that all of this represents threat and hope, it is always like that with change.

I know that these people are an important element in your operating space. I can see that at present they play an important role, but I don't understand why. When I do understand why, I will say so. And it may be unpleasant to listen to.

All of this is preliminary to the remarks that follow (where I have some technical expertise and a long memory) to compensate for my ignorance of the fine grain of soviet life. I would be pleased if you could comment on my errors. I am as unhappy as the Central Committee with what I see going on in the social sciences (*especially* the social sciences). But for different reasons. It would be fun to have a serious exchange on such issues, although I'll be darned if I can see a forum.

As you know, I have been involved with Soviet psychology for a little over twenty years. It is a very foreign enterprise for an American psychologist and as a way of getting to understand it, I have spent a fair amount of time studying the history of Soviet social sciences, as well as other areas of Soviet life and the European sources of Soviet psychological thought. The Fall that Sheila and I first came to Moscow the famous exhibition of art at the Manezh [Moscow design museum] was still on, the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred, and the academic exchange program was three years old. My advisor, Alexander Luria, was one of the founders of Soviet psychology, and an extremely unusual man. Given the opportunity to explore widely in Soviet psychology by Luria, I was given a good basis from which to judge subsequent events, as well as the motivation to understand what had gone on earlier.

The visit of American scientists to Moscow in June 1983

The situation that met me when I arrived in Moscow on June 12, 1983 was gloomy in the extreme. I came in several roles; as a member of delegation to the Institute of Psychology, A.N. [Akademiya Nauk, the Academy of Science] (Boris Lomov) to discuss the psychology of development; as the American psychology commissioner on the ACLS⁸-ANUSSR exchange (also run through Lomov); as editor of *Soviet Psychology*, the only systematic translation journal for Soviet psychologists; as a colleague of Lomov's who had exchanged some students with him and who had scientific work to discuss centering on the concept of communication. I had a lot of issues on my mind.

The seminar on development was attended by seven Americans and about 15 Soviets, all of whom gave papers. The quality of the papers varied; some dull, some interesting. Three American papers evoked a lot of interest; one on language development which was not well understood, one on behavior genetics and my paper on the construction of environments to overcome learning handicaps. Otherwise we got the typical gap between the two sciences; the Americans are method without substance, the Russians are verbal without enough substance or method. These impressions (partly justified on each side) were sustained by the slow and spotty translations and the failure to display for each other the concrete specifics of what we do. The distressing part of the conference is that the no adequate measures were taken to deal with these problems ahead of time. Lomov and I are experienced at these matters; we have made such seminars productive before by pairing off seminar members and seeing that they get a lot of time to spend with each other, labs, and face to face conversation. But this time, there was no real interest in making things work. (This indifference reflected perfectly the fact that in the year since I last had direct contact with one of Lomov's staff members who was my guest, I

⁸ ACLS: American Council of Learned Societies, an institution oversaw exchanges in many fields.

had not received any letters or manuscripts. The real business of the exchange existed in the activities of a few, isolated, junior people.)

Back to the seminar. Not only were we jerked around on our visas (which cost not only us, but Lomov's institute a lot of time and trouble). The officially cool reception was maintained after we got there by a visible and embarrassing lack of effort to make real contact. Only after a great deal of hassling did our delegation get to see any children, and then largely through the efforts of people outside Lomov's institute who knew Urie Bronfenbrenner and me. The Soviet chair never invited an American to talk outside of the official seminars. People inside Lomov's Institute were kept out of the room and away from the visitors. Even a walk in VDNK [a Moscow gallery] and dinner in a restaurant was blown into an international incident where I had to intervene between Lomov and his foreign secretary, who simply threw the fear of God into the Institute staff.

I think I am sophisticated enough to discount a reasonable amount of this behavior as a response to the very tense situation existing between our countries. Lomov certainly made no bones about the lousy relations and the fact that two Russians had been treated in an unfriendly manner by the Americans last Fall (never mind that it was not part of what he and I had been doing together for the last few years). What bothered me considerably more was the underlying mood of the place. A little background of our conference was the furious activity of the Institute, attempting to deal with criticism that was coming down on it via the CC [Central Committee] meeting going on downtown. People were feeling the pressure. Also in the background, but all too palpable, was the ugly struggle going on within Soviet psychology between Lomov and psychologists of other schools who have been removed, dismissed, and intimidated by Lomov's group in the last couple of years. People from other institutions participated in the seminar, but no other contacts were even hinted at; they left immediately after the official meetings and were not hooked up with American participants after hours.

