

ALEXANDER GERSCHENKRON

Soviet Marxism and Absolutism

DOKUMENTY SOVETSKO-ITAL'IANSKOI KONFERENTSII ISTORIKOV, 8-10 APRELIA 1968 GODA: ABSOLIUTIZM V ZAPADNOI EVROPE I ROSSII; RUSSKO-ITAL'IANSKIE SVIAZI VO VTOROI POLOVINE XIX VEKA. Moscow: "Nauka," 1970. 374 pp.

Joint meetings of Soviet and Italian historians have become something of a tradition. They had met previously twice, once in Moscow and once in Rome. Recently a book was published that contains the Proceedings of the third meeting, which took place in Moscow in April 1968. As shown in the book's subtitle, the program of the conference included just two subjects. The discussion of the story of the connections between Italian and Russian revolutionary movements brought forth neither worthwhile information nor interesting interpretations.¹ It may be safely neglected in the following. By contrast, the topic of absolutism gave rise to a rather fascinating debate in which the Soviet historians went at each other with considerable verve, while the Italians were essentially reduced to the role of interested but fairly quiet spectators.

That the conference should reveal some disagreements was perhaps not entirely unpredictable. Before the First World War, Russian Marxists produced several alternative interpretations of absolutism. Soviet historians continued to display concern for the problem, without for a long time—a few exceptions apart—allowing themselves the luxury of controversies. It is only since 1965 that divergent views have again become visible. Still, the vehemence of the debate, conducted in a downright un-Soviet fashion in the presence of foreigners, was unprecedented and quite surprising.

Interest in absolutist monarchy may be natural for men who live and work in the shadow of a powerful dictatorship, as it is for the dictators themselves. It was not for nothing that Aleksei Tolstoy wrote his novel on Peter

1. The Soviet historians were disappointed to learn both that the visit Lenin paid to Gorky in Capri (in 1908) left no traces whatsoever in the records of the Italian police (p. 153) and that the first evidence of awareness of Lenin's existence on the part of Italian socialists was a postcard addressed in 1913 to Karl Kautsky asking for information on Lenin's person and his whereabouts (pp. 154-55). For the rest, no more was done in the two papers on the subject and in the brief discussion thereof than to combine antiquarian notes on petty episodes with well-known facts and some superficial generalities.

the Great as his avowed contribution to the policies of the Five-Year Plans. For Soviet historians, to use our modern, somewhat illiterate parlance, the subject certainly was, and is, “viable, meaningful, and relevant.” But the history of absolutism also creates a host of specific intellectual problems from the point of view of Marxism. There is, first of all, the question of the relation of absolutism to the traditionally accepted sequence of “feudalism” and “capitalism.” Absolutism raises once more the old problem of similarities and differences between Western and Russian history. And, finally and perhaps most importantly, absolutism has always been the neuralgic point of the Marxian theory of state and, by the same token, of the materialistic conception of history. There is a rather short step from a preoccupation with absolutism to a critique of basic tenets of Marxism.

The paper on absolutism was presented by L. V. Cherepnin.² In form and substance, it followed the usual lines of Soviet orthodoxy. In the nineteenth century a celebrated Russian satirist once described the type of instruction meted out to the daughters of poorer gentry in their special boarding schools. Like their more fortunate aristocratic sisters, these girls were taught to speak French, to paint flowers, and to dance. But the standards were lower. They indeed learned to dance, but could do so only when starting from the corner of the room in which the stove stood. Soviet historians, too, cannot start except from the stove of quotations from Marx, Engels, and Lenin—the once so quotable Stalin being out of bounds at present. Accordingly, Cherepnin dutifully begins with the well-known and well-worn quotation from Engels concerning the few historical exceptions from the general Marxian view of the state as the political instrument of the economically ruling class: “Exceptionally, however, there have occurred periods in which the warring classes are so nearly in equilibrium vis-à-vis each other that the state [*Staatsgewalt*] obtains for the moment, as a seeming mediator, a certain independence from both of them. Thus was the absolutist monarchy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which balanced the gentry and the bourgeoisie against each other.”³ (It is curious that the phrase “for the moment” [*momentan*],

2. “On the Question of Formation of the Absolute Monarchy in Russia (XVI–XVIII Centuries),” pp. 11–60.

3. Cf. Friedrich Engels, *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staates*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1955), 2:298. Engels’s book was first published in 1884. His characterization of the absolutist monarchy goes back to an early remark by Marx in “Die moralisierende Kritik und die kritisierende Moral” (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke* [Berlin, 1959–68], 4:346), where, however, the term “equilibrium” was not yet used. Engels apparently employed the term in this context first in the 1870s in his polemical articles on the Housing Question, where he spoke of the equilibrium between the landed gentry and the bourgeoisie as “the basic condition [*Grundbedingung*] of the old absolutist monarchy.” See Friedrich Engels, *Zur Wohnungsfrage* (Zurich, 1945), p. 119.

