

Interpreting America: Russian and Soviet Studies of the History of American Thought. By John Ryder. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999. Pp. xxxiii + 326.

In offering an erudite examination of the most significant work done by Russian and Soviet scholars of American thought, John Ryder has provided us a book which is original and much needed—indeed, for philosophers and historians of ideas, perhaps indispensable. A long-time student of Soviet philosophy, Ryder is evidently not only comfortable with the Russian language and Soviet texts, but thoroughly comfortable with the history of American philosophic thought. Accordingly, his accounts of Russian and Soviet work are not only revelatory of Soviet understanding of American philosophy from the Puritans to Dewey, but stand as critical tools pertinent to the continuing re-examination of these traditions and figures. Indeed, the largest body of literature on American philosophy outside of English is in Russian. It is not difficult to suggest an explanation of this. As Ryder notes, as Marxists who take ideas and their own intellectual history seriously, Soviet philosophers saw in American thought not only a competing set of traditions, but especially in American pragmatism and naturalism, themes which spoke directly to Soviet concerns. While he makes clear that the Soviet “angle of vision” is presumptively critical, it is also very clear that there are Russian and Soviet scholars who are first-rate philosophers whose scholarly standards and energies take a back seat to no one.¹ Indeed, given the range of Ryder’s inquiry, the clarity of his prose and his sensitivity to the problems of philosophy—from political theory to epistemology, the book stands as a most useful critical survey of American thought. Assuming that there are benefits to be gained from *any* well-articulated alternative perspective, every reader, I suspect, will have my experience and, despite a presumed familiarity with the texts examined by these authors, see some things either not seen, not seen clearly or seen differently.

The volume has two main parts, each with a useful preamble which maps the background of what follows. Part I, “Early American Philosophy,” has three chapters, “The Colonial Period: Puritanism and Eighteenth Century Idealism,” “The American Enlightenment: Nature and Knowledge, Revolutionary Social Thought, and Political Theory,” and “Transcendentalism: The Romantic Worldview, Emerson and Thoreau.” Part II, “American Philosophy in the Golden Age,” has two chapters, a substantial

¹ It is true, of course, that a good deal of Soviet philosophy, especially at the height of the Cold War, was little more than a “scholastic” defense of the Soviet system, but it is hopelessly provincial to assume either that Marxism-Leninism is philosophically bankrupt or that Soviet philosophers were incapable of providing a scholarly explication and criticism of a philosophical text. One might note here that despite the best efforts of a handful of American philosophers to keep a conversation alive, including e.g., John Somerville, George Kline, Marvin Farber, and most recently, Peter H. Hare, American dis-interest in Russian and Soviet philosophy makes a project comparable to Ryder’s an impossibility. *Russian Philosophy* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), edited by James M. Edie, James P. Scanlon and Mary-Barbara Zeldin, with the collaboration of George Kline, remains a most useful three-volume historical anthology of Russian philosophic thought from its origins to the recent past. Excepting A.G. Spirkin’s summary of “dialectical materialism,” then the Soviet “official” philosophy, the volume takes one only to Lenin. For a recent volume dealing with some critical features in the history of Marxism-Leninism, see Terrell Carver and Manfred Steger (eds.), *Engels After Marx* (College Station: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

chapter on pragmatism, from Peirce to Rorty, and one on “Idealism, Realism, and Naturalism.” Only a taste is possible here.

The leading Soviet writers, perhaps more consistently historical materialist in their treatment of the early period, hold that it is an error to deny that this body of thought is “philosophical,” but find also that it “reflects the sharp ideological and sociopolitical conflicts of its time” (3) especially those generated by Calvinist belief and institutions. They see Puritan social thought as critical for later developments, but are critical of the more or less standard American interpretation, as for example, in Herbert Schneider or R.B. Perry which holds that Puritanism contains “within itself the principles that [this] tradition attributes to the Enlightenment” (13). A.M. Karimsky argues that there is a huge gap between covenant and contract theories. The former, unlike the latter, grounded authority in God. N.E. Pokrovsky allows for a continuity but argues that covenant theory is inherently contradictory since while it is generally democratic in its religious relations, it was fundamentally anti-democratic in its understanding of secular relations—where Enlightenment thought was most revolutionary. The issues raised here remain critical to understanding America.

