

ISCKMC 2020
International Scientific Congress «KNOWLEDGE, MAN AND CIVILIZATION»**PHILOSOPHY AND METHODOLOGY OF HISTORY IN THE
“MECHANIST” SCHOOL OF SOVIET PHILOSOPHY**

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i_nevzorova@mail.ru**Abstract**

The paper is devoted to the problem of relationship between philosophical thought and the methodology of historical research on the example of one of the Soviet philosophical schools of the 1920s. The paper reveals the significance of discussions about the subject of dialectical and historical materialism for the afterlife of Soviet social studies in the field of relationship between philosophy and special sciences, and specifically historical science. The study revealed the relationship between the general philosophical prerequisites of the doctrine and the specific guidelines dictated by humanitarian research in the field of identifying laws and extrapolating methods from other fields. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between the subject matter of a particular science and the ontological field of the approach from which the definition of the subject is derived. It is suggested that despite the high level of theorization and distance from specific historical studies this aspect of the topic has a significant impact on the chosen approach to the study. The paper concludes that it is necessary to develop a general philosophical problem for further development of special science research methodology, which can be considered not only as an important conclusion in the context of the history of Marxist philosophy, but also a special approach to understanding the genesis of the methodological crisis in disciplines undergoing large-scale transformations. It was suggested that not only the evasion of the philosophical problem field by researchers makes the solution of common issues spontaneous and inconsistent.

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1. Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, for a long time the Russian historical science has experienced transformations associated with the loss of all previous guidelines starting from established historiographic assessments to familiar methodological approaches to research. In this latter area, negative trends were especially noticeable, which made it possible to speak of the situation as of the “methodological crisis”. In this regard, the new era in the development of Russian science was far from all positively assessed as the time of new opportunities. The perception of what happened as a decline in the level of historical knowledge in our country is quite common (Grosul, 2011). In solidarity with this assessment it shall be noted that the most relief regression in the field of historical knowledge is noticeable in those areas that are related to the understanding of post-Soviet history and where there is no way to rely on historiographic tradition as a reliable foundation (Mochalov, 2019).

This indicates in favor of the fact that the problem does not revolve around overcoming the Soviet historiographic tradition, but is precisely connected with methodological attitudes. The lack of clarity in this area directly hinders the search for new ways in science. In this regard, the analysis of historically similar situations when historical science was at a turning point and experiencing a systemic crisis becomes especially relevant. It is worth paying particular attention to the fact that it is much more productive not to find ready-made solutions in the past, but to identify the causes of the same order. In the context of the Soviet history, this approach implies an appeal to the field of knowledge, which has a broader subject, namely, philosophy.

Even more relevant is the fact that with the collapse of the Eastern Block, not only domestic authors, but also foreign authors lost interest in the Soviet version of Marxism. Many meaningful works on the issue are in the past, in the realities of the Cold War (Joravsky, 1961; Szacki, 1981; Wetter, 1958). Newer works are a rare exception (Graham, 1987; Pollock, 2006).

2. Problem Statement

In connection with the above, there is a need to reveal the interaction of the methodology of historical science with philosophy on a specific past example from of domestic historical science, namely:

- Highlight specific ways and mechanisms of this influence.
- Demonstrate the possible implications of a set of decisions in the field of gnoseology and ontology.

3. Research Questions

The philosophical school of “mechanists”, which was active in the 1920s, was chosen as a specific object of study. The specific subject of consideration in this case were the following:

- general philosophical views of this direction, ideas on the matter, movement, understanding of categories of quantity and quality;
- understanding the subject of historical materialism;
- influence of philosophical attitudes on specific methodological views of this school.

4. Purpose of the Study

To outline the directions in which historical experience can be renewed to overcome the systemic methodological crisis in historical knowledge, to demonstrate the connection of science and philosophy as an effective way to solve methodological problems in historical science.

