

REVISITING BAKHTIN'S EAST-WEST CROSS-CULTURAL CONCEPTS

Abstract

Comparatively researching “Western” European classics - Bakhtin created unorthodox socialist, multi-disciplinary views relevant to Western neo-liberal studies today. “Western” attachments of Bakhtin, the non-western USSR Jew, resulted from diverse sources: 1. Impact by the Russian universal genius; 2. Communist ideology presumably international and multicultural; 3. Russia's inherited cultural history interacting with European dynasties and civilizations; 4. Russia's existing *domestic* multiculturalism. Bakhtin's controversies diffuse from his elemental sense of secular *crucifixion* between exile (Kazakhstan) and resistance to Stalin's dictatorship; attraction to Western version of socialism; inspiration from French revolutionary ideals and avant-gardism within his revisionist “Circle”.

Key words:

unorthodox socialism, revisionism, controversies, international, multicultural

БАХТИН: НЕГОВИТЕ КРОС-КУЛТУРНИ, ИСТОК-ЗАПАД КОНЦЕПТИ

Апстракт

Бахтин компаративно истражувал „Западни“ европски класици, создал неортодоксни социјалистички, мулти-дисциплинарни ставови - релевантни за западните нео-либерални проучувања денес. „Западноста“ на Бахтин (евреин од не-западниот СССР) има неколу извори: 1. Импакт од рускиот универзален гениј; 2. Комунистичка идеологија претпоставено интернационална и мултикултурна; 3. Взаемност на наследената руска културна историја со европските династии и цивилизации; 4. Постоечки мултикултурализам во Русија. Противречностите кај Бахтин дифузираат од неговото елементарно чувство на секуларна распнатост меѓу прогонство (Казахстан) и отпорот кон Сталиновата диктатура, привлеченост кон Западната социјалистичка верзија; инспирираност од идеалите на Француската револуција и авангардизам во неговиот ревизионистички „Круг“.

Клучни зборови:

ревизионизам, нео- социјализам, противречности, интернационализам, мултикултура

Introduction:

Decades before Bakhtin in the East of Europe, Charles Spurgeon in the West wrote: “*There are theories of socialism and the like which lead to anarchy and riot; but it is not so with the mild and gentle teaching of Jesus Christ whose every word is love and patience*”. Christianity in its beginnings was tormented just like mainstream socialists/communists tormented it (and the Jews), 2000 years later. The Fabian Society established (1884) for the advancement of the ideas of Karl Marx and the establishment of England as a socialist state, cynically called its own ideas as the “social gospel” and the “Christian Socialism” for the West.

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975), being among the free thinking figures during the upcoming Stalin socialism of censored thinking, managed to extensively research *alternative* ways, the Western European history and theory of culture, philosophy of language, linguistics, semiotics, structuralism, ethics, psychology, literary criticism and theory, religious criticism, sociology, anthropology and the arts. This persecuted philosopher, often considered mystic, has also written “Religion itself is philosophy”, voicing his *underground* writer’s defense in which the author/philosopher himself is a *hero*, instead of “God” or the people’s masses.

Bakhtin was impacted by atheism, and later impacted the Western thought, increasingly attracting secular researchers in the second half of the 20th century. Critical scholars find him attractive for the “Western” Jewish intellectuals due to his multi-faceted, *dialogical* approach to social interaction and socialist/communist although not explicitly atheist worldviews applied to his often obscure yet profoundly researched analytical theories comparing Marxism, the Formalists, German philosophy and Western culture.

Bakhtin’s interest in Western intellectual history could be characterized as an early cross-cultural exchange with ideological diversities. This also enabled Bakhtin’s inquisitive, and at times suspicious, mind to expand on *dialogues* beyond mere political divide and above social and cultural collisions. This period of Bakhtin the Bolshevik and Bakhtin the pro-western researcher, was productive due to his intellectual “mobility” outside the Soviet style of communism, reaching Western socialist ideologies of Europe. He shared avant-garde ideas with Aleksandar Blok, Ernst Cassirer, Malevich, Chagall, and the European modern and postmodern criticism of Western traditional views. (Brandist, 2002)

What is peculiar for 21st century reviewers of Bakhtin’s views, is the realization that Bakhtin, the product of a non-western, Bolshevik state, was able to grasp some common grounds between the Left of the *East* and the Left of the West. This synergy between Bakhtin from

Eastern ideological philosophies and the West, continues to attract western progressive social-cultural ideas and practice. It keeps permeating today's main-stream western educational, academic, cultural and media constructs, doctrines and agendas. Bakhtin could be considered as one of the precursors of the old communist influence morphing into new international globalism, particularly advancing in the *fundamental transformation* which divides America today. Bakhtin's intellectual dynamism, despite his health problems and his ideological and religious discrepancies, managed to express his criticism against Stalin's version of a communist revolution. Bakhtin remained a concealed intellectual between WWI and WWII, although he and his "Circle" witnessed paradoxical degeneration of the communist dictatorship in Russia.

