

## *Contemporary Soviet Psychology*

The Soviet sciences which deal with human beings, either as individuals or as members of society, are very different in intellectual texture to the corresponding disciplines in non-Soviet societies. Some studies which have developed a highly sophisticated technique and an important body of empirical results, such as social psychology, sociology or criminology, do not exist in any recognisable form in the Soviet Union: others, such as individual psychology, have developed within a narrowly-conceived framework of dogmatic Soviet Marxism. As compared with non-Soviet developments the anthropological sciences exemplify a certain lack of individualisation of judgment, as shown in such things as the choice of problem investigated, the theoretical concepts used as a conceptual framework by the scientists in investigating the problem, the method used and the kind of conclusions which are permitted or permissible. The particular science itself, for example psychology, is bounded by what appears to be a universally accepted theoretical schematism of Soviet Marxism, the principles of which are at no point directly open to scrutiny by the individual scientist. It is not permissible to criticise, or even to undermine by implication, the views of Lenin (especially as these are set forth in the *Philosophical Notebooks*), or of Pavlov, whose views taken together are accepted as giving an adequate 'anthropology' or basic principles of a science of man.

This means that Soviet psychology often lacks the degree of abstraction and depth of analysis of British and American psychology which have developed in the matrix of an extremely sophisticated epistemology and a very rich philosophical tradition beside which the industrious compilations of Lenin (*Materialism and Empiriocriticism, Philosophical Notebooks*), appear crude and barren. Soviet psychological theory often appears, even to a sympathetic student, to be extremely naive and tendentious - the main concern of the generalising article in this field appears to be to defend a series of analytical formulations achieved historically by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Pavlov on the basis of the materialism of the Enlightenment and German classical philosophy, rather than to develop original insights which will provide the investigator with the necessary methods and concepts for contemporary analysis of social and individual phenomena. (Ananiev; Rubinstein; Kostyuk.)

When this has been said, however, it must be recorded that a very great variety of interesting and useful experimental studies

have been, and are being made, especially with reference to human abilities and processes - for example, perception, memory, thinking, speech, the psychology of personality, etc. These are conceived within the context of Pavlovianism and are directed to the solution of practical problems of everyday life, in education, in the clinic, but hardly at all in the factory or collective farm. It is true that the interest of this work is mainly for academic psychologists; as Smirnov (1957) asserts: the actual 'practical application of research is insignificant by comparison with the extent of this work and its potential use'. The continuing attempt over a period of more than forty years to develop a Marxist psychology based on and illuminated by laboratory studies, and uncompromisingly materialist in aspiration must interest all socialists. The defects of contemporary Soviet psychology can plausibly be assigned to the dead hand of the bureaucracy and the ossification of the Soviet party (which themselves, of course, demand an elaborate explanation in terms of social, political and educational developments and of the external relations of the Soviet Union). It is of considerable significance in this connection that there was no journal devoted to psychological questions during the Stalin era. Psychological work, which was mainly of a generalising and apologetic character, was published in various educational, physiological and philosophical journals. The study of the individual and his reactions does not seem to have been regarded with much favour in this period, although this study went on in Universities and Research Institutes, as shown by the appearance of a very flourishing journal in 1955, *Voprosy Psikhologii*, or *Problems of Psychology*.

### *Theoretical Orientation of Soviet Psychology.*

Contemporary psychological research and teaching in the U.S.S.R. are based on the decisions of the Conference called by the Academy of Sciences in 1950 to discuss 'The Problems of the Physiological Doctrine of I.P. Pavlov' (Scientific Session; Gordon). The report of the discussion which lasted six days and in the course of which 137 contributions were made, runs to 718 pages in the Russian original; the outcome was clear from the first day, although the address to the 'great coryphaeus of Science' (Stalin) was passed with acclamation only at the end of the conference. This outcome was the decision to base psychiatry, medicine and psychological research and teaching on the principles of Pavlovianism. This system of concepts gives the materialist basis for the study of the organism functioning in its environment (Silow), as well as providing the fundamental laws of brain process underlying the scientific study of behaviour.

Pavlov's conceptions and discoveries, elaborated between 1903 and 1936 (see especially Pavlov pp. 409-447), are the complement

of Lenin's theory of cognition (Lenin). To put this otherwise, Pavlovianism is a detailed working-out in a laboratory setting of Leninist epistemology: in 1950 this fact was realised by Soviet psychologists as a group. Pavlov's discovery of the laws of brain functioning - irradiation/concentration; mutual induction; the three signalling systems in the brain - transcends the limits of physiology proper. His doctrine is a consistent and systematic materialist monism which Pavlov derived from the 'democratic enlighteners' of the Russian 1860's and which Lenin derived from Marx and the indigenous Russian materialist tradition. The idea that psychological qualities and processes - intelligence, thought, emotion, volition - arise out of objective, environmental conditions and not from animality, unconscious urges, self-existent minds or souls, or from biological inheritance, is the most fundamental principle in the theoretical orientation of Soviet psychology at the present time: it travelled from the British school of associationists via Dobrolyubov to 20th Century Soviet psychology. It is Lenin's principle of 'reflection', stated first by Marx in the form: 'It is not consciousness that determines existence, but social existence that determines consciousness.'

