SOVIET PHILOSOPHY IN TRANSITION:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH VLADISLAV LEKTORSKY

Vladislav Lektorsky has long been an influential figure in the Soviet philosophical world. As head of the Sector of the Theory of Knowledge at Moscow’s Institute of Philosophy, Prof. Lektorsky has been instrumental in furthering open and creative debate in epistemology and the philosophy of science. His own book, Sub”ekt, ob”ekt, poznanie (1980), represents an erudite attempt to develop a Marxist theory of knowledge in critical dialogue with a number of Western schools.1 For the past four years, Prof. Lektorsky has been editor-in-chief of Voprosy filosofii, the Soviet Union’s principal philosophy journal. Under his direction, the journal has played a significant role in stimulating reform in the Soviet philosophical world.

In May 1991, I had the opportunity to discuss with Prof. Lektorsky his views on Voprosy filosofii’s role under glasnost’ and perestrojka, the problem of reforming the Soviet philosophical world, the fate of Marxism in the USSR, and the recent revival of interest in Russian religious philosophy. The text of this interview appears below in my own translation.

Three months after the interview was conducted, the Soviet Union was turned upside down by the failed coup and its remarkable aftermath. Soviet communism has finally collapsed, and it remains unclear what we shall find in its place. However, it would be premature to suppose that Lektorsky’s remarks have been so overtaken by events as to have lost all relevance. In the first place, we should not underestimate the extent to which, by May 1991, the Soviet philosophical world had already undergone radical changes. For example, it was clear at that time that the Institute of Philosophy had long ceased to be an institution united by a common purpose — let alone the purpose of developing Soviet Marxism — and that the Communist Party’s influence there had shrunk to almost nil. Several major research projects under the Institute’s auspices were sponsored by external funding, and interaction with Western thinkers had been steadily increasing for several

years. Moreover, as Prof. Lektorsky describes, Voprosy filosofii had been untroubled by censorship for some time, even while it continued to publish with “Pravda,” the Communist Party’s publishing house.

Furthermore, it is important not to overestimate the immediate effect that the collapse of communism had on the Soviet philosophical world. Right until the death of the Union itself, academic life in the USSR seemed to be proceeding rather as it was before the coup. This is because, as Prof. Lektorsky remarks, many much needed reforms are not of a kind that can be instigated by decree. The rejuvenation of philosophical culture in the former Soviet Union demands not just institutional changes, but new resources, still greater interaction with philosophers abroad, and the emergence of new traditions of thought. Glasnost’ and perestrojka began the long process of renewal. It is to be hoped that it will continue apace in the new climate of democracy.

It is likely, of course, that philosophers in the “CIS” have yet to experience the real changes that will issue from the collapse of Soviet communism. As the economic climate worsens and the spirit of capitalism grows, so government may find itself disinclined to continue supporting academic pursuits in the humanities, particularly in light of the Academy’s role in the creation and sustenance of the ideology of the old order. While it has long been recognized that the Institute of Philosophy will have to be “streamlined,” there is now some danger that this will be effected simply by the withdrawal of public funding. This and similar changes, if they were to occur, would indeed dramatically affect the future course of philosophy in the former Soviet Union.

It therefore remains to be seen whether the democratization of Russia will bring about the reanimation or the demise of the philosophical tradition that Prof. Lektorsky represents. And for this reason, it is too soon to say whether his views in May 1991 have lost their relevance. But whatever the outcome, Prof. Lektorsky’s remarks will remain of interest as the stance of a “Gorbachevian” reformer in philosophy on the eve of the failed coup.

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Bakhurst: At the end of 1990, Voprosy filosofii changed publishers, moving from “Pravda,” the central Communist Party publishing house,
to “Nauka,” the imprint of the Academy of Sciences. What’s the story behind that move?

