

# A Soviet View of Structuralism, Althusser, and Foucault

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Excerpts from the article "Structuralizm I dialekticheskii materializm," *Filosofskie Nauki*, 1970, no. 1, pp. 177-182. This article gives V. E. Koslovskii's summaries of speeches given at a conference on structuralism in Moscow in March, 1969.

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[177] The report of V. E. Koslovskii (Academy of Social Science), entitled "On the relation of the dialectical method to the structural method," noted the unfounded claims by foreign representatives of a universal and general methodological significance and applicability of the structural method.

His report highlighted three basic principles of structuralism:

1. Structural analysis is legitimate only when it is comprehensive, that is, when it permits maintaining the completeness of a system in all its manifestations.
2. Any structure consists of relations constructed according to the principle of the additivity of elements.
3. It is necessary to strictly differentiate the synchronic viewpoint, that is, the consideration of the content of a system at a given moment, from the diachronic viewpoint, which considers the history of the system. This differentiation preserves the methodological priority of the synchronic viewpoint, since inner connections must be known in advance in order to understand the evolutionary process.

Many representatives of contemporary foreign philosophy, not only of bourgeois philosophy, but also Marxists (or those who call themselves Marxists) agree that *the structural method in social science* is a scientific method, and, as such, it interacts with the dialectical method. Moreover, this interaction, although it can be interpreted otherwise, is in essence this: Dialectics should be "structurized," that is, renovated with the help of the structural method. In

particular, this is the idea of L. Althusser and M. Godelier in France. The structural method is declared to be the only method for saving dialectics, "transforming dialectics into a science," and "rethinking Marxism." In other words, structuralism is raised to the rank of the only scientific method.

In V. E. Koslovskii's opinion, in order to seriously work out all these claims, without either declaring the structural method to be anathema or singing "halleluiahs" in its honor, as some philosophers do, it is necessary to compare judgments on the most important theoretical questions, as they are made by the dialectical and the structural methods.

The most essential divergence between the dialectical and structural methods is found on the main point—the question of contradiction.

Representatives of structuralism like M. Godelier claim that re-reading Marx shows that his understanding of the essence of the capitalist economic system reduces to a combination of two irreconcilable structures, the productive forces and the relations of production. The contradictions between these structures, however, are not contradictions *inside a structure* but between two structures, since they are irreconcilable, and cannot have unity.

According to this conception, the source of development of every system is *not internal*, but *external* (an external relation of one structure to another). Consequently, to conform to the main principle of structuralism—the priority of the synchronic over the diachronic—the main principle of dialectics—the self-development and self-movement of objects, as a result of the development of their internal contradictions—is rejected. The resolution of contradictions depends on the level of "compatibility" or "incompatibility" between the two systems

(the productive forces and the relations of production). Moreover, this resolution of contradictions is connected *only* with the level of development of the forces of production. Subjective factors, class struggle, and revolution are in fact ignored.

Godelier also claims (wrongly) that contradictions in phenomena are absent at the moment of their origin, and only appear at a certain stage of development. This leads to the conclusions that (a) the more intense the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production become, the greater the tendency to stagnation, and that (b) the absence of contradiction determines accelerated development of the productive forces.

Life refutes these conclusions. In the epoch of the domination of state monopoly capitalism, when contradictions in the mode of production are particularly sharp, the forces of production in general are developed even more quickly than in the preceding stages of the development of capitalism. It is also well known that contradictions in the capitalist mode of production arose from the moment of its appearance, and its growth then was contradictory, as it is now, accompanied by growth and destruction of the forces of production. Thus, in resolving the issue of any scientific method, the analysis of contradictions, the dialectical and structural methods diverge sharply.

This divergence also comes to light in the relation of the logical and the historical in cognition. Here, the errors of structuralist philosophy include investigating the logical and the historical in isolation from one another, by decisively ignoring the historical. It is well known, however, that the logical aspects of things comes to be conceived only when it is combined with the historical aspect, which is its basis.

The dialectical method also differs from the historical method on the question of the relation of internal and external.