which refers to at least a couple of centuries, was too hard to swallow even for the Soviet translators of Engels, and so in the Russian text it is improved by the mistranslation *na vremia*, which means “temporarily.”) After supplying another similar thought from Marx, Cherepnin states that despite all differences the origins of absolutist monarchy in Russia followed the same laws (*zakonomernosti*, which in Russian is a *calque* from the German *Gesetzmässigkeiten*) as applied in West European countries. The bold statement immediately calls for further qualifications. “Naturally, the formula of ‘equilibrium’ in the absolutist monarchy of gentry and bourgeoisie powers must not be applied mechanically, understanding it literally” (p. 16). “Equilibrium must not be understood as equilibrium on the scales or as mathematical equality” (p. 13). “In Russia there was no equilibrium of gentry and bourgeoisie in the sense of equality of their power, of equal importance of their specific weights. . . . Gentry was the ruling class, but in the total balance sheet of government policy account was taken of the aspirations of bourgeois elements” (p. 48). And finally: “Naturally, one cannot speak of any equilibrium between gentry and bourgeoisie either in the seventeenth or in the eighteenth century” (p. 161).

What is the purpose of this curious exercise which introduces a concept of equilibrium that turns out to be a “nonliteral” one, implying first a “non-mathematical equality” and finally no equality at all? It is threefold. First of all, it is designed to save the idea of a universal law of development as discovered by Marx and Engels. Second, it is designed to save the thesis of an economic basis of the political superstructure by connecting it with the rise of capitalism. And, third, it is intended to maintain the thesis of class struggle as the link between the economic basis and the superstructure. Was there then capitalism in Russia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? Cherepnin answers the question in the affirmative, or rather semiaffirmative: There were, he says, germs (*rostki*), or embryos (*zarodyshi*), or elements (p. 30), or rudiments (*zachatki*, p. 32) of capitalism. At the same time, absolutism was a “feudal monarchy” and feudalism had not yet “exhausted its still large reserves.” “The appearance of the rudiments of capitalist relations was the harbinger of the final ruin of the feudal formation, but [the ruin] was very remote and quite inconspicuous. And only on this plane of a faraway perspective is it possible to speak of the beginning disintegration of feudalism” (p. 32).

Note that it is these extremely cursory remarks, these qualifying afterthoughts, designed to save as much as possible from the class theory of state, that the Soviet historians feel obligated to regard as a full-blown “theory” of the absolutist monarchy, analyzing every word of those few sentences and at times arguing whether the adjective in “seeming moderator” (*scheinbarer Vermittler*) has a positive or negative connotation. (In the Russian translation this adjective may mean either “seeming” or “apparent,” which corresponds to the German distinction between *scheinbar* and *anscheinend*.)

This language does not seem to provide enough substance for an explanation of absolutism as arising from a clash between feudalism and capitalism. Nor do the “germs” and “embryos” add up to an economic basis for the absolutist superstructure. And so recourse must be had to still another concept. In 1894, young Lenin, in the heat of his polemics against Mikhailovsky, dropped the phrase regarding the “formation of the all-Russian market” as the economic basis for the unification of the country, or to use Lenin’s language, for “the creation of national interrelations . . . which was nothing else but the creation of bourgeois connections.”⁴ This phrase has been repeated in Soviet literature thousands and thousands of times, and Cherepnin naturally uses it, talking first of the “prerequisites of the all-Russian market” (pp. 19 and 24) and then of its formation in the seventeenth century (pp. 29–30), connecting it with the “genesis of capitalism” in Russia. And at the same time in order to maintain the concept of class struggle he speaks of an unprecedented magnitude (*razmakh*) of class struggle in Russia in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, except that the reference now is to the so-called peasant wars—that is, to the peasant rebellions the fear of which, it is stated, “provided an important stimulus for the merchant-capitalists and the industrial entrepreneurs to seek a rapprochement with the gentry and alliance with the autocracy” (pp. 34–35, 43).

Thus, with the equilibrium between the opposing classes of gentry and the bourgeoisie done away with, the conflict among them is also happily eliminated. Let us return later to this interpretation and the operational character of the concepts used and see first how Cherepnin’s paper was handled in the discussion that followed. The purpose is to show what the critics were able to accomplish and what they failed to do.

The strictures referred essentially to three points: (1) the concept of class equilibrium, (2) the concept of universal law, and (3) the relation between absolutism and capitalism.

With regard to the concept of equilibrium the critics dealt harshly with Cherepnin. N. I. Pavlenko, who is the leader of what one of the participants called “the new current” in Soviet history, was outspoken. Cherepnin, he said, has three mutually inconsistent views: (a) the theory of Marx and Engels is applicable to Russia; (b) the general formula of equilibrium should not be understood dogmatically; (c) there was no equilibrium of class forces in Russia. And he continues: “What we have in reality is that the conception of equilibrium exists ‘for itself’ [*sama po sebe*] and the facts exist ‘for themselves’ [*sami po sebe*]. What is more, the facts contradict the conception, for actually everything happened the other way round: The merchants and

4. V. I. Lenin, *Sochineniia*, 4th ed. (Moscow, 1941–62), 1:137.

the burgesses acted not as a counterpoise to the gentry, but as the latter's ally" (pp. 181–82).