**Lektorsky:** Well, it’s all bound up with the present political changes. The Communist Party used to be the only practical force in this society. Now, in principle we have pluralism. While in reality the Party remains the most influential force, there are others around that will become ever more powerful in the future. As a result, the Party has given up its pretensions to lead and direct culture, science, and so on. In the past, although *Voprosy filosofii* was run by the Academy of Sciences, we were answerable to the ideological wing of the Central Committee. But no longer. We are now quite independent. There is no censor. Nobody controls us. We are responsible to our readers alone, and we set the direction of the journal. A year ago, the Central Committee decided that “Pravda” would publish only Party publications — the newspaper *Pravda*, the journal *Kommunist,* and so on — and everything else would move to other publishers. Thus, a number of the Academy’s journals have now gone over to the Academy’s press.

**Bakhurst:** Were you pleased by this decision?

**Lektorsky:** Actually, we were rather ambivalent. Of course, it is good to be more independent, though in fact we had not had censorship problems for some time. However, “Pravda” is the most powerful publishing house in the USSR. They have paper and good production facilities. We had access to a xerox machine, copy editing facilities. There was even a car available. “Nauka” can’t offer us resources like these. Moreover, they were none too pleased at having to take responsibility for a number of major journals. So, the change-over has been difficult and, as a result, the first five issues this year have not yet seen the light of day! The price of becoming an entirely independent academic journal is that you have to give up certain privileges.

**Bakhurst:** So, how does *Voprosy filosofii* see its role under *glasnost’* and *perestrojka*?

**Lektorsky:** We believe our journal has a unique role to play. One thing the experiment of the last six years has shown is that the difficulties in solving certain political, economic and social problems are connected with the complexities of rejecting the old Soviet stereotypes. For example, we can write new laws, and many have been written, but they are not effective because they — and the new social order they are
supposed to help create — presuppose a new form of consciousness. We need to create a new kind of person, an active subject, responsible for his or her deeds.

This is not going to happen overnight, but it is essential to work to that end. It requires an exploration into social consciousness to rethink our understanding of the individual's place in society, his or her relation to other people, to the State, to party politics, and so on. At Voprosy filosofii, we see our principal task as facilitating this process. As the main Soviet philosophy journal, we seek a philosophical understanding of the changes occurring in Soviet culture. And we aim to make these discussions available not just to professional philosophers, but to a wider public interested in philosophy, including our scientists, theorists of our culture, our journalists and writers, and so on.

**Bakhurst:** To what extent is there public interest in philosophical debate at the present time?

**Lektorsky:** Well, in this country it was quite common to hear the view that philosophy is a specialist field of interest only to philosophers. Let them get on with it! Five years ago few non-philosophers read Voprosy filosofii. Indeed, not all the philosophers read it! It had stopped being interesting. However, in the present climate, people who try to think through the problems they meet in their everyday lives, at work, and so on, are brought one way or another to confront some pretty fundamental issues. And this has stimulated a broad interest in matters philosophical.

It is not so unusual for a good philosophical text to appear in an edition of 100,000 or 200,000 copies. Last year issues of Voprosy filosofii appeared in editions of 90,000, and even with recent price increases we still have a readership of 60,000. Not bad for a philosophical journal, and more than twice the circulation of four years ago. I think we have succeeded in raising the prestige of philosophy in popular consciousness. People may not understand what particular philosophers are doing, or they may not like it, but at least they respect it.

**Bakhurst:** How has the content of the journal changed to reflect these new interests and objectives?

**Lektorsky:** Well, we've carried a series of pieces on the problems of democracy, on the character of the State we are trying to build, on the
philosophy of law, and on the concept of social justice. A year ago, for example, we had a “round table” on “Law, Freedom and Democracy,” in which philosophers, legal specialists and political scientists all took part. They debated a number of important, and painful, issues, about which there is often a great deal of unclear thinking. If you read the press here, you might conclude that everything is in place for the few democratic reforms needed to solve all our problems. But the problem is much more complicated, first, because there are lots of legal-theoretical problems that need to be solved, and, second, as I already said, democratic mechanisms presuppose a certain kind of individual consciousness. There are many contrasting views, of course, about the genesis of this new consciousness. What *Voprosy filosofii* must do is provide a forum for this debate. For instance, we recently published an article by Erik Soloviev, a very interesting philosopher, in which he explores the complex relations between legal concepts and the structure of personhood. And not long ago, we organized a successful discussion of the problem of social privilege, in which philosophers, legal theorists, and various political figures from the Central Committee all participated.