The American Bicentennial occasioned a host of new work on the American War of Independence. For Karimsky, “The Declaration of Independence is the ideological justification for one of the most important progressive social transformations of modern times and in a theoretical respect it enriched the foremost social thought by cultivating the ideas of popular sovereignty and national self-determination, and ‘lawfulness’ of revolution” (47). But “the social system in the U.S. constantly violates, fails to fulfill, or is unable to realize those principles and demands with which its own formation was related” (*ibid.*). In the dominant Soviet view, contemporary American accounts make a virtue of what actually are shortcomings in the articulation of the U.S. Constitution, but at least on grounds provided by Ryder, it may well be that their explanation for the failures of the promise of the Declaration is less radical than on some American and British accounts. For example, while they argue that in Philadelphia in 1787 “the strongest determining factors were the economic and political interests of the propertied,” they follow the conventional wisdom in holding that the meeting was motivated by a “crisis” which followed the end of the war, they reject on a number of grounds Beard’s famous interpretation, including interestingly, that Beard paid insufficient attention to the theoretical principles which guided the “founders” (91), and they endorse the conventional view that Jefferson was the democrat *par excellence* whose principles lost out to the Federalists.²

Late nineteenth century Russian intellectuals were very much interested in American transcendentalist thought, but this interest “all but disappeared in the post revolutionary period.” After the 1962 translation of Thoreau’s *Walden*, interest was renewed. Ryder’s examination of the literature leads him to conclude that “Soviet commentators have located the inadequacies of transcendentalism in its philosophic idealism,” but of interest, “found its virtues in the very respects in which it is distinctly

² For an attempt at integrating the political theory and socio-economic factors of the so-called critical period, see my *War and Democracy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), Part III.

American,” in particular in its effort to find grounds for the democratic ideals not then realized. And anticipating the argument of Cornel West,³ they see Emerson as having “established a framework that was to blossom later into a new and distinctly American philosophic direction and vision” (103).

Ryder tells us that there was a veritable explosion of Soviet work on pragmatism following World War II and that it displayed “extraordinary hostility” (140). But by the late 1960s this had changed and formulaic pronouncements regarding its “bourgeois” and “imperialist” character were displaced by a criticism that aimed directly at technical philosophical issues. This remains true of post-Soviet writing which remains critical, but not primarily in terms of the political inadequacies of pragmatism. The root criticism, not unfamiliar to American students of pragmatism, focuses on its putative “subjectivism” and the consequences of this for morals and politics. Herein, perhaps, is the most important contribution of Ryder’s account of the very extensive Russian literature.

Soviet attention to pragmatism is hardly surprising. First, the Soviets find the pragmatic connection of action and knowledge to be distinctly progressive step forward. Thus, according to Sidorov, “Peirce’s ideas are the basis for working out a non-classical, nonspeculative, *active* form of rational knowledge” (155). But second, as Ryder says, “American philosophy with some few exceptions has developed in active opposition to a philosophic materialism that Soviet philosophers had traditionally regarded as the only general world view implicit in an consistent with contemporary science. Opposition to materialism has taken one or two forms. One of them is to reject materialism in favor of an explicit idealism, as in Royce and personalism. The other, found in Dewey and James, is first, to reject the dichotomy between materialism and idealism...and then to offer a view thought to be neither one nor the other” (224). Moreover, “for a host of reasons, some of them more justifiable than others, dialectical materialism has virtually never been taken seriously in the West, including by the majority of Western Marxists” (145). Pragmatism is surely one of the more justifiable reasons. Even prior to the “linguistic turn” in Anglo-American philosophy that actively marginalized it, pragmatism had contributed substantially to the demise of materialism as viable synoptic philosophy.⁴ But for the Russians the pragmatist project failed, ultimately unable to sustain a viable realism.