*Monism* (the integral unity of soma and psyche); *Reflection* ('Sensation is an image of matter in motion' - Lenin); *Determinism* ('An impulse, an impetus, or a cause for every given action or effect' - Pavlov); *Contradiction* ('Soviet psychology, based on Marxist materialism, unfolds the basic contradictions in neuro-psychic development and the transition between different forms of existence and consciousness' - Ananiev); *Historicity* (Human consciousness is determined by the laws of development of the mode of production of the material life of society); *Unity of consciousness and activity* (Consciousness is integrally connected with activity and changes with changes in the form of activity) - these six principles are the fundamental theoretical basis of Soviet psychology. All Soviet discussions of theory revolve around these six headings, with supporting quotations from Marx, Engels, Sechenov, Pavlov, Lenin, making their entrance along with criticisms in set terms of either defined errors, such as phenomenalism, positivism, mechanism, or criticism also in set terms of a short list of Western psychologists, Freud, Kohler, Lewin, Claparede, and occasionally a more modern writer (an abstract of whose views has been received in time for inclusion). Since 1954, however, when a group of Soviet psychologists attended the Montreal 14th International Congress, there has been a recognition that not all Western psychology is reactionary, and an article by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget has even appeared in the leading Soviet journal of psychology.

The fundamentalist devotion to certain *obiter dicta* of the

founders of Soviet Marxism (who were not concerned with developing a coherent psychological theory), and to the theoretical framework of Pavlovianism leads many people to question whether in fact Soviet psychology can be regarded as being properly a science rather than a branch of political philosophy. This question can be answered by reference to the great body of empirical studies published in the journal *Problems of Psychology* since it was established in 1955. Apart from the generalising articles which have been referred to and examined above, the material published here is without a doubt scientific in character, some of it of a very high order of merit. The method of induction is used in exactly the same way as elsewhere, analysis and comparison of observations and experiments is standard procedure.\* Although there is a concentration of interest along certain lines this is true of all scientific work, and the emphasis in Soviet psychology is on the rational processes in human beings (because of the fact that since the decree of 1936 psychology has been oriented in the field of education) - an emphasis which is by no means unhealthy!

#### *Empirical Studies and their Relation to Pavlovianism.*

Pavlovianism is the scientific basis of Soviet optimism about the transformative effects of education and a changing environment on new generations, and the significance of the Socialist Revolution in changing 'human nature'. Pavlov himself once gave it as his strongest and most permanent impression based on nearly forty years of work on conditioned reflexes that 'nothing is immobile or intractable, and everything may always be achieved, changed for the better, provided only that the proper conditions are created' (Pavlov p. 447).

Professor Leontiev of Moscow University has carried out a number of lines of work which lend support to Pavlov's view. In the field of backwardness he has worked with children whose teachers considered them to be incapable of learning to sing because of 'tone-deafness', regarded as a hereditary disability. Using electronic apparatus, Leontiev *showed* them visually the pitch of the note they had to sing as well as their attempts to reach and maintain that pitch. When this could be done further graded exercises were carried out until the child was singing simple melodies correctly. Usually only eight to ten sessions of this remedial teaching were necessary to have the child singing normally.

Similar types of remedial work was effected with children who were backward in arithmetic and other school subjects. A graded approach through concrete activities was adopted with success. It is believed that mental deficiency, where there is no maldevelop-

\* Statistical methods are hardly at all used in Soviet psychology.

ment or dysfunctioning of the nervous system, can be approached with the same basic orientation. The orientation has been summarised by Leontiev as follows: —

'The development of all the human psychic qualities passes through a series of consecutive stages in the course of which different links are formed, these providing the indispensable foundation for the composition of the final mechanism underlying the given quality. However, certain of these links normally form of themselves, in a hidden fashion, and outside the control of the educator. In such cases, when some link or other, antecedent to the mechanism, is not developed, or is developed incorrectly, this inevitably gives rise to a picture of incapacity. If the missing connection is discovered and formed, development proceeds normally'.