**Bakhurst:** What makes privilege a philosophical issue?

**Lektorsky:** There is a great deal of talk in the press about privilege. It’s well-known that certain privileges exist in this society for those in the bureaucracy. Once again, this is often taken for a very simple question, but in fact it’s not because the idea of privilege is deeply implicated in the character of the social structure that is embedded here and which we are trying to change. The problem is not just to expose privilege and take it away, but to understand how certain social structures and ways of thinking generate and legitimate privilege. And that’s a philosophical issue.

**Bakhurst:** What role is left for Marxism in the new Soviet social criticism?

**Lektorsky:** Well, Marxism, of course, was considered the ideological foundation of the society in which we all lived. That society was totalitarian and inhumane, and thus it is natural that the reaction to totalitarianism should sometimes be equated with the rejection of Marxism in all its forms, not just Stalinist, or Leninist. Hence, there are now numerous articles appearing all over the place, in magazines and
newspapers, arguing that the claims of Marxism are simply fictitious, fantastic, and utopian, and can lead to nothing but disaster. As a philosophical journal, we felt that this issue must be addressed, so we organized a discussion at the Institute of Philosophy under the title, "Is Marx dead?" The participants took various positions. There were those who argued that Marxism was indeed dead, and that nothing remains of it. But the majority took a different line. The general mood was to analyze Marxism — to consider how it developed historically, the forms it was given by Engels and Lenin — in order to identify different layers within the theory, to sort out what has grown old and is no longer justified (or was just plain false to begin with) from those ideas that were ahead of their time, that were perhaps not understood when they were formulated, and which are relevant today. We followed this with a piece by Vadim Mezhuev, "Socialism as idea and as reality," that sought to look with contemporary eyes at Marx's notion to see what remains interesting today. We're also publishing a series of things on utopianism — another very contemporary problem for us. Needless to say, these are all subjects that greatly interest our readers. Let me stress, however, that we aim at a philosophical grasp of what is going on in our society. We want understanding, and not just an emotional reaction. We have enough emotions to go around, thank you very much! Most of our publications are in the business of expressing them, and our politicians too for that matter. We want an objective, cool-headed philosophical discussion of what is happening that has theoretical integrity. That is our major concern.

Bakhurst: Is there a concern among Soviet philosophers to try to understand the significance of the changes here in their international context?

Lektorsky: Yes. It seems to us at Voprosy filosofii that a certain perestrojka is occurring in world civilization as a whole. This is connected with the fate of what is sometimes called "technological civilization," which — so it seems to many philosophers both here and abroad — is on a course that contains great dangers. Rethinking the development of technological societies requires us to address various ecological questions, to reconsider the relation between humanity and nature, and to rethink the nature of human beings themselves. The
course of development of technological civilization, beginning from at least the 17th Century, has not only led to certain fruitless and dangerous relations between society and nature, it has also created a particular understanding of the human agent and of the forms of his or her life activity. The “totalization of technology” leads to a technologization of social relations, to a technological understanding of interpersonal relations. Thus *Voprosy filosofii* has carried discussions of the future of technological societies and of the role of the individual within them, questions of ecology, of the nature of social relations and human communication, and so on. We see these debates as a way of entering discussions with colleagues from different countries, East and West.

**Bakhurst:** Your nervousness about “technological societies” is a far cry from the optimism about the power of science and technology that used to dominate so much Soviet philosophical writing. How have Soviet views of science changed under *perestrojka*?