The week following the seminar was supposed to be a time for our delegation to do a little traveling, see other institutions (especially ones involving kids), and talk with Soviet psychologists from other institutions. It was an amazing set of incompetent escapades, with some very decent people seeking to make the best of an awkward situation. We got little serious discussion in other institutions either because too little preparation had been done (although many letters and a phone call had made clear the intended activity) or because people were doing their set pieces and would not loosen the reins. The big exception was the area of behavior genetics which is a hot item in Soviet psychology right now, and where strong contacts were made with Lomov's approval.

The most distressing visit from my perspective was to the Institute of Psychology, A. Ped. N. [Academy of Pedagogical Sciences] (Matyushkin). Although Matyushkin is a Lomov man, who has replaced Davydov, he didn't get ready for us. I had asked specifically to see some people working on language development on behalf of one of our group and myself, but no one in this area was present for the visit. Matyushkin gave a set talk on the history of the Institute ending with self-criticism for failing to link theory and practice (see *Pravda* of the same morning). It was too sad to be funny. That institute has long been a world leader in showing pedagogically oriented psychologists how to link theory and practice. I could not resist listing a few of the lessons that world psychology has learned from Matyushkin's predecessors. In response I learned that there are new problems requiring new theories and solutions which the earlier generation was not up to, in particular, problems of psycho-diagnostics and training. More about those new problems shortly.

As we were waiting to see Matyushkin, we were approached by Felix Mikhailov, the

philosopher who currently works with the blind-deaf collective at the Institute. He had been called on the carpet [i.e., reprimanded] by Matyushkin for allowing his English *stazhor* [i.e., a foreign student he was supervising] to give a seminar without posting a formal notice and for allowing Sheila and me to talk to him about the blind deaf. The next day he got further hell because I knew too much about the plans to sequester those fantastic blind-deaf people back in Zagorsk (a sore point between Matyushkin and Mikhailov, who has refused to participate in that retrograde (efficient) move). Perhaps I should mention that Matyushkin also refused permission for Sarah Michaels, a *stazhor* from Lomov's institute, to work with children in his institute following up work we began some years ago. I could not rejoice in these changes in an institution I had long respected.

Next item. Arriving in Moscow, and finding the situation so tense, I formally asked permission to visit three scholars who were not on the seminar program and who worked in other institutes. I was told there was no time. Those scholars refused (correctly) to see me outside of the Institute since we were planning to talk science. Eventually I got that taken care of by inviting them to the Institute where it would have been impolite not to accept them and they did not fear as greatly that they would get in trouble.

Our last official visit was to be to Moscow, where I had once studied and worked. I had a lot of people to see there about articles for translation, new lines of research, etc. On the eve of the visit we were informed that the visit was cancelled, a mix-up in the foreign office of one of the institutions. That effectively cut off contact with a whole, important, segment of Soviet scholars.

OK. What do I expect coming from a capitalist, imperialist, country? The answers, maybe more. First, I expect my Soviet colleagues to make themselves look good, not bad. Time and again fear, suspicion, and incompetence were nakedly there for my colleagues to see. Hell, it reflects badly on me, never mind Soviet psychology or psychologists. Second, I expect a more discerning eye. Urie Bronfenbrenner is world famous as a man who takes Soviet psychology and the Soviet Union seriously. He is an American opinion leader. What kind of scientific politics is it to make him look or feel bad in the ways described? It was he who chose and led that delegation. Third, I expect more from Soviet psychology than I can see going on when I take all of my impressions together and compare them with the situation twenty years ago.

Background

Let me go back and trace the course of events.