The examination of Peirce, James, Dewey and Mead by Yu. K. Melvil (especially Peirce), N.S. Yulina, A.S. Bogomolov, and I.N. Sidorov, among others, is detailed,

³ Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

⁴ The exceptions prove the rule: See Roy Wood Sellars, V.J. McGill, and Marvin Farber (eds.) *Philosophy for the Future: The Quest for Modern Materialism* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1949). The large and now forgotten volume has a number of still useful essays, but perhaps only one shows any interest in dialectics. Many are explicitly hostile. For a powerful recent statement of the pertinence of materialism as a synoptic view, see John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999).

close to the text, and analytically and historically sensitive. Some of the criticism, to be sure, presupposes the correctness of some key features of “dialectical materialism.” Throughout the book, Ryder lets the Soviet’s make their case but is clear enough where he departs from them, e.g., as regards current versions of Lenin’s “reflection” theory. But a good deal of critique stands without such commitments, either because it is internal or because the analysis sharply illuminates contemporary philosophical debate. The chapter concludes with a more rapid but insightful survey of Russian accounts of more recent pragmatism, including C.I. Lewis, Quine, Goodman, Bernstein and Rorty.

In chapter 5, “Idealism, Realism and Naturalism” Ryder provides the Soviet account of Royce and the personalists, and overlapping with issues raised in the pragmatist tradition, the debate between realists, Whitehead and versions of naturalism and what Bogomolov calls “pseudo-naturalism.” Thus, while Roy Wood Sellars qualifies as an genuine naturalist, the pseudo-naturalists include Santayana who, despite his avowed materialism, ultimately created a metaphysical system that was a modernized version of Platonism, and Dewey and Hook, whose pragmatism undermines their naturalism. The Soviet philosophers tend to be sympathetic with American naturalism, but hold, perceptively, in my view, that the differences in American naturalism stem from tensions between the respective understandings of science and its relation to metaphysics. Thus Ernest Nagel differs from Justus Buchler and both from John Herman Randall. The problem begins with Peirce and includes Dewey.

Of particular relevance is the Soviet evaluation of American treatment of the category of substance. Following Engels, they approve of the naturalist rejection of substance as “primordial matter, or underlying “substratum.” Soviet materialism was thus a realism regarding “things” much as understood by R.W. Sellars or Everett J. Nelson. Thus, while he could applaud Whitehead’s effort to overcome bifurcations in nature, Bogomolov argued that Whitehead’s “process philosophy” introduced a new type of bifurcation: of “events,” which are concrete and changing, and “objects” which are abstract, universal and unchanging (237). Indeed, more generally, the problem of a metaphysics appropriate for science remains a central issue both in the philosophy of science and more generally in the articulation of a viable naturalism.

Ryder concludes this chapter with Soviet criticism of Abraham Edel’s naturalistic ethics. For Karimsky, although Edel knows that ethical norms and principles have a class character, he seeks to represent his position as the point of view of humanity in general (279). But since Edel was seeking what today might be called “a thin theory” of the good, this criticism may badly miss the mark. And, against the view shared by Dewey, Edel and Ernest Nagel that human suffering is due to “a failure to employ adequate methods of inquiry,” it results, as Bogomolov sees, from “a failure to appreciate the real character of social processes and relations” (*ibid.*). Even if we grant that these writers greatly overstated hopes for inquiry, the problem is not that Dewey or Edel failed to acknowledge that there are structural obstacles standing in the way of even melioration, but to whom we must look for the most helpful analysis of these obstacles and of their overcoming. These include not only American Marxists, but non-Marxists like C.W. Mills.

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