**Lektorsky:** Well, it is now clear to everyone that science and technology, notwithstanding the enormous role they play in our society, are not omnipotent forces, existing somehow above and beyond human beings, which will solve all humanity’s problems on their own. This realization has had some very positive consequences. Everyone now admits that it is wrong to deify science. Science and technology are not divine powers; one mustn’t have a *scientistic* view of science. We now see that there are lots of dimensions to life that require a philosophical, and not natural-scientific, understanding. However, there is a negative side too. The reaction to a totalitarian image of science, to *scientism*, sometimes turns into a wholesale rejection of science and technology as such. This is evident not just in the views of some philosophers, but throughout society, throughout our social consciousness. It comes hand-in-hand with the renewed interest in religion, an interest which sometimes aspires to replace all philosophical and scientific issues with purely religious ones, and which scorns anything “atheistic.” This whole trend is a symptom of the fact that the stereotypes that dominated our social consciousness for decades have disintegrated, leaving nothing in their place. The old ideas have gone, their illusoriness is evident to all, and in desperation people reach for all kinds of alternatives — astrology, the supernatural, religion, and so on.
**Bakhurst:** Voprosy filosofii has a long tradition of publishing articles on philosophy of natural science. How has the journal responded to this rejection of science?

**Lektorsky:** We are trying to provide some rational debate. The crucial thing is to understand that natural science itself is beginning to play a new role in society, in the light of the “ecological turn” occurring in world civilization. Hence, it is vital that there be discussion of the relation of science and society, science and humanity, science and nature, and of the role of values in the development of science. We want to encourage natural scientists to discuss these issues in our journal because the very course of development of natural science itself is leading them to reinterpret the relation between the natural and the human sciences. Last year, we published an article by Prigogine that tries to rethink the relation between physics and the human sciences through a discussion of the relation between physical time and historical time. This article caused a lot of interest and we are soon to publish another by the same author on “the philosophy of instability.” Here he tries to show that the image of nature which has dominated science since Newton is one-sided and that we need to rethink the character of science itself. Don’t try to understand nature and the cosmos without human beings. So, the development of natural science itself is forcing scientists to confront certain humanistic issues, and this is for the good, since the humanization of science and technology is essential if we are to chart a path between scientism on the one hand, and the wholesale rejection of science on the other.

**Bakhurst:** One fascinating feature of Soviet philosophy before perestrojka is that Soviet philosophers almost never wrote about the history of their own tradition, nor did they explore its relations to prerevolutionary Russian philosophy. This has surely been changing dramatically under glasnost.

**Lektorsky:** An important dimension of our journal’s work is to recover our philosophical heritage. Philosophy has existed as a discipline in Russia for at least two hundred years, but we have a poor understanding of Russian philosophy. Since Stalin, discussion has been restricted to only those elements of the Russian tradition that are “materialist,” “dialectical,” and “revolutionary”; that is, only the so-
called "philosophy of Russian social-democracy," propounded by thinkers like Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, Dobroliubov, Pisarev, and Plekhanov. But there is another trend in Russian philosophy that was very influential. This is an interesting group of religious and idealist philosophers, writing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some of them were Slavophiles, but not all. However, these philosophers — who include Vladimir Soloviev, Berdyaev, Lossky, Bulgakov and Florensky — were simply banned. Ten years ago, you could be arrested for owning books by Berdyaev! Under glasnost', this is obviously no longer the case, so we have been publishing a number of articles by these philosophers, together with commentaries addressing their relevance to the present situation.

**Bakhurst:** Why are these thinkers deemed so important at the moment? Isn't this just a symptom of the renewed fascination with religion?

**Lektorsky:** Not entirely. If you want to understand Russian culture, our traditions, our psychology, in both their positive and negative dimensions, then you have to consider the enormous influence of Russian idealist philosophy. Indeed, much of what happened after the Revolution was connected with what went before, with the consciousness and culture of the pre-revolutionary period. It is relevant, for example, to the development of Russian literature. Many writers were influenced by Soloviev: Blok and the Russian symbolists, for example. And others, such as Gorky and Mayakovsky, were inspired by Fedorov.

