

Rethinking Soviet Anthropology?
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Source: *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 5, No. 5 (Oct., 1989), pp. 23-24
Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3032967
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4. Inose (op. cit.) p. 579.
5. I accept here the following passage from Lave (1988:7):

'Thus thinking is said to have an emotional component, social in origin, and a cognitive-rational individual one; their weighting in the person is a reflection of the degree to which collective life dominates the individual'.

6. This question is examined in detail in Harries and Harries 1989.
7. According to poll results published by the *Asahi Shimbun* on 7 April 1986, 84 per cent. of the Japanese people support the present constitutional position of the emperor.
8. On this point see the section entitled The Fundamental Continuity in van Wolferen (1989:348-362).
9. Compare the invention of 'royal' tradition in England in the period corresponding to that beginning with the Meiji era in Japan: Cannadine (1983).
10. *Time*, 6 March 1989, p. 29.
11. Briefly described by Adrian Mayer in A.T., June 1989.

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conferences

RETHINKING SOVIET ANTHROPOLOGY?

A colloquium on 'Soviet anthropology and traditional societies' was held in Paris on 16-18 March 1989. The meeting, organized by Wladimir Berelowitch of the *Centre d'études sur l'URSS, l'Europe orientale et le domaine turc*, took place against the background of the steadily increasing interest in ethnic questions in the Soviet Union, as well as of the election of a new Head of the Institute of Ethnography in Moscow. Only days earlier, Valery Tishkov had been chosen to succeed Yulian Bromley. It was also notable for the varied composition of the Soviet delegation. Led by Abraham Pershits, this included some younger scholars who were not yet veterans of the international conference scene.

Over thirty papers were presented by Soviet, émigré and western speakers. This was the first time that a Soviet delegation had met a range of émigrés who left mostly in the 1970s and some of whom have been known in the west for their strong anti-Soviet statements. As delegates arrived throughout the afternoon before the meeting, and as long-lost colleagues embraced and settled down in armchairs in the lobby, the atmosphere seemed at the same time both cordial and uncertain: what position was everyone planning to take up?

The first morning was devoted to the history of the discipline. This contained papers by French and Soviet scholars which provoked some slight and inconclusive skirmishes, mostly among Soviet/western lines (e.g., Why do westerners believe that history is not a science?).

The afternoon session ('The conceptual apparatus') began with Pershits' presentation of his paper (submitted jointly with the absent Bromley) on 'The spontaneous and stimulated development of traditional societies'. This paper, and the response to it, immediately blew open most of the issues which were to dominate the remainder of the conference. In reiterating a standard Soviet typology of societies, Pershits characterized those of the Australian Aborigines and Bushmen as a historical cul-de-sac, whose 'stagnatory character leaps to the eye'.

The vehemence of the response contrasted strikingly with Pershits' own mild-mannered delivery. One French member of the audience summarized Pershits' viewpoint as tantamount to saying that colonialism was a stimulus to progress, an idea which has *une allure monstrueuse*. Natasha Sadomskaya (New York) asked Pershits if he was advocating a form of social Darwinism, to which Pershits replied that he believed such a Darwinism to have a 'rational kernel'. Claude Tardits (Paris) said that colonial 'progress' was imposed by force, and Peter Skalnik (Cape Town) that not only did most of the west disagree with him, but so did most of the third world. Pershits agreed that the price was harsh and that some groups were wiped out, but argued that those which remained, joined civilization.

The issues raised were far from being resolved—indeed, they were not yet fully formulated, since terms like 'development', 'progress' and 'civilization' were still being used without further qualification. After some other papers, including an elegant presentation by Ernest Gellner (Cambridge) comparing Soviet and western schemata of development, the discussion reverted to the Pandora's Box opened by Pershits, who also admitted that some textbooks had recently been de-recommended and that examinations in history for school-leavers and at university were currently in abeyance.

