

WRITING A UNIVERSAL HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY: SOVIET PHILOSOPHICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Soviet philosophical historiography became the subject of research in the 1960s almost simultaneously in the Western World and in the Soviet Union. The first attempt to give an account of the Soviet history of philosophy was an article¹, accompanied by a bibliography², that Karl G. Ballestrem published in 1963³. Ballestrem's work on this topic was a part of Joseph Bocheński's large-scale plan for systematic research on Soviet philosophy. This plan included the foundation of the Fribourg Institute of East-European Studies, the creation of a series of books («Sovietica») and the publication of a journal («Studies in Soviet Thought»). One might say that Bocheński's project, which started in the late 1950s, was concluded, as far as the study on Soviet philosophical historiography is concerned, by Evert Van der Zweerde's well-known book, which was the last volume to appear in the «Sovietica» series in 1997⁴.

Regarding the temporal coincidence of the beginning of research on Soviet philosophical historiography within and outside the Soviet world, it has been said that it can be explained, at least in part, by Western sovietologists' primacy in the field and the need felt by their Soviet colleagues to counter the way their "rivals" presented Soviet studies on the history of philosophy⁵. This view is held, for example, by the anonymous author of a critical note on an article by Bronislav Bogdanov and Mixail Iovčuk of 1965⁶. This author argues

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1. See Ballestrem 1963a.

2. Ballestrem 1963b.

3. Cfr. Bocheński 1963b, p. 309.

4. See Van der Zweerde 1997.

5. Examples of such Soviet works, highly critical of Western historiography, are Malinin 1963 and 1964; Suvorov 1964.

6. See Bogdanov, Iovčuk 1965.

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that although no Western scholars are mentioned, «Western research in history of Soviet philosophy, in general, and the history of Soviet historiography of philosophy, in particular, is obviously present in the paper discussed»⁷.

No matter how stimulating Western criticism was for Soviet philosophical culture, however, it is important to bear in mind that the latter was “naturally” – that is, in its intrinsic characteristics – inclined to pay special attention to the *theory, methodology* and *history* of philosophical historiography. The elaboration of a «scientific», Marxist theory and methodology of philosophical historiography was one of the main tasks set before Soviet philosophical scholarship. This line of work was developed with particular determination especially in the post-War period and continued to be followed, albeit with less ideological rigour and with more pluralistic and accommodating modes of dealing with problems, even in the very last phase of the Soviet era⁸. In that period, the study of the *history* of philosophical historiography was promoted as well. Numerous publications were devoted to it, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s⁹. Interest in this field also persisted, though not systematically, in the years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The bulk of the publications tackling Soviet historiography in the 1990s and in the first decade of the twenty-first century engages in discussions on the essence and fate of Russian philosophy and on the query as to whether, and how, the Soviet period could be included in a narrative of its history¹⁰.

It is not our aim, with this collection of essays, to contest any of the readings and the approaches towards Soviet philosophical historiography described above. Rather, our aim is to contextualise them, and, possibly, to build on them¹¹. The approach to the Soviet history of philosophy applied in the present collection of essays differs from the aforementioned ones in the way it considers its subject of research. It is exclusively historical, and the perspective is that of a global, or comparative, history of philosophy.

Soviet philosophy is part of the history of twentieth-century philosophy. By putting it in a comparative perspective, the present collection intends to

7. J.B. 1965, p. 313.

8. For bibliographical references and analyses of a number of such works, consult the articles published in this issue.

9. As examples of this, the following can be mentioned: the chapters dedicated to the history of the interpretation of medieval philosophy and of the thought of Spinoza included by Vasilij Sokolov in his respective books (Sokolov 1979, pp. 424-442; Sokolov 1964, pp. 352-383); Ratimir Lukanin's survey on the history of Soviet historiography on the Western European dialectics of the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries (Lukanin 1974); the collective volumes on the methodology and the history of historiography of Arabic and Oriental philosophy (Stepanjanc, Šajmumambetova 1986; Šajmumambetova 1987; Šajmumambetova 1990).

10. For an analysis of the search for Russia's intellectual legacy in the last twenty-five years, see DeBlasio 2011 and 2014.