**Bakhurst:** What kind of ideas did these philosophers offer?

**Lektorsky:** Well Fedorov, for example, had a grand notion of the transformation of the world. He was a Christian who tried to develop a radical new conception of the relations between generations. He had the mystical idea of the resurrection of the dead through the power of science and technology. The duty of science was to raise the dead. Many of our thinkers who were gripped by enthusiasm for the transformation of nature were stimulated by Fedorov's ideas, particularly Mayakovsky. That's just one example.³

There are many intelligent ideas in the works of these philosophers, although they are sometimes expressed in a curious form. They had certain ecological concerns, rare in thinkers of that period. They had
perceptive readings of the Revolution; for example, in Berdyaev’s work we see many profound thoughts about both the pre- and post-revolutionary period.

**Bakhurst:** Do you see any dangers in this reawakening of Russian religious philosophy?

**Lektorsky:** Yes, I do. There is a view that Russia has its own path of development — world civilization develops one way, but Russia’s development is different, unlike the rest of the world. Therefore, we must always travel along our own national path. Such developments as democracy and market economics are for the West, they won’t give anything to Russia and they can’t give anything to Russia. This idea has been around a long time. It appeared first in the Slavophiles of the early nineteenth century, and it found a special expression under Stalin where it was cloaked in Marxist attire. And the idea is still alive today. There are large numbers of people who believe that Russia has its own path, and if its distinctive characteristic used to be its allegiance to Marxism-Leninism, which the West had rejected, then today its special character should be found in the Russian orthodox religion, and the philosophical tradition to which it gave rise. This philosophy places us on our own path of development and it solves all problems, answers all riddles, and not only Russian riddles, but mysteries of all mankind. So we don’t have to assimilate the achievements of world civilization, we can just reject them and proceed on our own way. Thus, one danger consists in the threat of a certain isolationism within our culture.

**Bakhurst:** So is there a sense in which people are turning to Russian religious philosophy as a substitute for the old Marxism-Leninism?

**Lektorsky:** A very curious thing is happening. Before, the ideology of Marxism-Leninism was an object of religious belief; that is, people didn’t analyze Marxism, they just believed in it. “Marx said . . . ,” “Lenin teaches . . . .” If you learn it by heart, everything will be solved. Now we have a hostile reaction to Marxism-Leninism. But we are simply replacing our uncritical attitude to Marxism with an uncritical attitude to Russian religious philosophy. We had one icon, and now another stands in its place on the wall. But the type of relation to the object of belief is the same. In my view, our society needs most of all the emergence of critical consciousness, the appearance of people who are independent and can make their own decisions, who relate critically to everything,
and don't just take things on faith. People who can analyze things and understand what is going on. Without this, real democracy is impossible. It is painful, however, to admit this, so people look for an easier solution. They prefer simply to change one dogma for another. Now it’s “Soloviev said . . . ,” and “Florensky wrote . . . .” Of course, they are interesting figures, but for goodness sake don’t turn them into icons. You have to read them, discuss them, and argue with them.

It must be said, of course, that there is an element of fashion in this revival of religious philosophy. It’s fashionable to be a believer these days. Many who claim to be believers are really imposters — to be a truly religious person it has to engulf your very being, you can’t just take it up at the drop of a hat! Sadly, people — including members of the intelligentsia — are simply looking for an alternative source of infallibility. For this reason, we thought it essential to publish these works in a context in which they will be discussed critically in the light of the present situation, so that we can understand what is really interesting now, and what is debatable, and was so even then, 70 years ago. It is crucial to understand that, however interesting these thinkers are, the situation in this country has changed greatly since they were writing. We can’t resurrect the cultural context which created those works, or even the type of consciousness that bore them. We can’t lift solutions to contemporary problems from these works. The rejection of everything positive in Marxism in favour of the view that Russian religious philosophy has all the answers is indeed a dangerous position. This is not a solution to our problems but a dead-end, another dead-end.

**Bakhurst:** Has this concern with pre-revolutionary Russian thought been accompanied by a renewed interest in any post-revolutionary, Soviet thinkers?