The afternoon moved on to a paper by Vladimir Kabo (Moscow). His handout was entitled, blandly, 'The study of traditional social structure in Soviet anthropology yesterday and today'. But his talk was anything but bland and amounted to a chronicle and a passionate denunciation of dogmatism and repressive thinking in the history of Soviet anthropology. He began by drawing a contrast between today's gathering and the supposedly 'monolithic' nature of the Soviet delegation to the Burg Wartenstein conference in 1976 (see E. Gellner, ed: *Soviet and western anthropology*, London 1980[1]). But the high point was his quotation, in a mock Georgian accent, of Stalin's account of the evolution from matriarchal to patriarchal society, which produced gales of laughter from most of those present: 'this quotation from a dropout seminary student became a gem of Soviet anthropological theory'. He then denounced the continued dominance of these ideas in textbooks which are still current. Georgy Markov, the professor at Moscow University, protested that he would give short shrift to any student who followed such a textbook.

Kabo's paper was a turning point because it tested the new mood of dialogue and tolerance to the utmost—but not, it turned out, to destruction. The credit for this and for the success of the remainder of the conference must surely go to Pershits for his restrained and measured response, saved up until a cooler moment the next day. Until then, the potential for confrontation was focused on the divide between Soviet delegates and the west—or rather, the émigrés, with westerners largely standing on the sidelines as they did throughout the conference. By bringing disagreement right into the Soviet camp, Kabo revealed the Soviet delegation as a microcosm of the debates taking place in Soviet society as a whole. The effect was not to embarrass the Soviets but to normalize discussion by generalizing it, so that what anyone said came to depend not so much on who they were, as on what they really thought and believed. In the light of this, I heard, more than one émigré speaker on the following day toned down his talk considerably.

The other papers and discussions were varied and always interesting, and it would be impossible to touch on them all here. I was struck, for example, by Nora Dudwick's paper (Philadelphia) on the manipulation of

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ancient history by Armenian and Azerbaijani scholars to buttress their respective claims to the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Soviet delegation also provided some impressive presentations by their younger anthropologists. Igor Krupnik (Moscow) reviewed the history of Soviet descriptions of change among the native peoples of northeastern Siberia. He showed how with the increasing participation of these small, isolated Arctic peoples in public debate, there have emerged not one but five alternative models for their future development. Olga Artemova (Moscow) showed how, through being so widely used in dogmatic schemas of early human society, the Australian Aborigines had at the same time also provided material for much liberal argumentation in Soviet anthropology. Her own work also showed that Soviet anthropology is moving to an interest in Aboriginal society for its own sake and in particular towards a study of the relationship between collective norms and individual behaviour and personality.

The contribution of Soviet anthropologists to the study of peoples outside the borders of the USSR, if fieldwork abroad becomes more common, is likely to be very rich. Many people expressed the hope that Artemova would soon have the opportunity to study Aborigines for herself on the spot and found very impressive the one Soviet presentation based on fieldwork abroad, that of Mikhail Kryukov (Moscow). Kryukov offered an empirically-based view of the relativity of ethnicity. He presented a subtle analysis of some Montagnards in South Vietnam, where groups which are no different in language or material culture live intermingled yet nonetheless consider themselves to belong to different ethnic groups. At the same time, kin units may straddle more than one of these ethnic groups. Kryukov argued that neither the older Soviet model of a closed-off ethnic group, nor a western view cast in terms of social rather than ethnic groups, could cope with the data.

Also significant was the changing role of the émigrés, which shows two contradictory tendencies. On the one hand they are ceasing to be the main interpreters of Soviet anthropology to the west, since westerners can now make contacts inside the Soviet Union more freely for themselves. On the other hand, through the academic biculturalism gained during their stay in the west, they have a valuable contribution to make to perceptions of how reform could proceed inside Soviet anthropology and are offering this in a constructive spirit.