11. For other recent attempts in this direction, see Mesyats, Egorochkin 2014 and Guseynov 2016.

contribute to the inclusion of Soviet philosophy in the global historical-philosophical narrative. Soviet philosophy and philosophical historiography have always been regarded as a world of their own, self-sufficient and ruled by their specific laws and principles. This conviction is not unfounded but it reflects only one aspect of the whole story. Moreover, it would be objectionable, to say the least, to recount the history of twentieth-century philosophy without including a presentation of the most significant Soviet and eastern European authors, “schools” and research centers and without analysing their relationship with other contemporary philosophical cultures. With regard to this point, more than a half a century ago, in 1963, Bocheński stated: «Humanity has now, *grosso modo*, three major types of philosophy; the phenomenological, the analytic and the Soviet. Contemporary philosophy is not only what pleases *Herr Professor* in a given university, but all these together, right or wrong»¹². And in the same line of reasoning (but much more recently), Evert van der Zweerde pointed out that if «the joint phenomena of Soviet philosophy and philosophical sovietology are part of the historical development of philosophy, they should be part of present-day global or comparative history of philosophy, too»¹³.

The articles appearing in this issue of the «*Rivista di storia della filosofia*» are based on papers presented at a conference on «Writing a Universal History of Philosophy: Soviet Philosophical Historiography in a Comparative Perspective», which took place at the University of Padua in October 2016. The wording of the title is intended to suggest the significant role that the idea of a universal, or global, history of philosophy played in Soviet philosophical culture. Indeed, the realisation of a comprehensive Marxist account of the entire history of human thought was one of the “perennial” concerns and a stable horizon of Soviet philosophy throughout the Soviet era. As early as in 1922, Vladimir Lenin assigned Soviet historians of philosophy the explicit task of studying anew and retelling the entire history of philosophy from the Marxist point of view¹⁴. And as late as in 1986, an all-Union project was approved according to which in the following two five-year periods (1986-1990 and 1991-1995) Soviet historians of philosophy had to work collectively on a new «Marxist, multi-volume, general world-history of philosophy [*marksistkaja mnogotomnaja obobščajuščaja vseмирnaja istorija filosofii*]»¹⁵, which was to replace the one edited by Mixail Dynnik from 1957 to 1965¹⁶. In 1986, this objective seemed attainable under one condition: the Soviet philosophical community was called upon to «consolidate and complete the

12. Bocheński 1963a, p. 7.

13. Van der Zweerde 2003, p. 334.

14. This task was among those formulated by Vladimir Lenin in his article *O značenii voinstvujuščego materializma* (On the Significance of Belligerent Materialism) published in the journal «Pod znamenem marksizma» («Under the Banner of Marxism») in 1922.

15. «Vseмирnaja istorija filosofii» can be translated as universal, global, or world-history of philosophy.

16. Cfr. Dynnik *et al.* 1957-1965.

pursuit of building up the system of the history of philosophy as a science in order to provide the theoretical framework for the practice of historical-philosophical inquiry». However, in view of the task of completing the system of the history of philosophy as a science, some serious problems were reported, which at that point of time had not yet been solved. Among the latter was the circumstance that «the conception of studying the history of philosophy in its national form in relation to its form as a world-history, still remains an acute, unresolved problem»¹⁷. The tension between the world-history and the national history of philosophy was particularly strong as far as the “correct” interpretation of Russian thought is concerned, and it had been an issue fraught with strain ever since the famous philosophical discussions of the 1940s.

In the following articles, philosophical historiography as theorised and practised in the Soviet Union is approached with respect to three sets of problems. The first thematic focus considers the theory of philosophical historiography and the relevant debates held at different stages in its development. Secondly, emphasis is also placed on the attempts made by Soviet historiography to “globalise” the history of philosophy, that is, to write «the history of philosophy of the world as a whole». A third group of questions addressed in these proceedings is connected to the challenge of working out a fresh view of Soviet philosophical historiography by putting it in a comparative perspective. The comparative approach is applied in the essays in particular as far as Soviet and post-Soviet discourse on non-Western philosophy is concerned.

Generally and approximately speaking, the articles in this collection have been organized respecting a chronological order. Thus Daniela Steila’s contribution explores the inadequately studied theme of the beginning of the Soviet history of philosophy and the methodological discussions of the intellectually fervent and booming 1920s. Maja Soboleva offers a critical survey of the (unsuccessful, as she demonstrates) attempts made, at different stages in the development of the «history of philosophy as a science», to establish its methodology. Frances Nethercott focuses on the late 1950s and early 1960s and the intention on the part of the political authorities of the time «to substitute one authorised version of the past with another». She scrutinises some of the contributions to a 1964 conference on the methodology of historiography with the aim of pointing to «some of the more creative readings of Marx and ways of engaging with intellectual currents abroad».