At Moscow University also, Professor Teplov has been carrying through a programme of investigation of Pavlov's theory of types of personality, as found in human beings. Western psychologists look on Pavlov's attempt to revive the Hippocratic classification of temperament with considerable amusement. The Pavlovian typology is, of course, based on the characteristic features of the individual nervous system, and has nothing to do with the bodily 'humours'. Teplov believes that he has shown that it does not matter for academic success whether one belongs to the sanguine, the phlegmatic, the choleric or the melancholic type (as defined from the intensity, mobility and type of equilibrium of the nervous processes in the individual subject). Temperament in no way corresponds with 'destiny' - individual character is an alloy formed from the characteristics of the type and the changes produced by the external medium. It also seems possible to alter the basic temperamental type of the individual. This is all very interesting, but rather unconvincing to the Western psychologist, unless it be true that the Revolution has brought about a high degree of standardisation of human beings!

Krasnogorski, who works at the Naval Medical Academy in Leningrad, has been interested for a number of years in the field of human speech, considered as a high level conditioned reflex. It has been established that the same laws as operate with the first signal system (reaction to observable stimuli in the immediate environment, with animals as with humans), also govern the operation of the second signal system (speech). That is, the reaction to speech signals is at first generalised, then there is differentiation; the laws of irradiation/concentration around definite points in the cerebral cortex, and of mutual induction (excitation of one centre inhibiting others and vice-versa) also apply with speech signals. This refers of course to abstract connected discourse as well as to single words. This demonstration is extremely important because in the Pavlovian system the activities of the two signal systems, operating

through the various cortical centres in the brain, embrace the entire activity of man as a totality. The fact that the same laws operate at both levels (although it is recognised that there are also other laws specific to the second system), goes some way towards substantiating Pavlov's claim that the Russian school of physiology, founded by Sechenov, had won the whole human organism for physiological research by Sechenov's conception of reflex action as the basis of thought.

Unfortunately, it is true that little progress has been made in studying the *special* laws of the second signal system, but this problem is incomparably more complicated than those which Pavlov and his school have so far succeeded in solving.

Great activity is proceeding in Russian, Polish and Rumanian laboratories which are engaged on the investigation of this problem, making us of Ivanov-Smolenski's multiple-choice apparatus.

Stalin's 'contribution' to linguistics has probably had the effect of holding up work in this field.

Other developments in empirical research are of rather a technical character, being concerned with the organs of perception, nervous processes, thinking and memory, blind, deaf and mentally defective children, and animal studies. It is clear from the journals and books in which these materials are published, as well as from personal contacts with Soviet psychologists in this country and the Soviet Union, that psychology has achieved independent status as a branch of scientific activity and that Soviet psychologists have a professional expertise in no way inferior to that of other psychologists. They have been hampered for many years by the so-called 'cult of personality', or in other words, by the pressure from the ruling group to conform to Soviet orthodoxy. Pavlov's writings, as well as those of Marx and Lenin, have been used as a sacred text from which not only general criteria of scientific method can be drawn, but also specific answers to what are properly empirical questions, e.g., the role of speech in thinking; the nature of attention; the source of volition; and so on. Often the problems selected for investigation smack of the safe, sound-proof, shock-proof tower which was specially built for Pavlov's experiments, rather than of the noisy buzz of the market-place or factory meeting. But, of course, Western psychologists too have their towers.

One of the unsung victims of 'the cult of personality' was the study which in the Soviet Union was called 'psychotechnic', but which elsewhere was known as industrial psychology. It has been asserted by certain American engineers that the Stakhanovite movement was in fact the result of a rationalisation of mining work carried out by a group of industrial psychologists, but that in the popularisation of this movement through the person of Alexei Stakha-

nov all mention of this fact was concealed. It is certain that the Stakhanovite movement was a matter of personalities and that the principles involved had been worked out many years before not only in America, but a century before that by engineers in this country, for example, George Stephenson. It is also certain that 'psychotechnic' as an organised activity virtually disappeared after 1931 when the best-known Russian psychotechnicians attacked the methods which they had been using until that time and spoke of the need for methods different from those used in capitalist countries. There is no work done at the present time in the Soviet Union which could be described as industrial psychology, nor is there any study of groups either in factories, hospitals, clubs or schools in the U.S.S.R. Nor is there any attempt to uncover the actual causes of crime by means of social or individual surveys of a psychological character. The study of society by 'scientific Marxism' is confined in the Soviet Union to abstract discussions of dialectical abstractions, or to descriptions of an ideal model of a Socialist Society.

I am reminded of my experience in trying to secure from various planning organisations the figure representing the population of Moscow. This was (apparently) unknown; there seemed to be no answer to my further question: 'How then do you plan for a city such things as building, water supply, food, when the total population is unknown?' Whatever may be said of the Moscow planners it is a fact that Soviet psychologists are cut off, or have cut themselves off, from a tremendous variety of interesting problems and methods by confining themselves within the narrow limits of Pavlovian and Leninist orthodoxy.

#### *References.*

This article is based on a study of the journal *Voprosy Psikhologii* published since 1955 by the Russian Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. The articles referred to by the name of the author are available in English translation in Simon, B. (ed) *Psychology in the Soviet Union* (1957). Other references are:—

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