**Lektorsky:** I should emphasize that it’s not just that we don’t know Russian philosophy. We don’t know Soviet philosophy well either. So we have also started publishing works by philosophers who lived in difficult conditions, either during or after Stalinism, but who produced interesting work. Some people think that everything that was done before glasnost’ has no value whatsoever. We’re trying to show that this is not so. We’ve published pieces by Ilyenkov, Rubinstein, Kedrov, Asmus, Losev, and other authors, for we are very anxious that this tradition should not be lost. And we intend to publish more general
discussions of the history of Soviet philosophy as a whole, for much of it remains unknown.

Bakhurst: Let me take you back to the discussion you mentioned about whether Marxism is dead in Russia. Where do you stand in this debate?

Lektorsky: I think it is important to dwell for a moment on the idea of “Marxism-Leninism” that was so popular here. It used to be taught that there was a certain doctrine, Marxism, which had been brought to bear on the contemporary world by Lenin, and that with the combination “Marxism-Leninism” all our problems would be solved. Well, to begin with, “Leninism” was not Lenin’s suggestion. It was Stalin’s invention. After Lenin’s death, Stalin created a particular image of Lenin. Lenin left a mass of unsystematic material, highly particularistic, treating all kinds of specific topics. It was Stalin who, in a course of lectures called “Questions of Leninism,” created the dogmatic system that bore Lenin’s name. And so “Marxism-Leninism” was also born, the dogmatic result of Stalinist construction. I am against such a mechanistic blend of Marxism and Leninism. Lenin was an interesting thinker, of course, and an impressive political actor, even though it obviously is no longer appropriate to do everything according to his ideas.

Furthermore, the version of Marxism blended with Leninism, which was formed by our Party both before and after the Revolution, represents something that, in my view, is quite distinct from what Marx himself wrote. I think that, had Marx seen it, he would not have approved. “Marxism” as such developed after Marx’s death, and when Marx realized what was going to be associated with his name he uttered the famous words “I, of course, am no Marxist.” He was right about that, I think. It was Engels who did much to create that particular version of Marxism, at the end of the last century.

Bakhurst: What about Marx himself?

Lektorsky: In my view, he was an interesting and original philosopher. You can’t write the history of Western philosophy without including Marx’s contribution. It is important to understand, however, that much of what Marx wrote was created in particular historical circumstances. For example, Marx’s representation of capitalism, although it has enormous relevance today, was born of an analysis of English capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century. Capitalism has changed enor-
mously since then, and is now not much like the capitalism Marx described in *Capital*. It is also no longer possible to accept the view that all social problems can be solved by revolutionary force. Perhaps force cannot always be avoided. However, what we experienced here was a cult of force, a cult of violence. In this country, we thought force the answer to everything. Lenin was guilty in this, and it had terrible consequences. And in my view, Marx provided some of the justification: the cult of violence is present in some of his early works, though later in his career he was more cautious, countenancing various possible paths of development. The idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which Lenin thought essential to Marxism, is another failure, as is the general idea that the proletariat is the class that will be the salvation of humanity — an idea which Marx developed in the 1840s. Incidentally, one of our contributors to the round-table on the fate of Marxism, Erik Soloviev, interestingly argued that the idea of the proletariat redeeming humanity is directly analogous to the Christian view that only the most impoverished, most humiliated and most abused can free humanity, because only they can take the sins of the world upon their shoulders. Whether Marx saw this analogy or not I don’t know. In any case, the course of world history has not borne out his messianic image of the working class. On the contrary, in this country the idea led to the persecution of the intelligentsia and many other awful things, including the treatment of the peasantry.

**Bakhurst:** So what remains of Marx’s views?

**Lektorsky:** For me, Marx is a descendant of German classical philosophy, and his ideas have to be seen in the context of the development of that philosophy, particularly in the work of Kant and Hegel. Marx made a very significant contribution to the interpretation of the concept of activity that emerged in that tradition. Instead of reading activity as purely cognitive activity, the activity of consciousness, Marx introduces a notion of *practice* understood as the real activity of real subjects with real objects. This, I believe, has enormous epistemological significance. Marx’s interpretation of alienation, which again emerged from the German tradition, is also a monumental contribution. However, it seems to me that a whole series of Marx’s ideas, connected with the problematic of practice, alienation, and the concept of personhood, were not understood during his time. While Marx was alive, he was
read primarily as a theorist of society and of politics, whose most important ideas were those of the class struggle, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the proletarian revolution, and the critique of capitalism. It seems to me that now we need to evaluate Marx as a social philosopher.