A number of representatives of structuralism consider that their approach to this question (in particular, structures always include inner, hidden relations beyond the limits of visible relations) is in agreement with dialectics. There is an essential differ-

ence here, however. For example, in the structuralists' view, contradictions between the productive forces and the relations of production do not express a true relation of people, since the structural method opposes structure and process, but human relations concern a purely external area of ideological consciousness. Differing from this point of view, Marxism does not separate structure from process, releasing the relations between people from relations between things, and making the cognition of these relations a scientific subject.

In deciding the question of causality, the dialectical and structural methods also stand opposed. Some structuralists directly deny causal connections between infrastructure and superstructure, that is, between the economic base and social consciousness—i.e., ideology.

Even such a brief examination of the different approaches to the important problems makes the conclusion of the lecturer convincing, that the structural method cannot be a general methodological method, since its understanding and resolution of basic philosophical questions does is not confirmed in science and practice. The structural method, this non-dialectical method, operates in large part [179] by frozen, unmoving categories, although that does not give a basis for ignoring it. It is necessary to be led by the words of Lenin, who taught us to cut off the reactionary side of any trend in the science of bourgeois society, maintaining and using everything valuable and useful that it has in it. The anti-dialectical tendency that is met with in some representatives of structuralism is explained to a certain extent by the inadequate working out of dialectics, where dialectics does not always make progress in generalizing a whole series of new branches of science and new discoveries, of which there is such a wealth in our time.

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[180] The speech of Assistant Professor L. M. Minaev (Academy of Social Science) was in connection with the theme "Structuralism on nationalism and internationalism."

In the opinion of L. M. Minaev, the facts from recent years show that some interpretations of structuralism promote the spread of nationalist views. Thus certain ideas of Levi-Strauss open the way the exaggeration of national and regional differences, to absolutizing differences in the psychological [181] constitution of peoples and nations, and to denying the unity of human history. Levi-Strauss and some other structuralists, reflecting on the "positive qualities" of so-called exotic societies, revive the Rousseauian tradition of admiration for "uncivilized peoples."

Similar views inspire some African theorists to oppose the poetry and mythology of Africa to the spiritual values of European culture, even including Marxism.

With regard to another representative of structuralism, Michel Foucault, who limited Marxism to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, also held that Adam Smith and Marx belonged to the same thought structure. On the basis of similar views, he easily came to the conclusion that class and political differences between the USSR and the USA, for example, do not play a significant role, since it is a question of one and the same thought structure. In their representations of the development of humanity, Foucault and Levi-Strauss, as well as their student Lucien Sebag, proceed from the view that it is not material production and not practice that play the defining role: the predominance belongs to language, as well as to the subconscious and the unconscious.

Conclusion: we must not put excessive emphasis on the sympathy for Marxism of many representatives of structuralism, since structuralists receive bows from all sides, from positivists, Freudians, and advocates of the theory of convergence.

Presenting a report on the theme of "Structuralism and Personality," M. N. Gretskii (philosophy department, Moscow State University) first of all expressed his disagreement with a series of proposals in the speech of L. M. Minaev, and in particular that in his evaluation of Levi-Strauss, the charge of nationalism is at least unfounded. He also expressed regret about the mixing of structuralism (either concrete scientific or philosophical structuralism)

with the structural method in some speeches.

Characterizing structuralism briefly as a tendency affecting several humanitarian sciences in France, M. N. Gretskii singled out in it a basic feature, the primacy of relations over the elements related. This new feature of structuralism is connected with its success in concrete sciences and also its unresolved problems, among which are two main ones: the relations of structure and history and of structure and man. An example which illustrates the primacy of relations is a musical melody, in which the relation between notes is invariant, defined by the notes themselves, M. N. Gretskii pointed out how this idea "works" in linguistics and ethnology and how it leads to the idea of unconsciousness structures, determining the conscious actions of man. Here the transition is completed from partly scientific structuralism to the acceptance in principle of philosophical structuralism.

