

Frédéric Bertrand, *L'anthropologie soviétique des années 20-30. Configuration d'une rupture.*

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By his own account, the French anthropologist Frédéric Bertrand arrived in St. Petersburg with a black-and-white mental image of Russian social science in the first two decades of Soviet power: there was science, and there was state-imposed ideology; on the one hand genuine scholars, on the other, apparatchiks and informers. As he was reading through the archives of the venerable Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, a staff member invited him to her office for tea. Bertrand's conversations with her, her colleagues, and a handful of surviving eyewitnesses of that turbulent period of Soviet history (notably, the Central Asian specialist Leonid P. Potapov, and the French agronomist and linguist André-Georges Haudricourt, who spent a year in Russia in 1934-35) led him to refocus his investigation and rethink his presuppositions.

Bertrand identifies three further sources which, as it were, overdetermine the binarist representation of the evolution of ethnography in Russia: (1) official Soviet discourse of rupture with the practices and ideologies of the bourgeois, Tsarist past; (2) identity-forging strategies of the Soviet actors themselves, especially in the form of retroactive spin applied to Stalin-era events and personalities a half-century or more after the fact; (3) the Kuhnian models used by historians: scientific revolutions, paradigm shifts, normal vs. anomalous science. Unlike all too many researchers who refit their data according to preset categories of analysis, Bertrand retools his version of post-Kuhnian sociology of science to accommodate the realities of the practice of ethnography in Stalin's USSR. He allows for the juxtaposition of paradigms as well as their succession; the notions of 'paradigm' and 'scientific revolution' are nuanced to reflect "the permeability of constraints and the porosity of norms" (p. 25). He also adapts Gregory Bateson's concept of the 'double bind' to the pathogenic ideological atmosphere within which his subjects were obliged to work out their own salvations — or, for most, mere survival — in fear and trembling. Bertrand's *double contrainte* captures the necessity for individuals to formulate a favorable and legitimate line of conduct, despite the contradictory categories of the dominant discourse to which they must appear to adhere, and the nearly inevitable reprimand following any initiative (p. 34).

Bertrand's monograph comprises three chapters, a brief conclusion, and forty pages of useful appendices, including chronologies and brief sketches of individuals and institutions. In the first

chapter, Bertrand contrasts the discourses of rupture with the past and the ‘Marxization’ of Soviet science with the practice of “translation”, by which academics attempt to reconcile seemingly contradictory traditions or doctrines. A case in point is the ethnographer and museum director Nikolaj M. Matorin — one of the two individuals around whom Bertrand structures his history —, who attempted to retain certain notions from pre-Revolutionary social science, despite the opposition of radical followers of N. Ja. Marr. Marr — the other central figure — and the Marrists come to the forefront in the second chapter, on the “normalization” of ethnographic discourse. The key events of the period covered by Bertrand are two congresses of ethnographers, held in 1929 and 1932, at which Marr and his followers, notably the zealots V. B. Aptekar’ and F. V. Kiparisov, played a prominent role. In the third chapter, on competition among scientific projects, Bertrand goes back to the 19th century antecedents of Russian ethnography. Some of the finest field anthropologists of the late tsarist period were in fact political prisoners, exiled to the remote corners of Siberia. Although the radical backgrounds of such founding fathers as V. G. Bogoraz and L. Ja. Shternberg made them acceptable to the first generation of Soviet ethnographers, the rise of Marr and Marrism took the discipline in a new direction. Parallels between increasingly bizarre “Japhetic” theory of linguistic and ethnic origins, and the socio-cultural stadialism endorsed by Engels made the theory easy to graft onto Marxism-Leninism, which afforded it the privileged position from which it wreaked havoc on Soviet academia in the 1930’s. Among those attacked by Marr’s followers were numerous Slavists accused of “chauvinism”, and even the Lenin Prize-winning geneticist N. I. Vavilov, whose research on early centers of plant domestication was condemned as “migrationist” (207-212). Marr himself died in 1934, not long before Stalin rediscovered the ideological advantages of ethnic consciousness and the glorious historical heritage of the Russians. In the purges of 1936 and 1937, not only moderates such as Matorin, but many leading Marrists met their end before the NKVD’s firing squads.

Bertrand’s historical method has the merit of bringing out the comprises and difficult choices made by his subjects, along with instances of opportunism and attempts to undertake serious research under extraordinarily perilous conditions. Perhaps the strongest endorsement I can make for this book is that it left me eager to know more. There is much work that remains to be done, and many fascinating and troubling stories to be told, glimpses of which can be garnered from the twenty pages of biographical sketches appended by Bertrand to the main text. Bertrand’s two main characters and many of their followers did not survive the 1930’s — and few of them died in their beds. One wonders about the survivors, such as S. P. Tolstov, who somehow negotiated the choppy ideological waters that swallowed up his mentor P. F. Preobrazhenskij, or the Marrist linguist I. I. Meshchaninov, who edited the 1938 memorial collection in honor of his master that

Aptekar', Kiparisov and Xudjakov did not live to see. There has been some interesting speculation of late about the beginnings of Marrism itself: can one trace the foundational role accorded by Marr to the so-called "Japhetic" cultures, best preserved in the Caucasus, to Marr's adolescent flirtation with Georgian nationalism (Alpatov 1991: 14), or on the contrary, to a linguistic cosmopolitanism that led him to increasingly distance himself from the narrower concerns of his Georgian students and colleagues (Cherchi and Manning 2002)? Bertrand's documentation of the expansion of Marr's ideas from linguistics into ethnography, and of the research centers founded by Marr and his disciples, presents yet another facet of this fascinating and often-misunderstood academician: Marr as Franz Boas's Soviet counterpart, as it were. The two were close contemporaries, and had serious issues with the dominant West European (specially, German) approaches to language, culture and 'race' (Leavitt 2003). Both men formulated integrated multidisciplinary programs for the study of human diversity, which they translated into institutional reality in their adopted venues (St. Petersburg and New York, respectively). There, of course, the parallels end: Marr theorized human diversity in universal and evolutionary terms, whereas Boas was fiercely anti-evolutionist and sharply critical of grand theories in the human sciences. Boas's vision lives on in the four-fields composition of many North American anthropology departments, and in some strains of postmodernism; under saner circumstances, less productive of the terrifying double bind described by Bertrand, one wonders if Marr's vision could have evolved into something other than a linguistic Lysenkoism?

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(1250 words).