In 1962, there was no Institute of Psychology, A.N.. Psychology was a *kafedra* [Department] at MGU, Leningrad, and a few other major universities. It was closely tied to education or medicine. That configuration was the natural outcome of the events of the 1930s which curtailed psychological research and narrowed its scope. The major figures in Soviet psychology were almost all survivors of the 1930s, the war years, and the post-war turmoil in Soviet science.

They were complex people with complex visions of Psychology and the possibilities of its development in the USSR. They worked with insufficient help and equipment, limited access to their past work, and a student body that had grown to adulthood in the 1950s.

At this time there were many discussions in theoretical organs (remember Iliechov⁹?) and psychological journals about reopening such topics as social psychology, engineering psychology, empirical sociological studies, psycho-linguistics. Cybernetics was still a little suspect, but mathematical psychology (my first specialty, as it turns out) was *in*. Truly great

⁹ Iliechov was a senior Communist Party ideologist who was critical of the all social sciences.

Soviet scholars (Bernshtein, Kolmogorov) were lending an educational hand. The psychologists began to have dreams of expansion. Like their colleagues in the West, they thought that they could take new insights gained from their new methods and apply to them to help increase productivity in a number of economic areas. At the same time, they were in demand to help cosmonauts deal with the intricate tasks of space exploration and generals deal with the problems of complex technologies of death. They had a plan for staging a media event that would help raise their status and increase the resources they could claim for their science; they hosted the international congress of psychologists in 1966 (Moscow's year of the international congresses). They did an excellent job of hosting the world's psychologists, given the conditions. And they got what they wanted: increased recognition and a place in the big academy. They also got Lomov and the ascendancy of Leningrad psychologists, the social group and scientific ideology that currently rules our psychological sciences.

Since that time, there has been a steady expansion of psychology and a steady expansion of the power of the Institute of Psychology, A.N. to dictate the terms of growth. The old time leaders who founded the science and reorganized it in the 1950s have almost all died. In place of [Alexei] Leontiev one finds Bodalyov, in place of [Anatoli] Smirnov there is Matyushkin. In place of [A.V.] Zaporozhets, [A.N.] Poddyakov. Only the latter follows in the traditions of his predecessors. Everywhere else, the brand of psychology promoted by Lomov rules in place of the brand of psychology championed by Leontiev, Luria, Zaporozhets, Smirnov. What does that mean? Try these thoughts out.

First, it means that students of [Sergei] Rubinshtein, or people who use Rubinshtein's ideas, are now in control, replacing students of Vygotsky.

Americans might consider this simply the ascendancy of one school over another as happens here, but in the USSR it is recognized as an ideological shift of some importance. In 1934, Vygotsky's ideas and people were banished from the official Soviet scene to be replaced by Rubinshtein. The year suggests some of the circumstances. Interestingly, the curse laid on Vygotsky was double and contradictory; 1) he had promoted psychological testing (untrue, but there was room there to criticize), 2) Vygotsky and his students were accused of giving too much weight to the environment in determining human consciousness (e.g., they were behaviorists) The official replacement for their sociocultural school was the system worked out by Rubinshtein, a philosopher, who emphasized the active role of the individual in creating human capacities.

Rubinshtein won a Stalin prize, his books were standard, and except for a frightening accusation of cosmopolitanism in 1949, he was the official Soviet psychology for about 20 years.

The contradictory development of Soviet Psychology

I have pondered the ironies of these events for some time. Vygotsky, Luria and their friends were strong supporters of the Revolution and their suggestions for how to rebuild Psychology so that it could be Marxist and useful at the same time proved their usefulness in many different ways. But they got stuck with their own virtues. They believed in the power of society to transform people and they worked to create transformative environments on a humane basis. But humanity and efficiency are not often compatible. Fortunately for them, the War created circumstances where their humanity was efficient. Luria, Leontiev and Zaporozhets all did great and useful work during the war to help restore damaged people using their scientific principles. Their work during that period is justifiably world famous. Zaporozhets worked out perhaps the finest national program for preschool education anywhere. The many areas that Luria's imagination took him into are catalogued in his autobiography.