Left-wing cultural and literary critics from the 21st century West, agree that their neo-liberal, progressive cultural theories coincide with Bakhtin's interpretation of the history of the comic and tragic in society, culture and literature. Helene Iswolsky, translator of Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, and Michael Holquist, author of the Prologue to the translation, agree that Bakhtin's analysis of carnivals (from mythological, Pagan, Roman, to Renaissance and Medieval mass festivities) searches for parallels between the *liberating laughter* and the roots of the *revolution itself* which mimicked and masked revolt against established values. (Holquist, 1984) If agreed that Bakhtin defined archetypal instincts of the masses carry out revolt and rejection of ecclesiastical and feudal superiority, then it becomes evident that he found a self-justification in this parallel with his (and others') revolt against the Bolshevik revolution, and the criticism of the *Subversive Pleasures* manifested in a street rebelliousness, mass protests and ultimately revolution. Reasoning of this caliber further intrigued Western scholars and their cultural criticism and the rising film industry, as well as today's "occupy Wall street" movement demanding street rights to democracy outside governmental and constitutional institutions. (Stam, 1989)

Bakhtin's views on the early entertainment industry recognize negative aspects of mass seduction and reduction of the masses to spectators or to mere mad street mob democracy doomed to lose their meaningful self-realization. Nevertheless, western liberal criticism of today continues to be attracted to Bakhtin's views on individual and institutional opposition against intolerant government control centers. Today's critics of a new brand of mask, globally registered as the Anonymous mask, recognize trendy *retro* elements of rebelliousness depicted from pre-historic, pre-class and pre-political societies and cultures, now transferred to current resistance tendencies. In his "Introduction" to Iswolsky's translation of Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, Holquist reintroduces Bakhtin's scope and importance of culture of the mask and the mass carnivals, seeing them as recurring manifestation of opposition to official oppression, now

upheld in the West, and the rest of the world, by various global resistance movements.

Although archetypal, masked revolts that Bakhtin writes about, evolve into 21st century cynical, ironic bellicose masses, organizing themselves for freedom and democracy and against social order and existing government establishments. Bakhtin's intellectual and revolutionary curiosity might have detected the complex and serious threats of angered mass-laughter or *mob-justice* developing into revolutionary force, both in the West and the East. Bakhtinians today might view the Anonymous mask as a political culture of neo-militant rituals that tend (not only pretend with masks) to render revolutionary change, systematically engineered by the socialist West. This masked explosion against official forms of governments and societies, becomes no more a mere carnivalesque escape. It imposes itself as a neo-chaotic element in the mask-psychology, a new social-order political tool and a tendency to mimic the role of government and replace it with its non-government rule. Unlike the comic (although aggressive) acting of the Renaissance and Medieval Western masks (Norquist, 1984), 21st century Western, and global Anonymous masks are eccentric and not comic, threatening and highly engaged *actors and agents of an agitating and agitated change*. Masks in Western history of carnival processions were consecration of inequality, just as the Anonymous masks revolt against *inequality*, which makes them temporarily *equal* during political and social demonstrations and demands for becoming a part of the wholeness for a better world. These 21st century masks remain to be an object of a possibly permanent not temporary change, through real, or virtual, *carnivals* occupying the social media as much as street venues.

However, the 21st century phenomenon of the Anonymous masque could be interpreted , through Bakhtin's perspective as a Manifestations of life that refers not to the *isolated biological individual, not to the private, egotistic 'economic man,' but to the collective ancestral body of all the people, a collective body against a system*, in contemporary lexicon: non-government organizations. The Anonymous mask could be considered as another Bakhtin's providence relevant to the political philosophy of the West. Bakhtin re-viewed the mythological symbolism of the mask and its connection to expressions of change, reincarnation, relativity, negation of uniformity and similarity, rejection of conformity. His interpretation of the mask is related to secular transition, metamorphoses, violation of natural boundaries, mockery, while retaining ancient rites and rights to rituals and spectacles about *devil's* nature in the human defiance of fear, sin, guilt or God (and his ethical principles applied in managing a society). For Bakhtin there is nothing terrifying or alien in the interest for neo-pagan, new-age, atheist relativism in ethics where evil and good are relative, and the mask of the devil is an ambivalent figure expressing sanctioned points of view, celebrating material bodily stratum, and hedonist, pre-

Christian carnality, against the monotheistic spirituality of the “righteous, peaceful and good” maintained in the inner and outer world of a faithful, loyal and superior (not elitist) citizen. Opposite to the Christian postulate that “fear is the beginning of wisdom” and order, Bakhtinian liberation from fear points to the Western, Holquist interpretation of Bakhtin: “Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter (of the mask). Complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world.” From the first chapter, on laughter, ridiculing and cynicism, Bakhtin’s theory from the Eastern communism is interpreted by the Western neo-liberal desecration of Christian ethics through select, and inevitably controversial ideas of Holquist, such as: *“The essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life. Negation and destruction (death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation, from the birth of something new and better.”*

Concluding remarks:

One of the Western opposition voices to Bakhtin’s pointing to revolt and revolution in using masks (old or new aged), is Bergson's concept, who exempt himself from supporting the radical liberal philosophy of resistance through cynical laughter and fury. In the name of human dignity, respect, tolerance and freedom of expression, Bergson’s views do not accept freedom gained through radical-liberal aggression with its *“In your face – my faceless mask”* syndrome of hypocritical rebellion. Bergson belongs to the minds that “do mind” what destructive forces a mask can hide behind the mask, and beyond – behind its other inner masks. His understanding is that masks, of the past or present, bring out mostly negative functions and messages in local or global communities.

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