

**RUSSIA AND AMERICA:
A PHILOSOPHICAL COMPARISON**

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W. J. GAVIN AND T. J. BLAKELEY

RUSSIA AND AMERICA:
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*Development and Change of Outlook
from the 19th to the 20th Century*



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PREFACE

In this year of bicentennial celebration, there will no doubt take place several cultural analyses of the American tradition. This is only as it should be, for without an extensive, broad-based inquiry into where we have come from, we shall surely not foresee where we might go.

Nonetheless, most cultural analyses of the American context suffer from a common fault — the lack of a different context to use for purposes of comparison. True, American values and ideals were partly inherited from the European tradition. But that tradition is in many ways an inadequate mode of comparison. Without going too far afield, let us note two points: first, European culture was the proud inheritor of the Renaissance tradition, and, going back still further, of classical culture; second, the European countries are compact. Their land masses are such that the notion of “frontier” simply would not have arisen in the same way as it did in America.

On the other side of the globe, however, there does exist a country capable of serving as a suitable mirror. We speak, of course, of Russia. That country also came relatively late onto the cultural horizon, and was not privy to the Renaissance tradition. Furthermore, her land mass is such as to be “experimentally infinite” in character — not unlike the American frontier. It is hoped that much can be learned about the present cultural context by comparing the two countries in their youthful stages.

The present book will try to show that Russia and America are indeed similar in their developmental stages. Both countries acknowledge “the importance of the vague”. In the following the words “vagueness”, “mystery”, “ambiguity”, “openness”, and “contextuality” are used interchangeably to denote an uncertain state of affairs. Most importantly, a sense of vagueness was not necessarily viewed as a fall from perfection. As “vague”, the universe is unfinished, and hence incapable of complete rational delimitation. Furthermore, a vague universe, because of its indeterminate character, compels commitment on the part of human beings. As such, it renders life “intense”. A vague universe, then, might involve the following traits: a revolt against Cartesianism; a view of the human being as participator; the affirmation of an unfinished context; the interpenetration of thought and action; the impor-

tance of history; the assertion of community as providing "grounds of constraint" (see Chapter VI).

In addition, both countries went through a radical change at the turn of the century. This change is symbolized via the Turner thesis in America and the Bolshevik revolution in Russia.

Finally, contemporary expressions of cultural malaise or of dissatisfaction with a particular outlook in both Russia and America reflect (consciously or unconsciously) the importance of vagueness or mystery for any given culture.

Having said as much, it is perhaps apropos to say what the present study is not. It is not a claim that no differences exist between Russia and America either in the nineteenth or the twentieth centuries (or both).^{*} By now, the "convergence theory" has had a considerable number of supporters and detractors, and the argument may be left in more capable hands. The present study asserts merely that there are some similarities (as well as differences) and that these are worth pointing out. Furthermore, most of these similarities are seen in the nineteenth, not the twentieth, century. Contemporary Soviet reaction to nineteenth century figures indicates fear of ambiguous or uncertain contexts, but not willingness to return to them or to highlight their importance. America too has strayed far from acknowledging the importance of mystery. Indeed, the antiseptic world of twentieth-century America seems preoccupied with the opposite qualities of clarity and precision. However, there has arisen in America a series of culture critics who have realized that mystery has been lost and must in some sense be reclaimed.

All attempts to sum up a historical *Zeitgeist* suffer from over-simplification. This is doubly so in comparing two epochs which are declared similar in flavor. The present study makes no claim to be complete or impartial. The thesis here is that philosophy develops within cultural contexts and that a comparison of two giant cultural contexts at the turn of the century is indeed beneficial if we wish to utilize the past to gain a perspective on the future.

I personally am indebted to many of my former teachers, but two in particular stand out in my memory. Dr. Robert Pollock at Fordham University first introduced me to the importance of cultural contexts for philosophy. Dr. John J. McDermott of Queens College of the City University of New York first showed me the importance of an indigenous American "angle of vision", and of one of its foremost representatives, William James.

The manuscript received its final typing, as well as several grammatical

corrections, under the expert skills of my secretary, Mrs. Nancy Hennessey. Here again my debt is not a small one.

Lastly, this book is dedicated to my wife, Catherine, who above all people has made me realize that philosophy is a way of life and not merely an academic profession.

Portland, Maine
1976

WILLIAM J. GAVIN

For my part, I would like to thank Janet for her unflagging support and Elizabeth, Damian and Timothy for bearing up under the pressures of final composition.

Boston, Massachusetts
1976

THOMAS J. BLAKELEY

Thanks are herewith extended to the following journals for permission to quote from articles published therein: *Studies in Soviet Thought, Listening,* and *The Russian Review.*

NOTE

* The following are suggested as expositions of the internal historical development of Russian philosophy: V. V. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, 2 vols., transl. by G. L. Kline (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953); and Nicholas O. Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy* (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1951). By far the best anthology dealing with the beginnings and development of Russian philosophy is: *Russian Philosophy*, edited by James M. Edie, James P. Scanlan, and Mary-Barbara Zelding, with the collaboration of George L. Kline, 3 vols. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969).

Suggested expositions of the internal development of American philosophy include the following: John Smith, *The Spirit of American Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); John Smith, *Themes in American Philosophy: Purpose, Experience, and Community* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970); John J. McDermott, "The American Angle of Vision", Parts I and II, *Cross Currents*, Fall, 1965, and Winter, 1965. Perhaps the best general anthology remains *Classic American Philosophers*, General Editor Max H. Fisch (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1951).

Proponents of the theory of twentieth-century convergence include: Pitirim Sorokin, *Russia and the United States* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1944); John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1971). A critical stance is taken by Bertram D. Wolfe in his "Russia and the U. S. A.: A Challenge to the Convergence Theory", *The Humanist*, Vol. XXVIII, #5, September/October 1968, pp. 3-8.