In the USSR of the 1960s a different kind of practicality became necessary. Some way had to be found to increase productivity. The increased role of information technologies called for a new kind of expertise, closely linked to engineering. But individual, technical “fixes” were clearly not going to be enough. Efficiency also required close collaboration between different members of a work collective. Significantly, Leningrad was the place where engineering and social psychology were rehabilitated, following their exclusion from Soviet science in the 1930s. Significantly, Lomov did engineering psychology.

If we contrast the central demands on psychologists of the “Moscow School” with those on the “Leningrad School” (quotes because of the obvious oversimplification) it is impossible not to contrast the ideals of education and medicine with the ideals of engineering psychology. In the former two cases, the goal is to transform the individual to realize a fuller life by using the environment. In the engineering approach, the overwhelming demand is to subordinate the individual to the largely predetermined demands of the task set by industrial modes of production using machines.

Note the irony: those who deal in adaptation of men to machines use the rhetoric of individual initiative, while those who use the rhetoric of environmental shaping of consciousness deal in human transformation. Needless to say, the two Soviet sides are not polite to each other. When the Vygotskians were in charge in the late 1950s-’60s, they commanded the “Moscow heights.” Several of the Rubinshtein people (who are now in Lomov’s Institute) were in the Institute of Philosophy, the rest largely in Leningrad. They got little attention from abroad because they were post-Stalin, Marxist philosophers with no practical accomplishments to their credit and because they had no publicist who played Luria’s role of promoting Soviet research. Now there is a peculiar marriage of engineering pragmatics and Rubinshteinian philosophical psychology ruling the roost.

Now let’s consider these and some additional facts in light of the demands of the Central Committee that the social sciences stop theorizing and padding their salaries with doctorates (not a bad suggestion; the degree is a joke compared to twenty years ago). Easier said than done, and the problem is not restricted to individual weakness or lack of effort, although local institutional factors and personalities play a role. The problem comes back to a basic dilemma that Luria recognized in 1918 and many scholars have tried to resolve in the intervening decades. Human beings are not completely predictable and the laws that apply to their behavior are not likely to be reduced to the laws of physics in time to help social scientists to change human nature in a hurry. Yet the “hard science” models that were winning out in the effort to make the social sciences more scientific are based on linear models with little systematicity to take account of even low order interactions, let alone the dynamic feedback that characterizes complex living matter (let alone human beings). *These models are efficient ways to select people to adapt to existing conditions: They are almost helpless when it comes to creating ways to transform people and situations to make them mutually more livable in a consistently changing environment.* I came to Moscow carrying those ideas with a demonstration of how basic concepts of Soviet psychology could be used to solve some problems that reductionist psychology could not solve. Several of my Soviet colleagues pushed the same theme. It is a fundamental idea of Soviet psychology that human mental activity is an emergent phenomenon in phylogeny, with qualitatively distinct characteristics.

But this combination of critical theory and practical reduction is not the road that Soviet psychology is pursuing. To quote Lomov, “I see nothing wrong with reductionism.” I believe him. He does see nothing wrong with it. He is promoting a new kind of psycho-diagnosis based on IQ and personality tests for selecting cadres for all kinds of work. The interest in behavior

genetics fits right in there, because the behavior genetics movement is identifying inherited proclivities; Luria damn near got killed for similar work in the 1930s. So does interest in the "hard," neurophysiological work on brain potentials which is being linked to diagnostic techniques. As one of Lomov's staff put it: "We have had enough of all that soft, unscientific, social stuff; now we are doing objective science." This is what Matyushkin meant when he said there were new tasks of psycho-diagnosis and training that had to be dealt with, tasks which the former (Vygotskian) leadership was not up to.

In my opinion, what I witnessed in the USSR is the flip side of the coin, the "socialist face," of the same drive toward physical mastery that obsesses American science. It is a drive predicated on the power of machines to make work efficient, but the criterion of efficiency carries with it the terrible price of reduction of human interests to the narrowest kind of industrial production process. And for what? First and foremost, the military. Secondly, large scale industrial production. In this drive, with its enormous pressures, the cardinal rule that machines should work for humans and not humans for machines has been forgotten. This is the real common dilemma of the USSR and the USA (along with their common fear of the problem of third world countries).