A. Ia. Avrekh, the severest critic of the orthodox position, continues the same line: "I was happy to hear L. V. Cherepnin saying in his introductory remarks decisively and clearly . . . that there was no equilibrium. But at the same time in the paper it is being proved that there was an equilibrium, but it must not be understood literally as a mathematical equality. What is meant by equilibrium, says the author of the paper, is obviously the relation between the power of the ruling feudal class and that of the nascent class of bourgeoisie which influences the government. Thus," Avrekh goes on, "we are asked to consider as equilibrium any relation whatsoever. What if this relation is one hundred to one; what if it is the relation of the size of a skyscraper to that of a peasant hut? The whole point is that equilibrium is not simply any odd relation; it is a definite quantitative relation, and if such a relation is not given, words about equilibrium are nothing but empty sound" (p. 220). And, finally, V. I. Rutenberg, without further developing the thought, briefly remarks that "the thesis concerning equilibrium in absolutism sounds somewhat abstract. Actually, there cannot be such a thing as equilibrium in the historical process; it occurs only as a short-term state, as an element in the process which is characterized by struggles and contradictions" (p. 241). Presumably, the point of this statement is similar to what Avrekh said in a paper that was published after the conference, namely, that in the traditional approach "the question of the *origins* of absolutism is substituted for the question of the *nature* of absolutism."⁵ Implied in all these strictures of the concept of equilibrium is that the interpretation of absolutism as given by Marx and Engels is not applicable to Russia. In fact, the statement by Rutenberg in conjunction with Avrekh's clarification thereof possibly goes a bit further and may perhaps be interpreted as a more general criticism of Engels's formula: the explanatory power of the formula is reduced also in application to Western countries if it is to apply just to the *emergence* of absolutism and not to its further evolution. This would be very fair criticism of Engels's position, but one cannot be sure that this additional implication was in fact in Avrekh's mind. On the other hand, when in the concluding sentence of his comments Avrekh argues that the main thing is that facts must precede the scheme, however attractive the latter may be (p. 224), it is rather obvious that something quite general is meant by the term "scheme."

And indeed the discussion contains an even more far-reaching attack on the "scheme." A. D. Liublinskaia was the first to phrase it, although in a suitably tentative manner. She began by saying that "what we describe by

5. A. Ia. Avrekh, "Russkii absoliutizm i ego rol' v utverzhenii kapitalizma v Rossii," *Istoriia SSSR*, 1968, no. 2, p. 83.

the somewhat indefinite term 'prerequisites' considerably preceded the genesis of capitalist relations as such." She pulls back a little by admitting that "although in the last analysis the development of absolutist monarchy is connected with the growth of capitalism, it would be wrong to assume that capitalism *alone* creates and forms absolute monarchy." After the careful withdrawal comes the leap ahead: "It seems to me that Russia precisely presents the interesting case where the state power, as it were, got somewhat ahead of the economy and prepared important organizational and administrative measures which rendered possible the origin of new, capitalist relations, or, at any rate, helped those relations greatly" (p. 174). The language is mild and not quite straightforward, but the meaning is clear: After having said that absolutism has *also* roots other than capitalism, she excludes capitalism from being one of those roots.

Avrekh again takes up the theme and pursues it much more sharply. He begins by an outright denial of Cherepnin's thesis of the existence "in a remote plane" of capitalism in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Russia. "This," he mocks, "is an entirely new approach to historical reality: even though the reality does not yet exist, it will exist; and since it will exist in the future, it exists now." He admits that the creation of the "all-Russian market" is the "minimum precondition" for creation of absolutism, but a "unified market is not yet capitalism. Absolutism in Russia appeared long before the appearance of capitalism and became one of the most powerful prerequisites of capitalism. *The fundamental reason for this getting ahead [operezhenie] is the necessity to survive in the neighborhood of advanced Western-European countries*" (p. 222, my italics).

And I. F. Gindin, the author among other things of a very worthwhile study of Russian banking, explains to the listening Italians the broad meaning of the preceding statements. The passage deserves to be quoted *in extenso*. Gindin says: "Our guests, the distinguished Italian historians, naturally know that Soviet historiography is in a state of a powerful upsurge. But they are probably less well informed about the changes in the methods and tasks of historical research which have taken and still are taking place in Soviet historical science. The large shifts in methodology are seen first of all in the fact that the new research is being imbued with the historicism which is peculiar to the methodology of Marxism-Leninism; [they are also seen in the fact] of the ever-broadening understanding of historical development as an evolution through contradictions. *The same shifts have led to a deeper comprehension of the relationship between the economic basis and its superstructures; to the comprehension, that is, not only of the historical process being conditioned in the last analysis by the economic basis, but also of the uninterrupted interaction between that basis and the superstructural phe-*

nomena; [they have led] to deeper penetration into the processes of the reverse impact upon economic development of superstructures, that is, of state and the institutions of public law and, aside of them, of the area of private law and, finally, of ideological currents" (pp. 224–25, my italics).