5. Research Methods

The work is based on the principle of historicism in its specific application to this problem, i.e. it is not isolated as an understanding of methodological problems, but in the context of social thought of its time. The unity of problem and systemic approach.

6. Findings

Considering the views of “mechanists” and adjacent thinkers on historical materialism, several important points should be noted. First, this name is a tribute to the established historiographic tradition and was rejected by the representatives of the direction themselves. The supporters of this direction, like their opponents, considered themselves orthodox Marxists (Axelrod (Orthodox), 1927). Second, the school of “mechanists” has never been a monolithic movement. It was formed in the fight against the school of “dialectics” as an antithesis seeing there a danger of "Hegelianizing" Marxism. However, there were certainly some common methodological principles among the representatives of this platform. The main representatives of this platform were L.I. Axelrod (Orthodox), V.N. Sarabyanov, A.K. Timiryazev, A.I. Varjas, I.I. Skvortsov-Stepanov, I.A. Borichevsky, G.G. Bosse, V.T. Ter-Oganesov.

The fact that this school was widely represented mainly among natural scientists is quite relevant for the study. There were few social historians directly adjacent to the mechanists, although mechanistic ideas were generally widespread. In this regard, it is more difficult to identify the social historical views of mechanists, there is a reason to talk more about the mechanistic trends in individual social authors. For example, a supporter of mechanists in the 1920 was the prominent Soviet historian Militsa Nechkina, although she did not directly participate in these discussions (as cited in Tikhonov, 2019).

The fundamental idea of this direction in Soviet Marxism was the identification of the philosophical concept of matter with natural science (Orlov, 1928; Timiryazev, 1928). The open desire to reconsider the representations of F. Engels in this direction: now we cannot agree with Engels, who wrote that “the matter as such is a pure creation of thought and abstraction. Similarly, I explicitly acknowledged that we can no longer follow Engels, who has great doubts about the desire of natural science to “find a single matter as such and reduce qualitative differences to only quantitative differences in the composition of homologous minute particles” (Stepanov, 1928, p. 39).

A whole range of interconnected issues revolved around the thesis of the purely natural scientific meaning of the category “matter” in Marxism. First, this is the disregard of the category of quality, the reduction of any qualitative changes to quantitative (Varjas, 1928). The category of quality can be ignored or attributed to the difference between essential and insignificant movements (Orlov, 1927) only if any whole is the mechanical sum of its constituent parts and nothing more. The decomposition of all

“wholes”, in turn, leads to the reduction of all forms of the matter movement to a simple mechanical movement (Rubanovsky, 1928). This is the convergence of the higher levels of matter to the lower ones, which not only proceeds from the provision on the identity of the philosophical category “matter” with the atomic model, but also obsessively implies only it. The circle is closed.

Being applied to specific areas these rather general and abstract issues that rarely attract a specialist in a particular field led to very specific conclusions.

First, in the mechanistic version of Marxist philosophy, the ontological essence disappeared, it was completely integrated into special sciences. The philosophy itself as such lost its independent significance.

Second, almost all fundamental disciplines of Marxism lost their subject. Dialectical materialism was reduced to the totality of achievements of modern natural science (Stepanov, 1926). Historical materialism – to the totality of methods of certain social sciences (Sarabyanov, 1922). As paradoxical as it may sound at first glance, but with this approach it is the empirics that becomes more important than the method, and not vice versa. Because when a general methodology is a simple sum of private techniques and methods it has no independent meaning, it is unable to exert the opposite influence on its parts. After all, there is no qualitative difference between the whole and the parts. Another approach, the opposite influence, is considered as dogma and interference from the outside, an attempt by philosophy to “command” special sciences, an attempt to impose unfamiliar schemes on specialists (Perelman et al., 1927). In fact, all this is the standard positivist thesis that no philosophy is needed, every science is philosophy itself.