While all of this is old stuff (after all, Marx laid it out for us) it is very distressing to see this anti-humanist tendency enshrined in the leadership of Soviet psychology. In the past, psychology was a science of hope: In experiments like the work with the blind-deaf or experimental schooling it showed in our society the possibility of attaining its highest ideals through the humanist principles of Marxism. It willingly entered into the tasks of the society, but it constantly posed the centrality of human initiative in making things happen. Now linear models and selection (even selection based on brain waves) is taking over. Previously you had reductionism as a practical necessity and a healthy critique of that reductionism so that people would not confuse the reduced version for the whole. Now the critical theory surrounding the practical theory is eroding away. I consider it a very dangerous trend. Communism without humanism is not going to be easy to distinguish from corporate capitalism without humanism; both will be forms of fascism.

I cannot say the extent to which the current situation depends on personalities and the extent to which it reflects common tendencies in our two countries, tendencies that might be summed up in the notion of an "military-industrial" complex, about which Eisenhower and Khrushchev agreed.

There are steps that can be taken to counter this trend on both scientific and organizational grounds. (See P.P.S.)

Conclusions

Because my time is short, let me finish by returning to the issue of EST/Esalen and various human potential movements both in the US and the USSR. In both of our countries we face a new set of circumstances within which human beings grow to maturity and conduct their lives. The process of alienation which Marx attributed to capitalist modes of production has increased beyond his ability to imagine. We now have large technological elites who must learn a great deal about how the world simply in order to carry out their assigned tasks. These elites are puzzle solvers of a specialized kind who are given puzzles that can keep some people in their labs for many hours simply for the fun of it. When puzzles come in the form of computer programs, even young kids will spend endless hours at the task. But eventually the excitement ebbs as the limits are perceived; technicians begin to see a world beyond technique, a world of uncertainty, strong feelings, fear and beauty. They want "something more." They feel that there

are untapped reserves of potential for knowing the world. No longer believing in supernatural forces of the old kind, they raise the search for (and discovery of) untapped human potential as a goal in itself. They are ready for Esalen etc.

The big question, it seems to me, is whether one looks for greater potential in the individual or the group. Nikitin¹⁰ and [Sinichi] Suzuki¹¹ push the social organization of individual potential, as did Luria, Leontiev, Vygotsky, et al. Current American groups such as EST emphasize the individual sources of change (which, nonetheless, are socially organized). The tendency of Soviet psychology to use individual tests and psychological indicators of potential, to take efficiency as a criterion over transformation, individualizes the way that human potential is viewed. When combined with a reductionist scientific practice, a pragmatic philosophy, and technical expertise, it may well lead to a kind of "New Soviet Man" that will render the ideals of Marx's communism as twisted as the similar efforts of the 1930s and late 1940s. It is a scientific and social dead end. Whether it is a usable tendency, which can be corralled and diverted to breathe innovation and enthusiasm into a system that under-emphasizes individual initiative (here I speak of Russian culture, not Soviet psychology) I do not know.

In the meantime, I have my own problems with my own science which I will continue to work at. I certainly hope that events will allow me to go on learning from the interaction across our hostile border, and that the outcome of this interaction will be some form of mutual understanding that can resolve the terrible dilemmas that face us.

I hope all is well with you. The intensity with which you work and your ability to live with the contradictions are amazing. It's a game far too complex for me to understand.

Prevet,

July 19, 1983

Michael Cole

P.S. [Possible ways forward]

It is now July 11th and there was a call from Joseph [Goldin] again today. It must be some scene. Tomorrow afternoon I have to send this letter to Dimitri to carry with him. These addenda to my letter will include (if I have enough time), an extension of my thoughts about alternatives to the current social science situation and some further remarks on the upcoming broadcast, just in case there is one and you see Dimitri. If I am cut short, let me at least say that I very much hope that you have documented events at your end. This experiment is too interesting to relegate to the anecdote heap straight away. The way in which information is flowing even to make things possible is itself amazing. I have taken to writing notes to myself in the hopes of disentangling things one day. But without your half of the story, it will remain partly mysterious.