The carefully worded statement, despite its reference to Marxism-Leninism and the deliberate echoes from Engels's celebrated "four letters,"⁶ in reality goes far beyond the accepted tenets of Soviet orthodoxy. This becomes even clearer when Gindin (pp. 225–27) mounts an attack not merely against Cherepnin's paper, but against him as a representative of the traditional current in Soviet studies of feudalism, a current that is said to have been dominant for forty years (that is to say, from the inception of Stalin's Five-Year Plans). He credits the old school with the publication of valuable source materials on the period, but declares that by contrast its scholarly achievements have remained small. A new current, Gindin says, has been formed in 1965 by a group of historians under the leadership of N. I. Pavlenko.⁷ The new current differs in principle from the old one, because it is based on a modern methodology.

Those are brave words, and there is some sound meaning behind them. Still, bravery should not be foolhardy. And so it is perhaps not surprising to hear that the new methodology means a new approach to Lenin's contributions to Russian history—an approach that does not confine itself to "isolated quotations" from Lenin's works, but seeks to understand his intellectual legacy as a "holistic historical conception." Thereupon, Gindin proceeds to quote Lenin's various and quite "isolated" statements to the effect that the Russian autocracy before the emancipation of the peasantry in 1861 was a regime purely in the interest of the serf-owning gentry and that it was only after 1861 that the autocracy began to express the class interests of the bourgeoisie. At the same time Gindin also reminds his listeners that Lenin, speaking of the twentieth century, admitted at one point that autocracy "up to a certain degree constituted an independent organized political force" and at another spoke of the "enormous independence and self-reliance of tsarist power . . . from Nicholas II down to the last police officer" (*uriadnik*).⁸ It is indeed

6. Cf. the references to "interaction" and "in the last analysis" in the preceding statement and the same expressions used by Engels, particularly in the letters to J. Bloch and Hans Starkenburg (W. Borgius?). Marx and Engels, *Über historischen Materialismus*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1930), pp. 147 and 151.

7. N. I. Pavlenko, ed., *Perekhod ot feodalizma k kapitalizmu v Rossii: Materialy dlia obsuzhdeniia* (Moscow, 1965). This paper has been republished (Moscow, 1969) under the same title as a volume which includes the record of the discussion that took place in 1965 and in some respects, though not in their sharpness, adumbrates the debates at the present conference.

8. Lenin, *Sochineniia*, 4th ed. (Moscow, 1946), 6:144, and *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed. (Moscow, 1958–66), 21:32.

curious to check Gindin's references to Lenin's "holistic conception." They are all taken from articles dealing with sundry contemporary problems such as Leo Tolstoy's relation to the labor movement or the electoral campaigns for the Duma. In these little pieces, most of them numbering three to ten pages, Lenin off and on would include a sentence or half a sentence containing a more general historical assertion. To claim that such occasional scattered statements, entirely unsupported by any evidence and not referring at all to the absolutist monarchy of the eighteenth century, add up to a "universal conception of Russian history" is, of course, perfectly ludicrous and possible only within a milieu that is still imbued with the cult of personality, even though the object of the cult has been shifted.⁹ The reproach must be directed not against historians who are indeed trying to say something new, but precisely against the authoritarian environment that induces scholars to seek meaningless refuge behind an allegedly omniscient authority.

That a Soviet scholar who wishes to say something that deviates from orthodoxy has to tread warily is perhaps best shown by the comment of P. V. Volobuev. He begins by saying that the historical role of absolutist monarchies in Europe—from Spain to Russia—was determined by the necessity to complete the formation of nation-states. One may wonder about the use of both terms "necessity" and "nation-state," but leaving out the former and substituting "powerful state" for the latter, the statement is reasonable indeed. But the speaker immediately pulls back: "Marxian science," he says, "has established the inseparable interconnection between the appearance of absolutism and the origin of capitalism, the latter being the first cause of the former." In the very next sentence it is stated that this connection, however, can be traced only on a "universal historical scale," which means that in France and England absolutism arose as feudalism was disintegrating and bourgeois development proceeded apace, while in Russia absolutism was based on the previous feudal relations and the elements of capitalism were weak. From this admission of separability of the inseparables in Russia follows the unexpected conclusion that "all major European countries possessed a political superstructure—the absolutist monarchy—of the same type as to class nature and form" (pp. 192–93). Thus after the first sally into a polit-

9. Мне сдается, такая потребность лежать

То пред тем, то пред этим на брюхе

На вчерашнем основана духе!

Methinks this urge to lie

Now before this, now before that on one's belly

Is based on the spirit of yesterday!

A. K. Tolstoy, *Pesnia o Potoke-bogatyre*

These lines were composed in 1871. It appears that their relevance has successfully survived the test of a full century.