**Bakhurst:** What does it mean to see Marx as a “social philosopher?”

**Lektorsky:** What I find most interesting in Marx is his philosophical depiction of human beings, of the interrelations between human beings and world, individual and society, individual and individual. I believe that Marx’s idea of socialism needs to be rethought in relation to these issues, liberated from the narrow understanding of it that dominated here — the idea that socialism means the socialization of all property, or, rather, the ownership of all property by the State. The latter simply leads to a new form of alienation, something which Marx foresaw in his early works, though the subtle ideas there tended to get lost in the subsequent development of Marxism (indeed, Marx’s idea of alienation is extremely important if you want to understand the character of Soviet society.) What did Marx understand by socialism? Marx was not interested only in the problem of property. He was also concerned with the general problem of how we should arrange things so that human beings are no longer alienated from one another, so that one person is not the tool of another. Marx believed that when one man owns the means of production, and the proletarian has nothing, then the result is alienation, exploitation. Thus the issue was to unite labour and property. The concept of socialism was an attempt to solve that problem. The problem is still very much with us, and while it is versions of socialism will remain alive too. (Though it must be said that the term “socialism” is no longer in polite usage in the USSR.)

**Bakhurst:** Earlier, you mentioned Engels as responsible for creating the conception of Marxism that came to predominate in Russia . . .

**Lektorsky:** Well, it is revealing that Engels practically ignored Marx’s early works when he was trying to establish Marxism after Marx’s death, and he thereby threw away much that was interesting and potentially rich. What became known as “Marxism” was not only a long way from Marx, but also from the German philosophical tradition. And what Engels created in the name of Marxism, in works like *Dialectics of Nature*, has more in common with the positivist ideas about nature and
society so popular in the late nineteenth century, with Spencer, Darwin, and so on. This version has aged very badly, but Marx’s profound thoughts have not. So, I see Marx as a man who confronted some very deep problems, and like any great philosopher, like Kant, Hegel, or Plato, the problems he addresses are eternal problems. Why do we read Kant, or Hegel, and each time find something new? Because they posed the deepest problems of human existence, problems which don’t go away in the course of a few centuries. Marx too posed questions which have not disappeared, which continue to have massive significance today. And Marx will continue to be a source of interesting ideas, and in that sense Marx is not dead. I believe Marx is a philosopher for the future, notwithstanding the present hostile attitude to him in this country.

**Bakhurst:** Let’s turn now to consider the place of philosophy in the Soviet educational system. There are mandatory courses in philosophy, not just in universities, but in all institutions of higher education, or “vuzy.” These courses used to be dominated by Marxism-Leninism. How is the teaching of philosophy changing in the USSR?

**Lektorsky:** Well, it is changing, and it certainly needs to. Our teaching was such that when someone took their mandatory philosophy course at a vuzy, by the time they passed their exams, they believed that philosophy was such trash, such dogmatic nonsense that they vowed they’d never pick up another philosophy book as long as they lived. They thought “interesting philosophy” was a contradiction in terms. It is not surprising that the prestige of philosophy as a subject was low. Nobody could understand why we needed philosophy at all. It was seen as a purely ideological discipline, a means of ideological control, a means to give each generation the appropriate ideological veneer. And indeed it was partly like that. Hence, intelligent people came to think that philosophy was some kind of dreadful profession that no normal society would need.

Thanks to glasnost’, students will no longer tolerate the old dogmatic courses on Marxist-Leninist philosophy. As you well know, our old textbooks were unreadable; they were simply awful. Everybody now admits this because the students have refused to read them. Interesting philosophical works began to appear of quite a different kind, and when the students compared them with what they were being taught
they began to complain about their teachers. As a result, people are trying to teach differently, to begin anew.