About the dilemma of the social sciences. If I can, I will send along the plan for creating a graduate program in Communication It is relevant because if my analysis is correct (an analysis borrowed from Vygotsky in large part), the division of academic labor that created the social sciences in the last half the the 19th century gave each of them a part of the human pie that defined the problem in reductionist terms. This is most clearly seen in the Psychology/Sociology split, which gave the individual to psychology and the group to sociology. That division renders statements about either group or individual suspect, because you can't have one without the other. Yet the correlational methods that psychologists are so fond of applying very often take the form of an equation where aspects of social experience are used to

¹⁰ Nikitin Nikitin was a Soviet educationalist who promoted the human potential movement.

¹¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinichi_Suzuki_\(violinist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinichi_Suzuki_(violinist))

“predict” individual behavior (e.g., characteristics of good leaders, the form of schooling that increases children’s abilities, etc.). Such predictions are notorious for their low reliability and completely suspect validity, yet they have a certain utility for the right social order. An IQ test does predict aspects of later behavior even if we can’t get very good predictions and even if the assumptions of “fixed” ability are wrong in principle. So long as individuals don’t count and are treated as abstract mathematical entities obeying statistical laws, everything is fine. Note that despite the scientific trappings of statistics, there is no explanation here, just descriptions that bear a low order probabilistic relation to each other.

We can turn to experiments to get out of this bind, but experiments on complex human behavior require that we create fixed circumstances ahead of time that are often incompatible with any country’s moral codes, and even if we had total freedom, we would not be able to proceed on a completely individual basis.

These problems were familiar to Luria decades ago and to many other psychologists, but they held to the traditional categories and tried to redefine the units of analysis. I am afraid that industrial ideology overwhelms that enterprise. When we add the incredible lethargy of bureaucratized institutions (like the society of psychologists or the Institute of Psychology) the weight of tradition has to seriously taken into account when attempting change.

In the face of these obstacles, I made a sideways move. I adopted as the focal discipline Communication, the study of mediated human interaction. This formulation is not susceptible to reduction into stimulus and response; the importance of the medium and the fact of irreducible uncertainty in human action remain always at the forefront of the discussion. It is a formulation that brings the arts and letters naturally in to the discussion, but allows of mathematical refinement for special cases (such as the theory of signal detection, cybernetic modeling, etc.). The obvious move that your Academy of Science could make :set up a department of communication research on the theory/practice model that we have adopted. I think if you look into the idea, you will find lots to recommend it.

P.P.S. [Preparations for hook-up on 20th July]

A couple of more words on the broadcast (it is early on the 12th). At Joseph’s suggestion I am arranging for the kids to play a game with each other. Dimitri will bring our half of the idea and explain it more fully. If you could get Andrei Ershov to come from Novosibirsk to the broadcast in case we succeed in getting an Apple game up it would be terrific. I am working hard on Apple to provoke their interest.

The Esalen connection continues to make itself felt. Not only is Joseph inserting Steve Kull into our phone conversations, we have gotten offers of help (once Raz dropped out) from a promoter in L.A. for Mohammed Ali, a friendly call from Jim Hickman (who neglected to offer the information that he was headed for the USSR too), and generally a little more attention than we need. Dimitri has more experience than I do, but all I hear says that if you cooperate with Esalen, they will take the credit if you succeed and let you eat it if you don’t. All of our efforts are to demonstrate the real state of our group: we are a University-based academic group that studies how individual citizens can get the fullest possible knowledge of their life predicaments so that they can act responsibly as citizens in a very dangerous world. We are not a peace group in the style of US.

Those distinctions are absolutely necessary for us to continue. Under no circumstances should the Moscow half of the broadcast falter in that assumption. This broadcast is intended from our side to demonstrate the possibility of new forms of interaction among citizens of different countries. In particular, we have brought outstanding film makers together with their

audiences (kids and parents) to discuss their mutual interests in film as a mode of experiencing the world and our aspirations to extend that experience. If we can go a good job of that, the larger importance will be there.

The excitement here has increased as the possibility of a broadcast has grown. We are braced equally right now for success and failure. The interest in rebroadcast is enormous, and if it were not for the time factor, live broadcast could probably be arranged. Now it's time for me to go to work to see if we go ahead, or stop.