The distinction of sciences not by their subject, but by their method is by no means accidental. The subject cannot play a significant role where there is no ontology. The latter, in turn, additionally fixed the separation of philosophy from special sciences. For example, in relation to the same historical science, even such a great author as Bukharin (2008), who stood outside the “mechanistic” direction, but adjoined it ideologically, approved a scheme of the “theoretical level” in the form of a philosophy of history or sociology and “empirical” as the history itself. This view almost completely coincided with Western European positivism (Bart, 2014). The system of these two levels is closed, no philosophy is needed here. But these are not all the consequences.

Since ontology is de facto removed from consideration, and qualitatively different levels of matter are proclaimed to be reduced to one another (biology to chemistry, chemistry to physics, etc.), then the methodological monism is understood as simply reducing all methods to one universal, which in the established system becomes applicable to everything, namely reduced to a scientific method.

Moreover, it is important to note that the “mechanists” strongly opposed the transfer of the already established laws of mechanics or, more broadly, nature to society, considering this an unacceptable simplification (Vasiliev, 1927). It was about mechanics precisely as a method, about the ideal (Axelrod (Orthodox), 2010). Axelrod (Orthodox) (2011), for example, considered it possible to use a natural science experiment in history in an almost original form. The author considered the transfer of established laws from nature to society only the visibility of science, but the transfer of methods by which these laws were obtained did not seem unscientific.

Sarabyanov (1926) even believed that social science should not deal with any individual phenomena, it should be interested in studying only mass, typical phenomena. In this disregard for unique, individual phenomena, there is a tendency to approach the social sciences towards the natural as to an ideal. This, for example, sharply diverged from the views of the recognized Marxist historian Tyumenev (1929), who assured that in all sciences there is a place for the individualizing and generalizing method with the primacy of the latter, but at the same time in historical science the individualizing method has an independent meaning, while in the natural it almost fades away.

All this accordingly influenced the development of laws. In mechanists, the gradation of laws in nature was closer to Comtism, where the most common laws extend their effect to all spheres of nature and to them only its special specific laws are added in each area. Sociologists who adjoined the school of “dialectics” looked at the problem completely differently (Oransky, 1931).

These are briefly the principles promoted by the representatives of the “mechanistic” school in early Soviet philosophy regarding the social sciences. Late Soviet researchers in general noted the positivist nature of this movement (Chagin & Klushin, 1986), although some of its representatives themselves criticized machism in the pre-revolutionary period (Arosin, 1926).

7. Conclusion

The above confirms that the distracting questions, which often seem too abstract and theorized for an ordinary researcher, can have the most direct impact on determining the permissible limits in the study and understanding the global tasks. The results of such discussions affected the methodology of historical science and, of course, the construction of historical concepts.

As a matter of fact, there is reason to say that the “methodological crisis” is not only the problem of specific methods of research, which are more dependent on the source, goals, specific tasks, and so on. This, first of all, is the loss of benchmarks, the loss of sight of a global goal, without which any complex structure ceases to move. However, you can see more on a particular material.

Far from always the declared commitment to certain attitudes coincides with the real state of affairs, even if the authors themselves are sincerely confident in this. In this case, there is no way to suspect the creators of the school in their intention to disguise true views, almost all the cited authors were Marxists with pre-revolutionary experience, and L.I. Axelrod was even the closest student of G.V. Plekhanov. Nevertheless, the thinking of the previous positivist categories widespread in pre-revolutionary science simply did not allow creating a new methodological approach. The Marxist style often masked the previous, familiar constructions. Such situations not only make us think about whether any construction in Soviet Marxism is so “Marxist” but also about whether the transformations of methodological paradigms throughout the post-Soviet period are equally far from the declared. The logic of these transformations, not always visible and recognized by contemporaries, can be the subject of a long and fruitful study.

For example, the concept of S. Tulmin can be applied to them in terms of the fact that basic conceptual ideas in science also struggle for survival under external influences thus adapting to the requirements of the prevailing intellectual environment.

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