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COMPARATIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN RUSSIA

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The autobiographical fragment by Vladimir Aleksandrovich Vagner (or W. Wagner, as he signed his name for Western publications) harks back to the first *glasnost'* of the 1860s, when Wagner was in his teens and Alexander II was opening free discussion and ending serfdom, tilting the Tsarist system toward the revolutionary collapse of 1905–17. That earlier *glasnost'* allowed Herzen's *From the Other Shore*, which the exiled radical had published abroad in 1850, to appear in Russia in 1866. Almost seventy years later the aged Wagner, sitting down in Stalin's time to review his life, remembered above all the thrill of reading Herzen's revolutionary essay at the age of seventeen in provincial Tula. Putting Herzen's title at the head of his own lifestory, he was obviously reaching for an emblem, but we can only guess what he meant to suggest . . . perhaps that he was going into internal exile, feeling the same need as Herzen to explain his motives and to guess, as Herzen did, what wild changes the historical process might bring, on the chance that some future generations of Russians might have the freedom to read and the independence to understand.

It is a pity that the manuscript before us is so fragmentary. Let us assume that the aged Wagner accurately recalled the central themes of Herzen's essay. In Western exile he was free to publish his thoughts, but his conscience was bothering him for abandoning the struggle to improve the native land. He did *not* assume that Russia must simply copy the West, where he had observed the wholesale slaughter of Parisian workers when they demanded public work projects to relieve unemployment. In Herzen's essay sailing away from home became a metaphor of swiftly changing history, West and East. The institutions we know fade rapidly into the past, and we do not know what new ones we will find, or be judged for creating, at the other shore, the imagined place of arrival. Herzen's radical self dreamed that Russia would move through socialism

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to freedom, while the West would move through freedom to socialism. His grimly prophetic self foresaw general ruin, but scorned the conservative dream of trying to arrest the historical process: "Better to perish with the revolution than to seek refuge in the almshouse of reaction."

Was all that in Wagner's mind when he sat down at 84, and put Herzen's title at the head of his lifestory? These fragments do not tell us. Such bits and pieces of the tormented past have been tumbling out of public archives and private collections since Gorbachev started the second *glasnost'*, which has led so swiftly to collapse of the Soviet system. Perhaps we should speak of the apparent collapse, reminding ourselves that the Soviet system, like its Tsarist progenitor, shaped, and was shaped by, stubbornly persistent habits of thought and behavior in Russia.

Meantime students of Russian psychology—I mean both the historically developing mental habits of Russians and the multifaceted discipline called psychology in their country–must make do with what we have. We are supplied here with documents from Wagner's pen. There is a speech replying to compliments and congratulations at a celebration of his seventy-fifth birthday in 1924. As usual with such effusions of sentiment, it tells us rather little, beyond the fact that those who respected comparative psychology were still sufficiently numerous and self-confident to do public honor to the man who founded that branch of the discipline in Russia. That fact is in sharp contrast to the situation revealed by the document of 1932(?), a memorandum that Wagner wrote to the People's Commissariat of Education pleading for the restoration of his discipline in institutions of higher learning. It had suffered a sharp reversal of fortune in the time of Stalin's "revolution from above," 1928–32. And finally we have the fragments of autobiography, evidently written shortly before his death in 1934.

In the sentimental speech of 1924 there is a passage, toward the end, confessing belated recognition of shared guilt for unspecified conflicts. That deserves some comment, for it seems to echo the story that Chekhov was moved to write after lively discussions with Wagner in the summer of 1890. Wagner interpreted Darwinism to justify the right of the strong to stamp out the weak, so as to check the degeneration of the race, which was an obsessive concern at the turn of the century. Note within his autobiographical fragment the echo of contention between scientists and humanists, and note his continuing worry about degeneration. Chekhov's imagination turned the argument with Wagner into "The Duel," a tale of conflict between a vigorous young zoologist and a humanist layabout. It culminates in a duel that threatens virtual murder, for the zoologist is a practised marksman and the humanist knows nothing of guns. At the last moment a churchman deflects the shot that would have been fatal, and the story ends with the chastened Darwinist and the humanist agreeing, "No one knows what's really right." (Literally: "No one knows genuine *pravda*," the famous Russian word that runs together factual

and moral rightness.) Wagner was proud of his association with Chekhov, and we must wonder if the famous story that he helped to inspire was in his thoughts as he confessed his share in guilt for unspecified conflicts.

He had been all along a wideranging intellectual as well as a specialist in the study of animal behavior. For the "thick journals" that the educated public favored in the nineteenth century he wrote articles on topics such as pessimism and the Weltanschauung based on natural science, which also echoes in the present fragments. Nietzschean philosophy was supposed to transform the depressing sense of ourselves as transient objects into triumphant self-expression, pointing toward the transcendent Superman. Wagner published prerevolutionary articles on such themes, which also echo faintly in these fragments. Note the scorn expressed for the new generation of students who are interested only in training for a narrow profession that will ensure them an income. Note the scorn for himself, for submitting to the "herd instinct" though his intellect tells him that it is "stupid and degrading." Here and there one can detect bits of other, inconsistent themes of the nineteenth century, a period of enormous ideological creativity: confidence in human progress as proved "scientifically" by Herbert Spencer, or failure of such confidence and a turn to ataraxia, philosophic indifference, as preached by the ancient Greek and Roman naturalists, who also assumed that we are transient clumps of living atoms, and cultivated a sense of kinship with the void that awaits us, with nothingness.