ical explanation, the speaker at the cost of some inferential strain is safely back in the orthodox fold. But the next sally offers a new surprise. The emergence of economically founded absolutism in the West made possible a "premature" appearance of similar political forms in countries where the appropriate (economic) prerequisites for them were lacking, and he supports his view by adding that Russian absolutism was able to borrow from abroad the know-how concerning organization of bureaucracy, army, and industrial development, a point also made later in the debate by A. N. Chistozvonov (pp. 218–19). "Cases of such getting ahead [*operezhenie*] are in general not rare in history" (p. 194). Thus the speaker seems to have arrived at the same position as Liublinskaia and Avrekh, and he must quickly return, as he does, to the assertion that absolutism followed a universal law everywhere in the West as in Russia, inasmuch as the system arose more or less simultaneously everywhere; that it was feudal in nature; and, finally, that it represented the last form of feudal dictatorship before yielding to a bourgeois dictatorship. The ground has been shifted and any reference to capitalism omitted. But now, having secured himself once more, the speaker again is ready for a new sally, and he happily expresses "what apparently is a heretical thought," that is to say, "that the equilibrium between the warring classes of gentry and bourgeoisie is . . . not a general historical trait of absolutism. Since in Russia in contrast to France and England there was no such equilibrium, our assuming such a trait would make it impossible to speak of an identical type of absolutism in Russia and the West, and we would have to confine ourselves to noticing no more than superficial similarity." After having again hewn to the line pursued by Cherepnin's critics, even though through a curious argument, the speaker immediately destroys his own argument of the sameness of type, by stating that only in Western Europe, and above all in France, was there a classical type of absolutism with regard to origins, social basis, policies, and final outcome. At this point, however, he immediately feels that it may be offensive to Russia to have lacked the classical type of absolutism, and so, faithful to the idea of Russia's comprehensive historical endowment, which was so popular in Stalin's Russia, he claims that "in some respects also Russian absolutism could be regarded as classical, that is, for instance, with respect to its stability, power, scope of domination, and durability" (p. 195). And now he concludes by an unashamed return to his point of departure, that is to say, to the political situation in which Russia found herself, listing the struggle against the Tartars, the danger of foreign threats, and thereafter Russia's policy of foreign conquests, as well as the need to control both the enserfed peasantry and the non-Russian nationalities over the huge sprawling country.

The zigzag course of Volobuev's argument is well worth noting. It is

indeed instructive to see how many withdrawals and returns a Soviet historian feels he has to go through, how many bows before the idols of conceptual superstitions he has to make before he can arrive at the recognition of an elementary fact: the primary interest of the absolutist government in maintaining and expanding its power.

There are some differences between the representatives of the “new current” not only in tone, but also in substance. But there is basic agreement among them on important points: they believe that the historical development in Russia was in many respects fundamentally different from that in Western Europe, and that Marxian generalizations concerning the origin and nature of absolutist monarchy do not apply to Russia. They believe that capitalism had nothing to do with the emergence of absolutism in Russia for the simple reason that there was nothing in the country until at least the last years of the eighteenth century that can in reason be called capitalism. Accordingly, they regard as nonsensical any talk of equilibrium between gentry and bourgeoisie. More positively, they recognize the independent role of noneconomic factors, and most importantly, they introduce the concept of *operezhenie*, which is nothing short of an attack upon the materialistic conception of history. The political superstructure, supposedly the effect of the economic infrastructure, *preceded* the appearance of the latter. It is true that also the “new current” remains tied to the traditional concepts. Despite the many things they say, they repeat that the proposition according to which any state is a product of class struggle is an axiom—that is, something that needs no proof (Pavlenko, p. 182, seconded by Volobuev, p. 195).¹⁰ They still insist on describing the Russian absolutism as a “feudal monarchy” or as Avrekh has it a “feudal monarchy which because of its nature can evolve into a bourgeois monarchy,” the bureaucracy being essentially a bourgeois institution (p. 222).

It is also true that what they have failed to mention is at least as important as what they have, and that in particular their blind acceptance of the traditional statements regarding the West bars them from seeing the real similarities and differences between Russia and the West. But they have said enough to call upon their heads the wrath of the orthodox opinion. After S. O. Shmidt had charged Gindin (of all people) with returning to Stalinist practices because of Gindin’s rejection of “old methodology” (“I think we have moved away from the time when it was attempted to excommunicate from correct methodology those who disagree with you,” p. 245¹¹), M. V.

10. Statements regarding axioms of this kind flow from Soviet pens with the greatest ease. See, for example, M. Ia. Volkov’s article in the discussion that followed the conference, “O stanovlenii absoliutizma v Rossii,” *Istoriia SSSR*, 1970, no. 1, p. 97.

11. Later on, Cherepnin in his concluding remarks will say, “I think we all have *one* methodology: Marxism-Leninism” (p. 281).

Nechkina (an academician) started her sharp emotional counterattack. She bitterly accuses the men of the "new current," particularly Gindin, Volobuev, and Avrekh, of having "lost the problem"—the "problem" being nothing else but the materialistic conception of history. Where, she asks, is a characterization of the infrastructure of the superstructure? In the description of the critics, absolutism, as it were, hangs in the air. If it was not supported by gentry and the nobility, by which classes then was it supported? What is the historical function of your absolutism? "I do not know what you think about it, and, what is worse, I do not know whether you have been thinking about it at all." And as far as the novelty of the conception goes, Nechkina says, what matters in science is the correctness rather than the novelty of an approach (pp. 252–55).