The first three essays on the theory and methodology of philosophical historiography are followed by surveys dedicated to case studies: Tatiana Artemyeva’s article on the interpretation in Soviet historiography of the philosophy of the Russian Enlightenment; Kåre Mjør’s examination of the matter of criticism of Eurocentrism; my own study on the Soviet approaches to the history of medieval philosophy; Alyssa DeBlasio’s analysis of the use

17. Abramov *et al.* 1986, p. 48.

Merab Mamardašvili made of the history of philosophy in introducing his own thought. The next article, by Igor´ Evlampiev, examines Soviet studies in Renaissance philosophy as a basis for developing a new view of history in the 1960s-1980s. Then the case study undertaken by Fabio Grigenti considers the contribution of Silvano Tagliagambe (and of «the Italian school» in the study of the history and philosophy of science headed by Ludovico Geymonat) to the historiography of Soviet science and philosophy.

Finally, Evert van der Zweerde's essay is placed last because it may serve as a conclusion to the entire collection and points to some new themes of study. One of the conclusions drawn by Van der Zweerde is that the Soviet theory of the history of philosophy is «of philosophical interest *because of the contradictions that it entails*» [emphasis mine] and *not in spite of* them. Similarly to Frances Nethercott, Van der Zweerde points out the parallels between some developments in the Soviet and the Western philosophical and cultural historiography: parallels which, it seems, cannot be explained simply as coincidences or by referring to a possible “internal logic” in the development of historiography. Instead, we should see them as the result of the constant effort on the part of the Soviet scholarly community, despite frequent difficult circumstances, not to fall behind their Western “rivals”. Finally, and what is most important with respect to the problematics central to the conference and, consequently, to these proceedings, is Van der Zweerde's conclusion that the Soviet experience has successfully «set limits to a mistaken cultural relativism that suggests that Indian or Chinese or African philosophy – or Russian philosophy, for that matter – is somehow essentially different from European or Western philosophy».

Before concluding these few lines, I should like to stress a further point in the light of which Soviet philosophical historiography appears rather topical. It is clearly expressed in the article by Kåre Mjør, who claims that there is «structural similarity between Soviet and post-Soviet [Russian] histories of philosophy». His argument concerns the accounts given of Russian thought but I believe it can also be extended to other fields of historical-philosophical learning¹⁸. The same may be said of Mjør's question as to «how Marxist and materialist the Soviet historiography of philosophy after all was», a question that, in one form or another, is to be found in practically every essay in the present collection.

Let me conclude this introduction by mentioning the people and the institutions who have contributed to this project. It has benefited greatly from the support and competent advice of the members of the Scientific Committee of the conference whose proceedings are published here: Roberto Gilardi, Fabio Grigenti, Mario Longo, Giuseppe Micheli, Kåre Mjør, Gregorio Piaia,

18. For example, on the continuity between Soviet and post-Soviet historiography of medieval Arabic philosophy, see Šajmukambetova 1998.

Daniela Steila and Evert van der Zweerde. I am deeply grateful to the contributors for their valuable work as authors in this edition but also for the fertile discussions they animated during the conference. My gratitude goes also to Fabio Grigenti for his encouragement and dedicated commitment to the project. I would, moreover, like to thank the University of Padua and its Department FISPPA (Dipartimento di Filosofia, Sociologia, Pedagogia e Psicologia Applicata) for its financial support and for having hosted the event and Roberto Gilardi (head of the research project entitled «Dall'io al sé. Dalla concezione funzionalistica della persona alle teorie contemporanee dell'intenzionalità e della razionalità pratica» financed by the University of Padua) for the sponsorship which made the organisation of the conference possible. Many thanks are also owed to the editors of the «Rivista di storia della filosofia» for having generously agreed to publish these proceedings as well as for their patience and consideration.

The scholarly, or scientific, system is used for the transliteration of Russian names and for quotations in Russian. It has been applied consistently with the exception of the name of Nikita Khrushchev (instead of Xruščev), for whom the form generally accepted in the English-speaking world has been chosen, and of references to publications in English of works by Russian authors (in these cases, the transliteration of the name of the author as it appears in the publication in question is followed: e.g. Mikhail Egorochkin).

These conference proceedings are dedicated to the memory of Teodor Il'ič Ojzerman (1914-2017), Vasilij Vasil'evič Sokolov (1919-2017) and Leonid Mixajlovič Batkin (1932-2016).

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