Thus Vladimir Plotkin (Washington) gave an intriguing and far-reaching analysis of the influence on Soviet anthropology of Russian religious and social thought. He contrasted the western concept of Purgatory, occupying a large middle ground between Heaven and Hell, with a Russian dualism between sinfulness and sainthood which offers no such middle ground. In the west, this middle offered an arena for social norms and the compromises of a pluralistic society—though he did not comment on the relationship between the Catholic Purgatory and messianic, totalizing fascism in Italy. Thus, he claimed, when Marxism came to Russia, it was transformed through an emphasis on its messianic, totalizing aspects. The implication of this for today is that this tendency can continue to act against compromise and pluralism in any of the key oppositions such as east against west or order against anarchy (the latter of which can include democracy). Because of the absence of a neutral middle ground, such a society may lack the structural reserves for any change which is to be more than just a switch in the polarity of opposed values. Plotkin urged Soviet anthropologists to follow the lead already given by some Soviet historians and bring an awareness of this cultural dimension into their discussion of perestroika.

In an impassioned intervention, the editor of *Sovetskaya Etnografiya* Kyril Chistov (Leningrad), resisted Plotkin's implication that dualism was implanted ineradicably into the Russian soul and reminded us of the need to regard Russian culture as part of European culture. Addressing the westerners generally, he continued. 'To understand our many tragedies, don't think of us as sheep all shorn with the same shears... The scholarly tradition has never ceased despite the Stalinist tragedy... If you continue to talk without compassion about Soviet anthropology, you'll bring back Stalinism' Chistov also stressed the integrity of many Soviet anthropologists in dark times, a view echoed by several Soviet speakers.

In summing up, Pershits affirmed that there is an enormously important role for anthropologists in the Soviet Union today and that they have not yet committed themselves to playing that role fully. Skalnik added that ethnicity in the Soviet Union can now be clearly seen as a bigger, more important field than that encompassed by the theory of 'ethnos' which has prevailed in recent years. Krupnik pointed out that Soviet anthropologists are not trained to analyse violence or the manipulative use of ethnic mythology, but added that though they welcomed international advice, Soviet anthropologists would ultimately have to proceed by their own lights and make their own decisions.

The conference was thus a highly positive landmark for all those concerned with Soviet anthropology or the anthropology of the Soviet Union. There was a conscious attempt on all sides to de-ideologize issues and concede the validity of discussing them from a range of viewpoints. Naturally, some fundamental differences of approach, and even of the understanding of identical terminology, remained and there was no suggestion that these viewpoints could, would or should become merged. But, as Kryukov put it, a disagreement is no longer seen as an attack and the quest is very definitely for common ground.

Wladimir Berelowitch interpreted between French, Russian and English almost constantly throughout the colloquium with superb skill and stamina and poured oil most effectively on situations which were sometimes stormy or delicate. Not the least of his tasks will be to edit the proceedings for publication, as he has undertaken to do. Ernest Gellner's vote of thanks to him for conceiving and organizing the meeting was echoed by all participants most warmly.

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1. See review by T.O. Beidelman of this volume, and a riposte by Gellner, in *RAIN* 40, October 1980, and 41, December 1980. *Editor.*

letters

The Myth of Primitive Spain

The title of J.R. Corbin's short article—'The myth of primitive Spain' (A.T., August 1989)—attracted me as a flower attracts a bee. Reading of the paper, however, left a bitter after-taste. Like so many other anthropologists at present, Dr Corbin is engaged, from his Andalusian castle, in the absurd battle of defending the originality of the discipline come what may. Rather than being concerned with explaining social reality by means of joining forces with other social scientists, he wants to perpetuate the myth of the privileged access of anthropology to this reality. His unwarranted attack against what he calls 'theories of modern society'—in any case an extremely vague and inoperative expression—is a proof of that. A lesson that I have learnt from Evans-Pritchard is that social anthropology is as good as the social theory that sustains it.

The history of the discipline should teach modesty to the practitioners of anthropology; instead we have an inordinate belief in its almighty power. As if Andalusia (or any other area studied by social scientists for that matter) had been wanting for scores of years to be intellectually delivered by anthropologists in their shining armours. Unfortunately, this arrogance is not the result of scientific superiority; rather it conceals the present-day intellectual impotence and professional frustration of

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