Speaking against the subjective idealist philosophy that had been dominant in France up to that time, structuralists oppose the free conscious activity of the subject to subjectless objective structures, consisting of pure relations without differences of substrate. The contemporary human sciences, as Levi-Strauss said, "dissolved" man. They attack man from the inside and the outside. From the point of view of the structuralist interpretation of psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan), unconscious symbolic structures constitute man himself. From the point of view of the structuralist reinterpretation of Marxism (Louis Althusser), man as an element of a system is fully determined by social relations, leaving to him only the role is as the "bearer" of these relations. Hence the logical conclusion of the idea of "theoretical anti-humanism," with which, of course, it is impossible to agree.

Althusser's conception, which is widespread in France, requires serious analysis, particularly because the idea of reducing the human individual to social relations looks at first glance to be fully Marxist. Sometimes this position even "becomes more specific," indicating that the essence of man *reduces* to specific social relations.

But his also means reducing man to relations or representing him as formless clay. In fact, man is the product of all preceding development, determined not only by specific social relations, but also by all of history, and because of this has relative independence.

The problem of the relation of structuralism, system-structural methods and natural science was reflected in the speeches of S. T. Meliukhin (Moscow State University) and R. S. Karpinskoi (Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Science of the USSR).

Professor S. T. Meliukhin considered that system-structural methods comprise in themselves consideration of material objects and processes on account of a whole variety of their inner and outer connections, and interactions of elements in a specific material system or process, on account of the place of the specific object in the general series of actions. Structural analysis also presupposes the emergence of laws of change of systems and of the change in the mutual connection of the elements that constitute them. Moreover, these laws should be revealed not only as of a general, qualitative type, but possibly also quantitative, giving the basis for exact predictions by way of definite equations.

One of the most important problems of system-structural analysis is the investigation of the mutual relation of the characteristics of systems and the elements they contain. It is well known that these properties are qualitatively different, and in most cases, from the basic properties of the primitive structural elements, it is very difficult to predict theoretically beforehand [182] what properties a newly arising whole system will possess. The properties of such a system are usually established empirically and after its emergence. For this, many properties of the elements are inadequately combined for the formation of the whole system. If bringing out theoretical principles defining this inadequacy and revealing the way to predict the properties of the whole were successful, it would be an enormous step forward in the scientific cognition of the world, in particular, in re-

vealing the content of the process of development and the formation of new qualities.

The basic positions of system-structural methods were already formed in other terminology in preceding philosophical theories of cognition and its methods, and have found their clearest expression in dialectical materialism. But the system-structural method reveals the significance of these principles from a new perspective, from the point of view of the achievements and needs of contemporary natural science, above all in connection with the working out of the general theory of systems. The system-structural method must not be identified with structuralism, which often puts forward metaphysical and idealistic conceptions, in contradistinction to dialectical materialism.

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The last speech in the discussion was devoted to the theme of "structuralism and organization." A. E. Voskoboinikov, (Komsomol Higher School), speaking on this theme, polemicized in particular with G. M. Gak, who considered the structural method to be something established in philosophy long ago. Although the word 'structure,' A. E. Voskoboinikov said, also was encountered already among the ancient Greeks, it then had nothing in common with the contemporary understanding of structure, since the basic idea of structuralism is the mediation of parts, elements of any whole.

A. E. Voskoboinikov considers that there is no contradiction between dialectics and the synchronic approach if it is correctly understood. Synchrony is characterized not as something opposed to dialectics, but as something opposed to historicism, and historicism is not dialectics.

The general conclusion that resulted from the discussion was that the structural method requires profound study and major investigative work, because of its undoubted significance in the development of many branches of science.

Along with that we must not lose a critical approach, and must be principled in evaluation of the method, its relations with dialectical methods, and most important,

we must not forget that some bourgeois ideologists give the structural method their interpretation, tending to use it in the whole struggle against Marxism and its philosophy.

Those taking part in the discussion expressed the desire to continue and broaden the discussion of the problems of the structural method in theoretical conferences and in print.