The last point has formal, although in this case no substantive, merit. And Nechkina certainly both did and did not grasp the meaning of Cherepnin's critics. She is right in saying that the economic basis was missing. But she fails to understand that this is the crucial point. That is precisely what was intended to be conveyed by the references to the independence of autocracy and by the concept of *operezhenie*. In a sense, both parties share the guilt for the short circuit in communication. Nechkina is barred from proper understanding by her unwavering adherence to Marxian formulae. If her opponents are doing lip service or are being motivated by caution, for her those formulae are indeed axioms. It may be added that she is aided in her faith by the suggestive force of Marxian metaphors. *Unterbau* and *Überbau*, infrastructure and superstructure! Who can think of a building having an attic but no stories beneath it? It is interesting that serious Marxian scholars have been conscious of the danger for a long time. As early as 1910, Otto Bauer in his review of Hilferding's *Finanzkapital* spoke of Marx's (and Hilferding's) use of metaphoric language and urged its abandonment in favor of precise abstract terms.¹² A metaphor, chosen in order to elucidate the thought, acquires independent existence and in its turn influences thought. This specific predicament of social science is of course not confined to Marxism, and that is (or should be) well known to sociologists who blandly speak of "systems" or to economic historians who keep worrying whether the "industrial revolution," or the "price revolution," was or was not a "revolution." All this does not excuse Nechkina's dogmatic position. But, as said before, the fault is not entirely hers. If the critics of the traditional school had been more outspoken, if they had not tried to camouflage their strictures, if they had concentrated on saying clearly what was in fact done by the absolutist governments in Russia, then Nechkina, instead of chiding them for not an-

12. Otto Bauer, "Das Finanzkapital," *Der Kampf*, 1909/1910, p. 392.

swering questions that are obligatory for any adept of the materialistic conception of history, would have understood that they considered those questions irrelevant, and she would have been forced to defend her position not in methodological but in substantive terms.

As said before, the Italian historians, nearly all of them introduced in the preface to the book as Marxists, had few opportunities to participate in the raging debate. Yet some of their brief interventions were very much to the point. Paolo Alatri urged the Russians to “abandon schematic generalizations, petrified, unchanged formulae” which, he said, “are indeed convenient, but only because they stem from intellectual laziness” (p. 361). And Corrado Vivanti, courteously and with some hesitation, suggested that the disagreements that appeared in the discussion might have lost some of their acerbity if the problems had been treated in terms of comparative history on the basis of deeper and more direct knowledge of historical processes in other European countries (p. 269).

Vivanti’s comment was indeed very appropriate, and probably more so than the Russians are able to appreciate at present. Throughout the discussion they made brief references to mercantilism, mostly referring to protectionist policies. It seems clear that the whole modern literature on mercantilism has remained quite unknown to them. One merely has to look at the standard Soviet histories of economic doctrines to be impressed by the fact. All the interpretations and generalizations therein are supported exclusively by Marx’s scattered comments on the subject.¹³

Knowledge of modern approaches to the problem would have made it possible for them to see mercantilism not just as certain ideas about balance of trade and certain acts of foreign economic policy, but as a complex of measures extending over the whole field of the economy and designed to promote economic development in the interest of increasing the power of the state—that is, of the absolutist monarchies. Seen in this fashion, it is possible indeed to arrive at a “universal theory,” so dear to the heart of Soviet orthodoxy—an explanation, that is, that would be valid for both France and Russia. In fact, the inclusion of Russian experience greatly helps in forming such a general view of European mercantilism. One may suppose that Corrado Vivanti had just this in mind when he expressed the view that greater knowledge of European history might lead to a reconciliation between the “new” and “old” currents and reduce the temperature of their debates. But he failed to mention that such a reconciliation would have exacted a high price from

13. See, for example, A. I. Pashkov, ed., *Istoriia russkoi ekonomicheskoi mysli*, 2 vols. in 3 (Moscow, 1955–60), vol. 1, part 1. This volume has been translated (or rather mistranslated) into English by John M. Letiche, *A History of Russian Economic Thought* (Berkeley, 1964).

the “old current” and perhaps also from the “new” men, because they would be forced to admit the primacy of the political factor in absolutist monarchies.

Both the representatives of the old and new currents would have to recognize that the economic unification of the countries ruled by absolutist monarchs (including the celebrated formation of the “all-Russian market”¹⁴) was to a very large extent not a precondition of absolutism, but its very aim and accomplishment. It was not for nothing that Eli F. Heckscher devoted the whole first volume of his magnum opus on *Mercantilism* to the policies of unification. Capitalism is an interesting but elusive term, as is, for instance, evidenced in the present discussion by the inability of the Soviet historians to agree whether the use of peasant serfs as hired laborers in mines and mills was or was not “capitalistic” (cf. pp. 228 and 253). But economic development is a clear concept. And with regard to Russia, also the enlightened “new” historians do indeed talk about the independence of autocracy, but they avoid discussing what this independence was used for in the economic field. This is curious. But again as Heckscher once pointed out, Marxian contributions to economic history in general had remained rather meager, because Marxian scholars’ interest in the *influence* of the infrastructure upon the superstructure overshadowed their interest in the infrastructure itself.¹⁵

But if it was difficult for Marxian scholars to devote sufficient attention to the “economic basis,” it is much more difficult for them to recognize the situations where the state—the alleged superstructure—was creating the economic basis, so that in reality the state was the basis—the infrastructure—and the economy and the social relations connected with it were, to a varying extent, the product of the state and, as such, a superstructure upon the political basis. This is precisely what the mercantilist policies were all about, whether in France or in Russia. Industries were being created and along with them also the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. To put it in Marxian terms, what was being brought about was both productive forces and production relations. At the same time, it is true that there were considerable differences in the process, both quantitative and qualitative, between the West and the East.