**Bakhurst:** How easy is it to encourage Soviet philosophy teachers to teach in a new way?

**Lektorsky:** That is the principal problem. We want our philosophy teachers to teach the subject in an interesting way, to acquaint students with various philosophical positions. They must know about the most influential schools in Western philosophy: analytic philosophy, existentialism, phenomenology, Western Marxism, etc. The difficulty is that it is a tall order to demand that a generation of philosophy teachers relearn their discipline. They have got to, because people are not listening to them any more. But how are they to do it? Remember we're not just talking about university lecturers, but about a massive army of teachers — maybe 20,000 — in all institutions of higher education.

On the bright side, however, a lot of well-known institutes and universities now have the right to decide for themselves how to teach philosophy (for example, some of the technical and medical institutes). They've defined new, more specialized courses tailored to their students' needs — on ethics or philosophy of science, for example.

**Bakhurst:** Is it hard to find literature to support such courses?

**Lektorsky:** Yes. There are no textbooks for these courses, though people are beginning to write some. Whereas both the teaching and publication of philosophy used to be highly centralized — there were a few publishing houses that dealt with philosophy and publication was strictly controlled — now things are quite the reverse. There are many little private publishers putting out philosophical texts. For example, there is a collective, called "Gnosis," that grew out of Progress publishers and that publishes philosophical books. They haven't done much yet, but they've made a start. They produced a new edition of Plato with the Greek text in parallel with a translation. People buy these books. The edition may not be large, but it's all snapped up for sure. I haven't yet seen a private publisher produce a textbook, but soon an *Introduction to Ethics*, or *Introduction to Philosophy of Science* may appear.

So, there is a gradual move towards greater freedom in the teaching of philosophy. It may be too much to ask that people do a year of the subject and emerge philosophically sophisticated — philosophy is a
complex subject — but at least we could work to make our intelligentsia understand that philosophy is an important and serious thing to do, and that some philosophical books are worth reading. This is perhaps the most important thing we can do for students who are not specialists in philosophy. In principle we can do it. As I said, there is already a marked change in people's attitude to philosophy; more and more students are reading *Voprosy filosofii*. Incidentally, I recently saw in a magazine a photo of someone in prison reading a book, and when I looked more closely I saw it was *Voprosy filosofii*. So perhaps an interest in philosophy is really becoming more widespread! The serious problem, however, is re-educating the philosophy teachers.

**Bakhurst:** Finally, let me ask you about your own work. What are you writing at the moment?

**Lektorsky:** That's a most painful question. Taking on a journal like *Voprosy filosofii* was an exciting challenge at a time like this, but it's a lot of work. When I started I had no idea how hard it would be. In the West, journals are produced rather differently, and editors-in-chief can usually remain aloof. Here, however, not only must we work on every issue from the point of view of its content and ideas, search for interesting authors, and so on, we also have lots of technical headaches, paper shortages, typographical problems and so on. So I have no time to write. However, I'm thinking about questions of the historical character of rationality. I want to take the kinds of epistemological issues that I studied before into a broader context to look at the ways in which forms of rationality change. I think this is essential for understanding what is happening in the contemporary world. Moreover, I hope this topic will provide a new context in which to re-evaluate the legacy of Marx, Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and other Soviet thinkers who produced important work. Furthermore, I think this project will necessitate a dialogue with Western developments, like postmodernism, feminism, and communitarianism, for all these are bound up with the changes in the ways our civilization thinks of personhood, our relation to nature, and so on. I'm excited by all this at the moment, but I just have no time. When *Voprosy filosofii* has finally settled in with the new publisher, I hope things will be calmer, and I will be able to write, if only for two hours a week! That's the paradox: the more there is to write about, the less time there is to write.
NOTES

1 V. A. Lektorsky, _Sub"ekt, Ob"ekt, Poznanie_ (Moscow: Nauka, 1980). Translated as _Subject, Object, Cognition_ (Moscow: Progress, 1984).

2 Editor's note: The journal has undergone a name change: it is now _Svobodaja mys'l_ (Free Thought).


*Queen’s University*
*Department of Philosophy*
*Kingston, Canada K7L 3N6*