Yet Wagner did care about public causes, including the discipline of comparative psychology, which he implanted in Russian institutions of higher learning. The article by his disciple Khotin situates Wagner in the two-front struggle that focused his efforts in psychology: against anthropomorphic reading of human mentality into subhuman behavior, and against the reduction of all levels of mentality to the mechanics of nerve systems. That struggle began before the Revolution and continued to the grim moment in the 1930s when comparative psychology was virtually condemned by Stalinist ideological authorities, who declared anathema on pluralism and demanded a monolithic psychology. Pavlov's "teaching" was supposed to be the foundation of the monolith, and Wagner had been an early, sharp critic of Pavlov's simplistic dream that the reflex arc provided an escape from the complexities of evolutionary reality.

Unfortunately, Stalinist constraints on debate obliged Wagner and Khotin to refrain from full, frank analysis of their disagreements with Pavlov and his school. I note in particular Khotin's reluctance to challenge Pavlov himself with explicit criticism of his obvious errors. The most obvious was his insistence that imagined processes in the cerebral cortex are the universal explanation of all learned behavior, though many animals that exhibit such behavior lack a cerebral cortex. That had been pointed out from the first appearance of Pavlov's "teaching" in 1904,

and not only by Wagner. Bekhterev, the major rival to Pavlov for leadership in the neurophysiological approach to psychology, called attention to such flaws. The reader should also be aware that Bekhterev, though ostensibly insisting on "reflexology" as the ultimate basis of psychology, was quite tolerant of many different schools and approaches, as Pavlov was not. Hence Wagner found the first institutional base for comparative psychology within Bekhterev's Institute, which flourished for a while under the Soviet regime, but suffered severed cutbacks in the 1930s, when the ideological establishment turned against Bekhterev's school and started the deification of Pavlov's "doctrine."

Khotin's article was written in 1934–5, while he was at the Bekhterev Institute in Leningrad, just before he was arrested, exiled to Central Asia, and transfered to hospital work as a neurologist. His daughter Malakhovskaia deserves special thanks for furnishing that precise information. He was obviously making a last-ditch defense of comparative psychology within the framework newly established by Stalinist ideological authorities. The article evidently failed to persuade them, even though it gingerly recalled their conflicts with Pavlov and his school in the 1920s. Back then Pavlov had invoked reflexes of freedom and of purpose in his efforts to show that the science of physiology contradicted Marxism, but Khotin was not free to dwell on that conflict, for Pavlov and the Soviet authorities had got over it.

After a 1932 meeting in Gorky's apartment between Stalin and representatives of Pavlov's school, Pavlov moved toward reconciliation with the Soviet system, and finally gave an enthusiastic endorsement of it. Within that context one can understand the timid quality of Khotin's criticism, his tendency to point at a few disciples of Pavlov rather than the master, his clumsy appeal to Marxist dialectics as the main reason to favor the concept of emergent levels of mentality and to reject the reduction of all mentality to reflex arcs. If he had vigorously demonstrated the obvious discordance between Pavlov's school and worldwide trends in neurophysiology, he would have been challenging the recently established rule that Soviet science must be different from "bourgeois" science, that it must be "Marxist" in a unique, confessional sense of the very ambiguous term. If he had vigorously demonstrated the obvious discordance between Pavlov and Marx, between neurological reductionism and an historical and cultural approach to understanding the human animal, Khotin would have been openly challenging the power of the ideological bureaucracy to be, under Stalin, the official interpreters of confessional Marxism. Whether reasoning from science or from ideology, Khotin was damned if he did and damned if he didn't. That he tried at all is a tribute to his courage and his intellectual integrity. That he got as far as he did in his reasoning, in bringing out the scientific and ideological issues which were being frozen by the deification of Pavlov's "teaching," is evidence of keen intelligence.

Perhaps a gloss is needed for Khotin's appeal to the work of Beritov, or I. S. Beritashvili (1885–1974), as this Georgian physiologist began to sign his publications when the Soviet regime fostered the development of national pride among the non-Russian populations of the former Russian Empire. Like Lashley in the United States, Beritashvili moved from admiration of Pavlov's experimental method and line of reasoning to criticism of the imaginary neural circuits that Pavlov invoked to explain his results. Beritashvili was much more outspoken and insistent in his criticism than the comparative psychologists in Russia, perhaps because the Georgian context in which he worked gave him a greater sense of autonomy with respect to the ideological bosses in Moscow. He combined efforts to figure out the real neural circuitry of conditioning with speculation about the nature of mental "representation" (*predstavlenie, Vorstellung*), a concept that he insisted was essential to the analysis of learning, even in such lowly animals as chickens or turtles, since they show firm memories of particular places where they once found food. When Khotin ostentatiously criticizes Beritashvili for attributing mental representation to subhuman animals, and invokes Engels to support the criticism, we must wonder what mixture of styles we are witnessing, of authentic scientific disagreement and artificial pleading before the ideological authorities.

Such efforts to disentangle science and ideology within the Soviet context can too easily turn into a form of self-deception among Western scientists, who have no explicitly identified ideological authorities supervising their controversies and may therefore imagine that they have no ideological elements in their scientific reasoning. Khotin's article, if read with the care it deserves, should remind us that the Soviet wrangle over comparative psychology and neural reductionism was a peculiar version of a worldwide contestation that continues to the present. The absence of ideological bosses does not signify the absence of ideological issues. On the contrary, lacking established authorities to lay down a line of demarcation, ideological and scientific issues are mixed up with a fiendish subtlety, challenging neuroscientists and comparative psychologists to be rigorously critical of themselves as well as their adversaries. Careful attention to the history of past mixtures can be a sobering and enlightening approach to such rigor.

REFERENCE

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