14. The Soviet historians might well have noted that on the formation of the “all-Russian market,” Lermontov, the indubitable poet, may be a surer guide than Lenin, the dubious historian, as is evidenced by the following three lines from Lermontov’s beautiful *Song About Stepan Paramonovich Kalashnikov*, where Ivan the Terrible by a *ukaz* establishes a free market “for the whole wide Russian tsardom”:

Твоим братьям велю от сего же дня,
По всему царству русскому широкому,
Торговать безданно, беспощадно . . .

To quote Lermontov in this context should be still more reasonable than the thoughtless repetition by reputed scholars of an idol’s obiter dictum.

15. Eli F. Heckscher, “Quantitative Measurement in Economic History,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 53 (1939): 169.

It is obvious that Peter the Great had an infinitely larger task cut out for him than, say, Colbert. Peter the Great who built industrial enterprises and was prepared to put them in charge of entrepreneurs, "whether they wanted it or not"; who shifted masses of peasants to work in mines and manufactories, in the construction of canals, ships, ports, and cities; who elevated men to the rank of the gentry, and at the same time placed the gentry in the compulsory service of the state; who made the peasant serfdom effective by various police and fiscal measures and used the enserfed peasantry as an integral part of the overall system of the service state, as part and parcel of his policy of economic development—Peter the Great was the demiurgos, the creator of the economy in the interest of the state. And the state was neither the state of the gentry nor the state of the bourgeoisie; it was the state's state, pursuing the interests of the state. This is what in reality stands behind Cherepnin's thoroughly inept phrase that the absolutist monarchy "took into account the interests of the bourgeoisie." But this is also what stands—much less ineptly, but quite inadequately—behind the term *operezhenie* (the getting ahead) with which the adherents of the new current operated in the discussion. Had they said what the term actually implied, had they had full recourse to the facts of political and economic history of Russia in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, then Nechkina, the academician, would have had the arduous and thankless job of denying those facts, instead of issuing facile charges of nonobservance of orthodox tenets.

Had the "new" historians talked history rather than generalities, they would have been able to understand also that the differences between the West and the East are explicable in terms of differences in the degree of economic backwardness of the countries concerned, the concept in itself providing the morphological unity within which the spatial diversities can be meaningfully and fruitfully treated. Then they would have understood, for instance, why the absolutist monarchy of Peter the Great had used the instrument of serfdom and had enormously increased the burdens upon the peasantry, while the absolutist monarchy of Joseph II in Austria was able to abolish the personal subjection of the peasantry and sought to lighten the peasants' burden.

It is, of course, true that in the remainder of the eighteenth century the absolutist state in Russia surrendered the peasantry to the gentry, thereby greatly enhancing the latter's economic and social position. This could happen because as a result of the reform work of Peter the Great the great gap between the power aspirations of the state and the country's economic potential had been sufficiently reduced, so that the state no longer needed the compulsory service of the gentry, and the connection between economic development and the serfdom of the peasantry could be severed. But this also

means that the position of the gentry varied a good deal throughout the history of Russian autocracy and that concepts such as "feudal monarchy," or for that matter "the ruling class," are both so gross and so vague, and by the same token so nonoperational, that they can only obscure the actual state of things. What else but obfuscation is Cherepnin's previously quoted remark that feudalism "had not yet exhausted its still large reserves," when the plain fact is that the state was able to reduce its demands upon the gentry? And no one raises the question of what those "reserves" were and how their size could be determined. It is another matter that particularly after 1773 (Pugachev's rebellion) the gentry became relatively the safest group upon which the autocracy could rely.

The members of the "new current" still have much to learn and to unlearn. The task of liberating themselves from petrified concepts to which no precise meaning can be attached is still ahead of them. It is to their credit that at least by implication, by distinguishing between the origin and the nature of the absolutist monarchy, they cast some doubt on the importance of Engels's concept of "equilibrium of class power." But they are still quite willing to abstain from any critical examination of the question to what extent the equilibrium concept as applied to the West is more than a facile metaphor. A concept of this kind naturally defies any quantification, except perhaps in special conditions of modern parliamentarism.¹⁶ Class power is a highly complex term, composed of many quite disparate elements. To determine aggregate class power, it would be necessary to attach additive coefficients to each of those elements. The point is not that this is hardly a feasible enterprise, but that scholars who are willing to speak lightheartedly of equilibria of class power never even ask how such a term could be rendered operational at least *in principle*. It is conceivable that an historian after a thorough, detailed study of class structure in a given society may feel that he has acquired the right to pronounce an intuitive judgment that any two classes were approximately equal in power. But equality is not sufficient. The historian still would have to advance from "equality" to "equilibrium," which is an infinitely more difficult concept, introducing fluctuations over time and raising the problem of new criteria of operability. At any rate, neither Marx nor Engels ever bothered to demonstrate the operational meaning of such concepts with regard to absolutist monarchies, let alone to offer a serious historical study of this form of government; and there is little evidence as yet

16. That is why Otto Bauer's use of "equilibrium of class power" in application to the early years of the Austrian Republic after World War I was at least a perfectly debatable concept, although even in this case the measurable aspects covered only a part of the problem. Cf. his *Die österreichische Revolution* (Vienna, 1923), pp. 243 ff. See also the first presentation of the concept by Otto Bauer in his parliamentary speeches in 1920 and 1922. Cf. Otto Bauer, *Zum Wort gemeldet* (Vienna, 1968), pp. 78 and 93-94.

that it is possible in Soviet Russia to avoid taking on faith as revealed truth any hint dropped by Marx, or Engels, or Lenin.¹⁷

But the problem at hand is something else. There is still no clear recognition that the interests of the state are something *sui generis* and in some periods not just as important, but infinitely more important than class interests. The naïve acceptance for such periods of “axioms” of class interests as main determinants can only lead research into the cul-de-sacs of sham problems and irrelevant conclusions. What is needed is an undogmatic general theory of state power in which the autonomy—the *Eigengesetzlichkeit*—of that power is no longer either disdainfully denied as “false consciousness” or at best reluctantly and somewhat cryptically admitted as an “epistemological form of consciousness,”¹⁸ but is frankly recognized as a crucial sociological phenomenon that is indispensable for the understanding of momentous historical events and processes.

It is uncertain whether the Soviet historians will be able to advance to more critical and more productive work at least in the narrow but important field of politics and economics of absolutist monarchy. Their interest in the topic is obvious and, as said before, very understandable. B. F. Porshnev is not a man of the “new current.” He stated in the discussion his agreement with Cherepnin’s paper, whose argumentation he found very convincing. And yet it was Porshnev who in his intervention (p. 202) went on to say that *any state* has the main function of preserving the existing order and uses means of physical oppression and psychological pressure for the purpose, but that absolutism used the two instruments with an unprecedented intensity. And Porshnev elucidated what he had in mind: on the one hand, the state’s monopoly, its exclusive right, to kill and to jail, to deprive of property and to tax; and on the other hand, the “enormous power of moral pressure.” Porshnev just stops short of completing the parallel by speaking of the “ideological monopoly” of the absolutist state.¹⁹ At least one element of absolutist rule that was missing in Porshnev’s picture was supplied after the conference in the still continuing discussion of absolutism by A. L. Shapiro, who spoke of the “deification of the absolutist monarch.” Shapiro, too, stopped short of

17. The word “hint” deserves a word of explanation. The Russian language has a word *ukazanie* which has been used in translating two different German words: *Hinweis* and *Weisung*. Now, *Hinweis* implies “hint,” “indication,” “suggestion,” “direction,” while *Weisung* means “order,” “command,” “directive.” It has been interesting to observe how in Soviet literature the much-used word *ukazanie*, when applied to the sayings of the fathers of the creed, has lost the connotation of “suggestion” and has acquired that of “command”; and command implied not only an obligation to conduct research in a certain area, to deal with a certain problem, but also to come up with pre-established results.

18. Cf. Max Adler, *Die Staatsauffassung des Marxismus* (Vienna, 1922), p. 33.

19. Cf. similar statements by Porshnev in his recent book, *Frantsiia, angliiskaia revoliutsiia i evropeiskaia politika v seredine XVII veka* (Moscow, 1970), pp. 19–20.

using the phrase "cult of personality," perhaps leaving this task of easy substitution to his readers.²⁰ And even Nechkina made a revealing statement. When speaking of Russian autocracy in the nineteenth century, she mentioned the existence of two ideologies, one "official" and one "secret" for the internal use of tsarism. What is all this, if not a description of the Soviet dictatorship, of Soviet absolutism? In particular, any Soviet scholar, however orthodox his or her position, has had plentiful opportunity to observe that behind the loudly proclaimed adherence to Marxian ideology lurks the real, the "secret," power ideology of the government.

But the obvious similarities between the two political systems make the discussion of absolutism a double-edged problem. The interest of historians in discussing it is counterpoised by the interest of the government in preventing the discussion from spilling over the rims of the official ideology, which with all its heterogeneity was and still is one of the stability conditions of the exercise of dictatorial power. In pursuing its policy of "ideological monopoly," the Soviet government has been responsible for an abysmal debasement of Marxism as a scholarly theory. In the obedient hands of Soviet historians, a hypothesis which was quite fruitful in exploring processes of historical change in some areas and in some periods was converted into a dogma, a universal law applicable to all times and climes. What is so interesting about the debates at the present conference is the beginning recognition of the limits of applicability of Marxian analysis. That recognition itself is still restrained by the ingrained habits of thought as well as by natural caution, if not fear. No real revival of untrammelled critical scholarship is yet in sight. But there are signs of life pushing up from beneath the frozen surface, and they should not be allowed to pass unnoticed.

20. A. L. Shapiro, "Ob absoliutizme v Rossii," *Istoriia SSSR*, 1968, no. 5, p. 70.